

An Ecocritical Reading of Wangari Maathai's Autobiography *Unbowed: a Memoir*

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Abstract:In her autobiography, *Unbowed: A Memoir*, Wangari Maathai displays a close relationship between the present culture and nature. Maathai's ideology is evident as she theorizes on global environmental justice, political ecology, postcolonial politics, and explores the intersectional ties among environmentalism, anticolonial struggle, and social justice. The aim of this paper is to provide an eco-critical reading of Wangari Maathai's autobiography. The study applied the theories of Autobiography, African Feminism, and Autobiographics to show that the choice of particular narrative strategies is influenced by the relationship between context, gender and genre. From a close reading of the text, the study established that Wangari Maathai has structured *Unbowed: A Memoir* as a rhetorical and linguistic means of argumentation, and she turns her whole body of writing into a single – but very convincing – argument for a responsible and holistic approach to empowerment of women and nation building in Kenya, by planting trees. In writing *Unbowed*, Wangari Maathai mixes the genre of memoir with the very similar genre of the autobiography. The paper therefore concludes that Maathai uses different kinds of metaphors. Some metaphors of nature may support or contradict her aims in her portrayal of human-nature relationship. Nevertheless, it is evident that the environment is prominent in Maathai's autobiographical writing.

Keywords:Ecocritical Reading, Wangari Maathai, Autobiography, *Unbowed*, Memoir

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper engages a Kenyan autobiographical text with a view to analyzing how the writer's choices of form reconstruct her life as well as indexes Kenyan histories. Various studies identify the difference in form when examining writings by men and women. These researchers argue that women and men experience the world differently and this reflects in how they narrate their life experiences. Although they still share the same goal of recording their lives into a larger societal story. Women have exploited distinct forms such as the epistolary and common forms as autobiography to write their lives. Ebila¹ discusses how Wangari Maathai's life experiences in *Unbowed* offer an opportunity for discussing the contradictions surrounding the perception, place and identity of women in African politics. Ebila argues that womanhood tropes which glorify the role and place of women in the construction of nations foster gendered nationalism by silencing women's agency in the making of nations. Ebila asserts that Maathai's autobiography allows us to view and question social-cultural constructions of womanhood versus manhood and the influence on gender power relations on women's participation in the politics of the postcolonial nation states in Africa.

One's vocation also influences form. Notably, Kipkorir², in his autobiography, uses historicity to records change over time while Ngugi wa Thiong'o^{3,4} and Kabira⁵ employ a range of literary strategies to realize their artistic vision. Maathai presents an argument for herself and environment. These autobiographical writings influence form and emerge as instrument for dissenting voices in post-independent Kenya projecting similar and dissimilar postcolonial situations. Their formal choices highlight the use of orality to resist enforced voicelessness. Intersections among public, private individual and collective elements and allow us to identify a form determined by social-political positionality of the writing subject through a range of literary, historical, eco-critical consciousness.

Statement of the Problem

This paper analyses selected aspects of Wangari Maathai's autobiographical work not just as a distinct genre in literature, but as a literary output characterized by certain formal choices that speak to the history that constitute the speaking subject in the narrative. The paper explores how, through form, gendered histories are

interpellated in the autobiography by the author. The thesis of this paper is that the selected autobiographer's choices of form significantly contribute to the reconstruction of her life as well as indexing Kenyan history. The study reads the autobiography as a complex literary artefact whose form is molded at the junction of individual and collective subjectivities which are best appraised with due regard to the vexing questions of race, ethnicity, gender and class.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Various scholars have studied some of the texts selected for this study. For example, Muchiri⁶, in *Women's Autobiography: Voices from Independent Kenya*, analyses voice in autobiographical works by Charity Waciama, Wanjiku Kabira, Esther Owuor, Rasna Warah, Wambui Otieno, Muthoni Likimani and Wangari Maathai. On Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir*, Muchiri argues that Maathai's choice of title shows autobiography's egocentric nature (p. 94). Even though Muchiri also explicates some texts by male writers, her argument is that the female autobiographical voice highlights social concerns from a domestic and personalized perspective. Thus, female autobiographical voice functions as a tool for self-exploration and self-definition. Since Muchiri's work focuses on voice in Kenyan women's life writing, there remains a gap in exploration of form.

