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National Allegory Through Her Own Voice: A Reading of Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story*

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This paper examines Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* as a national allegory, exploring its portrayal of Kenya's socio-political and cultural identity. Anchored on Hall's theory of the nation as a site of inclusion and exclusion, the study foregrounds Maathai's articulation of Kenya's gendered nationhood. Further drawing on the theoretical postulations of Butler, McClintock, and Yuval-Davis, the paper interrogates how Maathai critiques patriarchal structures and the instrumentalization of women in national narratives. Her story intertwines personal struggles with national challenges. Her marriage and subsequent divorce reflect Kenya's tumultuous journey through independence and post-independence disillusionment. Through the lens of orature, Maathai revisits Kikuyu myths, colonial disruptions, and postcolonial challenges, revealing the interplay of gender, power, and nationalism. Maathai's leadership, grounded in her Anjiru clan heritage, underscores her unwavering commitment to national development through political, environmental, and social activism. Despite setbacks in politics and personal life, she emerges as a resilient figure, confronting issues such as ethnic division, governance failures, and environmental degradation. Maathai's autobiographical reflections on identity, social justice, and environmental activism underscore her resistance against colonial and neo-colonial legacies. This allegorical reading posits *Unbowed* as a narrative of Kenya's ongoing struggle for equality, inclusivity, and self-determination. Using metaphors such as the African stool with three legs (democracy, sustainable resource management, and peace), Maathai offers a blueprint for a just and sustainable Kenya. Her story celebrates persistence, hope, and collective responsibility in the quest for nation-building, providing a powerful feminist and nationalist perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* (2010) is more than a personal memoir; it is a profound commentary on Kenya's national identity, gender dynamics, and socio-political evolution. In this work, Maathai intricately weaves her life story with the broader narrative of Kenya, constructing a national allegory that critiques colonialism, patriarchy, and postcolonial disillusionment. Using Hall's (1996) concept of the nation as a site of inclusion and exclusion, the text reveals how Kenya's nationhood is shaped by complex dynamics of gender and power. This paper situates Maathai's narrative within the broader discourse on gender and nationalism, drawing on theorists such as Butler (1990), McClintock (1995), and Yuval-Davis (1997) to explore how gender is central to the construction and maintenance of national identity. Maathai critiques the marginalization of women in both traditional and modern nation-building processes, exemplifying her arguments through Kikuyu myths, colonial legacies, and post-independence governance. Through orature, she highlights the alienation of African cultures and identities under colonial rule, while advocating for cultural preservation as a means of reclaiming national identity.

This paper analyzes *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* as a layered allegory, using Maathai's experiences to critique the historical and ideological forces that shaped Kenya. From a childhood steeped in Kikuyu

traditions to her environmental activism, Maathai's journey reflects Kenya's broader struggle for freedom, justice, and gender equality. By revisiting myths, employing allegorical narratives, and highlighting systemic injustices, Maathai underscores the resilience required to reclaim Kenya's identity and integrity. The paper ultimately positions *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* as a vital text in understanding the intersections of gender, power, and nationhood in the African context.

Mary Josephine Wangari Muta Maathai (1940-2011) married and later divorced Mwangi Mathai. Wangari Maathai was a social, environmental and political activist and a writer. She was the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize as well as the first woman in East and Central Africa to attain a doctoral degree. She was an outspoken Kenyan politician in the pro-democracy movement. In 2002, she became a member of parliament for the Tetu constituency under the National Rainbow Coalition party that ousted the Kenya African National Unity (KANU) party from power. Maathai was the chairperson of the National Council of Women, an elite women's organization as well as the chair of the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (Women's Progress) Organization. She is the founder of Mazingira Green Party, established in 2003 as an eco-friendly political movement. Besides her autobiography *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* (2006), she is also the author of *Greenbelt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (2003), *The Challenge of Africa*

(2009), and *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (2010).

