

Wangari Maathai's Postcolonial Environmental Struggle

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Abstract

This paper turns to the works of the Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai in order to highlight her life's struggle to preserve Kenya's fertile soil as an environmental resistance to postcolonial environmental corruption. This is carried out through taking a closer look at Maathai's memoir, *Unbowed*, and how it was successful in dramatizing the poor's struggle against the injustice that was first carried out by the colonial government, and then by the Kenyan corrupted regime. In order to achieve this goal, the paper studies the concept of slow violence as being an indirect violence against the poor with delayed effects. This is analyzed through studying the colonizers' environmental crimes such as deforestation as being an example of such an act of slow violence with deadly effects seen as malnutrition or hunger. The study concludes that Maathai was successful in preserving the Kenyan sources of food from the colonial impacts through dedicating her life to the environment. A struggle that started during the colonial era, and continued through the corruption of the Moi regime.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Environment, African literature, Wangari Maathai, deforestation

1. Introduction

Today, the importance of the environment can easily be felt due to the recent attention that was caused by the huge environmental issues, such as global warming and water degradation. However, during the 1960s and the 1970s, it was a completely different story, people and officials simply did not feel the importance of the environment, especially in developing countries. That was mainly caused by the lack of awareness by the public and the heavy environmental corruption by governments. Consequently, any warnings against the long-term environmental threats were regarded as either ridiculous voices, or enemies of development.

To be more precise, it is useful to look at the environmental policies of many postcolonial governments. Their futuristic vision was to destroy the environment as much as possible in order to create a postcolonial ‘civilized’ country. Perhaps a clear example of that awful policy can be seen in Kenya during the years that followed colonialism. In fact, the nation’s environment was already wounded by the scourges of colonialism. Kushner (2009) believes that “environmental racism was a commonplace within colonialism, from the stealing of fertile lands to the clearcutting of indigenous forests. The entire capitalist enterprise upon which colonialism was built, and which neocolonialism still is, rests on the availability of natural resources at the cheapest costs” (p.197). As such, the Kenyan environment needed a selfless and a visionary leader who was capable of advocating for its rights. Hence, the Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai was an astonishing example of a life dedicated to what can be regarded as a postcolonial search for environmental justice.

Scholars around the world have studied and analyzed the writings and the environmental activism of the Kenyan environmental activist extensively. For instance, in her analysis of Maathai’s environmental efforts, Gorsevski (2012) argues that Maathai’s work “exemplifies local activism that is based on local culture and which offers insights and political meanings for broader audiences internationally.” (p.14). Gorsevski believes that Maathai’s determination to restore the Kenyan fertile forests should be seen as a role model for other nations where resistance can stem from the traditions of the local culture. Presbey (2013), on the other hand, argues that Maathai ought to be viewed as a revolutionary leader when it comes to convincing the public that they should take matters into their own hands. As Presbey writes, Maathai “dared to criticize those who wanted God or the government to rescue them, and encouraged and demonstrated women coming together to make changes in their communities and country in conformity with their values” (p.23). However, Van Klinken (2022), believes that Maathai used faith as a tool to encourage her community to engage with her environmental activism. Van Klinken argues that Maathai work “presents a model of creatively using faith-based resources to engage communities in the work of protecting the environment (p.173). Nonetheless, Cockram (2017) views Maathai’s cultural impact through her ability to convince women to take active roles in their societies. Cockram argues, “Maathai’s broad notion of development began to restore women’s visible worth in the community, as they were given the resources to create a tangible difference in the lives of their families.” (p.7). Although, the analysis of Gorsevski, Presbey, Van Klinken, and Cockram are crucial for understanding Maathai’s activism, there is still need for considering Maathai’s resistance as a practical way for exposing the forces of aggression that formed an indirect violence against the environment of the poor. Therefore, this paper aims to bring more attention to how one can gain crucial insights by reading Maathai’s memoir, *Unbowed*, as being an example of a life of commitment for creating practical solutions for preventing an unseen violence from happening to the poor.

2. Body of Paper

In his brilliant book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2013), Rob Nixon introduced the concept of slow violence as being an indirect violence with delayed effects. He argues, “by slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence with of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (p.2). Usually, this type of violence is best seen in the Global South where countries have suffered from direct and indirect hegemony of the Global North. A hegemony that brought destruction to the poor’s environment through causing economic inflation, deadly health problems, or massive loss to the sources of food.

