



COLONIZED ECOLOGY: THE DYNAMICS OF DISLOCATION AND DESPOLIATION IN WANGARI MAATHAI'S *UNBOWED*

TARIMOWENI JUSTLINE EGULE

Department of English and Literary Studies,
University of Africa, Toru-orua, Bayelsa State.
tigerjustice72@gmail.com
08030684147; 08075043688

Abstract

This paper interrogates the effects of colonialism on the African ecology in Wangari Maathai's memoir *Unbowed*. Through a critical ecocritical lens, it explores how colonialism has led to the dislocation and despoliation of cultures, indigenous ecosystems, and communities in Kenya. The analysis reveals how Maathai's narrative resists the colonial legacy of environmental degradation, cultural erasure, and ecological exploitation, while promoting a vision of ecological sustainability, social justice, and indigenous self-determination. By interrogating the dynamics of colonized ecology, this paper highlights the importance of decolonizing environmentalism and recognizing the agency and knowledge of indigenous communities in shaping their own ecological futures. The study concludes that Maathai strongly kicks against the ecological dislocation, exploitation and other ecological practices that do not adhere to international required standards. Humans must satisfy their basic needs, but how these needs are met become her primary concern. It becomes pertinent for humanity to strike a balance between satisfying their basic needs and unrestricted exploitation of the environment.

Keywords: Colonialism, Ecology, Ecocriticism, Despoliation, Maathai

Introduction

Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* is a powerful exploration of one of the several written Kenya's ecological narratives. Maathai in this literary compilation tends to weave together her personal journey with the struggles of her nation, highlighting the intricate relationships between colonialism and the forces of environmental destruction. Hence, her memoir seems to retrospectively expose the layers of ecological ruins in Kenya's colonial and post-colonial experiences. Maathai's memoir critiques the legacy of colonialism and its impact on Kenya's environment. She produced a life narrative that reveals how environmental dislocation and despoliation disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Therefore, the reader is confronted with how Maathai explores the complexities of personal and national identity, reflecting on her experiences as a Kikuyu woman in Kenya as she offers a profound exploration of the intersections between environmentalism, colonialism, and personal narrative.

As a pioneering Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel laureate, Maathai's ecological life narrative embodies the unveiling of the forces of ecological dislocation and despoliation. Hence, this paper titled: Colonised Ecology: The Dynamics of Dislocation and Despoliation in Maathai's *Unbowed* delves into the complex relationships between colonialism and the environment. Through a critical analysis of Maathai's memoir, this paper examines how colonial and postcolonial forces are implicated in the disruption of both material and non-material environmental spaces in Kenya particularly and Africa in general. This reading is done with the intention of serving as a pointer to the ever-present dangers of ecological encroachment and unrestricted search for natural resources in Africa in the 21st century. This paper aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on environmental humanities. Ultimately, it tends to deepens societal understanding of the ever-present potential and catastrophic effects of neo-colonial and anti-ecological policies within the framework of natural resources extraction in Africa.



Therefore, prompting the urgent need for environmental sustainability and protection even in the face of rapid economic expansion, modernization and urban development.

The study is anchored on ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, also referred to as environmental criticism or "green" criticism is a growing field of literary analysis that focuses on the intricate relationships between humans and their natural surroundings. It interrogates how literature reflects, influences, and critiques environmental issues, examining the ways in which nature and ecological concerns are portrayed, and how these depictions shape human attitudes toward the environment. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) define ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Buell (1995) defines ecocriticism as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis. Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary in approach, which insist on the collaboration between natural scientist, writers, literary critics, anthropologist, historians and more. It considers the earth as an ecosphere and is characterized by eco-consciousness. It is an earth-centred move towards literary studies which aims at promoting the understanding of who we are, what we stand for, and what our behaviour should be towards nature and the environment. It asks us to scrutinize ourselves and the world around us, looking at the way that we represent, relate and interact with the environment both natural and manmade.