Mwangi⁷, in his unpublished thesis *Artistic Choices and Gender Placement in the Writings of NgugiwaThiong'o and Grace Ogot* examines *Detained: A Writers Prison Diary*, among other texts. Mwangi argues that writers create differently on account of gender as he demonstrates that an individual is embodied in the history. Nonetheless, how gender influences writing has not been adequately explored in autobiographical writing, a gap that this study purposes to fill. This is the case because Mwangi seems to overlook generic differences in specific genres that the writers use as he studies all the texts under the umbrella of fiction. The study delineates only works that deal with narration of a life lived, where the author is the same as the character to identify literary features employed.

Gikandi⁸ conducts a detailed study of NgugiwaThiong'o's works. Leech and Short⁹, when referring to each author as having a habit of expression of thought, states that "each writer has a linguistic 'thumbprint', an individual combination of linguistic habits which somehow betrays him in all that he writes" (p. 10). Commenting on Ngugi's *Detained*, Gikandi seems to be focused on Ngugi's distinct style. He says that it is the form that Ngugi chooses to write that gives the text its power. He outlines the different spaces that Ngugi uses and points out how form characterizes the text; for example, the use of a series of notes. He argues that Ngugi succeeds because he is able to allegorize his own experiences and turn them into fables of class struggle in the post colony. Therefore, for Gikandi, what makes the diary successful is the presence of the writer including his subjectivities as a human being rather than narrator.

When Gikandi⁸ was writing on Ngugi's oeuvre, Ngugi had not written *Dreams in a Time of War* and *In the House of the Interpreter*. This opens up another window in which we can study the writer's style in his autobiographical writings. Ngugi's turn to the autobiography in his later years of writing provides a rich canvass to read the style he employs in them. As such, the study investigates how one writes about self and the influences they carry to the text. The study presents a chance to compare the narrative choices made by a writer who has written both memoirs and a diary. More pointedly, the paper examine different versions of life stories, how a writer crafts a convincing autobiographical self as well as the strategic decisions he makes to achieve coherence.

Ndigirigi¹⁰, in *Bloodhounds at the Gate: Trauma, Narrative Memory, and Melancholia in NgugiwaThiong'o's Memoirs of Wartime*, examines the complicated positions from which NgugiwaThiong'o witnesses the trauma of the emergency period in Kenya (1952-59). Ndigirigi shows that while the memoirs narrativize events that do not rise to the high threshold of traumatic experience, they contain reconstructed narrative memories of the loss and melancholia Ngugi felt during the period. Nixon¹¹, in *Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism*, suggests that Maathai's text be read through the lens of ecocriticism. In his work, he examines autobiographies by figures like Wangari Maathai, Arundhati Roy, Indra Sinha, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Abdulrahman Munif, Njabulo Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, Jamaica Kincaid, Rachel Carson, and June Jordan. He addresses what he sees as "the complex, often vexed figure of the environmental writer-activist" (p. 5). He addresses not just literary, but more broadly, rhetorical and visual challenges posed by what he terms as slow violence. Nixon places particular emphasis on combative writers who have deployed their imaginative agility and worldly ardor to help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmental degradation.

Nixon's work helps us connect the literary aspect of Maathai's work by helping explain how she not only spearheads action for environmental justice but more importantly, how she imaginatively presents the issues at stake through her autobiographical writing. He sees *Unbowed* as providing an entry point to study "movement memoir" (p. 129) as an imaginative form and investigate the relationship between singular autobiography and the collective history of social movement. Thus, Nixon connects form in *Unbowed* to activism. Similarly, in a foundational collection of essays that show the transformation of existing tropes,

genres, and concepts (including eco-critical concepts) or the significance of suppressed environmental epistemologies for reimagining development, environmental protection, sustainability, and relationships between humans and nonhuman nature toward the goal of forging a better future for Africa, Caminero-Santangelo and Myers¹² explore the significance of Maathai's autobiography to sustainable development.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a textual analysis approach with form as the focal point. It, therefore, studied the autobiographical text by Wangari Maathai¹⁴ through categorization of various autobiographers' careers and gender. For instance, Kipkorir is a historian while Ngugi is a literary writer and critic; Kabira is a literary critic while Maathai was a natural scientist renowned for environmental activism. These individuals from diverse disciplines engage in reconstructions of their lives using the autobiography. As such, the researcher assumed that there was bound to be differences in the way they deploy language strategies to articulate their visions. To address the variations in form of the reconstructed lives, the study drew insights from the principles of the theory of autobiography, Autobiographics and African Feminism. This eclectic approach was influenced by the understanding that categories such as gender, class and race may determine writers' narrative strategies.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forces of Invasion

