JHEA/RESA Vol. 20, No. 1, 2022, pp. 67-84

(ISSN 0851–7762)

Re-membering Wangari Maathai's Feminist Scholarship in her Autobiography *Unbowed: One Woman's Story*

Stephen M. Mutie*

Abstract

While scholars have proposed to interrupt and resist the prevailing androcentric view prevalent in Kenyan society, and, of course, some of these ways have borne fruit, this article proposes to turn attention to women's narratives as captured in their autobiographies. This article is thus an interpretive analysis of Professor Wangari Maathai's autobiography *Unbowed: One Woman's Story*. Hopefully, personal story will answer particular theoretical questions that underpin the understanding and conceptualisation of feminism by *Wanjiku* (poor women) in Kenya. Under the backdrop of this question lies a fundamental assumption that feminism in Kenya needs a rethinking and a possible reconceptualisation to address past failures and setbacks. While locating its interrogation on postcolonial feminist theoretical underpinnings, the article adopts a qualitative approach as part of the research design. Being interpretive, the study relies on lit-crit methodology to analyse Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed*. The main concern is to interrogate how Maathai's autobiography reframes feminist scholarship in Kenya, particularly by underscoring the significance of *Wanjiku* as a key resource in the whole feminist enterprise.

Résumé

Alors que les chercheurs ont proposé d'interrompre et de résister à la vision androcentrique dominante dans la société kenyane, et, bien sûr, certains de ces moyens ont porté leurs fruits, cet article propose de se pencher sur les récits des femmes tels que relatés dans leurs autobiographies. Cet article est donc une analyse interprétative de l'autobiographie *Unbowed: One*

* Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Kenyatta University, Kenya. Email: muties13@yahoo.co.uk

Woman's Story par la professeure Wangari Maathai. Nous espérons que cette histoire personnelle répondra à des questions théoriques particulières qui sous-tendent la compréhension et la conceptualisation du féminisme par les *Wanjiku* (femmes pauvres) au Kenya. En toile de fond de cette question, se trouve l'hypothèse fondamentale selon laquelle le féminisme au Kenya a besoin d'être repensé et éventuellement reconceptualisé pour faire face aux échecs et revers auxquels il a été confronté. Tout en basant son interrogation sur les fondements théoriques du féminisme postcolonial, l'article adopte une approche qualitative dans le cadre de la conception de la recherche. Interprétative, l'étude s'appuie sur une méthodologie de critique littéraire pour analyser *Unbowed* de Wangari Maathai. La principale préoccupation est d'interroger la façon dont l'autobiographie de Maathai recadre la recherche féministe au Kenya, en particulier en soulignant l'importance des *Wanjiku* comme une ressource clé dans toute initiative féministe.

Introduction: Wangari Maathai

Born in rural Ihithe, a small village in the central highlands of what was then British Kenya in 1940, Prof. Maathai was the familiar face of an extraordinary Kenyan woman. A trailblazer par excellence, she was the first woman in the East African region to acquire a PhD in 1971 and headed the department of veterinary medicine at the University of Nairobi. Between 1977 and 1979 her personal life experienced a turbulent phase following separation from her husband and their divorce. She lost jobs because of the Kenyan government's malice, was sabotaged by the courts, refused to be boxed in by her gender and battled with riot police officers during the push for multiparty democracy in the late 1980s and 1990s. Years later, her sacrifices were amply rewarded when she broke the glass ceiling to become the first African woman to receive a Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 in recognition of her 'contribution to sustainable development, human rights, and peace.'

In *Unbowed*, she recounts the political and personal beliefs that led her, in 1977, to establish the Green Belt Movement, which spread from Kenya across Africa, helping to restore indigenous forests while mobilising rural communities, particularly women, by offering them small compensation to plant trees in their villages. She introduced the idea of planting trees to serve people. This idea developed into a grassroots organisation, the Green Belt Movement, dedicated to planting trees to conserve the environment and improve quality of life. This movement responded to the needs of Kenyan women who stated that their streams were dried up, their food supply had decreased, and they walked great distances to find firewood. Maathai would pay poor women to plant trees to reforest Kenya. The mission of the movement

is to empower the community through environmental management. This form of community empowerment is a different form of feminist activism that serves the needs of women and children aptly. Maathai recounts:

> As long as the Green Belt Movement was perceived as a few women raising seedlings, we didn't matter to the government. 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 – senior officials in the government and members of parliament began to take notice. (2006:180)

Her rise was marred with numerous challenges that sought to dim her quest for environmental awareness and the fight for democratic space in Kenya. She first attempted to be elected as a member of parliament in 1982 but failed. Her second attempt was in the 1997 General Election when she ran for the presidency and Member of Parliament for Tetu constituency, failing. Her political breakthrough came in the 2002 General Election when she clinched the Member of Parliament seat and was subsequently appointed as an assistant minister for environment and natural resources, a position she held until 2005.