This paper is premised on the view that Wangari Maathai's memoir, *Unbowed: One Woman's Story*, serves as a national allegory that critiques patriarchal structures and the instrumentalization of women in Kenya's socio-political narrative while offering a blueprint for a more inclusive and sustainable nation through her personal struggles and activism. Therefore, this paper encapsulates the main arguments about how Maathai's autobiography reflects Kenya's gendered nationhood, critiques colonial legacies, and presents a vision for national development grounded in environmentalism and social justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The nature of the autobiography, its form and substance, has been discussed by many critics since the emergence of the genre. Much focus is on the question of the self in the autobiography in relation to the society of the writer. Many of these critics focus on what distinguishes autobiography from other genres of literature while highlighting the various elements that define the genre. In his definition of the autobiography as a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his/her existence with focus on his/her individual life, Lejeune (1989) highlights four major elements of the genre: language is narrative and prose; subject is primarily individual life based on the story of personality; the author and the narrator are identical, and the identity of the narrator and the principal character that is assumed is marked by the first person, what Gennette (1980) calls 'autodiegetic' narration in his classification of narrative 'voices'. The narrator tells her existence within a given space and time, based on her judgement and comprehension of her existence.

Ochieng' (2005) evaluates the relevance and contribution of selected biographies and autobiographies to Kenyan history. He looks into the challenges faced by the historian in deciding

whether to treat autobiographies as authentic sources of history, noting that while some autobiographies may be objective, the genre is prone to distortions and deliberate omissions. He majorly focuses on Kenyan men's biographies that are quite rich in historical knowledge, including Harry Thuku, J.M. Kariuki, Tom Mboya, Oginga Odinga and Bildad Kaggia. Ochieng' views autobiographies as sources of history. His views lay the ground for this paper since one of the standards for the reading of autobiography is its supposed fidelity to historical truth. In the autobiography under study, does the woman narrator (in this case Maathai) exhibit enough knowledge of the history of the nation like those mentioned by Ochieng'?

Kamau (2006) uses the deconstructive approach to analyse Camara Laye's *The African Child*, Mugo Gatheru's *Child of Two Worlds* and Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* in his critical study of the African autobiography. He links colonial circumstances that led to the growth of autobiographical writing in Africa with available oral literature resources such as narrative traditions. In his study, Kamau looks at the structural and sociological design of the African autobiography through the issues: of how life becomes a story, (re)creating the self and others and the multiplicity of narratives and meaning in autobiography. It is in this multiplicity of narratives within an autobiography that the nation is narrated. Drawing from Kamau's work, this paper focuses on how Maathai uses her self-writing to tell the narrative of the nation.

Muchiri (2014) focuses on the autobiographical voice and how the woman gives herself identity within her writing through the first-person narrative voice. In this way, the woman is both the main character and performer of her own story. She further indicates that the autobiography is the most appropriate form of women's self-expression as it enables them to narrate their stories in their own voices and to highlight social concerns from a domestic and personalized perspective. She

observes that the field of autobiography in independent Kenya has witnessed the publication of a large number of autobiographies by men and, in comparison, very few by women. While there has been an increased interest in autobiographical studies by literary scholars, the Kenyan female autobiographer has been largely unexplored yet this speciality is crucial to the understanding of autobiographical writing. She argues that most of the women's autobiographies discuss and highlight social concerns from a domestic and personalized perspective. This in turn functions as a tool for women's self-exploration and self-definition. The voice of the woman autobiographer, as argued by Muchiri, forms the basis for this paper as the (oral) narrative of the nation through her historical, political and socio-cultural experiences offers an alternative perspective on the construction of the nation from a feminine standpoint.

In a study, Nyandoro (2014) investigated self-identity in selected Kenyan autobiographies in which he established that the author of the autobiography has the intention of constructing the self. The autobiographer narrates, stages and emerges as a transcendental collective identity within a historically given identity. This transition from self-identity to collective identity is achieved when the autobiographer consciously selects one of the multiple self-identities as the organizing principle upon which s/he can employ her/his autobiography. This argument benefits this paper as the aspect of self-construction transcends collective identity, which is historically given through civil nationalism. Equally, this paper benefits from Nyandoro's argument on the role of the construction of self-identity, mainly achieved through the staging of history, since it is through the self that the story of the nation is told.

