



SLOW HEALING: ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN UNBOWED: A MEMOIR

YAVAŞ İYİLEŞME: UNBOWED: A MEMOIR ADLI ANI YAZISINDA ÇEVRESEL VE SOSYAL ADALET

Hediye ÖZKAN 

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Aksaray Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Ana Bilim Dalı, hediyeozkan@aksaray.edu.tr

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Abstract

In her autobiography *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006), Wangari Maathai, a political activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, depicts environmental and political struggle against the legacies of colonialism. The personal narrative chronicles the ways in which the socio-cultural and ecological exploitation is perpetuated due to (neo)colonialism, capitalism, the centralization of power, and modernity under the myth of progress. In 1977, Maathai's individual environmental efforts evolved into a collective struggle as The Green Belt Movement, which has trained rural women in Kenya to plant trees, generate income, and relentlessly fight against deforestation and soil erosion by planting millions of trees in Africa. This study examines Maathai's personal narrative, which overtly highlights the interconnectedness of environmental and social justice by suggesting that without ecological justice, social justice is not possible. Drawing on the concept of "slow violence" to examine the resignifications of ecological damage in Africa and analyzing life writing as a site of resistance, negotiation, and agency, this study discusses the politics of decoloniality generated by indigenous knowledge systems to understand the interrelatedness of human and nature, and reinstate basic human rights, the damaged environment, and the perception of nature.

Öz

Nobel barış ödülü sahibi ve siyasi aktivist Wangari Maathai, sömürgecinin kalıntılarına karşı çevresel ve siyasi mücadelesini *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006) adlı otobiyografisinde nakleder. Kitap neo-kolonializm, kapitalizm, gücün tekelleşmesi ve gelişim miti altında modernizmden kaynaklanan sosyal-kültürel ve çevresel tahakküme karşı Maathai'nin mücadelesini konu alır. Maathai'nin çabaları, Kenya'nın kırsal kesimindeki kadınları ağaç dikmeleri için eğiten, onlara maddi gelir sağlayan ve Afrika genelinde milyonlarca ağaç dikerek ormansızlaşma ve erozyonla savaşılan kolektif bir mücadeleye dönüşerek 1977 yılında Yeşil Kemer Hareketi adını alır. Bu çalışma, çevresel adalet sağlanmadan sosyal adaletten söz edilemeyeceğini önererek çevresel ve sosyal adaletin birbiri ile olan yakın ilişkisini inceler. "Yavaş şiddet" kavramı ile Afrika'daki çevresel tahribatın yanı sıra direnç, uzlaşma ve eylem alanı olan anı yazınsal türünü inceleyen bu çalışma, insan ve çevrenin karmaşık ilişkisini anlamayı amaçlar. Tahrip olmuş çevreyi ve insanların çevre hakkındaki tutumlarını onarmak ve temel insan haklarını yeniden tahsis etmek için yerli bilgi sistemleri tarafından üretilen bağımsızlaşma politikalarını irdeler.

Introduction

Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006) portrays the individual and collective environmental and political struggle against the socio-cultural and ecological degradation due to (neo)colonialism in Kenya. The personal narrative accentuates the mass-scale destruction initiated by the European settlers in the nineteenth century, whose anti-ecological treatments displaced local people and destroyed diverse species of fauna and flora. After the independence of Kenya in the 1960s, the authoritarian neocolonial government perpetuated the legacies of environmental colonialism through the privatization of public land, clearing of the forests, land-grabbing, and mismanagement of natural resources. To unsettle colonial and patriarchal structures that simultaneously exploit natural resources and women, Maathai advocates harmonious interaction of human and non-human, creates ecological awareness that goes beyond nation borders, and promotes women's empowerment, education, policy change, and sustainability. Within a transnational perspective, I argue that the personal narrative asserts the interconnectedness of environmental and social justice by suggesting that without ecological justice, social justice is not possible. Drawing on the concept of "slow violence" within the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, this study analyzes the individual and collective social and environmental effort as "slow healing" to reinstate basic human rights, the damaged environment, and the perception of nature. Following the theoretical background on postcolonial ecocritical theory, the concept of "slow violence," and the relationship between ecology and life writing, the first part of the article focuses on how the personal narrative portrays the insidious environmental and epistemic violence of European colonialism in Africa, Kenya in particular, while the second part examines the individual and collective efforts to raise public awareness about the damaged environment through education, political activism, and international support.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, "slow violence," life writing and ecology