Maathai's uses imagery in *Unbowed*. She seeks to draw connections of her love for nature which she traces right back from her childhood. She mentions the rains the lush green fertile land and the predictable seasons that characterized her homeland. She therefore establishes a setting which will justify the reason why she gets into environmental conservation. Maathai sees destruction of the environment as sources of invasion. She not only writes about a life lived but one that is desirous to live. How people should relate to the ecosystem around them advocates for mutual respect of both male and female. The portrayal of realities such as inequality, corruption, disease and ambition show the writers strive for positive and optimistic image about Africa. Images of the life-giving powers of nature intersect with the resilience of the African woman to widen human possibilities.

Gorserski¹⁴ regards Maathai's representation of the environment not only as discursive but also symbolic. For instance, Maathai¹³ uses the metaphoric example of the invasion of plastic in people's daily life. She decries the substitution by Kenyans of "beautiful, colorful baskets of different sizes and types made from sisal and other natural fibers" with "flimsy plastic bags to carry their goods" (p. 35). Maathai's description of place of the plastic bags as a metaphor for the negative aspects of globalization, such as the "focus on a cash economy and cash crops" helps convince the reader on her stance that this has impoverished life for Kenyans (p. 35). Plastic substituted for sisal mirrored economic and social practices that have displaced people physically from nature, causing an "explosion of immigration" of villagers from rural areas to cities (p. 35). "These plastics litter the parks and streets, blow into the trees and bushes, and kill domestic animals (when they swallow them inadvertently), and provide breeding grounds for mosquitoes. They leave the town so dirty it is almost impossible to find a place to sit and rest away from their plastic bags" (p. 35) Maathai establishes a connection between the encroachment into environmental space with the threat of loss of personal freedom when she says: "because when they are done with what is owned by the public, they'll come for what is mine and yours (p. 195).

Another symbol that is related to invading forces is the planned tower at Uhuru Park. As envisioned by Maathai the tower would consist of sixty stories high and would house, among other things, the Headquarters KANU, the *Kenya Times* newspaper (the organ of the ruling party), a trading center, offices, an auditorium, galleries shopping malls and parking space for two thousand cars. The tower would be the tallest building of its kind in Africa. ... The plan also called for a huge symbol of president Moi" (p. 189). Maathai is opposed to this because it did not make economic sense and were just examples of patriarchal and masculinity in display of imposing erect power symbols like towers and statues Maathai says: "What also annoyed me was such grandiose and costly white elephants, which were more often monuments to ego than well-considered contributions to the public good, were being created thorough out Africa (p. 186); here, concrete fields were invading the natural environment and spreads violence to those who are vulnerable like nature. Again, when Maathai is beaten up and has to be taken bloodied to hospital it symbolizes that the very system that oppressed women was also oppressing nature. By presenting this scenario, Maathai is able to create a crisis which shows that everyone is under threat and raises questions of sustainability. This form of imagery which acts as both a textual construct and a reality is presented when Maathai narrates the Uhuru Park saga. Maathai reverts to symbolism making the intended sky scraper a monster and highlights the individual citizen's responsibility towards a more responsible attitude towards the environment. Basing her strategy on story telling she says: "It all starts in "autumn 1989, I was working late in the office as was often the case, when a young law student knocked on my door. Although I didn't know him, it was obvious he had news for me. He told me that he had

learned from reliable sources that that the government was planning to build a skyscraper in Uhuru Park.” (p. 184).

Maathai argues that “it was bitter irony that the park named to celebrate our independence, was subjected like so many of Kenya’s public goods, to land grabbers in the government” (p. 185). On this particular occasion and many other occasions, Maathai faces direct confrontation with the authorities. Maathai highlights the power of the individual and shows the snowball effect that responsibility toward the environment has. Opposition to the tower is seen “in what began simply and essentially with one person deciding what could be done to protect Uhuru Park (p. 183). Maathai is able to show anxieties that building of the park presents. She says that despite past intrusions into the park, nothing would “literally cast such shadow over it as the proposed Times Media Trust Complex. Although the government disputed how much park would be consumed by the complex, what I discovered convinced me that it would be a sizeable piece.” In other words, the Times Media Trust Complex would be a monster. Yenjela¹⁵ observes that Wangari Maathai used civil disobedience to stop the building by arguing that the edifice was an affront to the city’s ecosystem. Here the forces of neocolonialism are clearly seen to be against nature.