Ndogo (2016) examines how writers, such as Odinga (1967), wa Thiong'o (1981), Maathai (2006), Ogot (2003), represent the self and nationhood in Kenya (through their social and political worlds). He focuses on how memory is

utilized, not merely as a tool for remembering the past but also as a narrative strategy and trope. In his study, he examines the construction of a nation and consequently the extent to which this is used in interrogating or even inventing Kenyan nationhood. He further points out that in diverse ways, these writers engage with the "official" history or the grand narrative of the nation by intertwining personal experiences with national stories. Further, he observes that these narratives not only deconstruct that history but also invent versions of self by inserting personal histories in the grand narrative of post-independent Kenya. On this premise, this paper looks into the way the woman superimposes her personal stories on those of the Kenyan nation by relating to her personal experiences. Ndogo further examines the autobiographical narration of the self and nation. He carries out a comparative study with a focus on selected male and female autobiographers to assess how heroism and iconography can be used to mediate the contested space of nationhood. He discusses how each of these writers constructs himself/herself and the nation through memory within his/her social-political arena. Ndogo's study is closely related to this paper with regard to the narrative construction of the nation. However, this paper specifically focuses on how Maathai in her autobiography, through her own voice narrates the story of the nation.

Ebila (2015) in her study discusses how Wangari Maathai's life experiences offer an opportunity for discussing the contradictions surrounding the perception, place and identity of women in African nationhood. Against the backdrop of gendered nationalism, which glorifies the role and place of women in the construction of nations, the article presents a different reality of how some male leaders of postcolonial nation-states like Kenyan silence the voices of women politicians by urging them to behave like 'proper women'. The article indicates that Maathai's autobiography demonstrates that the social construction of womanhood in African politics is influenced by

socio-cultural and patriarchal ideologies that construct the ideal African woman as the docile one, the one who does not question male authority. Maathai's autobiography becomes a lens that can be used to view and question the social construction of womanhood versus manhood and the influence of gender power relations on women's participation in the politics of the postcolonial nation-states in Africa. In this context, I read Maathai's autobiography as a means through which a woman, through narrative, contests the roles assigned to women by the male-dominated ideologies in regard to nation construction; how she provides a means for retelling the story of the nation.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative method, which involves a close critical textual analysis. This is so because the paper critically analyses documented literary materials in which personal and socio-historical content is contextualized. The investigations involved an intrinsic reading of Wangari Maathai's autobiography *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* to identify the allegory of the nation through her own voice as evident in her personal story. These readings are analysed and findings are fused within the framework of theories of autobiography, nation and gender. Cognizant of the complex nature of the autobiographical genre, as well as Smith and Watson's (2010) argument that for the marginalized woman, autobiographical language may serve as a coinage that purchases entry into the social and discursive economy, the paper analyses Maathai's presentation of her awareness of the historical and cultural subordinate position to which she is subjected by the male dominant Kenyan cultures and how this bears on her narration of the Kenyan nation. Hall's (1996) concept of the nation as a site of inclusion and exclusion lays the ground for this paper. Butler's (1990) and McClintok's (1995) gender perspectives helped in understanding how the woman affirms her role in nation construction and formation through her socio-political and professional involvement in

her society/nation. McClintok (1995) observes that nations are gendered and women have an active cultural and political participatory role in national formation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The allegorical representation of the Kenyan nation is read in the light of Hall's (1996) allegorical approach to the nation. He examines how the allegorical nature of the nation enables both exclusion and inclusion within national identities. He argues that the nation can be a site for both democratic struggles for inclusion and exclusion that marginalize certain groups. It is within the complexity of national identity that the gender narrative of the nation is fused. Maathai is cognizant of the patriarchal ideological construction of the nation and the nurturing of the nation by the woman.

Resonating with Hall's arguments on the inclusion and exclusion of national identity are Butler's (1990), McClintok's (1995) and Yuval-Davis' (1997) arguments on the gendering of a nation. These scholars argue that the gendering of a nation involves the enforcement of gender norms, the instrumentalization of women's roles and the exclusionary construction of national identity. A complex interplay between gender, power and nationalism then arises. For instance, Maathai recognizes that society acknowledges the role of women as mothers of a nation but fails to acknowledge their contribution to the very nation hence 'otherizing' them. In reference to the political space, during her husband's political campaign, she asserts:

...they wanted to project their 'Africanness' through their wives both at home and in society. Women are commonly described as carriers and promoters of culture. Yet men are also carriers of culture: Why in these instances couldn't they express it? (pp. 110-111).

