

An Exploration of the Decolonization and Ecofeminist Activism of Indigenous Kenyan Women in Wangari Maathai's Memoir *Unbowed: One Woman's Story*

Naeemah J. Alrasheedi

Department of English Language and Translation, College of Sciences and Arts in Bukayriyah, Qassim University, P.O. Box 6640, Buraidah 51452, Saudi Arabia

Abstract—Wangari Maathai, perhaps one of the world's most renowned African female writers, frequently writes on the struggles faced by indigenous Kenyan women who lack the essentials for survival. Her writings are infused with the efforts of indigenous women to establish themselves as contributing members who can create new ethical, cultural, and territorial agendas. In her writings, Maathai also places a strong emphasis on indigenous female ideal transformation and decolonization narratives. Environmentalism and indigenous women's agency have always been a key unrelenting passion in Maathai's writings. Following this passion, this study examines the decolonization and ecofeminist activist narratives that shape the indigenous Kenyan women's national collective identity and agency. The purpose of this article is to explore Maathai's inspiring activism which is a succession of countless acts of activism toward the planting of both the seeds of land and the agency of indigenous Kenyan women.

Index Terms—identity, decolonization, ecofeminist, indigenous women, activism

I. INTRODUCTION

Wangari Maathai was the first African indigenous activist to voice Kenyan women's agency. After Kenya gained its independence in 1963, a massive plan of deforestation in the country followed. Maathai realized that the consequences of this plan would affect not only the land but also Kenya's indigenous women. As a political activist and writer with a profound awareness of the suffering of indigenous Kenyan women, Maathai embodies the voice of the indigenous in her autobiographical memoir *Unbowed: One Woman's Story*. The subject of decolonizing indigenous women's understanding of gender and environment is a perpetual concern in her memoir. The interesting aspects found in Maathai's autobiography are its different representations of the resistance to violence, gender inequality, environmental injustice, and environmental crises (Nixon, 2011).

Due to the negative consequences of colonization, especially those related to the status of education and women, Maathai decided on a strategy to dedicate her activism towards the decolonization of education and the empowerment of indigenous women in Kenya. Her strategy mainly aimed at considering the land as a defining space where indigenous Kenyan women can play an active role in planting the seeds of both their plants and their identity.

Maathai's strategy was implemented in 1977 with the establishment of the Green Belt Movement project. The movement has two main objectives: how to regain the land's productivity and how to conserve water by planting trees. Moreover, the movement focuses on connecting female leadership development to environmental preservation (Clifford, 2017).

Recognizing Maathai's significant and enormous contributions, writers including Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, and Rob Nixon have hailed her autobiography as a movement memoir (Nixon, 2011). With the release of *Unbowed: One Woman's Story*, Maathai's intellectual journey was recognized in 2004 when she became the first indigenous African woman recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. As a postcolonial ecofeminist writer, Maathai initiates the first profound connection between environment and women's agency. The activism of Maathai is brilliantly represented in *Unbowed* through the explanation of how colonial education is just one example of how colonization paired with the rise of global capitalism delegitimizes indigenous knowledge. Indeed, the writer laments the loss of African culture and the alienating impacts of colonization as she condemns the colonial education Kenyan students received colonial education at the cost of Kenyan traditions where even the mother tongue of the Kenyan people was completely forbidden in schools.

With this premise, this article intends to scrutinize the intersectional activism and environmentalism in Maathai's *Unbowed*, specifically how the author showcases the significant connection between gender and environmental issues through the perspective of indigenous Kenyan women.