Hence, due to its long-term effects on the lives of the poor, the issue of deforestation perfectly fits Nixon’s definition. He writes, “neither soil erosion nor deforestation posed a sudden threat, but both were persistently and pervasively injurious to Kenyan’s long-term human and environmental prospects” (p.129). The loss of forests meant the loss of both; fertile soil and indigenous plants. Two important factors in directing the people of Kenya into a great life-threatening danger; starvation. Thus, the environmental legislations of destroying forests by the Kenyan postcolonial government can be seen as a slow violence toward the poor. It was not just a destruction of Kenyans’ only lifeline, but more importantly, it was a contribution to an already difficult situation of a whole nation. Still, this new Kenyan government believed strongly in that step as a necessary one for developing the country after independence. Hence, challenging the actions of the postcolonial government was not an easy task. Maathai had to struggle against a brain washed mentality that was heavily affected by colonialism.

To understand the difficulties Maathai had to face, one must understand the mentality of the postcolonial Kenya. It was a country that was still under heavy influence of the aftermath of colonialism. This is because the British were successful in not just colonizing the Kenyans’ land, but also their minds. In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (2013), the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o described the way the British colonized Kenya. He writes, “colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves ...” (p.16). Thereby, it seems that colonizing the Kenyan mind did not end by independence. The Kenyans were still heavily affected by the British’s ideology, principles, concerns, etc. This meant that the Kenyans’ freedom could not start by independence. Their true freedom had to start from their ability to reconnect with their roots. Something the British worked hard on preventing through sever manipulating of the Kenyan mind.

For example, Maathai discussed how by controlling the schooling system, the British turned the Kenyans against themselves. Children were raised to see the White colonizers as not just the superior class, but more importantly, as the side with good intentions. On the other hand,

the Kenyans who were fighting against them were viewed as terrorists. Maathai writes, “the extent of the misinformation and brainwashing was such that we prayed that the Mau Mau would be arrested. I did not understand that the Mau Mau were our freedom fighters!” (p.64). This awful imperialist mentality was dangerous because it aimed at using the poor’s own minds as tools for controlling them. Consequently, the Kenyans were the victims of seeing the world only through the eyes of the British.

In this way, the colonizers changed how the Kenyans looked at their environment. Hence, instead of being a blissful source for the poor, it became the curse of greed. In *Unbowed*, Maathai discussed the way the invaders implanted this disastrous notion in the mentality of the Kenyans. She writes, “before the Europeans arrived, the peoples of Kenya did not look at trees and see timber ... 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 a cash economy like theirs” (p.175). In fact, introducing this destructive mentality was behind the misery of the Kenyans for many years to come. It enhanced greed through using the agricultural lands as not sources of food, but rather as sources of wealth. A clear example of that was the way the British treated the Kenyan forests.

During colonization, the British treated Kenya and its people simply as a private property for investment. Thus, the destruction of forests was done under the umbrella of agricultural investment. The indigenous plants which provided the main source of food were substituted by cash crops, such as tea and coffee. In this manner, the poor were used merely as tools for producing profits for the White beneficiaries. In her memoir, Maathai described beautifully the colonizers’ massive destruction of the Kenyan indigenous plants. Her description catches the awfulness of the scene in a child’s eyes. She writes, “the colonial government had decided to encroach into the forest and establish commercial plantations of nonnative trees. I remember seeing huge bonfires as the natural forests went up in smoke” (p.38). As Shattuck (2022) argues that “the land degradation Maathai was witnessing had deep roots in Kenya’s history as a colony of the British Crown” (p.24). As such, it appears that generations of Kenyans grew up watching this violent act be committed against their forests. Unfortunately, this slow violence made these generations to be convinced that destroying the indigenous plants to grow cash crops was the right thing to do. It changed the Kenyans’ original philosophy of looking at fertile lands as precious source of food for the security and stability of their families.

Thereby, it was clear that the colonizers were the first assaulters on the Kenyan environment. They were the first who introduced the slow violence of deforestation. Because by destroying the indigenous plants, they turned Kenya from being a resourceful country into a nation fighting malnutrition. As a result of that, the long Kenyan heritage of looking at forests as the source of food disappeared. In this way, the British colonizers established the foundations for the environmental corruption in Kenya. Sadly, it was a great heritage of corruption that permeated in the minds of the Kenyans to the extent that it presented itself as the norm.