The recitation of myth is a common feature of orature performance evident in Maathai's autobiography. Maathai foregrounds the woman as

the mother of the nation by alluding to the origin and existence of the nation in the myth of the creation of the Kikuyu community. In this myth, God created Gikuyu and Mumbi and blessed them with ten daughters from whom the ten clans of the Kikuyu community arose (p. 4). This parallels Kenyatta's myth narrative in *Facing Mount Kenya* (1995) although in this case, the daughters are nine (pp. 3-6). In both versions of the myth, the matriarchal system is recognized. She notes that despite the clans being matrilineal, otherizing of the woman was evident as many privileges like inheritance, ownership of land, livestock and perennial crops were transferred to men (p. 5). Despite the mystery behind the change from matriarchy to patriarchy in the Kikuyu nation, which in other oral narratives has largely been alluded to the legend of Wangu wa Makeri where the leadership of women is overturned by the men, Maathai feels that otherizing of the nation began with the coming of the Europeans as missionaries, traders and administrators. In her own observation, the Europeans' renaming of anything they came across led to a 'new order' and loss of identity for Africanness at the expense of embracing Europeaness. It is this 'new order' that gave birth to new geographical nations (p. 7) thus distorting the existing nations albeit micronations. As they did this, they distorted nationhood and destroyed the rich African culture by devilizing it for their own selfish gains:

Before the arrival of the missionaries, Kikuyus and all the Kenyan communities had largely oral cultures...Ironically, the missionaries described such instruments in detail but then encouraged the local people who had converted to Christianity to destroy them. Even as they trivialized many aspects of the local culture, including various art forms, they also recorded them and saved some of the artefacts, which now reside in European museums. I have heard that one of these *gichandi* is in a museum in Turin, Italy (p. 9).

Through orature, Maathai reemphasizes the evils of the colonizer and African political leaders. She vividly retells the story of "Konyeki and His Father as narrated to her and the other children by Aunt Nyakweya" (pp. 297-303). In the story, "four young women admired a very handsome man at a dance. However, with each passing time three of the women noticed something strange with the man: he had two mouths and had eyes like those of a chameleon. Each of these times they told the fourth girl but she dismissed their observation as she was madly in love. As custom permitted, after the dance, the girls went with the man to his home. One of them too scared of what she saw, of the man, on the way decided to leave for her home. While at his home, the two witnessed the horrific sight of the man-eating parts of a human being. Cunningly, they sought their escape leaving behind their love-stricken friend who finally became his wife and bore him a son, Konyeki who was an *Irimu* like his father. While in search for her sister who had not returned home after the dance, the woman's pregnant sister visits and before she could escape as cautioned, she is eaten by Konyeki and his father. Her twins whom Konyeki takes to his mother to cook for him are saved by Konyeki's mother and finally, they kill Konyeki and his father thus gaining freedom to go back to their people together with their aunt." This allegorical story cannot just be read as the literal monster/ogre story. It is a commentary on the naivety of the Kenyan citizens, the Africans, of the evils emitted upon them by both the colonialists and their fellow African leaders – *the Irimu* (Ogre) – on one hand, and on the other as a warning to them (Kenyans) that they must always stay alert to see these evils, and patiently craft a way of freeing themselves and their nation as evident by the women's actions in the story. Symbolically, the vulnerability of the women to deception and their ability to conquer evil is contrasted as a way of illuminating the democratic struggle between evil and good.

As she takes us through the journey of her schooling, Maathai observes how the colonizer

deployed ideological warfare to imprison the minds of the young Africans in various ways. First, she talks of how Mau Mau was demonized through religion:

...at St. Cecilia... I had been sufficiently indoctrinated to believe that the Mau Maus were the terror group and that everyone else was trying to restore order. The British propaganda kept us naïve about the political and economic roots of the conflict and was designed to make us believe that the Mau Mau wanted to return us to a primitive, backward and even satanic past...The extent of the misinformation and brainwashing was such that we prayed that the Mau Mau would be arrested. I did not understand that the Mau Mau were our own freedom fighters! (pp. 63-64).