Maathai’s fight is heroic; thus portrayed as the hero fighting for the good. Indeed, she writes: “the slaying of the “Park monster,” as we called it, energized the Kenyan people, to me this was the beginning of the end of Kenya as a one-party state. Restoration of democracy would last another decade.” Therefore, the place and space that Uhuru Park occupies becomes a site of contestation. In Kenya, in the early 1990s men were detained for advocating for greater democratic space used this space as public protest. For instance, when many people were imprisoned and detained without trial, Maathai observes that. The mothers had formed a group Release Political Prisoners to appeal to the government to release their son’s from Detention. Maathai says: “I listened to these women, I felt compassion for them. As a mother myself, I wondered what it would be like to have your child thrown into a cell with no sense of when he might be tried or released. I thought off my own sons and brothers: what wouldn’t I do for them?” (p. 217). The identification of the persona to other mothers is meant to show the connection that the mothers had to their children and because of that natural identification they had with each other having experienced motherhood.

Coming together to protest their son’s detention in the space provided by nature pitted what’s constructed, i.e. the government; natural against constructed. “The government always responds to something that is done loud and publicly” (p. 217). The mothers would not leave Nairobi for their sons and that we were prepared to sleep in Uhuru Park while they waited (p. 217) opposition to the building of Uhuru Park was symbolic as it extended from just opposing the structure but also to opposing “The years of misrule corruption, violence environmental mismanagement, and oppression had devastated our country” (p. 289).

Mother Nature

Another image that acquires symbolism is Mother Nature. This imagery runs through the text it is clearly seen in the chapter titled “Beginnings” whereby Mother Nature imagery represented by fertility as well as the beautiful scenery of the virgin land. Maathai grounds her imagery in the sense of place and culture. For instance, she recalls, when she was a child, that “Managu, a green vegetable, flourished in maize fields after the harvest,” and that its “small, yellow, juicy berries sprouted amid the managu leaves. Whenever I was sent with my siblings to look after our sheep and goats as they grazed in the freshly cut fields, I would feast myself silly on those berries!” (p. 16). These vivid images of a rich, local, naturally occurring source of food show the connection between a healthy, thriving environment, and the sustenance of people living there. Maathai then contrasts this positive image from the past environmental status of thriving *managu* with the present day, lamenting, “unfortunately, one does not see the managu plants a lot these days one of the negative consequences of over cultivation and the use of agrochemicals” (p. 16). Gorsevski¹⁴ chooses to see this as emplaced rhetoric (ER), arguing that Maathai’s images conveyed meanings, both publically to show the outside impact of “agrochemicals,” and privately, in the personal moment of sharing a childhood joy like a “feast” of wild berries. This brings into highlight the intersection between the literary and the environment especially if the writers are actively involved in sensitizing for awareness and change and social justice and freedom.

Maathai a scientist focus is on the environment and how its degradation has led to poverty and redefines our way of understanding the cause of Kenya’s problems and offers possible solutions through depiction of nature, conservation, and development, she does this in a way that brings out aesthetics. Maathai makes a symbol of her mother when she passes on. At her mother’s graveside, which she hadn’t visited because of pain she experienced, she had planted a tree. “But I hear the tree has grown tall and reminds visitors that there lies a loving mother of mine (p. 275) my mother was certainly not an environmentalist in the way we would understand the concept today, but she knew the beauty of nature when she saw it and how it made her feel. ... My mother is gone, as are many rivers and with them the trout and a way of life that knew and honoured the abundance of the natural world. Now because of the devastation of the hillsides instead of rivers here are only little streams and the Gura River no longer roars. The river says nothing Its roar has been slowly silenced.

ArokomaKuuraga” may she sleep where it rains.” The place is wet with morning dew and is therefore green (p. 276) here the death of her mother is compared to the death of the environment. “May you sleep where there is rain and dew” was the final blessing given when someone was laid to rest (p. 37).