According to Dobie (2009) what ecocriticism obviously elicits is the interest in examining the relationship of literature and nature as a way to renew a reader's awareness of the nonhuman world and his or her responsibility to sustain it. Sharing the fundamental premise that all things are interrelated, they are actively concerned about the impact of human actions on the environment. Dobie (2009) also notes that as an ecocritic, it is important that one reads and analyses a text by being attentive and sensitive to environmental issues which hitherto have been relegated to the background by critics. This paper, therefore, demonstrates how African writers represent African environments and address African environmental issues through literature. The significance of this study among others is the fact that it deploys insights from Ecocriticism to the evaluation of the connection between literature and environment. To this end, this study contributes to literary scholarship by considering the ways Maathai delineates ecological sensibilities and the impact of colonial encounter on African bionetwork. Maathai's narratives, hence, unsettling western anthropocentric position on environment. Consequently, the study provides a better perception and positive reception on the ecological challenges and sustainability in Africa.

Dynamics of Dislocation and Despoliation in Maathai's *Unbowed*

One begins this exposition with a well-crafted submission by Okuyade (2013). A position that tends to resonate and set the basis for comprehending the present state of the African environment in the twenty-first century as espoused in Maathai's memoir. In his assessment of genesis of global ecological crisis, he argues that as humans we are confronted with global environmental catastrophe, which puts us in watershed moment which has left humanity in the twenty-first century in a perpetual state of crisis. A situation that is as a result of humanity's "uncanny translation of the functions of the environment to meet his/her ever in satiate greed for satisfying his/her unquenchable taste for resources. From this dimension, the earth becomes a mere product which is to be constantly consumed" (Okuyade, 2013: 460). Hence, the above position provides the guide to the sentiments expressed in this paper. This is because in "[...] depicting [biosphere, eco-ethos and ...] rural landscapes with a sensitivity to change in human and non-human environments [Maathai's memoir] can be understood in relation to Eco criticism particularly, when humans use nature for utilitarian purposes" (Tongsukkaeng, 2013:11). Therefore, her memoir, borrowing from Tongsukkaeng's (2013:11) idea "critiques anthropogenic and anthropocentric ideologies, these ideologies which transforms external nature in the forms of ecological disintegration and probes the categories of man and nature".

Moreover, it is in this sense that Feghabo (2017:151) argues that, "In most pastoral African societies, the interlacing relationship between the people; particularly their culture(s) and the environment have however been altered by the adventurism of Western colonialist's imperialism, which succeeded colonialism, simply sustains the alteration of the relationships between the three, consequently alienating the people from their culture(s)". Hence, Maathai "[...] depicts human culture's detrimental

impact on the environment in order to re-evaluate human's potential to create and destroy nature" (Tongsukkaeng, 2013: 11). Her memoir "[...] about transformed environment critiques a culture that sometimes unjustly conceptualizes nature as a commodity for human exploitation" (Tongsukkaeng, 2013:12). Tongsukkaeng (2013:12) says that "It sees the natural world as a homogenized entity and economic resources or as an expression of culture values that humans can make use of". According to Hiltner (2015:2) it is an "ethic that makes human interests paramount".

Therefore, Maathai's memoir demonstrates how environmental culture can inform human rationality of nature by focusing on intrinsic values in the external environment. She critiques self-centred ideologies that often forgets or ignores the diversity of non-human creatures and ecological elements such as rivers, wind, rain, moorland, stones, rocks, trees, mountains, and forests by restoring cultural, economic, and ecological values into these observable features (Ogaga and Egule, 2024). In her assessment on the ongoing ecological dislocation, Maathai to certain extent seems to blame Christianity as a typical propagator of the anthropogenic ideology. In some scholarly quarters, the Judeo-Christian concept has been implicated in regards to one of the sources of human sense of superiority in that it claims human beings are made in God's image and have a higher place in the "great chain of being". It is also, against this backdrop, White (1967) maintains that modern science and technology are products of Western culture and because Western culture has at its root's Christian attitudes and principles, nature has no reason for existence except to serve mankind. Hence, Maathai (2007:175) captures these forced alterations in her eco-autobiographical narrative when she observes that:

Before the Europeans arrived, the people of Kenya, did not look at trees and see timber, or at elephant and see commercial ivory stocks, or at cheetahs and see beautiful skin for sale. But when Kenya was colonized and we encountered Europeans, with their knowledge, technology, understanding, religion and culture – all of it new – we converted our values into cash economy like theirs. Everything was now perceived as having monetary value.