Just like *Irimu* (Ogre) in the story ‘Konyeki and his Father’, the colonizer disguised herself in religion as she inflicted fear (of the Mau Mau) among the young girls in school and kept them off from the truth about the reason for the liberation struggle in the country. In retrospect, she takes us back to the breach of the agreement signed in 1890 between Captain (Lord) Fredrick Lugard and Waiyaki wa Hinga on land and other property (p. 62). Maathai points to the betrayal by the British as the cause for the organization of the Freedom Army (Mau Mau). It is in one of the theories of what Mau Mau stands for (*maundu ni mau* – ‘the main issues are’) that she echoes the issues that make up (mother) a nation: land, freedom and self-governance. These three issues form the basis for her narration of the Kenyan nation spanning the precolonial to the postcolonial era while cognizant that betrayal and liberation struggle characterize the existence of the Kenyan people.

Other than religion as an ideological tool, the colonizer imposed the use of the English language on the students at St. Cecilia – an aspect reflected in our education system today. Maathai notes that this trivializes anything African and lays a foundation for a deeper sense of self-doubt and inferiority complex (p. 60). Swayer (2003) draws on the Sapir-

Whorf hypothesis, which has also been called linguistic relativity. This hypothesis is based on the idea that people experience their world through their language. They understand their world through the culture embedded in their language and that language shapes thought. Therefore, by imposing the use of the English language, the colonizer aimed to shape the mindset of the young African students to embrace Westernization at the expense of Africanization. The punishment of the ‘monitor’ and inscription of the phrase ‘I am stupid, I was caught speaking in my mother tongue’ (p. 59) for speaking in a language other than English, was to demean the value of the African languages and by extension, the African culture. To debunk the narrative around the African languages, Maathai reverts to the importance of the African languages: “The reality is that mother tongues are extremely important vehicles of communication, and carriers of cultures, knowledge, wisdom and history” (p. 60). In this case, Wangari is emphasizing the need for the preservation of the Kenyan culture as a means of giving the Kenyan nation its identity. This preservation may be achieved through the constant performance or retelling of orature stories that identify Africans with their cultures.

As discussed earlier, Maathai, the other girls at St. Cecilia and other Christians had been indoctrinated into ‘Western’ ways of life. Their way of life was to match what the missionaries had considered socially right: language, names and even dress code. At birth, Maathai is given the name Wangari according to the Kikuyu culture, later, as an infant, she baptized Miriam. Upon joining St. Cecilia and converting to a Catholic, she changed her name from Miriam to Mary Josephine and later reverts back to her name Wangari after her studies in the United States (p. 96). I, therefore, argue that this naming journey for Maathai metaphorically represents the identity crisis that Africa, in this case Kenya, finds itself in due to the overreliance on foreign ideologies. In her own observation, the Europeans had eroded the Kenyan African identity by imposing a new culture on them as signified

through the use of their Christian names at the expense of their African names contrary to what they (Europeans) were practising. Maathai notes: “The way surnames were forgotten in Kenya struck me as similar to how many African Americans in the times of slavery and segregation were known only by their first names, yet had to address white people as Mr. or Miss, followed by their surnames” (p. 98). In this case, Maathai is reminding Kenyans that the responsibility of reclaiming the nation’s lost glory squarely lies in their own hands.

In her narrative, Maathai employs orature to underscore the prominence of issues of social justice, leadership and environment. In a tone akin to a retelling of an aetiological tale, Maathai describes her origin as a way of authenticating her self-story and that of the Kenyan nation. Her entire story seems to aim to explain and justify her personality and passion for the causes of social justice and the environment. She takes the reader back to the past practices of the Kikuyu nation on how a child was initiated into the community hence given identity(nationhood) and all the rights that come with citizenship. She asserts:

When a baby joined the community, a beautiful and practical ritual followed that introduced the infant to the land of the ancestors and conserved a world of plenty and good that came from the soil...Even before breast milk, I would have swallowed the juice of green bananas, blue-purple sugarcane, sweet potatoes and a fattened lamb, all fruits of the local land. I am as much a child of my native soil as I am of my father... (p. 4).