As a result, the Kenyan post-colonial government was not different as it continued the colonial environmental corruption. The only difference, however, was instead of being covered under investment, violence against the environment was carried out under the veil of development. And thus, deforestation continued in the name of civilization – a lie that was even believed by Kenya’s highest level of authority. Maathai’s story of struggle offers an important insight to how the Kenyan president himself was convinced about the irrelevance of Kenya’s natural forests. She argues, “the president offered his opinion: He couldn’t understand why people would be opposed to the luxury development in Karuta Forest. After all, he said, much of Nairobi had been built out on forest land, and this was just another example of the city striding forward into the future” (p.270).

Therefore, advocating for environmental justice during the postcolonial period was a struggle against high powers of governmental authorities. This is because in this ‘striding’ into the future by the Kenyan president, his corrupted government was committing severe crimes against the environment. In their article, “The Impact of Corruption on Deforestation: A Cross-Country Evidence,” Koyuncu and Yilmaz (2008) noted that corruption is the most responsible cause for deforestation. They argue, “food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) sees the corruption as one of the major threats to world's forest resources. Policies and measures taken towards reducing corruption, therefore, will help to decrease illegal forest activities (e.g. illegal logging and timbering, smuggling of forest products etc.) and in turn depletion of forests” (p.220).

The unnoticed governmental crawling into public forests was being done in order to distribute Kenya’s land to a certain group of people. The land was seen as a postcolonial treasure where only the elite should enjoy the prize. To achieve this goal, the poor were tricked by fascinating promises of skyscrapers and huge complexes; aspects of deceptive civilization that were going to be the tools for passing the violence under a shiny cover.

Thus, the mission of Maathai’s environmental activism was also in fighting the innocence of the poor. She writes, “some of them would ask me, ‘why are you putting yourself in this situation? It’s not your land. Why are you bothered?’ And I would reply, Because after they are done with what is owned by the public, they’ll come for what is mine and yours” (p.195). As such, it appears that the Kenyan government felt that it was their right, just like the colonizers, to have full control over the Kenyan land, especially its forests. That was a bold step into committing a slow crime against the poor through destroying their main source of food. To add insult to injury, this destruction of the public property was handed to the upper class.

Therefore, one aspect of the postcolonial governmental corruption is the normal appearance of the beneficiaries. Those were the black Kenyans who replaced the colonizers’ high ranked settlers. They were the chosen class, the new Whites who were looking for stealing the poor’s hope. These elite of prestigious thieves were the real obstacle of development, not the forests. They took advantage of the gap that was left by the colonizers to grab Kenya’s wealth through the government’s blessing. A powerful blessing that had the ability to legalize the taking over of

public lands. More importantly, it was a power that would fight fiercely anyone dared to prevent this deal. Thus, in order to stop their greed Maathai had to struggle with the governmental authorities – Jail, loss of job, beating, and psychological abuse were the price Maathai had to pay in order to be a Kenyan environmental activist during the Moi regime. In this regard, Shattuck writes, “President Moi and the Kenyan government maintained their authority by committing a number of human rights abuses against citizens of Kenya who sought political change. These abuses included detaining, torturing, or even killing those who spoke out against his regime” (p.22).

Under this postcolonial governmental corruption, the awful Kenyan history was repeating itself. This was due to the idea that during colonialism, the British colonizers treated the Kenyan land as their own property. Thereby, it was used as a way of segregation between the high and low races. The Whites were given the fertile lands; Kenya's natural treasure. In this regard, Maathai writes, “in Kenya, these settlers began arriving in increasing numbers and the British authorities gave them land in the highlands” (p.9). Of course, highlands were the places that these settlers wished to own. After independence, the Moi regime was doing almost the same thing. The only difference was that Kenyan land was distributed this time by either class, or governmental position. In other words, the new Kenyan rulers were using the Kenyan land as bribes, gifts, or grants. Maathai described this postcolonial injustice by writing:

The government was selling off public lands to its cronies and allowing tree farms for the timber industry to be established in national forests, and so destroying watersheds and biodiversity. In many ways the government continued the policies of the colonial era, but made sure the benefits went only to the small elite it favored. In turn, of course, this elite strongly supported the government and helped it stay in power. (p.173)

The poor and their environment were the only victims of this deal by the postcolonial government and its elites. It was an indirect violence that needed the efforts of Maathai to expose its dangers on the environment of the poor. Therefore, a better way of looking at Maathai’s environmental struggle is through understanding that it was a struggle against the postcolonial powers.