When Maathai receives her Nobel Prize, she says:

I faced Mt Kenya, the source of inspiration for me throughout my life as well as for generations of people before me. I reflected on how appropriate it was that I should be at this place at this time celebrating the historic news facing this mountain. The mountain is known to be rather shy, the summit often cloaked by a veil of clouds. It was hidden that day. As I searched for her with my eyes and heart, I recalled the many times I have worried whether she will survive the harm we are doing her (p. 293)... Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, 85 so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own (p. 135).

The Nobel had heard the voice of nature. Maathai says that she was always attentive to nature. Her contact with animals starts with her name. She says that the kikuyu word for leopard is *Ngari* and the possessive form, “of the leopard,” is *wa-ngari*. “If you are walking on the path and you see the leopards tail,” my mother said, “be careful not to step on it. Instead as you keep on walking tell the leopard, “You and I are both leopards so why would we disagree? “ I believed that the leopard would recognize me as *wa-ngari* and not hurt me and that I had no reason to fear it (p. 43). In her chapter titled “Cultivation” Maathai offers man the solution of communicating with nature in order to maintain the peaceful co-existence. And when three elephants are shot because of her problem is that these are killed when they could have been immobilized by tranquilizers. She believes the traditional approach to avoid conflict was important.

The Symbol of the Tree

Maathai writes the tree into her autobiographical writings in ways that go beyond its physical presence. As the center for drama, the tree is portrayed as is a symbol of and as a sign of protest and defiance as the following examples will illustrate is in the beginning of the text where Maathai narrates the fig tree of her childhood. It is presented as a symbol of life as it “hosts birds and sustains families collecting firewood for the household” (p. 44). Maathai gives a detailed description of the forest and its fertility and mystery. The fact that as a child she was told not to pick any dry wood out of the fig tree shows the nature conservation that lay with the traditional Kikuyu understanding of nature. Referred to as “Trees of God,” the metaphor meant to cause one to respect the tree like others in the community, she was cautioned not to cut, burn, or even gather their dead wood (p. 45). The words that Maathai uses to describe the three are lyrical. She describes the trees as having “bark the color of elephant skin and thick, gnarled branches with roots springing out and anchoring the tree to the ground,” offering up to a “sixty foot” green canopy of shade with “dense undergrowth” (44). The sacred nature of the migumotrees ensured that protected. As Maathai notes: “[t]he trees also held the soil together, reducing erosion and landslides” (p. 46). The symbol of this ordinary fig tree rhetorical symbol, both literally and figuratively. The tree is part of an ecosystem, but is a synecdoche, standing in for an entire ecosystem. Also, it seems that the tree is an extension of Maathai, with many people closely associating her with the tree. Tree-planting as a symbolic act that represents sustainable development. The symbolic planting of trees in the Uhuru Park and Karura forest protests, it speaks power to government authorities. Its meaning just like the metaphor in a literary text can be manipulated and directed to mark symbolic moments of public memory.

In retrospect, Maathai paints an idyllic childhood that is threatened. She says: “With the trees the British introduced for the timber and building industry, “they eliminated local plants and animals, destroying the natural ecosystem that helped gather and retain rainwater,” (p. 201) this is exactly what the Green Belt Movement is working to get back. Adopting the style of documentary showing the cause and effect, Clifford¹⁶ says that Maathai shows that:

Many of the ecological problems of Kenya are traceable to British initiated practices of using the most fertile land for growing “cash crops,” such as coffee and tea, and of replacing native trees with pine and water guzzling eucalyptus trees, the wood-pulp from which is used to produce writing paper and other paper products that are sold on the international market. The pattern of planting non-native trees contributed to the lack of water for growing nutritious food for people and their domesticated animals. Women, who were long silent about their struggles to feed their families, were inspired by Maathai to take the initiative to promote communal planting of native trees, thereby drawing attention to problems related to Kenya’s fragile ecosystems and the importance of their resolution (p. 41).