The elaborate reception of a newborn baby by the community echoes communalism as the fabric that knits society together. By linking a child’s identity to both the land and parent, Maathai justifies her struggle and that of other women to ensure fair, equal treatment and privileges for both men and women in post-independent Kenya. Maathai, like many other Kenyan young people who had acquired education during the colonial time, had a clear vision of what their country Kenya should be after

the departure of the colonialists. From her American experience, Maathai dreamt of a Kenya that is persistent, serious and visionary (p. 95). The excitement for a new Kenya after all the troubles of colonialism signalled an optimistic atmosphere for Maathai and others who had returned from overseas to develop their nation: “We felt that Kenya’s destiny was in our hands. It truly was a whole new world” (p. 100). Ironically, on her return back to Kenya from America with a promise of a job at the University of Nairobi, she faces a totally different world from what she had expected of an independent country. The new nation was marred with corruption, nepotism, tribalism and a myriad of injustices. ‘Uhuru’ was elusive and had left the citizens disillusioned. It is at this point that Maathai’s struggles for her identity as “a child of her native soil and of her father” began. She and other disillusioned Kenyans start a journey of restoring the stolen freedom of the Kenyan nation.

Maathai notes that gender discrimination that is greatly instigated by the patriarchal order is one of the retrogressive aspects of a nation. While at the University of Nairobi, being a woman, she and her female colleagues are not accorded the same privileges as their male counterparts. At one point she wonders how, as a professor, she could be earning less than her technician: “...there was no reason on earth that I should receive less money than my technician” (p. 117). In her criticism of the way independent Kenya took over most of the colonial systems, she pegs the genesis of women’s discrimination in the employment sector to the legacies of the colonial era (pp. 114-115). This she feels should change as it echoes neo-colonialism in a post-independent African nation (Kenya). Her desire to actualize this change is what gives impetus to her and the other women folk to fight for justice. She and her colleague, Vertistine Mbaya, resiliently fought for the rights of the women in the University. This is despite the resistance from the University management and other women who had been advised by their husbands against it. Their success was beneficial to both men and women as she notes:

“To their credit, I never heard any criticism from the male colleagues with whom Vert and I raised these issues...In retrospect, Mwangi was a beneficiary of our struggle” (p. 117). Therefore, equal opportunities and distribution of resources to both men and women will serve as a benefit to the well-being of a nation’s people regardless of their gender.

However, Maathai’s gain is ironically coupled with challenges in her marriage. The story of her marriage to Mwangi and the consecutive divorce allegorically represents the construction of the Kenyan nation through the struggle for independence and the failure of the nation after independence. Despite this disappointment, her dream and determination for a better Kenya is still evident in her leadership skills; skills that stem from her clan Anjiru that was associated with leadership (p. 5). Her leadership positions at various levels, for example at the University in both the Staff Union and the Department, the National Council of Women (NCWK) show her contribution to the development of the Kenyan nation. She argues that it is these leadership skills that enabled her to succeed in her support for her husband, Mwangi, to win elections in 1974. Her vision for a better Kenya gives her the determination to keep Mwangi’s promises to the people despite his reluctance on the same. Her take was that political deception and exploitation of people’s emotions by politicians are bottlenecks to the development of a nation. These evils are only beneficial to the egocentric politicians and only disillusion people who have faith in their leaders. It is for this reason that Maathai, a woman, and a wife in this case, feels obliged to keep the promises made by her husband. Under the umbrella of ‘Envirocare Ltd’, she ventures into a project in which resources would be shared between the rich and the poor (p. 27). It is worth noting that even though this did not succeed, she tried to cultivate a spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood in national development.

Maathai narrates her experiences in politics as a way of foregrounding some of the obstacles to national

development. Her entry into politics in 1997 as an aspirant for both presidential and parliamentary seats was a result of her good leadership of the Green Belt Movement. The people’s desire to have her as their leader was based on the hope that she would help them out of their problems given the expertise she had displayed in the movement (p. 255). She perceived this as a chance to serve her people and save them from the evils of poor governance. As she notes, her entry into the presidential race of fifteen candidates was to enable her to dialogue with her fellow candidates to form a united front so that the opposition would not lose elections like in the 1992 elections. Despite her efforts, she meets resistance, hostility and even false accusations from both the people that she thought she was out to save and the media. On this basis, she lost both seats. Her loss, she believes was due to lack of unity, ethnic cocoon as she was expected to support the “local favourite son” as well as false rumour that she had dropped out of the races. Ethnicity, falsehood and lack of unity, she notes, are some of the obstacles to national development. Despite this, her role as a woman in the political scene before elections both in 1992 and 1997 of calling for a united opposition that would take over power so as to end the oppressive KANU regime is recognized. In her own wisdom, she had predicted no win if the opposition was not united, and true to her prediction, the opposition suffered a humiliating defeat in both 1992 and 1997. She relates the cause of these losses to the selfish motives of both the leaders and the citizens of post-independent states who have resorted to the politics of ethnicity and personality cults (the “Big Man in Africa” syndrome) (p. 258). Nevertheless, she celebrates the unity and win experienced in the 2002 elections. Her participation in the political scene puts the woman in the limelight of a nation’s politics that is largely male-dominated. In their narration, all these women, echo the extra vigour that is required of a woman to compete in politics amidst the challenges they face, as she says: “A woman Politician needs the skin of an elephant” (p. 254). Maathai insinuates