But in all her undertakings, she spoke against the 'marginal and inferior space' (Nyongesa, Murimi and Makokha 2021:1) that women, especially the poor, found themselves. Her fearless and bold nature was evident even in parliament. One time in the Kenyan National Parliament, she was quoted as having told the male members to forget what was below the belt and deal with the substance above the belt. She advised them to stop getting 'distracted by the anatomy below the line and instead the debate [over the Times Complex] required the use of the anatomy of whatever lies above the neck' (Maathai 2006:192). This was *inferiorising* them, as she was one of the few in the country who had attained a PhD.

Maathai also won other notable awards, including the Right Livelihood Award (1984), the Edinburgh Medal (for outstanding contribution to humanity through science) (1993), the Global Environment Award, World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (2003), Doctor of Public Service (honorary degree), University of Pittsburgh (2006), the Goldman Environmental Prize (1991), the Indira Gandhi Prize (2006), and the Jawaharlal Nehru Award (2005). These accolades project Maathai as a distinguished environmentalist and fighter for democratic space in Kenya. Maathai emerged as a global icon of ecological consciousness, democracy and women rights meaning that she was a threat to the imperialistic world. Thus, the central premise of this article is to interrogate her tenacity to transform feminist scholarship in Kenyan higher. However, her high

achievements in the global arena did not alienate her from her peasant roots. Instead, she chose to oscillate between the two worlds. Of interest here is to problematise how her struggle for gender rights and democracy can be nuanced within her renaming herself 'Maathai' as a hybrid of *Wanjiku* and the elitist feminist. Maathai, therefore, aligns herself as the alternative voice that speaks for the otherised *Wanjiku*. She uses her double worldview as an elite woman and her peasant roots to create a third space that rejects gatekeeping in Kenya feminist scholarship.

Maathai's autobiography, *Unbowed*, shows how she underscores the importance of rural women in feminist scholarship in this personal narrative. Situating the autobiography within the larger postcolonial forces that shaped Maathai's public life, this article interrogates how her life, through her tale and self-definition, can be said to gravitate across and reject the gatekeeping discourses that try to define feminist scholarship in Kenya. She bore the brunt of the patriarchal establishment that sought to defeat her in her struggle against patriarchy.

Locating *Wanjiku* in Feminist Scholarship

The term *Wanjiku* is used in Kenyan parlance to refer to a low-income peasant woman living in low-income neighbourhoods. Among other attributes, this woman has low academic achievement, is economically and politically oppressed, and is less privileged. It is this woman that Maathai fronts in her autobiography *Unbowed*. Right from how the title is framed, this autobiography shows a life-story that personifies the spirit of African feminist scholarship at its core, especially in the way this autobiography intertwines activism with the feminist politics of gender studies in Kenyan universities. Furthermore, the autobiography explores the systemic challenges that the author faces in her profession and how she triumphs over them.

In her first chapter, 'Beginnings', Maathai describes the natural environment of her family's village and the effects of colonial settlement, Christianity and literacy on the native culture of Kenya. How did the coming of white settlers change the native way of life, particularly in terms of families' relations to the land, traditional economy, and education? Because her education was in English (and later provided her entry to the Kenyan professional elite), it had the potential to separate her from people who spoke the native languages of Kenya and for her to be seen as 'a white woman in a black skin' (2006:110). How does she feel about this problem, and how did she address the issue of language in the Green Belt Movement? (Maathai 2006:60, 72).

Unbowed recaptures Maathai's struggles against attempts by patriarchal institutions like the university to re-invent her as a 'proper' woman. The memoir details her rise to prominence and her frustrations of high employment:

> I was very conscious of the fact that a highly educated woman like me ran the risk of making her husband lose votes and support if I was accused of not being enough of an African woman, of being "a white woman in black skin" … it was important for me to demonstrate to people that they were welcome in our home. What they encountered was very different from what they expected … this attitude of many of our people was curious given that Kenyan politicians were part of the elite. Like Mwangi, many had been educated abroad, spoke English at home and in their workplaces … but they wanted to project their "Africanness" through their wives, both at home and in the society. Women are commonly described as carriers and promoters of culture. Yet men are also carriers of culture: why couldn't they express it in these instances? (Maathai 2006:110–11)

Through the autobiography, especially within the lens of postcolonial feminist theory, Maathai's account shows how gender spaces are controlled and maintained through narratives about others and ourselves. In 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', Hazel Carby (2013) identifies the fissures in theoretical frameworks and generalisations advanced by white feminists when placed alongside the experience of many black women who faced legacies of imperialism, racism and colonialism. Likewise, most feminist undertakings in Kenya have been accused of and rejected as elitist and sometimes urbane. Carby's affront to the superior West seals a firm foundation for fronting a Kenyan feminist self, who can oscillate between elitism and remain relevant to *Wanjiku*'s traditional demeanour. This is the position that I am taking in this article. I believe that Kenyan feminist scholarship is rid of gatekeeping, a process by which *Wanjiku*, a rightful member of a feminist community in Kenya, is restricted access to feminist scholarship and discourse. By this principle, *Wanjiku* is not entitled to access all spaces or participate in all discussions therein:

> It became clear I was being turned into a sacrificial lamb at one point. Anybody who had a grudge against modern, educated, and independent women was being given an opportunity to spit on me. I decided to hold my head high, put my shoulders back, and suffer with dignity: *I would give every woman and girl reasons to be proud and never regret being educated, successful, and talented.* "What I have," I told myself, "is something to celebrate and not to ridicule or dishonor." (Maathai 2006:146)

In the quotation above, Maathai suggests that although she is a 'modern, educated, and independent wom[a]n', she 'would give every woman and

girl reasons to be proud and never regret being educated, successful, and talented.' This shows that she acknowledges her being modern, but she was determined to speak for 'every woman'. In essence, Maathai's modernity refers to a '[t]emporal/historical concept by which we refer to our understanding of the present in its uniqueness that is in what distinguishing it from the past' (Calinescu 1993).

This article proceeds from this point. While feminist scholarship in Kenya has brought forth a worrying difference between educated feminists and *Wanjiku*, Maathai's feminist undertaking fronts *Wanjiku*, and thus it provides a paradigm shift in feminist scholarship in Kenya. It is true that 'we cannot hope to reconstitute ourselves in all our absences or to rectify the ill-conceived presences that invade *her*story from *his*tory, but we do wish to bear witness to our herstories' (Carby 2013:86). But while Carby's article argues that most contemporary feminist theory does not sufficiently account for the experience of black women, I argue here that a good number of the past existing Kenyan feminist scholars do not seem to adequately articulate *Wanjiku*'s issues, rather their own. To reconceptualise feminist thinking in Kenya, Maathai involves *Wanjiku* in planting seedlings for family welfare. It will be recalled that urbane feminists see the contemporary family as the source of oppression of women:

> It is difficult to argue that the present structure of the family household is anything other than oppressive for women. Feminists have consistently, and rightly, seen the family as a central site of women's oppression in contemporary society. The reasons for this lie both in the material structure of the household, by which women are by and large financially dependent on men, and in the ideology of the family, through which women are confined to a primary concern with domesticity and motherhood (Barrett 1980:214).

This kind of thinking irredeemably severs *Wanjiku*'s 'kind of feminism' from the front of Kenyan elite feminists. Whereas the Kenyan family is seen as pathological by elite Kenyan feminists, *Wanjiku* still holds the institution of marriage dear. It is the reason she opted not to drop her husband's name, Mathai, but instead added a letter to it: 'Maathai.'

In her autobiography, Maathai portrays the lukewarm reception she received from *Wanjiku* who weren't open to the feminist activism she led. This shows the lone tribulations she underwent in her quest to mobilise *Wanjiku* to participate in the struggle. She avers:

> However, the women refused to join us. Many said their husbands had advised them not to be part of that struggle. Perhaps it is not surprising. Those women opposing our campaign were portraying us as women who didn't want to live with our husbands, which of course, was not true. (Maathai 2006:116)

Maathai's autobiography is a *one-woman's story* (emphasis mine) – a story that points to the tenacious spirit of the Kenyan woman. Though well educated, Maathai commits to championing less privileged women in her fight against not only oppressive Kenyan patriarchal systems but also tries to bridge over the gatekeeping that exists in Kenyan feminist scholarship. To make this possible, she involves *Wanjiku* doing what Iheka (2017) calls 'environmentalism for the poor'. Her autobiography broadens our perspective on violent resistance and its complicity in ecological degradation, thus reopening the question of violence that earlier marked the struggle for liberation by such figures as Frantz Fanon; and by involving the village women in planting seedlings for sustainable development and environmental conservation, her autobiography provides a framework within which we can view her feminism as considering the intersections of humans with their environment in those instances of oppression, resistance and agency.

According to Iheka in *Naturalizing Africa*, Maathai's autobiography 'traces her ecological vision to the indigenous practices of her rural Kikuyu upbringing that privileges respect for the environment and the need to nurture the earth that sustains humans' (2017:8). The people Iheka calls 'rural Kikuyu' are *Wanjiku*, the village Gikuyu woman. These are the people that Maathai fights for, speaks for, and represents in all her battles against the Kenyan government under the then president Arap Moi. She chooses *Wanjiku* over elitist women in her feminist reconceptualisation. Maathai suggests that the rural womenfolk nurse and protect the environment through their 'Africanness' through her personal story, an autobiography. However, she hints that not all women can portray this Africanness. She therefore fronts *Wanjiku* as the representation of all underprivileged women in Kenya.

According to Gayle Letherby in *Feminist Auto/Biography,* all research that aims to transform society must be informed by autobiographical experience 'and is an intellectual activity that involves a consideration of power, emotion, and P/politics':

> My argument for theorised subjectivity involves the constant, critical interrogation of our personhood – both intellectual and personal – within the production of the knowledge … as researchers, we become the biographers of our respondents while recognising that the research relationship influences the autobiographies that respondents share with us. (2016:48–9)

According to this position, Maathai's autobiographical voice becomes paramount to transform Kenyan society. Letherby (2016) fronts a position that starts with the subjective. Thus, Maathai's personal story fronts her subjectivity, which mirrors *Wanjiku*'s subjectivity, her 'place', and, of course, shows how *Wanjiku*'s agency has been defined and monitored by others.