Postcolonial ecocriticism promotes environmental, social, and economic justice and epistemic and ecological decolonization by investigating environmental issues within their socio-political origins. It is a critique of global-capitalist systems and addresses the impact of colonial and neo-colonial practices, the human and nature struggle, which are inextricably connected, and questions of power, privilege, and alterity. While postcolonial frameworks relatively address one side of the problem, since postcolonial theory "*is inherently anthropocentric (human-centered)*" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 3) and "*has dealt most significantly with cultural contradictions,*

ambiguities, and ambivalences" (Shohat, 1992, p. 107), the need for ecological methodologies are integral to rethink postcolonial criticism as well as theorize and historicize the complex power relations between colonialism, human, and the environment. With the engagement of ecological approaches, it is possible to study simultaneously the ontological and ecological histories of the empire and colonies and broaden the theoretical, historical, and geographic scope of postcolonial studies.

Although ecocritical methodology is firmly rooted in predominantly Anglo-American environmental discourse and accused of focusing exclusively on natural purity and the retreat from pollution due to modernism, Hubert Zapf (2016) draws attention to "*the diversity of local, regional, and national manifestations, and the transnational and transdisciplinary connectivities of ecological thought*" (p. 8). The new ecological approaches, emphasizing transatlantic perspectives, include the North and the Global South where the postcolonial ecological discourse and the Third World concerns converge. In non-Western literature, postcolonial and ecocriticism together offer an interdisciplinary approach to the relationship between local, regional, national, social, and environmental issues due to Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism, employed to justify colonist exploitation of nature and indigenous people. Furthermore, postcolonial ecocriticism "*has brought forward critiques of capitalism, consumption, technology, neoliberalism, modernization and biopiracy in the former British colonies and beyond*" (Deloughrey, 2014, p. 325). The sustained dialogue, rapprochement, and interdisciplinary engagement between these methodologies as postcolonial ecocriticism provides a broader perspective about human-nature and past-present relations, engaging with "*critical discourses which thematize issues emerging from colonial relations and their aftermath, covering a long historical span (including the present)*" (Shohat, 1992, p. 101). While examining the consequences of European colonialism and the vexed relationship between colonizer and colonized, nature and culture, and human and non-human, a postcolonial ecocritical perspective expands the frame of reference and sheds light on the damaged local ecosystems in the colonial sites, Africa in particular.

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon (2011) defines "slow violence" as "*a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all*" (p. 2). It is slow, long-lasting, unobserved, imperceptible, and undiagnosed. Although violence is conventionally defined as a visible act, we should be informed about the invisibility of slow violence, causing slow

and long-lasting environmental calamities since “slow violence” insidiously permeates the land of the global poor without drawing our attention to the matter. However, according to Nixon (2011), environmentally embedded violence “*needs to be seen—and deeply considered—as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time*” (p. 8). The disastrous and belated repercussions of slow violence reverberate across time and space. To address the casualties of slow violence and to make it visible, besides preventative environmental legislations and policy changes, artistic, sensational, and representational narrative forms and testimonies are important as they potentially draw public attention to the imperceptible threats.

A creative and effective way of confronting incremental and attritional violence and its layered predicaments is writing, which arouses public sentiment to the catastrophic human acts against nature and their long-term implications. Writing provides new words to express the impacts of immense destruction that often reverberates in unanticipated ways. With the contribution of postcolonial writers invested in literature whose primary function, according to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2010), “*has been that of global consciousness-raising in a wide variety of (post) colonial contexts in which the twin demands of social and environmental justice are conspicuously displayed*” (p. 33), aesthetic properties meet with ecologically-oriented social and political advocacy within various literary modes. Discussing the valuable role of the writer-activist, Nixon (2011) notes, “*imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses*” and it “*can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration*” (p. 15). Countering the layered invisibility of slow violence, the role of the writer-activist is “*to integrate reflections on empire, foreign policy, and resistance with questions about aesthetic strategy*” (Nixon, 2011, p. 32). As a writer-activist, Maathai presents the socio-environmental damage of colonial and neocolonial violence—suggesting continuities—increasingly and gradually inflicted on the global South along with mobile, immobile, and fugitive sources and locals.