II. A BRIEF OVERVIEW ABOUT *UNBOWED*'S STRATEGIES

A. *Indigenous Writers*

African female authors have significantly enriched the field of postcolonial and feminist studies. Some of the most prominent indigenous African writers include Wangari Maathai, Tsiti Dangarembga, and Chimamanda Adichie – each of whom are African female writers who have experienced the meaning of being silenced and alienated from their native countries. However, among these African female writers, it is Wangari Maathai who is considered the first African author to depict the indigenous Kenyan women as a potential force of decolonization (Smith, 2021). Still, all of these writers share a united conviction that one group of indigenous women from anywhere in the world can be active members of their society and a representation of not only the freedom of the land but also environmental justice. Postcolonialism and Ecofeminism engage the indigenous Kenyan women's attempts to restore the native identity of their land. Ecofeminism reveals the similarities between indigenous women and nature by reflecting the influence of nature on their definition of self and their role in life.

B. *Innovative Decolonizing Activism Strategies*

In her memoir, Maathai examines innovative forms of decolonizing that empower women to not only oppose colonial capitalism but also reestablish their agency and join a group of indigenous women fighting to decolonize the environment and gender. Thus, this article reflects on how she challenges the idea that women, especially indigenous women, have no voice and can only speak about personal matters. Maathai reveals her motivation for undermining male hegemony, particularly, when the writer presents examples of decolonizing activism. These examples depict activism based on opposition and a gendered form of resistance; as a result, subversive activism is one tactic used in this genre. These women embody the attitude of self-sacrifice in their daily lives, and it connects with the way they repurpose the autobiographical tradition to express common experiences (Thompson, 2018). Maathai's courageous insistence is indicative of this spirit as if saying: "If we are going to shed blood because of our land, we will" (Thompson, 2018). Similarly, Bernice Johnson Reagan has described Maathai's activism as "coalition-building." For instance, Maathai provides a platform for women to organize opposition against adversarial forces for the benefit of the country as a whole. These forces include environmental deterioration, state repression, violence, gender discrimination, ethnic stereotypes, brutality, and corruption. Moreover, Kenyan women of the indigenous tribes who strive to reject imposed patriarchal and colonial presumptions share one nationalistic identity. What is most crucial to them, however, is planting their land to preserve water and wood. When each indigenous woman is deeply embedded in the cultivation of their land, they realize how their active roles not only reflect their agency but also their land's existence.

C. *The Green Belt Movement*

The movement places a strong emphasis on engaging indigenous Kenyan women in leadership development for environmental preservation. The thousands of women who participated in the Green Belt Project saw the native trees they planted as signs of hope for the return of the communal values and farming methods that their ancestors practiced before European colonizers replaced native vegetation with non-native cash crops like coffee and tea (Clifford, 2017). Examples of these indigenous trees include native fig trees with root systems that help provide clean underground water. Clifford echoes Maathai's work, adding that Maathai has inspired indigenous Kenyan women to take action to encourage group planting of native trees, raising awareness of challenges with Kenya's vulnerable ecosystems and the importance of their remedy (Clifford, 2017). Women have previously kept quiet about the difficulties they faced in supporting their families. Alternatively, Maathai believes it is critical to offer traditional methods as alternatives to environmental damage. Maathai frequently promotes idealized ecological native uniqueness, for instance, she asks for a return to homogeneous cultures free of social conflict. Using the Green Belt Movement as an example, Maathai constructs her entire decolonization vision around her accounts of the tree-planting initiative. According to Maathai, the trees offered stability and clean water, they prevented soil erosion, and they allowed households to produce crops, providing them with a variety of food and nutrition. Maathai continues by detailing how the loss of the wonders and the trees caused a great deal of issues. She then admits that if they get the trees back, they can make up for these losses. Through giving indigenous women agency and autonomy, her stories reclaim their voices while also lament the loss of Kenyan culture and the alienating impacts of colonization.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The autobiographical memoir *Unbowed* serves as the main source for the investigation of the indigenous Kenyan women's struggle to deconstruct the image of the subaltern women as narrated by the indigenous lead Wangari Maathai. Although much has been written about different female African feminist texts, there has been little emphasis on creating an overall understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of Maathai's memoir. The autobiographical text serves as an intersectional narrative strategy that uses environmentally-themed issues as a practical approach to finding solutions for the questions of indigenous Kenyan women's rights and education. The following literature review features some of the most important articles published on the given thematic approach of *Unbowed*. Since there are a few articles that discuss this approach, this article introduces the overall critique of the memoir and presents theoretical frames that explain this approach.