In the excerpt above, both the “tree” and Mathai achieve rhetorical symbolism of the Green Belt Movement. She traces environmental problems to colonialism and erosion of culture, with women beg most affected offering the solution. This effectively shows how gender, race and class are interconnected. Representations of the tree by other autobiographical writing like Kipkorir² offer us different perspective. For instance, Kipkorir looks at the eucalyptus trees as a sign of modernity that defines his wives progressive and evidence of Christianity. Kipkorir also highlights land use, highlights that this symbolized not only progress,

modern land management through the furrows and environmental improvement, but also wealth and landownership Ngugi also includes the tree in his writing and much as in dreams in observes the forest at his home receding this is not his main focus. Ngugi also uses the Pear tree and the migumo tree as symbolic of the struggles that his mother and he had to undergo. In their representations of the tree the writers use real life trees in ways that project meaning. Observes that Kabira observes how Maathai has struggled to have the streams back.

Trees in Maathai's *Unbowed* acquire a symbolic nature. For instance, she writes about how seven trees planted by Maathai formed the first "green belt" Maathai writes:

On June 5 1977, Kenya marked the world wide celebrations of World Environmental Day with a procession organized by NCWK. Maathai records that they planted seven trees. According to Maathai "The trees symbolize seven people from seven ethnic groups. The Nandi flame, broad leaved Cordia, African fig tree, east African yellowwood. These seven trees formed the first green belt" only two trees survived, but both of have thrived and are now more than thirty feet tall and their canopy for local people selling goods and resting (p. 132).

How the first "greenbelt" Maathai planted does reflects the impact of colonialism's especially on land alienation its post-independence troubles especially about illegal llano allocations for development that reduced forest cover. As women and communities increased their efforts we encouraged them to plant seedlings in rows of at least a thousand trees to form green belts. This is how the green belt movement began to be used. Not only did the "belts" hold the soil in place and provide shade and windbreaks but they also re-created habitat and enhanced the beauty of the landscape (p. 137) Trees have been an essential part of my life and have provided me with many lessons. Trees are living symbols of peace and hope. A tree has roots in the soil yet reaches to the sky. It tells us that in order to aspire we need to be grounded, and that no matter how high we go it is from our roots that we draw sustenance. (p. 293) Trees, according to Maathai, offer hope. Maathai writes: "What I have learnt over the years is that we must be patient, persistent and committed. When we are planting trees sometimes people say to me, "I don't want to plant this tree, because it will not grow fast enough. I have to keep reminding them that the trees they are cutting today were not planted by them, but by those who came before. So they must plant trees that will benefit communities in the future. I remind them that like a seedling, with sun good soil and abundant rain the roots of our future will bury themselves in the ground and a canopy of hope will reach into the sky" (p. 289).

Maathai uses comparison to show what she has done with which shows that what she is doing has been done elsewhere former US president Vice President Al Gore (p. 227), Dalai Lama and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (p. 205) who have already won credibility in the world. By referring to them in regards to her causes and in emphasizing that her dreams are the same as for example Al Gore's, she makes it clear that her hopes and aspirations are on the same level as people like them: "We hope one day to return and plant millions of trees and so realize Al Gore's dream of a green Haiti" (p. 229). Maathai shows the interaction between the real life and the written world. Tree planting becomes real because of its visible results and the drama surrounding it becomes a text imposing on the form of autobiography. Protecting the tree involves power politics and also drama. Narrating The Saba Saba event Maathai says that it marked the struggle for freedom. Maathai decided to honour those killed in the Saba Saba by planting a small grove of trees in Uhuru Park. Elements suspected of being sympathetic to the government periodically tried to destroy the trees by slashing the trunks and the branches or even burning them to the ground – this kind of vindictive vandalism was common among the regime's agents and supporters. Yet, the trees like us, survived, the rains would come and the sun would shine and before you knew it the trees would be throwing new leaves and shoots into the air. These trees, like SabaSaba, inspired me. They showed me that, no matter how much you try to destroy it, you cannot stop the truth and justice from sprouting (p. 207). Here, the symbol of the tree takes a political angle and seen as a means of projecting protest.