The relationship between ecology and writing, particularly in life writing form, allows the construction of an ecological commitment for the recuperation and consolation of both human and physical nature. Emphasizing the relationship between ecology and life writing, Zapf (2013) notes that ecology focuses on “*‘life’ in its various forms and manifestations*” that “*the personal with the political*” and “*the*

intimacies of private life have become a preferred site of public interest and communication” (p. 3). The human-centered basis of life writing is reconsidered within the ecological dimensions and interrelatedness of nature and nonhuman as a “*space of expression and of (re)integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourse*” (p. 7). Imaginative writing opens up the text to an alternative world for nonhuman nature. The therapeutic function of nature converges with the healing power of imaginative writing. The idea that life writing and nature as a refuge for healing facilitates environmental, cultural, and individual recovery and combats displacement, and loss of culture and identity. For physical and mental survival, the reconciliation of the alienation from the land and self, and the recuperation of psychic wounds, life writing offers an aesthetic and imaginative resolution and indictment. Furthermore, life writing interrogates invisibility and representational biases, examining the body and land as resources. According to Kate Fletcher (2022), life writing is “*a form of environmental direct action*” (p. 199). Maathai’s creative resilience with her oppositional and affirmative stance is a powerful representational strategy for the potential recovery of the degraded ecosystem along with a wounded psyche. She gives voice to other life forms by establishing new connections between human and nonhuman.

Most scholarship about Wangari Maathai has centered around her activism and political life discussed by various researchers. Lynnette Zelezny and Megan Bailey (2006), for instance, examine the Green Belt Movement as “an exemplary model of environmental activism” (p. 105) while Janet Muthuki (2006) defines the Movement as a grassroots environmental and social justice organization (p. 84). Offering a rhetorical analysis of the Movement, Eileen E. Schell (2013) discusses how the Green Belt Movement perpetuates ecological literacy and fights for global environmental justice and women’s rights in Africa (p. 588). Employing contemporary social movement theory, Marc Michaelson (1994) describes the Green Belt Movement as a women’s self-help movement, focusing on consensually-based social transformation by analyzing its emergence, objectives, structure, strategies, and outcomes (p. 545). The former chairperson of the Green Belt Movement and Maathai’s daughter Wanjira Mathai (2022) argues how the Movement offers a long-term sustainable solution through local and indigenous knowledge and gender equality (p. 4). Fredah Mainah and Mariam Konaté (2018) scrutinize the empowering approach of the Movement to improve Kenyan women’s political and social participation in public policy processes (p. 206). Similarly, explaining the significance of women’s leadership for the political representation and the construction of woman-oriented social agendas, Gwendolyn

Mikell (1995) investigates Maathai's political life within the context of "the emerging African feminism [which] will generate positive changes in African political structures and contribute to greater gender equality" (p. 420). On the other hand, proposing a unique argument, Adriaan van Klinken (2022) examines Maathai's engagement with Christian traditions, the Bible in particular, as a part of her environmental activism (p. 158).

Besides a substantial amount of research about Maathai's environmental activism and political career, literature, exploring particularly her personal narrative, *Unbowed*, focuses mostly on the feminist or ecocritical readings of the text. In their article, Elizabeth J. Mukutu, Wanjiku M. Kabira, and Godwin Siunduan (2018) offer an eco-critical reading of *Unbowed* by using the theory of autobiography, autobiographics, and African feminism. Interrogating the ecological history of Kenya in *Unbowed*, Ogaga Okuyade (2013) analyzes the autobiographical mode and the transitional shifts in the narrative from the story of an activist to that of a community/nation (p. 144). Rob Nixon (2011) examines a genre of environmental activist literature which describes global manifestations of "slow violence" and writes about how Maathai worked with environmentally motivated women from poor communities for sustainable security and countered the marginalization and vilification of women who threatened the status quo (p. 128). Employing African feminist thought and transformative leadership theory, Eunice W. Stuhlhofer (2022) interprets the role of marriage and divorce in *Unbowed* and their impact on Maathai's leadership. In their article, Garima Rawat and Vivek K. Gaurav (2023) examine the depiction of colonization in *Unbowed* as a cultural devastation. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, Stephen M. Mutie (2022b) explains the conceptualization of feminism by poor women in Kenya and argues how Maathai in her memoir united elite feminists and the Kenyan peasant women under the concept of nationalism (p. 82). In another article, Stephen M. Mutie (2022a) notes how Maathai reworks the madness label to speak against Otherness and societal injustice. Situated within diverse scholarship, this study follows a novel approach by employing postcolonial ecocritical theory to analyze Maathai's personal narrative *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006), which critiques colonial structural violence and considers education, political activism, and international support as sustainable solutions and forms of "slow healing" for environmental and social injustices. What distinguishes this study from the previous ones is its particular focus on the politics of decoloniality generated by indigenous knowledge systems used to reverse the ramifications of (neo)colonial environmental, cultural, and social obliteration.