Her autobiography narrates *Wanjiku*'s marginalisation and how the elite feminists hurt, discredit and misrepresent them and their plight. A specific case is Mwende in Machakos County whose both hands were chopped off by her husband who accused her of infidelity. In the recent past, Kenya has witnessed serious violence cases against women. These cases range from rape, chopping of hands and stabbing. These setbacks and defeats in the war on gender violence and related societal vices are confounded by the perennial failure of the realisation of the two-thirds gender rule that occasionally threatens the legitimacy of the Kenyan parliament, both the Senate and the National Assembly. The two-thirds rule in Kenya stipulates that all elective bodies should meet the threshold of not having more than two-thirds from one gender. It has been an uphill task since the National Assembly, as the legislative arm of government, has not supported this course.

During the 1990s and 2000s, the context within which *Unbowed* is located, the movement was dominated by female lawyers who articulated their arguments in formal legalistic language to negotiate with male politicians in a style recognised and respected by a patriarchal system. In most cases, male politicians have always accused these elite feminist parliamentarians as being incapable of representing *Wanjiku*. This is because the elite feminist seems to be a lone ranger, fighting patriarchy from an elevated social position, which by its very nature excludes the rural woman. By organising the rural Kikuyu women alongside the 'naturalising environment', Maathai's autobiography fronts a reform process created to enhance women's political voice and access to decision-making and advance women's rights more largely, thus situating women's and the feminist engagement process against the wider political economy of Kenya's political development since the early 1990s. Her autobiography reflects the resilience of long-standing barriers to women's voices and access to decision-making and new constraints and manifestations of resistance and backlash that feminist women face from *Wanjiku* in the post-constitutional reform context.

Interventions set to mitigate gender disparity/violence can only be located within the frameworks of feminist scholarship. However, this article argues that feminist scholarship in Kenya is a guarded space and gatekeeping reigns supreme. This strand of feminist scholarship in academia is elitist and does not take *Wanjiku* on its canvas. Maathai's reflective experience as an agitator for women's rights thus places her in the forefront of unlocking elitist feminists as the gatekeepers of patriarchy. In it lies inconsistencies, abstractions, doublespeak and apparent failures of the feminist enterprise in Kenya.

As a revolutionary figure, Maathai has parallels with Vandana Shiva, an astute woman associated with the anti-GMO movement in India. Both

suave and educated women actively participated in the fight for the otherised women and indicate their holistic approach to feminism in challenging the existing elitism in feminism. Shiva, in *Staying Alive*, mentions the key role played by the women of Chipko Movement, whose mission intersected in the areas of ecological insights and gender activism:

> The recent Chipko movement has popularly been referred to as a women's movement, but only some male Chipko activists have been projected into visibility. The women's contribution has been neglected and remains invisible, inspite of the fact that the history of Chipko is a history of the visions and actions of exceptionally courageous women. Environmental movements like Chipko have become historical landmarks because they have been fuelled by women's ecological insights and political and moral strengths. I will dwell at some length on some of these exceptional women because my interaction has personally inspired me with them, and because I feel that it is unjust that the real pillars of the movement are still largely unknown. The experience of these powerful women also needs to be shared to remind us that we are not alone, and that we do not take the first steps: others have walked before us (Shiva 1988:64).

Maathai's strand of *Wanjiku* feminism acknowledges the marginalised struggles of the peasantry, which remains unrecognisable in scholarship despite her tremendous contribution to ecological restoration and women's rights. Maathai won numerous awards that brought her a lot of fame and money, but her Green Belt Movement associates, primarily women, got the chance to be appreciated. The accolades won by Maathai are metaphors of elitism that Maathai seeks to shed through modelling her feminist underpinnings by thrusting *Wanjiku* into the limelight.

This article aims to show that although feminists in Kenya hope to represent the plight of women in general, this homogenising discourse does not speak for *Wanjiku* in the village. On the contrary, the two sets of women show indifference in income, education and class, which places the urbane female at a more advantageous point than the rural one. This presents a contestation: who speaks for whom? What role do these inconsistencies in Kenyan feminist scholarship portend? To what extent can literature be said to mitigate these inconsistencies?

The goal of feminism is to open a conversation about how gender equality can be achieved, but the efforts to achieve this remain an uphill task. The argument is that the laudable developments enshrined in the Constitution of Kenya 2010 have failed to provide frameworks within which the two-thirds gender rule can be realised. The gender rule in the eyes of the patriarchal establishment is seen as unmerited leadership opportunities for women.

