



FEMALE EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION AND PRESERVATION (ANALYSIS OF WANGARI MAATHAI'S UNBOWED)

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ABSTRACT- This article explores the kinship between women and environment projected by women writers in World literatures in general and African literature in particular. These writers have established a space to discuss the politics of gender, modernity, environmental issues and changes in Africa to articulate a culturally-located discourse of development. Women writers have taught women to stand up for themselves and what they believe in. Through their works of prose fiction they have been able to show women as important part of them that should voice out and not drown in the patriarchal abyss as society expects. Thus women writers during the twenty five years have made a significant contribution. Eventually the works of women writers underwent rapid changes and have steadily risen in quantity and quality. Women writers invite the readers to re-imagine and re-vision the truth that living ethically, beautifully well with human and the environment is necessary. They focus on the poignant aspects of protecting the environment and all creatures which share the ecosystem. Each of their writings has changed the way that ordinary human being perceives the world. Women writers have also shown that women have an effect on the health of the planet beginning from the smallest decisions of day-to-day lives to international policy through which each can make a difference to protect the planet. Thus women writers have offered a different mirror of their own while dealing with the themes of environment, female empowerment and ecological concerns. They may be titled as 'Guardians of the Planet'.

KEYWORDS: African Literature, Women, Environment, Feminism, Gender Equality, Re-imagine, Re-vision, Ecosystem, Female Empowerment, Preservation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Women Writers in Africa have established themselves in the sixteenth century after undergoing much struggle. The truth applies more to women writers who were unnoticed as serious writers. It is subsumed under the massive humming and bustling of her male counterpart who have taken women for granted. Thus women writers during the twenty five years have made a significant contribution to literature. Eventually the works of women writers underwent rapid changes and have steadily risen. Black women novelists are meditating on recreating and restoring the stereotyped images of women with a view to project a different picture. Women writers have focused to depict women who are empowered and try to seek a balance between the family and the natural world. Helen Chukwuma expresses;

The identification of male positive disposition to the cause of women is a healthy development for African Literature.

Firstly, it underscores the validity of women's complaint of subjugation and negative exposure. Secondly, it compliments and advances literature from the continent. With such unison of voice, the real essence of African Literature is brought to the fore and appreciated (Chukwuma 1990: 113).

WOMEN'S KINSHIP WITH ENVIRONMENT

Women writers invite the readers to re-imagine and re-vision the truth that living ethically, beautifully well with human and the environment is necessary. They focus on the poignant aspects of protecting the environment and all creatures which share the ecosystem. Each of their writings has changed the way that ordinary human being perceives the world. Women writers have also shown that women have an effect on the health of the planet beginning from the smallest decisions of day-to-day lives to international policy through which each can make a difference to protect the planet. Thus women writers have offered a different mirror of their own while dealing with the themes of environment, female empowerment and ecological concerns. They may be titled as 'Guardians of the Planet'.

Trailblazing women environmentalists aim for the betterment of environment by legislating actions for eco-feministic protection. These writers work for a greater cause by saving the environment and women to the utmost by participating in protest activities to curb atrocities against women and nature. We have a perennial list of environmentalists in the galaxy of English Literature all who fought for protection of environment and women's rights and privileges connected to it. Some of them are Gauri Devi, the leader of 'The Chipko Movement', Medha Patkar, 'Powerful Activist of Narmada Bachao Andholan', Maneka Gandhi, the 'Founder of People for Animals' organization, Vandana Shiva, Eco-feminist, identified as environmental 'hero' and 'Gandhi of Grain', Kate Sessions, 'the Mother of Balboa Park', Rosalie Barrow Edge, the 'Advocater for the protection of Wild Life', Margaret Thomas Murie, the 'Grandmother of Conservation Movement' and Wangari Maathai, the 'Founder of Green Belt Movement'.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WANGARI MAATHAI

The challenge for African Literature, Wangari Maathai is the most cherished woman worldwide. She was domiciled in Nyeri, rural Kenya (Africa), in 1940. She was a student of Biological Science. This background as student of science made her develop passion for the environment. Internationally acclaimed as fosterer of democracy, Maathai fought for women's rights, and environmental conservation.