In the above extract, the Christian dogmas are a culprit in these alterations. Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt for the current ecological crisis. No wonder Buell (1995) draws our attention to the opening chapter of Genesis which he classified as the root of Western techno-domination. To this end, the Christian ideology of humans dominating the natural environment for self-aggrandisement and profit over the ages has in one sense supported the persistent exploitation of natural resources. Hence, White (1967:1203-1207) laments that: "Christian attitude towards man's relation to nature is universally held [...] To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact, the whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West [...]". Consequently, it is the foregoing that manifest itself in Maathai's ecological memoir. She reveals that, the first instance of ecological dislocation in the narrative is tied to the disparagement of the ecological ontology of the people in the narrative. According to Ogaga and Egule (2024) which can be seen in the loss of their cosmic beliefs in the divinity of natural entities like Mount Kenya; together with the dislocation of its ecological significance. Being a symbolic manifestation of God's creative ability, presence, protection, provision, preservation, peace and posterity. For Maathai (2007: 5-6), this cultural oriented environmentalism:

[...] have now virtually died away. They were dying even as I was born. When Europeans missionaries came to the central highlands at the end of the nineteenth century, they taught the people that God did not dwell on Mount Kenya, but rather in Heaven; a place above the clouds. The proper place to worship him was in church on Sunday, a concept that was unknown to Kikuyus. Nevertheless, many people accepted the missionary's world view, and within two generations they lost respect for their own beliefs and traditions.

These dislocations Maathai depicts carry a very devastating experience for individuals, the Kenya nation in particular and African in general. This is because it dismantled their cultural oriented environmentalism by giving assent to environmental exploitation and subsequent debasement. As Maathai (2007:6) seems to confess. For instance, she declares "... Hallowed landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as



a sign of progress”. What Maathai establishes with the narrative of the dislocation of the people culturally based environmentalism (cosmic eco-awareness) in the story of Mount Kenya is to demonstrate that as a precursor to ecological exploitation, these self-centred and exploitative religious based ideologies are deplored as the first strategy for ecological dislocation and alienation of the people from their cosmic ecological convictions. Thus, these Christian dogmas and Western education condemn traditional cosmological roots, creates doubt and disbelief and breed disregard for cultural environmental based ontology. Therefore, the results of these imperial ideological approaches are a total opening up of Kenya ecological spaces for the subsequent exploitation by imperialists. This is quite evidence in the extract below as Maathai (2007: 8-9) says:

Throughout the nineteenth century, European missionaries crisscrossed Africa, clearing the way for Christianity. Almost immediately behind them came numerous explores, adventures, fortune seekers, and those in the service of European powers prospecting for riches in Africa [both natural and human] to exploit [...] The missionaries would generally do their work by visiting villages and attending to peoples [...] Even as they trivialized many aspects of the local cultures, including various art forms.

These experiences inform wa Thiongo (1983:31) assessment that “Christianity as an organised religion is corrupt and hypocritical: besides acting as an agent of imperialism. It exercises a highly disruptive influence on African life and is the chief villain in alienating the African from his own culture”. Thus, he regards religion as the greatest weapon of African ecological dislocation, exploitation and debasement. This experiences also prompts Cabral (1980:153) claims that, “the European exploiters, oppressors and grabbers of land use Christianity as a tool to explain the manifest contradictions portrayed in African history because of the working out of broader historical forces”. Also, the incident of the destruction and uprooting of the fig tree is also paramount to understanding the ongoing ecological crisis in Maathai’s ecological memoir. Because as the author elicits, the destruction of the sacred fig tree marks the climax of the encroachment of the imperial forces with a resultant ecological dislocation of the Kikuyu’s indigenous epistemology for environmental conservation. The falling of the fig tree is followed by the building of alien structure (church). Hence, dislocating the traditional ontological based ecological structure, invariably making a way for the exploitation of pristine ecological spaces and natural resources by imperialists. This development frightens Maathai given her knowledge of the significance of the fig tree in ensuring equilibrium among the various components of the ecosystem. She is terrified seeing such strange symbolic structure in the place of the fig tree. This dislocation foreshadows ecological devastation. Because without doubt, paradoxically, the now imposed structure will engender new and frustrating burdens for the Kikuyu people leading up to drought, hunger, poverty and the absence of divine and spiritual sustenance. Thus, it is obvious from the foregoing that the aim of the introduction of anthropogenic ideology (Christianity) is the opening-up of traditional ecological bio-diversity for capitalist/imperialist exploitation and extraction of natural resources.