One way to correct this would be to include *Wanjiku* in feminist scholarship by understanding her space. Locating *Wanjiku* in her space would help her understand the masculinities that she fights and the kind of narrative she would use to counter the existing repressive narratives that define women. The question of narrative creation is crucial mainly when applied to an autobiography. Maathai's subjective position in her autobiography is examined alongside other narratives in the 1980s and 1990s, exposing and critiquing the gatekeeping that existed.

Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Progress for Women) is a women's caucus vehemently criticised in Maathai's autobiography. Maendeleo ya Wanawake was the women's wing of the government, a powerful caucus whose core mandate was to voice women's issues in the state. Although it aimed to represent and speak for all women in the Republic, *Wanjiku* felt left out from the conversation and her issues were not well articulated. In her autobiography, Maathai vehemently criticises Maendeleo ya Wanawake as being incapable of helping women. She compellingly avers that when she was undergoing difficulties, instead of the women supporting her, they chastised her telling her to behave like a proper woman. She writes:

> Moi [the then President of Kenya] also suggested that if I was to be a proper woman in the African tradition, I should respect men and be quiet … prompted by President Moi, who wondered in that speech why the women of Kenya had not spoken out against this "wayward" woman, the leadership of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, our former National Council of Women colleagues and now a faithful branch of KANU, criticised me … at one point they suggested that I had "gone astray and should seek guidance from [my] fellow women." (Maathai 2006:196)

The leadership of Maendeleo ya Wanawake was largely elitist. Going by Maathai's criticism of the lobby group, it would have been prudent that the organisation was run as a non-governmental entity that offered an alternative voice for *Wanjiku* predicaments. Although, the caucus was to protect women's rights and articulate women's issues in President Moi's government, Maathai portrays them as opportunistic, blocking social transformation fronted by other women. Being gatekeepers to the seat of patriarchal power, these women prevented other women from achieving emancipation, and the progress for women enshrined in the title of their movement became only emancipation of individual self-interests. Maathai directs her energies in championing *Wanjiku* by calling out the power structures behind the elitist women's groups that had no touch with the rural womenfolk oppressed by President Moi's government. Her Green Belt Movement drive sought to voice the concerns of the peasant woman placed

at the bottom of the social strata. Maathai's feminist drive is anchored on creating a bridge between the elitist woman's (her)story and *Wanjiku* who isn't represented by the elitist women group of Maendeleo ya Wanawake. Maathai's conviction is that 'He who pays the piper controls the tune', thus the lobby group of Maendeleo ya Wanawake could not sufficiently advocate for the true emancipation of *Wanjiku* since it was government-controlled.

Collapsing Elitism into Peasantry Gender Struggles in *Unbowed*

As argued above, what Maathai does, and succeeds in, in her autobiography, is to break the barriers that separate elite feminists from *Wanjiku*. Using herself as a means to such an end, she strides between the two worlds to portray the inescapability of inclusion in the fight against gender oppression. From the available literature sources, it is evident that African women lack a unique expression of feminism. Furthermore, there is a need for African supporters of feminism to re-define feminism as the concept still appears to be a movement without cohesion in the eyes of many. Maathai spearheaded the efforts of self-dependence by encouraging *Wanjiku* to finance her means of living. Such a practice was creative and did not rely on borrowing ideas from Western women's feminism.

Wanjiku's practice of feminism is deeply rooted in the traditional culture and lived experience of African women. Most African women who are mainly poor belong to this type of African feminism. In *Unbowed*, Maathai profiles herself as an academic and an unapologetic peasant. Finding comradeship among the poor women in her ankle-long green Kitenge, Maathai supported their activities. Maathai recalls an event organised by Kenyan peasant women mothers who were agitating for the release of their sons who were jailed in Nyayo torture chambers in Nairobi. Maathai graphically details these peasant women's fearlessness, and the brutal power that the patriarchal system confronted them with:

> The mothers in the tent refused to be intimidated and they did not run. Instead, they did something very brave: several of them stripped, some of them completely naked, and showed the police officers their breasts. (Maathai 2006:221)

In urging the protesting mothers of the detainees to strip when confronted by security officers who were threatening to break up their protests, Maathai argues that the brave women wove traditional beliefs on nudity and gender activism in their fight for democracy. In this incident, Maathai gets involved in the peasantry political struggles of *Wanjiku* through decisive female-gendered activism. By invoking the gendered power

associated with female nudity Maathai presents how older women whose sons were in detentation resorted to the social construct of stripping to counter the police, underlining the move as a special weapon. Stripping as a mode of resistance, especially looking at it through a contextual cultural lens, can only be associated and make complete sense within the contexts of peasant revolution, not from the elitist feminist class. A similar contrasting case was witnessed in Nairobi in 2016. Dubbed 'My Dress My Choice', a feminist protest was organised; but no peasant woman was welcome. The participants were purely elite, from a high-class life judging by their attire, language and mannerisms.