In fact, during the years that followed independence, Maathai’s environmental efforts played an important role in preventing the destruction of public forests and national parks on numerous occasions. For example, Maathai was successful in preventing the destruction of Uhuru Park and Karura Forests. Both public places, with their fertile soil, were going to be used as private properties of corporates owned by ministers. Yet, the important thing in these two examples was the degree of the physical and psychological abuse Maathai had to bear in order to prevent these projects. The fact that she was willing to endure that torture raise the question of why was she so determined to maintain the environment?

Maathai’s power came from her strong belief in the importance of Kenya’s fertile soil as the nation’s most valuable resource. Thus, her environmental activism stemmed from seeing the

loss of agricultural lands as a hidden catastrophe on the whole nation. She writes, “land is one of Kenya’s most important national resources. Its fertile topsoil ought to be considered a very valuable resource, especially because it continues to play a major role in sustaining the economy through agriculture. However little immediate and economic value is attached to soil per se...” (p.39). Maathai’s argument regarding the importance of agriculture to the economy can be expanded to include the importance of fertile soil to the people as well. Koyuncu and Yilmaz (2008) argue, “they [forests] play an important role in reducing poverty and hunger, and improving food security” (p.213).

Therefore, the most evident warning about the coming environmental catastrophe was the rising issue of malnutrition among the Kenyan children. In his article, “The Economic Implications of Malnutrition,” Belli (1997) writes on malnutrition, “there is ample evidence suggesting that children who suffer from malnutrition, especially during the first months of life, will grow up into weaker, smaller, more disease-prone, and less intelligent adults than those who were well fed from the moment that they were born” (p.2).

This horrific issue appeared in the postcolonial period not only because of the heavy deforestation by the government, but by the farmers as well. Under the Moi regime, people were destroying their only source of food to create spaces for growing cash crops. Thus, with the help of the government, farmers were unconsciously committing crimes against themselves, and against Kenya’s future generations. Yet, the elimination of forests and indigenous trees did not reveal its dangers immediately; it needed time to present itself as a deadly symptom of the environmental mismanagement by the Kenyan government. Maathai writes about the situation of the children’s health during the new Kenya:

Children in the central region of Kenya were suffering from diseases associated with malnutrition. This was an eye-opener for me, since that is where I come from and I knew from personal experience that the central region was one of the most fertile in Kenya. But times had changed. Many farmers had converted practically all of their land into growing coffee and tea to sell in the international market. These ‘cash crops’ were occupying land previously used to produce food for people to eat. (p.123)

Maathai’s argument on malnutrition suggests that the postcolonial environmental struggle was deeply complicated. The public’s lack of awareness and the governmental corruption were intertwined factors that enhanced the misery of the poor. Thus, the real challenge was how an environmental activist could defeat such a complicated situation? As such, to understand how Maathai was able to stand against the powers of the postcolonial corruption and the heritage of the colonial ignorance, one has to analyze Maathai’s method for saving the environment. In other words, what was the secret for the successfulness of her environmental activism?

What distinguished Maathai’s environmental activism was her ability in making the environment help itself. This is due to her philosophy in using trees as both, her weapon to fight

corruption, and also her tool to enhance the public's awareness. The strength of this peaceful was its ability to make it difficult for the government to accuse Maathai of being opportunist, envious, or even rebellious. The only two crimes the government could find were either to accuse her of being an individual enemy of development, or being a disobedience Kenyan woman (Ebila, p. 147). Both accusations were ridiculous and could not destroy her public image. Furthermore, trees were the perfect tools for reattaching the people to their environment. By planting the seed, caring for the tree, and harvesting its fruits the Kenyans were being reattached to their original connection to the land.

Concerning environmental activism, trees played two important roles. First, they served as a symbolic act for refusing the actions of the corrupted government. In this peaceful symbolic move, the authorities were put in an embarrassing situation, especially in front the world. In the eyes of the international community, the challengers of the actions of the Kenyan government, like Maathai, were not holding guns, knives, or even sticks. They were holding seedlings, a global image of peace. It was an honest gesture that captured the world's attention, and consequently, brought the most effective pressure on the government to stop deforestation. In this regard, Iraki (2020), argues that "the conflict also caught the attention of the international press making Wangari the people's defender of human rights, especially the right to a clean environment" (p.58). Still, one should not forget that the global pressure would not have happened if not for the creativity and honesty of Maathai's symbol of resistance.