Maathai engages the authorities in drama of being chased out of the forest while wanting to plant a tree. Dramaturgy enacted by use of dialogue is episodic two incidents come into mind one is when Maathai describes her activities in burnt forest after the clashes and is Maathai established tree nurseries. She tells them "when the seedlings are ready for planting." I told them: "Invite the other communities and give them seedlings. Tell them, "These are trees of peace. We are not interested in conflict" (p. 239). Maathai intends this to be symbolic, however, she says: "I'll never know whether they saw trees as symbols of peace or took them because they were free. But communities from both sides planted trees. Maathai's visit to areas of violence was construed as incitement. Anticipating trouble Maathai says that she keeps within the law so that her supporters could say," she has not broken the law" Maathai makes sure that the press is with them, in one episode she drove from Nairobi, "As we drove through the forest in the pitch-black night, we suddenly came upon a group of men dressed in traditional warlike costumes including headgear and sheets across their chests crossing the road. ... here in front of us was the killing machine whose destructive actions we had come to witness (p. 241).

Another incident is her campaign to plant trees in Karura on October 7 the campaign took new dimensions. Joined by opposition Member of Parliament and the press they confront workers who were armed with *panga* and would not listen to their demands. Maathai says: "it appeared they were ready for battle. In no time hell broke loose." In narrating this incident Maathai uses drama. She employs irony when she says "Luckily no one was hurt, while I regretted the destruction of property, I couldn't help but wonder what vehicles and buildings were doing in the forest in the first place, since they were not part of the biodiversity I knew" (p. 264). The drama surrounding the tree planting in the forest is that once they planted the trees they needed to water them. "We still needed to get into the forest, because the seedlings in the tree nursery we had established needed constant tending. They also needed to survey and ensure the building does not go any further. The government dramatically sends a battalion of soldiers to guard the forest is. They enter the forest through a strip of Marshlands north of Karura "A group of about twenty – the women hitching up their dresses, the men rolling up their trousers and all of us removing our shoes stepped into the wet ground sing the footprints of our guide in front of us. I was armed with my watering can, and the press with us, too." This drama surrounding the trees perform the intersection of history and fiction in the revelation of politically instigated wars. Unlike the slow violence that Rob Nixon talks about that happens over the years and whose result is seen in soil erosion and desertification, the depiction of the drama of tree planting in Karura by Maathai complete with a battalion of soldiers may be understood by drawing upon the work of Rancière¹⁷. Through the drama of planting the tree in the forest Maathai is able to show visibility and the right to speak and act. This draws the reader to the tree as a site for political struggle. For Rancière, the political is inherently aesthetic at the conceptual and substantive level. In narrating these incidents it is not the formal choices such as the use of imagery that is important rather it is the action and the place of that action that renders it aesthetic. "Politics revolves around what can be seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" (p. 13).

Political struggle is necessarily aesthetic insofar as it is an attempt to reconfigure the place not only of particular groups, but also the social order within which they are embedded. For Rancière¹⁷, artistic practices are but particular ways of making and doing; they can have a distinctly political function, however, in the way that they reorder the relations among spaces and times, subjects and object Maathai writes in ways that the readers we conceive the violence on two opposing sides as immediate and explosive, and with the media covering it visible. "The police thought they had the forest completely covered, and yet we crept in we beat them to it!" (p. 265). According to Nixon¹¹, in contemporary toxic discourse, furthermore, victims are permitted to reverse roles and claim authority (p. 655). This and many other incidents that Maathai narrates when she confronts the police "Armed to the teeth" (p. 267) are included to show that all they needed was to plant a tree and to show the active violence that was being perpetuated against nature.

There is symbolism associated with planting a tree as it symbolizes posterity it constitutes part of Maathai's philosophy. A very big part of her life-philosophy which constitutes values such as respect for basic human rights justice, equality and equity, non-violence, caring and integrity (p. 250). The trees, Maathai argues, provided sustainability, clean water, they hindered earth erosion and thus made it possible for families to grow crops and in this way get varied food and nourishment. Maathai then goes on to stories explaining that the wonders have disappeared alongside with the trees, which has led to a lot of problems. She then continues with her own realization of the fact that it can all come back if they get back the trees. Therefore, Maathai closely associates trees with culture. Maathai sees the resistance to are neocolonial government and elites whose stripping of Kenya's trees for their own gain as symbolic of a wider process of undemocratic, corrupt theft of the country's future for individual gain plays out the intersection between literary devices and government policy. She shows in another gesture of thanksgiving Maathai celebrates her Nobel price by symbolically planting a tree. "I kneeled down, put my hands in the red soil, warm from the sun, and settled a tree seedling in the ground. They handed me a bucket of water and I watered the tree (p. 292). I have shown that the tree trope is used by Maathai in her writing to dramatize the conflict as a solution and a hope and to highlight its threat.