THE GREEN BELT MOVEMENT

In her most remarkable work titled *Unbowed*, Maathai talks about her life story. Her journey is not just long and strenuous, but a stubborn and determined one. Wangari dug into her project, the Green Belt Movement, which began by engaging women in planting native trees to counter deforestation. The Green Belt Movement (GBM) was founded by Maathai in 1977. It is an environmental organization that sought to empower women, to conserve the environment and improve living standards. Maathai felt deeply grieved when she heard the women of her native land reported that their streams were drying up, supply of food was scanty and they had to walk long distances to get firewood for fuel. GBM fostered women to work together to grow to plant trees, store rainwater, provide food and firewood, and make some money as a token for their labour.

The Green Belt Movement was established by Maathai under the aegis of National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK). With a double purpose of both reducing the effects of deforestation and provide a forum for women to be creative and effective leaders, the movement was developed. Maathai firmly believed that working with Green Belt gave women the ability to alter their environment and involve in decision making policies. One of the important objectives of the NCWK and the Green Belt Movement was to promote the positive image of women. For Maathai, women's involvement as women as equal participants and developers of the Green Belts led to a affirmative self-identity, and consequently provided models for female empowerment. Maathai asserted that women both assisted in reforestation and generated a source of income for themselves. Thus the movement developed into a powerful platform for environmentalism, addressing women's rights and political power. Together with the movement and other voices crying for justice in Kenya, Wangari remembers clashes with authority, the police, and politicians, and the slow, hard path to progress.

NOSTALGIA FOR PRIMITIVE GLORY IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Maathai developed a strong association with nature like William Wordsworth, the Harbinger and High priest of nature. Crompton-Rickett mentions:

that it was Wordsworth's aim as a poet to seek

for beauty in meadow, woodland, and the mountain
top, and to interpret this beauty in spiritual terms (308).

Wordsworth conceived of nature as a 'living personality' and believed that there is a mutual consciousness between humankind and nature. For him nature was mysterious. In the similar vein, Maathai too worshiped the environment in all its glory and richness. This love towards the environment sowed seeds for commitment to the environment.

Maathai is a thought-influencer and her historical, political and social coincidences stimulated the development of her distinctive personality both as a radical humanist and defender of women's and human rights and the environment and her value system. Regarding the Civil rights movement she said,

It shaped my concept of human rights;
and it made me understand that human rights
are not things that are put on the table for
people to enjoy. These are things you fight for,
then you protect it (2009).

Wangari Maathai was a crusader who fought for women's rights and environmental protection. She was a radical whose philosophy and thought process made individuals; women and communities re-imagine, re-define and re-construct, re-claim and restore their relations and encounters with environment. Her works are tender accounts of young women in uncharted territories who balance a feminist attitude to the wilderness mythology with a sense of "wonder for the natural world and fierce love for preserving it".

Wangari Maathai's titled *Unbowed* is nostalgia for passing away of the primeval natural world in all its glory. This natural glory is associated with feminism. According to Maathai the intervention and rise of industrialization paved the way for massive deforestation process and resulted in the loss of rich vegetation. Since the environment is the mother and nourisher, Maathai links women also to the creative process and expresses the eco-feministic concerns which are the key factors of reproduction and generate peace, harmony and commitment to the families. In the book, Maathai mourns the loss of understanding for the natural world that promoted her to partake of establishing and creating a sustainable culture in Kenya.

UNBOWED: A MEMOIR

The word 'memoir' means a memory or reminiscence. A memoir is a literary genre in which the author writes about his/her memories usually going back to childhood. It is a factual account of a person's life. As a literary technique the writers use this genre to tell a story about the experiences of their life. It is a record composed from personal observation and experience. Zinsser on *The Art and Craft of Memoir* comments:

A good memoir requires two elements-One of art,
the other of craft.....Memoir is how we try to make
sense of who we are, Who we once were, and what
values and heritage shaped us.. (William Zinsser, 1998).

The book is an honest representation of Maathai's thoughts on female empowerment which is possible through ecological restoration and preservation. The language with which Maathai has expressed in the book has inspired generations of women.