Besides, it was a clever idea to dramatize the postcolonial environmental struggle. In this symbolism, the idea of planting contradicted the idea of extracting. Thereby, on an abstract level, the aggressive act can be seen in destroying trees as an image of killing. In this violent situation, the governmental officials were the assaulters, the destroyers, or even the killers. On the contrary, the peaceful gesture of planting trees can be understood as vision for planting the seeds of life. Hence, the activists were the rebuilders, the optimists and the peaceful people.

Therefore, Maathai was able to create a very effective symbol for her environmental activism that can catch the world's attention and cause huge pressure on the government. More importantly, she was not just successful in making trees becoming the symbol of resistance, and the protector of the poor's rights, but it was a proof that the power of peace could surpass the power of violence. (Hunt, p. 246)

Second, planting the indigenous trees was a simple and a practical solution for the issue of deforestation and its subsequent deadly dangers of soil erosion and food shortages. In other words, planting trees were the last and only defense line that can bring back life to the Kenyan environment through achieving the missing natural balance. But more importantly, it was a simple and an important strategy for creating a collaborative work where the poor can help themselves. Maathai argues, "The trees would provide a supply of wood that would enable women to cook nutritious foods. They would also have wood for fencing and fodder for cattle and goats ... protect watersheds and bind the soil, and, if they were fruit trees, provide food." (p.125).

It appears that Maathai looked at trees from the perspective of both; the poor and Kenya as a nation. On the one hand, the poor needed the indigenous trees because they were a rich source of food. On the other hand, Kenya as a nation needed to plant trees because that would help the economy. In this way, she strongly believed that planting them on a large scale was a necessity for the survival Kenya as a whole.

Therefore, by planting these trees and committing herself to reforesting the lost forests, she exceeded acknowledging the manifestations of the problem into finding real solutions. This practical approach of not just exposing the dangers of losing the environment, but rather taking actual steps to save it is what distinguished Maathai's environmental activism from other environmental activists. For example, the Nigerian Ken Saro-Wiwa who focused a lot on the consequences of the destruction of the environment of his people, and did not create actual and practical solutions to save it.

Still, the actual planting was not an easy challenge; it had to struggle against two intertwined issues. First, because of the governmental constant and unpredictable harassments, it required huge courage from Maathai and also from her followers. Especially when considering that the government was willing to use physical violence in order to prevent the actual planting. This is because reforestation was considered an act of disobedience by the Kenyan government. Stopping it by force was a possibility that could be used at any time. For example, in order to save the Karuta Forests, Maathai and her followers had to bear the physical attacks from thugs who were employed by the government. This clear hostility was a tough challenge that reforestation had to struggle with because it indicates that defending the Kenyan environment was a life-threatening job.

Second, since the act of planting a tree is a long process that needed a lot of time to show its results, reforestation required persistence and persuasion to convince Kenyans to participate in it. To overcome this difficult challenge, Maathai had to persuade her people that reforestation would help Kenya's future generation in the same way their ancestors helped them. She writes, "I have to keep reminding them that the trees they are cutting today were not planted by them, but by those who came before. So they must plant the trees that will benefit communities in the future" (p.289). What Maathai's words suggest is perhaps the idea of creating a sense of responsibility toward creating a better postcolonial Kenya by not counting on the government, but by rather counting on the environment – something that all Kenyans could do through participating in replanting their land.

3. Conclusion

This paper attempted to present Maathai's efforts to save the Kenyan environment as a postcolonial environmental resistance. Or as Smulders (2016) describes it as being "a dramatic

immediacy that successfully counteracts the effects of slow violence” (p.24). It is an indirect violence that started during the colonial era, and continued through the corruption of the Moi regime. Under both governments, the slow violence of deforestation was being heavily carried out, causing massive loss to the main sources of food. It was a nation’s catastrophe that started to show its symptoms in the rising issue of malnutrition. However, by creating a creative and practical solution, Maathai was able to prevent this violence and spread awareness over its dangers.

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