Rob Nixon's work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* explores the memoir's central approach which explains how Maathai's memoir can be defined as a "movement memoir" (Nixon, 2011). As the leading figure in the memoir, Maathai introduces a prominent indigenous figure who calls for a collective community of indigenous Kenyan women to create a social movement. Likewise, another text titled *Narrating the Self and Nation in Kenyan Autobiographical Writings* argues for the fact that *Unbowed* serves as a tool for how the culture can be re-imagined and defined in post-colonial Kenya. Samuel Ndogo contemplates how authors like Maathai use her memorization of Kenyan history as a narrative device to decolonize the colonizer's practices. To clarify Ndogo's argument, he asserts how "African authors represent their experiences as if they are bearing witness to social and historical transformations that have occurred on the continent during the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial epochs" (Ndogo, 2016). Similarly, in her research article entitled, "No Choice but to Strive: Gender, State Power, and Resistance in the Life Narratives of Emma Mashinini, Mamphela Ramphele, and Wangari Maathai", Courtney L. Thompson explains these narrative devices and the degree to which each activist is willing to put her life on the line for causes that reclaim the rights of the majority rather than a privileged few. The spirit of self-sacrifice is apparent in these women's daily lives and works together with how they reappropriate the autobiographical tradition to produce shared experiences (Thompson, 2018).

In the same vein, *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa* depicts Maathai's memoir as an ecofeminist narrative of "the connections between women's rights and the struggle against environmental degradation in the postcolonial nation, and how the writer fights against notions of authenticity used to justify oppressive gendered relationships and the plundering of the nation's ecosystems" (Caminero-Santangelo & Myers, 2011). As specified earlier in this article, there are a few criticisms of Maathai's memoir as an ecofeminist and postcolonial device narrative. Therefore, this article illustrates how the representations of the author's decolonizing activism in her autobiography validate Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's assertion in the edited text *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Smith and Watson subvert such autobiographical presentations drawn from both external and native cultural practices and reflect the diversity of the protagonist and her narrative journey. Smith and Watson emphasize that it is not their intention to universalize their criticism and that their volume is not meant to proclaim the colonization of "woman" or the colonization of the human subject on a global scale. Instead, they emphasize how they intend to provide investigations based on particular locations of colonialism such as colonial Kenya, India, and Indochina/Vietnam and its aftereffects (Smith & Watson, 1992).

Revolving around this theoretical framework of a post-colonial subject, Maathai's memoir also ventures into Fanonian theories that address how the processes of colonial conquest and the subsequent bureaucratization of imperial power shape the subjectivity of colonized people. In this vein, this perspective of postcolonialism draws attention to Maathai's autobiographical self, exemplifying how the colonized subject becomes a central concept in this article. Following this perspective, Smith and Watson's analysis examined the reason why so few critics discuss Maathai's autobiography or the colonial subject's autobiography in their writing and how it can be read as a "potential site of decolonization" (Smith & Watson, 1992). Consequently, this article investigates Maathai's autobiography as a postcolonial ecofeminist.

IV. INVESTIGATING DECOLONIZATION AND ECOFEMINIST NARRATIVES IN *UNBOWED*

Wangari Maathai's memoir *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* was published in October 2006 and recounts the life of Maathai and both her activism and her educational journey to the United States. Maathai, a rural village girl from the Kikuyu tribe, challenged social and political conventions associated with her background and gender. After Maathai finished her doctorate in the United States, she became a motivational figure to many indigenous Kenyan women, particularly after the Green Belt Movement. Maathai as an activist motivated indigenous Kenyan women by reminding them that they have nowhere else to go. We cannot tire to keep going," she wrote, "We owe it to the current and future generations of all species to rise up and live the talk; as women and men continue this task of clothing this naked Earth, we are in the company of many others throughout the world who care passionately about this blue plane" (Maathai, 2006, p. 295). "We remained unbowed" was the continuous slogan that Maathai keeps reminding the indigenous Kenyan women to follow even today.