Meanwhile, as the people continue to undergo several changes in their cultural outlook and ecological orientation, imperial forces and their destructive encroachment continue to make in-roads into Kenya pastoral landscapes. Traditional societies were evolving, losing their landscapes and bucolic outlooks. Thus, “Everything that represented the local culture was enthusiastically replaced” (Maathai, 2007:11). Africans were not quick to comprehending that their encounter and subsequent dislocation from their ecological sensitivity, pristine and endemic way of life were aided by the combined forces of these alien ideologies, which had resulted to a debasement of their biodiversity. This is done in a magnitude that continued to pose a serious threat to the corporate survival and existence of the people and their environmental spaces. For example, Maathai (2007: 39-41) draws attention to how encroachment into a one hitherto pristine Aberdare Forest breeds ecological despoliation:

The colonial government had decided to encroach into the forest and established commercial plantation of non-native trees. I remember seeing huge bonfires as the natural forest meant up in smoke [...] these trees did damage, [...] they eliminated local plants and animals destroying the natural ecosystem that help gather and retain rain water [...] over the

subsequent decade, underground water levels decreased markedly and eventually, rivers and stream either dried up or were greatly reduced [...]

Today, the central highlands are no longer as cold as they used to be.

The implication is that Maathai indicts these new and destructive schemas for the present state of the environment. The present state of the ecology is opposite to the precolonial pristine environment of Kikuyu before Maathai's birth and during her childhood experiences. The Kikuyu clan not only experience ecological dislocation (cosmic dislocation) but also a regular process of debasement of their biodiversity. This informs Welker (2013:9) thinking that "[...] deep ecology blames anthropocentric culture for the ecological crisis and [...] humanity must rethink [...] how it relates to nature and its place within the broader ecology by incorporating the vital needs of other species [...]". Significantly, at the point of her return from educational pursuits in the evolution of the ecological experience of the people of Kenya, the effects of ecological imperialism are remarkably extending to human spaces against the initial debasement of the non-human spaces. Initially, the paper has pointed out that the first impact of this alien encroachment to indigenous ecological spaces is the debasement of non-human habitat; that is the loss of ecological ethos, wild and wilderness sensation, despoliation of aquatic/terrestrial spaces, through deforestation, desertification, and mechanized/commercialized farming. But, in addition, Maathai's reveals new sets of ecological challenges. Therefore, If the initial stage of ecological dislocation and debasement of the African ecological space is dominated by the despoliation of the non-human spaces, the current state of debasement is of a more complex magnitude.

Thus, in the present scenario there is a glide from the debasement of non-human spaces to that of the human spaces. The implication is that, the encroachment and over exploitation of the non-human spaces are resulting to the despoliation of the human spaces. It is not debatable that humanity is basically dependent on the environment for survival. Therefore, if the primary base of human survival is under threat the result is that humanity is heading to an absolute potential ecological catastrophe. One sees an example of this catastrophic ecological development in the narrative when Maathai reports the result of a study on the environment. A study that reveals the increasing rate of diseases associated with malnutrition among children, toddlers and the collective nation in the central region of Kenya. Ascribing the state of the deteriorating public health to the deteriorated environment. She says: "it suddenly became clear. Not only was the livestock industry threatened ... but I, my children, my students, my fellow citizens, and my entire country would pay the price [...] the connection between the symptoms of environmental degradation and their causes deforestation, degeneration, unsustainable agriculture, and soil loss were self-evident". (Maathai, 2007:122-125).

Of note, the non-human space had been noted for its potentials within the African's human ecological space; the present state of affairs becomes more threatening and fatal. Africans and the people of Kenya found themselves in a very difficult circumstance, between the devil and the deep blue sea. It is saddening to know as Maathai (2007: 3-4), declares that a land that "[was] still lush, green and fertile [...] hunger was virtually unknown. The soil was rich, dark, dark red-brown, and moist", has now become a death trap, a suicidal and ecological grave site for the people of Ihethe and the entire Kenya society. Obviously, the exploitative tenderness of the colonial regime and its neo-colonial accomplices brought about environment degradation. But also, the decline in the availability of minor forest produces aided by the twin agents of deforestation and degradation of forests which have continued to threaten food security and public health across Africa. Obviously, from Maathai's personal narrative, humanity in the long run will become a victim of its own selfish and material insatiability. Because, the non-human space will always look for ways to fight back the miss/excessive appropriation of its ecological components. In most case, it will result to devastation on humanity as ecocide and ecological apocalypse (earthquakes, volcanic eruption, epidemic, floods among others). This will be a very disturbing state for humanity especially Africans, who for ages had formed a strong bond with non-human spaces, a bond that have assured security, sustenance, provision of adequate psychological, emotional and physical healing including spiritual associations.