“[Maathai’s] story provides uplifting proof
of the power of perseverance—and of the
power of principled, passionate people to change
their countries and inspire the world.” —*The Washington Post*

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is an honest story told by a brave woman who struggles to bring equality of sexes and eventually empowerment to women. Structurally the book is divided into 13 chapters. Each chapter is titled differently and is symbolic of the experiences of Maathai and the African women. The chapter titles are;

1. Beginning
 2. Cultivation
 3. Educate and the State of Emergency
 4. American Dream
 5. Independence-Kenya’s and My Own
 6. Foresters without Diplomas
 7. Difficult Years
 8. Seeds of Change
 9. Fighting for Freedom
 10. Freedom turns a Corner
 11. Aluta continua- the struggle continues
 12. Opening the gates of Politics
 13. Rise Up and Walk
- Epilogue: Canopy of Hope
- Afterword

THE STORY OF *UNBOWED* IN A NUTSHELL

Maathai’s memoir takes place in the village of Ithite in rural Kenya where Wangari recounts childhood experiences of growing abundant plants and diverse vegetal life and respect was given to fig trees. This simple story begins with Maathai recalling her childhood days that she spent in Mount Kenya. Being the eldest in the family, Maathai had to bear the brunt of shouldering the responsibility to help her mother. She never felt bad in assisting her mother in doing household chores. One day it happened that Maathai got a chance to go to school. It was like bolt from the blue and Maathai’s joy knew no bounds. Without giving a second thought, she seized the opportunity with both hands. Eventually she was educated in US where she witnessed that black people were discriminated. Being dismayed at the pathetic situation of women in the United States, Maathai decided to return home.

Back in her home town, Maathai realized that deforestation, urbanization and colonization were the root cause of all troubles in her land. Maathai was hell bent in bringing back the primitive glory of her ethnic culture and began ardently to work for the uplift and empowerment of women and curb deforestation which her country suffered. The trusted spirit of freedom which America nurtured in her made her

promote the same in Kenya. From the firmness of Maathai's mind one can comprehend that the memoir is unique and exceptionally penned by a staunch women in a very straightforward and honest manner.

Wangari Maathai's memoir is direct, honest,
and beautifully written—a gripping account of modern
Africa's trials and triumphs, a universal story of courage,
persistence, and success against great odds in
a noble cause." —President Bill Clinton

HUMANS (WOMEN) AS CHANGE AGENTS

The dynamic woman of Kenya, Maathai has given hope to women in Kenya. Her powerful voice and her relentless efforts to stand strong in the winds of injustice, and her ceaseless love for mankind brought great changes towards democracy and freedom for women. Maathai believed that human beings as a united society must fight for the freedom from the bondage of hegemony and other injustices meted out to them. They should identify what is their privilege, thus standing up for their beliefs and protecting 'Mother Earth' to continue to nurture and provide for all. *Unbowed* ultimately gives full courage and strength to women.

TREE AND ITS SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE FOR MAATHAI

Maathai is best known as a tree planter and environmentalist. Through their work she came to understand the key factors keeping women in poverty:

As I sat listening to the women talk about water,
energy, and nutrition, I could see that everything
they lacked depended on the environment. (*Unbowed*, 119).

A focus on land and trees would reverse that degradation, and it would be something that women could do for themselves, not waiting for government action. This insight would lead to the Green Belt Movement, a women-led organisation that pursued ecological restoration for female empowerment.

But as soon as we began to explain how trees
disappear and why it is important for citizens to
stand up for their rights – whether environmental,
women's, or human (*Unbowed*, 106).

When her organisation was evicted from its offices and blacklisted, she had no choice but to relocate her 80 staff into her own home and garden, where she spent years living in a single room. She was arrested and harassed, hospitalised by police brutality on more than one occasion. She spent time in prison. At times she had to travel around the country in secret, having been warned that she was on an assassination list. Nonetheless, Maathai tells her remarkable story with clear and uncluttered prose, and a generosity towards others. It's written with humility, a woman who became globally influential but in her own words "never severed my connection to the soil". It's a story of determination and strength, of joy and solidarity, and of standing up to greed, corruption and violence with singing and dancing and planting trees. Maathai believed that every tree has a personality.

Trees, in the tradition of the Kikuyu, the largest ethnic tribe in Kenya to which Wangari also belonged, are a symbol of peace and of a good conscience. When two groups are at war with each other, their elders carry a staff from the thigi tree, and place it between the fighting sides. This, it is believed, causes them to stop and seek reconciliation. A tree, Wangari said,

has a personality. As it grows, it changes its environment,

and also the hearts and minds of the people
who take care of it. They build a relationship
to it, and the tree encourages them to do more,
to care more. And so should we, wherever
we are, in this world. Trees are living symbols
of peace and hope(*Unbowed*,99).

The tree symbolizes vitality which is transmitted to the flowers and attracts bees and birds. So every part of the tree is magnificent to the poet as new relationships are established. So Toru Dutt immortalizes the magic of the tree and is optimistic that the tree can live through generations much like the 'Yew' trees of Borrowdale of William Wordsworth.