Maathai realizes the importance of fulfilling the dream of her ancestors who consider the land as a parallel meaning to their own existence. The writer uses her own scholarly journey to the United States as a solid foundation to resist the imposed stereotypical images of indigenous Kenyan women. Words like weak, barbarous, ignorant, and submissive reflect the troubled journey of these indigenous Kenyan women in rejecting these stereotypes. Maathai's philosophy in narrating her life journey became the new hope for indigenous Kenyan women to construct their identity. Her decision to empower and support the indigenous Kenyan women's true identity was challenging because indigenous Kenyan women seemed to be trapped in their fears of patriarchal political corruption. In *Unbowed*, Maathai turned these fears into alarming courage in the indigenous women, clearly stating that "if we are going to shed blood because of our land, we will" (Maathai, 2006, p. 261). Numerous actions in Maathai's memoir reveal her continuous attempts to reveal how the land motivates indigenous Kenyan women through planting seeds and providing water across the Green Belt to realize their active role in society. Indeed, the writer takes pleasure in admiring the land:

At the time of my birth, the land around Ihithe was still lush, green, and fertile. The seasons were so regular that you could almost predict that the long, monsoon rains would start falling in mid-March. In July you knew

it would be so foggy you would not be able to see ten feet in front of you, and so cold in the morning that the grass would be silvery-white with frost. In Kikuyu, July is known as *mworia nyoni*, the month when birds rot, because birds would freeze to death and fall from trees. We lived in a land abundant with shrubs, and creepers. (Maathai, 2006, p. 3)

The lush and green environment of Maathai's youth is marked by the rich, sufficient substances of the land. She emphasizes that although her people, like other Africans worldwide, are not affluent in the traditional sense of the word, they never went hungry because "hunger was virtually unknown" (Maathai, 2006, p. 4). Maathai's environmental awareness is revealed through these evocative descriptions of the terrain and weather patterns, which supports her lifelong commitment to environmental issues. It becomes apparent that the description of land in her book is meant to support a broader argument, revealing her involvement in environmental conservation and gender issues. Indeed, the majority of her memories center on the value of preserving nature and the sense of peace that pervaded her surroundings as she grew up. This is clear from the tales she recalls and the pictures she uses to portray that pristine setting.

However, imperial adventure disturbs this harmony of nature and memories. In this new colonial era, the grass was removed to make room for commercial coffee and tea plantations. Maathai emphasizes the negative effects of colonialism on the indigenous people through her analysis of the diverse conflicts and complexities in her indigenous Kenyan community. All the way back to her grandparents' generation in the 1800s, she describes the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras as the "European world," one that remained in isolation and had very limited contact with the outside world. "I did not know my grandparents, although they were from a pre-colonial era." Except for the Maasais, "they would not have interacted with any other communities outside of the central highlands" (Maathai, 2006).

Even while these surrounding villages occasionally clashed, they found means to promote peace between them, like intermarriages though she does not necessarily romanticize this period. Conversely, she made a point of emphasizing the fact that these communities "thought" themselves autonomous entities or nations, to use Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation. As a result, the colonial expedition severely disturbed the seeming "order" that pervaded the precolonial era. Colonialism therefore becomes a turning point that results in a new definition of these groups (Ndogo, 2016). Maathai emphasizes this when she declares she was aware that her parents did not raise her in an atmosphere that "encouraged fear or uncertainty. There were numerous reasons to dream instead as well as be imaginative and creative" (Maathai, 2006, p. 19).