Maathai indeed oscillated between the two worlds, elitism and peasantry, because of not stripping when others were stripping naked, the point she raises in her autobiography is that feminist scholarship will only dismantle androcentricism when feminism theorisations involve *Wanjiku*. Her social consciousness consists of the construction of feminism that considers *Wanjiku* as a significant stakeholder, whose opposition is not men or patriarchy but the social-political evils and class that choke our relationships. Mama (2005:96) argues that:

> The attainment of nation-statehood has made it incumbent on women to pursue their integration into public life, and much energy has been devoted to lobbying for legal and policy reforms, and demanding women's equal representation in the hierarchies of power and fairer access to resources.

In other words, feminism can be understood in women's energy towards mitigating divisive tendencies that characterise their collective march towards global development as women. Women intellectuals like Maathai have used their writings to rout the debilitating deprivations of the social evils that affect the postcolonial Kenyan state. Especially in chapter 5, 'Independence – Kenya's and my Own', Maathai portrays androcentricism in Kenya:

> I decided to pursue the matter in different offices. I found out that the zoology professor had indeed offered the job to someone else, and that that person was someone else … was it also because I was a woman? Perhaps not, but it wasn't long after that, when seeking another job at the same institution, that I encountered sexism from the same men. Both ethnic and gender barriers now were placed in the way of my self-advancement. I realised then that the sky would not be my limit! Most likely, my gender and my ethnicity would be. When I began teaching, all the students were male and they found it difficult to believe that I had the qualifications to be their instructor in anatomy. I was a woman, after all … it wasn't easy to deal with the students and male colleagues. The latter would often tease me: "Do you really have a master's degree in biology?" (Maathai 2006:101–4)

In what Maathai calls 'Difficult Years' (2006:139–63), 'I was also facing the challenge of venturing into what was considered a man's world. Nobody told me that men would be threatened by the high academic achievements of women like me. But Kenyan society idolises education and considers it a panacea for all other problems. Traditionally, society also puts more value on boys than girls: Boys are provided education before girls and boys are expected to be greater achievers than girls. Therefore, it was an unspoken problem that my husband and I had a Ph.D. And taught in the university' (2006:139).

It is noteworthy that scholars in African feminist scholarship have suggested that current approaches to studying women and gender in Africa are rooted in activism (Mama 1996; 2005; Osirim 2009; Fox 2009). For example, Diaw (2007) argues that in 1996, the Senegalese Association of University Graduates held a conference entitled 'Discrimination against women in the workforce'. Scholars decried the under-representation of women at faculty and university assemblies. But, again, those women recruited to the staff of universities faced numerous hurdles in rising to higher academic and administrative echelons. Some of these are occasioned by social and cultural demands on their time, making it extremely difficult for them to devote the kind of time required for excellence in research and scholarship.

This article has interrogated Maathai's autobiography, *Unbowed*, and has noted that, as a pioneer academic, Maathai met several hurdles that curtailed her progress in her career. However, what is important to note is the challenges that she encounters in academia. She writes: 'When I began teaching, all the students were male, and they found it difficult to believe that I had the qualifications to be their instructor in anatomy. I was a woman, after all, and in my mid-twenties' (Maathai 2006:104). This shows the kind of treatment she was to receive in her career; being defined within the lens of patriarchy. However, how Maathai deals with this is admirable: 'I decided to hold my head high, put my shoulders back, and suffer with dignity: I would give every woman and girl reasons to be proud and never regret being educated, successful, and talented' (Maathai 2006:146).

This observation and resolve places *Unbowed* squarely in feminist scholarship. Here Maathai aims to articulate the evils perpetuated on women in academia and give her opinion on the mitigation measures: being unbowed. It is in this spirit and quest that she redefines herself:

> To deal with my terrible feelings of rejection, I got the idea of adding another "a" to "Mathai" and to write it as it is pronounced in Kikuyu. And so I became "Maathai." The extra syllable also signified that although a part of me would always be connected to Mwangi and his surname, I had a new identity. Henceforth, only I would define who I was: Wangari Muta Maathai. (Maathai 2006:147)

Anchoring this article within postcolonial feminist theory as construed by Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (1991), I argue that by critiquing femininity, Maathai's autobiography adds to the knowledge of the theory by presenting another aspect of colonialism – within feminist theory itself – that is, African women colonising African women from the class level. Within this colonialism, this article argues that gender violence and related vices continue to ravage *Wanjiku* while the feminist scholar continues with gender theorisations within the confines of university boardrooms. While the university is a site for knowledge construction and dissemination, it is also an ideological state apparatus available to disseminate any type of knowledge.

Much of this theorisation continues to muzzle *Wanjiku*, relegating her to the fringes of society – as a second class citizen. To propose a paradigm shift, Maathai's autobiography fronts *Wanjiku*'s activities in village-based organisations, especially planting trees. While Mohanty, Russo and Torres (1991) deconstruct what they term as a tendency to present and code Third World women as absolute victims of male domination and traditional cultural practices, Maathai's autobiography suggests that there are in the African conception of feminist theory misrepresentations, inconsistencies and doublespeak. This is because feminist scholars and feminists do not consider *Wanjiku*'s voice.