Thus we can be assured that Wangari's love for the environment was simply passionate. For her nature gave sustenance and possessed therapeutic effect on human beings. Maathai found that her favorite fig tree, where she had played as a child, had been cut down; the stream running near it had dried up. The similar experience reminds us of Toru Dutt, an Indian poetess who also expresses her grief in the poem titled *Our Casuarina Tree*. The poet celebrates the majesty of the Casuarina Tree which was grown in the garden back in her mother land. Toru Dutt remembers her happy childhood days spent under the tree and revives her memories with her beloved siblings. She says that the tree is an added gift and her real connection with it lies on the happy memories she shared with it. For the poetess the tree becomes a symbol of not just the rich tradition of India's culture and philosophy but the tree remains her pride as it is the only link she has left with her past.

Maathai climbed the ranks of politics and academia through hard-work and indomitable courage, pioneered in fighting for the rights of women and safeguarding the natural world. It is surprising to note that until the age of 71 Maathai planted trees with her own hands, thus living up to her credo of the human need to connect with the earth, and the holiness spun around that relationship.

I don't really know why I care so much.
I just have something inside me that tells
me that there is a problem, and I have got
to do something about it. I think that is
what I would call the God in me.

Maathai realized that fate of women was directly connected to their environment; that is, their attitude towards and treatment of it. In 1974, she founded *Envirocare*, a company that hired unemployed women to plant trees. Kenya suffered from severe deforestation having gained its independence from the British Empire. So she started to offer the women workshops on how sustainable management of the environment would eventually lead to cleaner more stable food income. The women were also encouraged to plant trees, and received small stipends for their upkeep. They would choose local kinds of trees and plants which were well adapted to the natural growth and would also yield food and medicine.

DIDACTIC ELEMENT IN THE BOOK

In *Unbowed*, Wangari Maathai offers a meaningful message of hope and prosperity which comes from self-sufficiency. A pillar of the Green Belt Movement, Maathai's ethics consisted of safeguarding local knowledge, cultures, environment and women. She stayed, persevered and empowered them. She helped the community to realize that they are custodians and beneficiaries of trees; she showed them that they had agency to improve their own lives. She believed in the slogan 'All starts with planting that one tree'. Her work on environmental conservation also crystallized the relationship between natural resources and social conflict. Maathai was convinced that sustainability includes the well-being of the women and environment which is possible only through good governance.

'I knew that we could not live with a political
system that killed creativity, nurtured corruption,

and produced people who were afraid of their
own leaders' (*Unbowed*, 26).

Wangari Maathai was certainly targeted for being a woman. Her struggles as a black and a woman caused her dual suffering. Maathai wrote of prison ordeal;

There I was, dressed to kill with my beads
in a cell that was cold, dank, filthy, smelly and crowded,
with no room to sit down, water was all over,"
Later I was put into a concrete, maximum-security
cell with four other women and given a uniform,
a pan to use as a toilet, and a blanket. The women
warders also cut off my braids(*Unbowed* 125).

Maathai told the BBC that she wrote her autobiography *Unbowed* to give hope to others. She gave a trumpet call to all women to use whatever opportunities that came their way. She believed that life is not a bed of roses but a journey which is sometimes pleasant and sometimes painful. But though women are fairer sex, yet it is they who should fight for their rights and privileges to restore and preserve the ecology around them. As the title implies, women should not submit or yield to patriarchal domination, discrimination and other forms of hegemony. Women should remain 'unbowed' to anyone in any situation.

II. CONCLUSION

Wangari Maathai said that pain and suffering does come by chance but because of the path one has chosen to walk. So from *Unbowed* one can learn that certainly women and environment are interconnected and interdependent on one another. Women writers have taught women to stand up for themselves and what they believe in, through their works of prose fiction they have been able to show women a part of them that should voice out, not drown in the patriarchal abyss as society expects. Al Gore, stated;

Wangari overcame incredible obstacles to devote her life to service—service to her children, to her constituents, to the women, and indeed all the people of Kenya—and to the world as a whole (*The New York Times*).

Truly Maathai is a mighty and commanding example of how an 'individual' especially 'woman' becomes an agent and force for change. So (Women) or Female Empowerment is possible through Ecological Restoration and Preservation attempted persistently not only by women, but by all. To Maathai "What people see as fearlessness is really persistence."

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