Ken Coates, in his definition of Indigenous Kenyan people in the text *A Global History of Indigenous Peoples Struggle and Survival*, argues that decolonization and indigenization processes are taking place in the majority of indigenous societies. In Coates' assertion, he clarifies that they take part in uprisings against colonial governments, foreign influences, environmental damage, and other issues. It is apparent in the indigenous Kenyan people's attempts to face intense economic and political pressure to conform to the local, national, or international norms how they are attempting to preserve and protect their cultural independence (Coates, 2004). Therefore, ongoing definitions of the collective identity frequently see the division of their property or the absence of control over resources as a crucial component. Coates clarifies that indigenous peoples are deeply connected to the land across generations (Coates, 2004). Maathai, for instance, remembers how the changes in her community had an impact on the indigenous people and their land as she signals that:

I saw rivers silted with topsoil, much of which was coming from the forest where plantations of commercial trees had replaced indigenous forest. I noticed that much of the land had been covered by trees, bushes, and grasses when I was growing up had been replaced by tea and coffee. (Maathai, 2006, p. 121)

This in turn creates a context in which readers can understand simply how and why Maathai's native land is on the verge of being lost due to both colonial capitalism's exploitation of natural resources and postcolonial lust for material possession. It is a mindless appropriation of collective wealth for bureaucratic and private utility (Maathai, 2006, p. 142).

In addition to the colonial exploitation of the Kenyan people, Maathai specifies the close relationship between environmental and gender issues. She emphasized that women and children are those who are most adversely affected by these negative effects of colonization. In one instance, she explains how rural women are mostly in charge of cultivating the land, making planting decisions, tending to the crops, and gathering food. According to Maathai in *Unbowed*, she writes as she sat there "listening to the women discuss nutrition, energy, and water, the writer could realize that everything lacked depends on the environment around them" (Maathai, 2006, p. 124). These indigenous Kenyan women were defining their new agendas. Maathai recounts how these women's lives and their land are specifically impacted by developments in her area. She clarifies how she

saw rivers silted with topsoil, much of which was coming from the forest where plantations of commercial trees had replaced indigenous forest. I noticed that much of the land had been covered by trees, bushes, and grasses when I was growing up had been replaced by tea and coffee. (Maathai, 2006, p. 121)

In this strategy, she explains how women are the first to notice environmental deterioration that negatively affects agricultural production: if the well runs dry, they are the ones concerned about finding alternative sources of water and the ones who have to go far to get it. As mothers, they can see it in their children's tears and hear it in their babies' screams when the food they serve their family is contaminated with toxins or impurities (Maathai, 2006, p. 123). As Maathai points out:

As forests and watersheds became degraded, it was the women who had to walk the extra miles to fetch water and firewood; it was the women who had to plough and plant in once rich but now denuded land where, without the anchorage of trees, topsoil was washed and blown away. (Maathai, 2006, p. 140)

In another example, she narrates how:

During the rainy season, thousands of tons of topsoil are eroded from Kenya's countryside by rivers and washed into the ocean and lakes. Additionally, the soil is lost through wind erosion in areas where the land is devoid of vegetative cover. Losing topsoil should be considered analogous to losing territory to an invading enemy. (Maathai, 2006, p. 7)

Moreover, Nixon's remark that women actively participating in the Green Belt Movement strategically used what can be called intersectional environmentalism to extend their support and legitimacy is also pertinent in this context. Moreover, they served as an inspiration for "other civil rights campaigns that did not directly address the environment, such as the battles for women's rights, the release of political prisoners, and improved political transparency" (Nixon, 2011). The women, he continued, had been forcefully excluded from subsequent development myths which had betrayed them. They were convinced of the connections between environmental aggression, poverty, and starvation (Nixon, 2011). This was exemplified clearly when the Moi government claimed ownership of Karura Forest and Uhuru Park for private "development" ventures. Whether they were of colonial or neocolonial origin, Maathai was able to rally women who had historically been the victims of plunder that favored small male elites. The fact is that the regime attempted (without success) to fight against the threat that this intersectional ecology posed in 1985, and this may be seen in the relationship between women's activism and the Green Belt movement (Nixon, 2011). The dictatorship anticipated that, in order to promote greater political accountability, these indigenous women tending to seedlings in their rural nurseries would aid in the beginning of a bigger effort to end direct and indirect violence (Nixon, 2011). Maathai illustrates how women, especially rural women, are likely to be negatively impacted by environmental deterioration through these examples.