Although Maathai is ready to roll up her sleeves and work for her nation, a set of challenges impinge on her desire. Using the context of her work environment (the University of Nairobi), Maathai reveals the embedded cancers gnawing the marrow or kernel of the nation that include ethnicity, corruption, and gendered discrimination:

> I found out that the zoology professor had indeed offered the job to someone else, and that that person was someone from his ethnic community. To add insult to injury, that person was still in Canada. It was the first time I had encountered that form of discrimination. *Was it also because I was a woman?* ... both ethnic and gender barriers now were placed in the way of my self-advancement. I realised that the sky would not be my limit! Most likely, my gender and my ethnicity would be. (Maathai 2006:101)

Here Maathai intertwines patriarchy and other social evils that hold the country back. Collapsing the above two quotes, I note a motif that seems to propel Maathai: as a nationalist. It will be recalled that feminism has a place in modern Kenyan politics where women struggle to find their rightful position. The job denial ignited the voluntarist spirit of nationalism. Maathai vents her frustrations just like different categories of highly educated graduates with nationalist internationality who return to Africa after studying and working for their continent only to be disappointed. Her activism is a response to the barriers wedged upon her agency.

The recognition of *Wanjiku* in the feminist discourses in Kenya is based on the importance of women as the overall producers in the food chain in the liberalisation against colonialism. Maathai suits the two types of African feminists as described in her autobiography. Despite the various drawbacks that such women feminists face, Maathai stood unbowed, setting an essential standard for other African feminists to come.

Odiemo-Munara (2008) has rightly demonstrated how female writers in East Africa, through the women figures in their texts, subvert, actively resist, and engage with power/authority; and in the process manage to re-evaluate the dominant zeitgeist, oppositionally establishing the East African woman as an active and speaking subject in the ongoing re-imagining of the East African postcolonies. It is noteworthy that this engagement is political in nature, and that it is largely located within feminist theory whose purpose is to struggle against the oppression of women as women. This widespread oppression results from patriarchy, supremacy of masculine power, and male authority most firmly entrenched (Goldberg 1994; Garber 1992; Fuss 1991).

In Kenya, patriarchy entrenches its hegemony more strongly through nationalism and nationhood and feminism works towards rewriting this hegemony. It is within these frameworks that Maathai's autobiographies can be interrogated, and this article argues that these writers use their memoirs to examine and deconstruct the concepts of Kenyan nationalism and nationhood as male prerogatives. In her memoir, *Unbowed*, Maathai portrays the indefatigable spirit of the Kenyan peasant woman. She is the matriarch of democracy in Kenya. She has fought dark forces which discriminated against her as a woman during Daniel Moi's regime. In dismantling patriarchal notions in Kenya's elite leadership, she uses religion.

Her memoir draws largely from the biblical Book of Acts 3: 1–10 with its mantra 'Rise and Walk'. It will be recalled that in the discourses of resistance to any kind of hegemony in Kenya, religion becomes an important tool in subalterns' quest to refuse to be silenced. Maathai in her memoir immerses her subtle critique of powers that crippled democracy in Kenya. Her resilience is drawn from her earlier relationship with her female mentors. Maathai writes about being particularly devastated by her mother's death (2006:274–6), and earlier describes her relationships with her mother and grandmother when she was a child (2006:13, 36–7). Maathai, therefore, tries to prop *Wanjiku* based on her personal experience as elaborated by her matrilineal ancestry. This reads into Woolf's (1977) formulation: 'we think back through our mothers if we are women'.

Maathai captures this critique thus: 'Throughout my life,' she writes, 'I have never stopped to strategise about my next steps. I often just keep walking along, through whichever door opens. I have been on a journey, and this journey has never stopped' (2006:286). Maathai uses the journey motif to portray the fight against patriarchal hegemony as tedious and unyielding. Because of this hardship, the fighter must never lose faith. Yet, in the same breath, she observes: '[a]s I sat in those cells, denying me the ability to control what happened seemed to me to be the greatest punishment the regime could mete out to me' (Maathai 2006:214).

To buttress her academic (elite) feminist strategies with the *Wanjiku* strategies bore fruit, and people (mostly the elite) were astonished by what her courage could achieve:

> People were amazed not only that one relatively insignificant woman could stop a large project that those in power wanted to see completed, but astonished that it could be done only a year after we had watched in despair as losers of an election were declared the winners. ... To me, this was the beginning of the end of Kenya as a one-party state. (Maathai 2006:204–5)

Fighting these dark forces in Kenya was not a preserve of the women; however, by capitalising on these occurrences in her memoir, Maathai debunks the concept of Kenya's nationhood as a male prerogative. Notably, the issue of agrarian women playing a central role in the whole liberation struggle had also been captured by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his novel *The Devil on the Cross*, where the author props Wariinga as the face of revolution based on the narratives of the Mau Mau Movement in the nationalist struggle. Maathai's memoir presents her as a fearless intellectual, professor, writer and mother who led a selfless public life of struggle in the quest to fight for social justice.