that some women can be better leaders than their male counterparts and that their contribution to national development is worthwhile, hence their capability should not be downplayed.

In the midst of the aborted independence for Kenya characterized by assassinations, lack of freedom of expression, insecurity and false accusations among other political and patriarchal injustices, the Kenyan women never gave up their commitment to fight for justice. For instance, at one time when Maathai had been arrested and falsely accused of spreading malicious rumours, sedition, and treason; at her most painful and agonizing moment, the women were there with banners reading: “WANGARI, BRAVE DAUGHTER OF KENYA, ... YOU WILL NEVER WALK ALONE” (p. 215). This gave her hope that there are people who care and are ready to fight for the future of their nation. This, I argue, is an indication of the womanhood and sisterhood spirit for the purpose of achieving nationhood despite the obstacles. It is this same courage – under the guidance and advice of Maathai – that is exhibited by the women in the fight for the release of their sons from prison (the political prisoners; the young men who had been detained for advocating for greater democratic space). The women’s advocacy for the release of their sons and their enduring suffering reflects on the mothering of a nation through sacrifice and resilience. As the political class otherizes its citizens, the mothers’ mothers them (p. 222). This resonates well with Achebe’s (2010) argument on the supremacy of motherhood. While in exile Okonkwo is warned by his maternal uncle, Uchendu, for his stubborn character:

“Then listen to me,” he said and cleared his throat. “It is true that a child belongs to his father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother’s hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect

you...And that is why we say that mother is supreme (p. 133).

Achebe’s (2010) presentation of the image of a mother as the protector and soother of a child in times of trouble, parallels what Maathai is narrating in her autobiography. The Kenyan nation has found itself in trouble as a result of the aborted ‘Uhuru’ that was hard-earned. The post-independent leadership has mismanaged resources, oppressed its people and deprived them of their basic rights. Women like Maathai have the responsibility to get the nation back on its feet. The question then is: could she and the other women, just like in the story of ‘Konyeki and his father’, be the four women who admired the young handsome man and reacted to his ugliness – monster traits – differently at different times? Considering her presentation of the woman in her narration, Maathai constantly echoes victimhood (just like the four women in the story). The female characters’ harassment and oppression by various systems (*irimu*/monster) become a catalyst for turning victimhood into self-sacrificing heroines as both a feminist and a nationalist gesture.

Maathai sums up the genesis of her deeds that have created the unbowed Maathai with the phrase “A great river begins somewhere” (p. 119). In her self-narrative, Maathai accords ‘mother earth’ with a lot of importance. As noted earlier, a child at birth is first initiated into the abundance of Mother Earth as a way of giving him/her a sense of belonging (nationhood). Hence, her passion and love for the environment began at birth and got ignited by her childhood experiences at Ilhuthu, her home:

...These were the experiences that made me feel very close to the land and appreciate the beauty of the environment. I have never lost that closeness to the soil. I knew that the soil should remain on the land and painfully recognized the destruction of the land when I saw the silt in rivers, especially after the rains (p. 48).

It is this appreciation for its importance that drove Maathai to defend the environment from

destruction. She satirizes her people's naivety in the acceptance of the destruction of the natural resources as a sign of progress: "...traders and administrators who introduced new methods of exploiting our rich natural resources: logging, clear cutting native forests, establishing plantations of imported trees, hunting wildlife and undertaking expansive commercial agriculture...accepting it as a sign of progress" (p. 6). This destruction has continued even after independence she opposes strongly. Her fight to preserve the environment is evident in the many encounters and confrontations she had with the Government. For instance, her opposition to the construction of the Times Towers at Uhuru Park and the grabbing of Karura Forest was met with a lot of hostility from the government. She is cynical of those who either violate other people's rights or ruin the environment for their own benefit. It is for this reason that she foregrounds her major concerns for the nation:

For me, the destruction of Karura Forest, like the malnourished women in the 1970s, the Times Complex in Uhuru Park, and the political prisoners detained without trial were problems that needed to be solved, and the authorities were stopping me from finding a solution (p. 273).