Therefore, as Nixon observes, the postcolonial ecofeminism of *Unbowed* is evident in the way rural women in particular experienced the "perfect storm" of colonial land theft, dispossession, individualization, and the struggle to continue serving as the main landowners despite increasingly difficult conditions such as soil erosion and forest stripping (Maathai, 2006, p. 40).

The autobiography investigates how environmental justice began to affect women the most. This is arguably an accurate description of *Unbowed* as readers comprehend the way the political convergence of the conflicts for indigenous women's rights and the environment in Kenya made experiential sense. It is important to mention that Maathai has earned a place in the literary heritage of African women because of her approach to how she depicts gender issues and empowers women in her memoir, and as "one which has been denied African women writers" for a very long time "because gender has been ignored as a factor in the development of African literature" (Stratton, 2002). Therefore, one might be tempted to situate *Unbowed* as more of an ecofeminist postcolonial biography.

V. CONCLUSION

In this memoir, indigenous Kenyan women are displayed as a symbolic depiction of the ideal of an indigenous woman who is highly motivated, serving as an example to encourage other indigenous people to realize their full capabilities. Maathai has articulated in her memoir that she places greater value on indigenous Kenyan women than on indigenous Kenyan men. She reveals that indigenous women experience a more profound activism evolution, whereas men strive to acquire financial profit from the land. When read in this context, Maathai's decolonizing activism, which is also focused on the Green Belt Movement and the stories of the tree planting, shows how she did not let educational disparities affect her relationships with groups of women who were regarded as less educated; rather, these women were welcomed and made up the majority members of the Green Belt Movement. Her strategy for empowering indigenous women helped narrow the gap between those with formal education and those without it. Here, this article claims that the Green Belt Movement is a postcolonial ecofeminist movement that liberates and strengthens indigenous women of all educational levels. As a result, there is a need for additional research on both the decolonization and ecofeminist activism narratives that are both completely unexplored.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher would like to thank the Deanship of Scientific Research, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, for funding publication of this project.

REFERENCES

- [1] Caminero-Santangelo, Byron, and Garth Myers. (2011). *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*. Ohio University Press.
- [2] Clifford, A. (2017). On Care for Our Common Home: An Ecofeminist Response. *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*. (Vol.72).
- [3] Coates, Ken. (2004). *A global History of Indigenous Peoples*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

- [4] Maathai, Wangari. (2006). *Unbowed: A Memoir*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- [5] Ndogo, Samuel. (2016). *Narrating the Self and Nation in Kenyan Autobiographical Writings*. LIT Verlag Münster.
- [6] Nixon, Rob. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP.
- [7] Shiva, Vandana. (2014). *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books Ltd.
- [8] Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [9] Smith, Sidonie., & Watson, J. (Eds.). (1992). *De-colonizing the Subject: the Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. U of Minnesota.
- [10] Stratton, Florence. (2002). *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. Taylor & Francis.
- [11] Thompson, Courtney L. (2018). No Choice but to Strive: Gender, State Power, and Resistance in the Life Narratives of Emma Mashinini, Mamphela Ramphele, and Wangari Maathai. *Palimpsest* (Vol. 7, pp. 43-70).
- [12] Zulfikar, Sadia. (2016). *African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Naeemah J. Alrasheedi is an Assistant Professor in Literature and Criticism in Department of English Language and Translation at the College of Sciences and Arts in Bukairiyah, Qassim University, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. She has a PhD in English literature and Criticism, with a specialization in Shakespearean Transatlantic studies and appropriations from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA. Her research focuses on interdisciplinary studies in literature, African American literature, indigenous literature, postmodernism studies, and areas such as transnational feminist studies and Arabic appropriations of Shakespeare. Pairing with her academic role, she serves as the Director of the Department of English Language and Translation at Qassim University.
Email: nalrasheedi@qu.edu.sa