Her story is based on factual and historical claims that embolden her nationalistic course, as captured in *Unbowed*. Maathai's resisting voice presents Kenyan women as equal partakers of Kenya's post-independence narrative. Therefore, her memoir becomes an astonishing and important recollection of the life and work of a nationalist figure. She applied herself to everything she did with vigour and heart; the opportunity to be educated, something that continues to be lobbied for for so many girls in Third World countries, was a major turning point and became the first of many open doorways she walked through and made the most of, not for own benefit, but always for the good of all. For instance, she actively engaged with the Forum for African Women Educationists (FAWE), which is headquartered in Nairobi.

In Kenya, Maathai often found herself at the mercy of deeply ingrained ethnicity and sexism. What situations stand out most strongly as unjust, and how did she stand up to and try to change the injustices she experienced? Facing the difficulties of departmental politics at the university, Maathai writes, 'I found myself wanting to be more than the equal of some of the men I knew. I had higher aspirations and did not want to be compared with men of lesser ability and capacity. I wanted to be me' (2006:117).

It seems almost like a romantic fantasy to imagine what the world could be like if more women were allowed to gain the necessary knowledge that could enable them to facilitate solutions to village and country problems, that would allow them to live sustainably and not in fear or poverty without understanding why. However, Maathai knew and practised that one person can't change everything. It is through showing and empowering others, and especially *Wanjiku*, that change happens. In *Unbowed*, Maathai offers an inspiring message of hope and prosperity through self-sufficiency. In this profoundly affecting and inspiring memoir, Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner and a divorcée, recounts her extraordinary life as a political activist, feminist and environmentalist in Kenya.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm the idea made earlier in this article: Kenyan feminism has to be rethought to include *Wanjiku*, whom the mostly elitist feminism has not sufficiently captured. This should percolate down to *Wanjiku* and involve her. Kenyan autobiographies, particularly those written by women, have navigated past these muzzling patriarchal concepts and placed the Kenyan woman into the concept of nationalism. Women of all walks of life, including Maathai, have demonstrated that Kenyan elite feminists and authors should communicate a holistic picture of feminism manifested in alliance with women of all ranks. The presence of gatekeeping only slows the argument over liberation. Increasing the status of women is an effective plan, primarily when it is owned and directed by women. Incorporating locally held knowledge and strategies to identify entry points and modes of engagement to shape programming choices might contribute to more effective support and reduce the risk of harm (including rejecting a women's empowerment agenda because it represents foreign or Western values). The conceptualisation of *Wanjiku* feminism reconceived women's empowerment as a powerful agenda – driven and owned by Kenyan women and gender activists to the greatest possible extent.

References

Calinescu, M., 1993, 'Modernity, modernism, modernisation: variations on modern themes', *Symplokē* 1(1): 1–20.

Carby, H., 2013, 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', in S. Harris and L. Hughes, eds, *A Feminist Reader: Feminist Thought from Sappho to Satrapi*. Vol IV 1981–2003, Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Diaw, A., 2007, 'Sewing machines and computers? Seeing gender ininstitutional and intellectual cultures at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal', *Feminist Africa 9: Rethinking Universities II*, Cape Town: African Gender Institute.

Fox, D., 2009, 'The Anthropological Collaborator: Feminist Scholarship and Activism in Africa', in M. Ndulo and M. Grieco, eds, *Power, Gender and Social Change in Africa*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Fuss, D., ed., 1991, *Inside/Out*, New York, NY: Routledge.

Garber, M., 1992, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York, NY: Routledge.

Goldberg, J., ed., 1994, *Queering the Renaissance*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

Iheka, C., 2017, 'Pope Francis' integral ecology and environmentalism for the poor', *Environmental Ethics* 39: 243–60.

Maathai, W., 2006, *Unbowed: One Woman's Story*, London: Heinemann.

Mama, A., 1996, *Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa during the 1990s*, Working Paper Series 5/96, Dakar: CODESRIA.

Mama, A., 2005, 'Gender Studies for Africa's Intellectual Transformation', in T. Mkandawire, ed., *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, London: Zed Books.

Mohanty, C.T., Russo, A., and Torres, L., 1991, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Nyongesa, A., Murimi G., and Makokha, J., 2021, 'Otherness and marginal spaces: beyond politics and race in contemporary African novels', *Imbizo* 12 (1): 16 pp, available at https://doi.org/10.25159/2663-6565/7694.

Odiemo-Munara, L., 2008, 'Women engagement with power and authority in writing East Africa', paper presented at CODESRIA's 12th General Assembly, Governing the African Public Sphere, Yaoundé, 7–11 December.

Osirim, M., 2009, 'Mobilising for Change Locally and Globally: African Women as Scholar-Activists in Feminist and Gender Studies', in M. Ndulo and M. Grieco, eds, *Power, Gender and Social Change in Africa*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Shiva, V., 1988, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*, London: Zed Books.

Woolf, V., 1977, *A Room of One's Own*, London: Grafton.