With a lot of resilience, Maathai met every confrontation with a new strategy as she confesses: "Throughout my life. I have never stopped to strategize about my next steps" (p. 286). It is this resilience and forging of new strategies from time to time that she recommends of the citizens in their endeavour to the development of their nation. Her persistent protection of the environment finally gained her international recognition as she won the Nobel Peace Prize. This award justifies her call: "...we must be patient, persistent and committed" (p. 289). Linking this to her role in politics, she recognizes that the 2002 political win by the opposition was a result of patience, persistence and determination, coupled with hope that had finally restored democracy and brought change. However, she is quick to caution that democracy does not

solve problems but no matter how minute the change may be, it is worth the struggle: "However, I do feel that it is better to try to bring about some change from the inside than hammer in vain on the doors from the outside..." (p. 289). From this quote, it is clear that Maathai's desire to participate in politics as a member of parliament was informed by this thought. It is also this line of thought that she uses to encourage people to plant trees even if they will take too long to mature. This should be done to benefit the communities in the future. In being optimistic about the future of the Kenyan nation, she juxtaposes the life of a seedling to that of a nation:

I remind them that like a seedling, with the sun, good soil and abundant rain, the roots of our future will bury themselves in the ground and a canopy of hope will reach the sky...No matter how dark the cloud there is always a thin silver lining, and that is what we look for. The silver lining will come, if not to us then to the next generation or the generation after that. And maybe with the generation the lining will no longer be thin (pp. 289-290).

Maathai's narration of her political and environmental involvement allegorically represents her narrative of the Kenyan nation. Through the analogy of a traditional African stool that has three legs and a basin to sit on (p. 294), Maathai highlights what makes the greatness of a nation: democracy, sustainable and equitable management of resources, and a culture of peace upon which society (nation) is constructed. All three must coexist for a nation to develop. For these to be achieved, resilience and persistence are key; as she says "We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations ..." (p. 295). She asserts that the journey to gaining a free and just nation is full of obstacles. However, they should not hinder the completion of the journey (p. 164). It is for this reason that at the beginning of her story, Maathai mentions her Kikuyu community as one of the forty-two ethnic groups in Kenya, hence signalling the mothering aspect of a nation – forty-two children of mother Kenya. She notes that there

were conflicts and coexistence among neighbouring communities in Kenya before colonialism, but this did not deter the communities from interacting peacefully through trade and marriage. Therefore, Kenyans should learn to coexist and learn to handle conflicts without creating a rift that will hinder the development of the nation.

CONCLUSION

Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* emerges as a profound allegory of the Kenyan nation, intertwining themes of gender, culture, and national identity. Through her personal experiences, Maathai critiques the patriarchal and colonial forces that shaped Kenya, highlighting the contradictions in women's roles as both nurturers of the nation and victims of systemic exclusion. By employing oral traditions, myths, and allegorical tales like "Konyeki and His Father," she enriches her narrative, offering a layered critique of both colonial and postcolonial governance. These stories reflect Kenya's ongoing struggle between oppression and liberation, underscoring the importance of vigilance and agency in reclaiming sovereignty and justice. Her reflections on the betrayal of the Mau Mau fighters and the ideological manipulation of youth further emphasize the enduring challenges of self-determination and equity in Kenya.

Maathai's autobiography transcends her personal story, becoming a testament to the resilience of the Kenyan people and a roadmap for addressing systemic inequalities. Her activism in environmental conservation, social justice, and the empowerment of women illustrates the transformative potential of collective effort and visionary leadership. Employing metaphors like the African stool and the nurturing role of motherhood, Maathai positions women as pivotal agents in reshaping Kenya's socio-political landscape. Ultimately, *Unbowed* calls for unity, equity, and sustainability, urging Kenyans to embrace their cultural heritage, confront structural inequalities, and forge a future rooted in justice and shared identity. It serves as a powerful reminder of the

nation's potential to overcome challenges and achieve true progress through resilience, solidarity, and hope.

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