Maathai constantly resorts to traditional knowledge and tropes to explain her vision for the environment, the interconnected factors such as democratic space sustainable development and peace. Maathai links the traditional African stool with its three legs and a basin to sit to represent three critical pillars of just and stable societies. Maathai explains the symbolism which stands for democratic space, sustainable and equitable management of resources, and cultures of peace that are deliberately cultivated within communities and nations. She argues that the basin or sea, represents society and its prospect for development. "No development can take place in such unless all three are in place, supporting the seat, no society can survive" (p. 294). Here, Maathai resorts to traditional symbols which are basic in their structure and closely associated with nature to highlight the need to go back to the past life she therefore looks towards traditional knowledge systems for insight into ways to think about and relate to nature.

The way Maathai ends her autobiography is the same way she does begin; with an eco-critical message that shows that people are already dealing with the issue. She says:

As women and men continue this work of clothing this naked Earth, we are in the company of many others throughout the world who care deeply for this blue planet. We have nowhere else to go. Those of us who witness the degraded state of the environment and the suffering that comes when it cannot afford to be complacent we continue to be restless. If we carry the burden, we are driven to action. We cannot tire to give up, we owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk (p. 295).

Using personification “clothing this naked Earth,” and vivid description “this blue planet” Maathai is able to highlight the crisis of environmental degradation that needs to be urgently addressed: “We have nowhere else to go” Maathai’s use of the collective we shows her inclusion of every one including other species introducing the idea of rights for non-human. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species “to rise up and walk” Maathai’s use of biblical allusion to the command given to Lazarus is used different compared to how Ngugi uses this allusion especially because Ngugi sees Lazarus as a comeback of colonial evil while Maathai sees it as a rejuvenation. This resort to use of non-conventional method of autobiographical writing like use of the third person invites a collective. Also the inclusion of non-person (earth, trees, and rivers) and other species adds to the categories of the highlights a dimension where inanimate who have a stake in the environment. It can also be read as a crisis witnessing narrative¹⁸. In this case, Maathai witnesses the environmental degradation and sees herself both as victim and agent.

Maathai is vocal about environmental issues and interventions and highlights gender relations and challenges patriarchy within national and global ideological structures. We would argue, however, that reading through the lens of ecocriticism is ultimately inadequate in understanding the form that Maathai’s *Unbowed* as an autobiographical writing takes. Maathai writing enables us to make connections with racism, sexism, classism, colonialism and even speciesism, man is not alone in this planet and must coexist. Rob Nixon says what we can apply here’s that one implication, clearly, is that toxic discourse calls for a way of imagining physical environments that fuses a social constructivist with an environmental restoration perspective (p. 656) universal importance by transporting it into the field of general human interest.

Whereas reading Maathai’s work from an eco-critical lens can be contested especially with regards to issues of representation as shown by De Man¹⁹, Oppermann²⁰ or Phillips²⁰ who are skeptical about applying ecocriticism to literary text. Our concern is not of the veracity of events depicted but to show that Maathai has appropriated the autobiography and presented her ideological arguments using narrative strategies whose act of constructed realities animates landscapes and gives significance to natural things which include; the trees the mountains and rivers while inserting pastoral vignettes we cannot help but on questions regarding the natural world and its presence. Ecocriticism in autobiographical writing depersonalizes a genre that is very personal, subjective, and supposedly egocentric (male) genre. While appropriating the conventions of autobiography, the “I” is reduced to how it relates with the rest of the world however turning to traditional knowledge redeems the individual to think as a collective to treat the environment.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Wangari Maathai has structured *Unbowed: a Memoir* as rhetorical and linguistic means of argumentation, and she turns her whole body of writing into a single – but very convincing - argument for a responsible and holistic approach to empowerment of women and nation building in Kenya by planting trees. In writing *Unbowed*, Wangari Maathai mixes the genre of memoir with the very similar genre of the autobiography and orality in this section. This paper has provided a critique of the kinds of metaphors used by Maathai. It was noted that some metaphors of nature may support or contradict her aims in her portrayal of human-nature relationship. Nonetheless, it is evident that the environment is prominent in Maathai’s autobiographical writing.

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