Therefore, the debasement of the biosphere and ecosystem as insinuated in Maathai's memoir cannot be overemphasized. Beyond the ecological argument of the degradation of environment, the



environment has become a major global topical issue. There are enough signals of the impending ecological crises the earth faces as a result of human conscious and unconscious actions. One does not need a soothsayer to decipher the interconnection and interdependence between human and the non-human spaces. This is anchored on the fact that, the environment is a primary means of human sustenance as such it is the hotbed of economic, social, spiritual and cultural activities in every society. Therefore, it implies that the condition of non-human spaces at any given point in time is instrumental to the survival of its inhabitants. Hence, through her story, Maathai had explored the complexities of personal and national identity, reflecting on her experiences as a Kikuyu woman in Kenya and her interactions with Western education and culture. Maathai's memoir serves as a testament to the power of human actions on the environment inspiring readers to recognize the interconnectedness of human and non-human spaces for environmental sustainability, highlighting the importance of integrating local knowledge systems and community-led initiatives.

Conclusion

To conclude therefore, without doubt, the connection between art and the natural environment has its root from antiquity. Throughout history, humanity has sought inspiration from the beauty and serenity of the natural environment for artistic expression. However, despite how this connection had been quite promising for creativity, sadly for decades, human activities endangered the environment. As a result, the world today is on the brink of an impending environmental apocalypse.

Suggestions

There is need therefore for a shift in the way humans know and experience nature. More significantly, communities in developing nations need education on the cogency of nativist's ecological ethics in re-inventing and sustaining harmonious co-existence between humans and the nonhuman environment. In this regard, an appropriate eco-vision becomes necessary in a bid to addressing the needs and aspirations of communities struggling to come to terms with the negative effects of modernity, globalization among others. Literature can therefore fit into this role effectively through the inculcation of alternative ecological ontology and ecological friendly based behavioural shift.

References

- Dobie, A. (2009). *From theory to practice: an introduction to literary criticism*. Wadsworth.
- Buell, L. (1995). *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing and the foundation of American culture*. Harvard UP.
- Cabral, A. (1980). *Unity and struggle*. Heinemann.
- Feghabo, C. C. (2017). Petrodollar politics: The mutation of the environment, culture and human intercourse in Helon Habila's *oil on water*. *Wilberforce Island Review: A Journal of Faculty of Arts*, 15, 149-162.
- Glottfelty, C. & Harold, F. (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. University of Georgia.
- Iheka, C. (2018). *Resistance from the ground: Agriculture, gender, and manual labor. Naturalizing Africa ecological violence, agency, and postcolonial resistance in African literature*. University of Cambridge Press.
- Maathai, W. (2007). *Unbowed: A memoir*. Anchor Books,
- Mishra, S. K. (2004). Ecocriticism: A study of environmental issues in literature. *BRICS Journal of Educational Research*, 6(4), 168-170.
- Okuyade, O. (2013). Can the earth be belted? Rethinking eco-literacy and ecological justice in Wangari Maathai's *unbowed: A memoir*". In *Ecocritical Literature: Re-greening African landscapes*. Okuyade Ogaga, (ed). African Heritage Press, pp. 136-160.
- Ogaga, O., & Egule, T. J. (2024). Indigenous roots of environmentalism in Wangari Maathai's *unbowed: A memoir*. *East – West Cultural Passage*, 18, 88-112.
- Tongsukkaeng, C. (2015). Ecocritical reading in the poetry of Ted Hughes. Diss. University of Leeds.
- Wa Thiongo, N. (1983). *Barrel of a pen: Resistance to repression in neo-colonial Kenya*. African World Press,



- Welker, C. (2013). Rethinking deep ecology: From critique to synthesis. Diss. Colorado State University,
- White, L. (1967). The historical roots of our ecological crisis. *Science New Series*, 155, (3767), 1203-1207.