Material and Epistemic Violence

Drawing on her upbringing in the Nakuru district, Maathai describes her life as a dynamic part of nature and wilderness at the beginning of the narrative, vividly depicting her childhood and Kikuyu people who are engaged with nature, trees, seasons, and soil in Ithite, located in the central highlands of Kenya. This area is portrayed as a “*lush, green and fertile*” land “*abundant with shrubs, creepers, ferns, and trees*” (Maathai, 2006, p. 3). Since there is no tap water in houses, Maathai, with other children of the village, brings water from the stream where banana plants, sugarcane, and arrowroots grow. Within the virgin and Edenic environment and close-knit idealized community, particularly fig trees are considered mysterious, sacred, and necessary for survival and not to be used as firewood. Maathai explains how underground water travels up along the roots of a fig tree and becomes a stream, and highlights how such “*cultural and spiritual practices contributed to conservation of biodiversity*” (Maathai, 2006, p. 46). As John R. Ehrenfeld and Andrew J. Hoffman (2013) state: “*What’s needed in complex systems isn’t positive knowledge, it’s understanding. Understanding comes from a keen sense of observation and continuous learning about the system in which one lives*” (p. 94). The interrelation of organic life in the narrative points to indigenous knowledge gained through first-hand experiences within the pre-colonial lifestyle of the Kenyan communal family. The wild-living system requires us to “*learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get back home*” (Snyder, 1990, p. 24). However, this harmonious setup in nature is disturbed by the rising influence of missionaries, who have a significant impact on the gradual transformation of the local lifestyle.

The local cultural and spiritual practices are gradually replaced with colonial Christianity imposed by European missionaries who “*taught to local people that God did not dwell on Mount Kenya, but rather in heaven, a place above the clouds*” (Maathai, 2006, p. 6). They counter the villagers’ belief system in which Mount Kenya, “*a Place of Brightness*” was considered as a sacred place. Villagers believe that “*everything came from it: abundant rains, rivers, streams, clean drinking water. Whenever Kikuyus were praying, burying their dead, or performing sacrifices, they faced Mount Kenya, and when they built their houses, they made sure the doors looked toward it*” (Maathai, 2006, p. 5). Religion, culture, and nature are interconnected, and they simultaneously intermingle in the villagers’ daily lives. However, missionaries redefine sacred items and places of the villagers and force them to

believe that “*the proper place to worship him was in Church on Sundays*” (Maathai, 2006, p. 6). While villagers can practice their beliefs whenever they want, missionaries restrict the religious rituals and ceremonies to be performed in a building at a particular time. Gradually, local people join the missionaries, and “*within two generations they lost respect for their own beliefs and traditions*” (p. 6). Environmental historian Donald Worster (1994) claims that Christian imperialism “*stripped from nature all spiritual qualities and rigidly distanced it from human feelings— promoting a view of creation as a mechanical contrivance*” (p. 29). Native traditions and practices are replaced by the influence of the new belief and indoctrinations that shaped the African psyche.

European colonists not only redefine spiritual practices but also rename people and natural elements including streams, mountains, and regions. The practice of renaming flora and fauna with the language of the empire is a denial of Indigenous existence and subjectivity as Jamaica Kincaid (1999) remarks, “*this naming of things is so crucial to possession—a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away—that it is a murder, an erasing*” (p. 122). Imitating the colonizers, the locals give a new name to those who converted while the others who do not embrace Christianity are still known as Kikuyus. The new converts are called *athomi*, meaning “people who read,” and the first book they read was the Bible (p. 11). It was the sign of modernization for the villagers and those who did not accept Christianity were considered primitive and backwards. Katherine Iverson (1978) defines this practice as “*creating violence and expecting assimilation while practicing segregation*” (p. 175). There was civilization and modernizations, but, on the other hand, colonial education and modernization break the solidarity of the community and destroy the social fabric and kinship in the native society.

As “*agents of colonialism in the practical sense,*” missionaries and “*each mission station are an exercise in colonization*” (Rodney, 2006, p. 123). The church has a partial education, which they did not teach the equality of all human beings before God. Rather, “*In colonial Africa, could be rely upon to preach turning the other cheek in the face of exploitation, and they drove home the message that everything would be right in the next world*” (Rodney, 2006, p. 124). In *The Challenge for Africa*, Maathai (2009) mentions, “*As Christianity became embedded in Africa, so did the idea that it was the afterlife that was the proper focus of a devotee, rather than this one*” (p. 40). This belief deludes people and devalues the life at present. Maathai adds, “*Such an attitude allows institutions (such as the church) and powerful people (a member of*

parliament or other politician) to encourage people to remain passive” (p. 40). As a result, “*people come to believe that they will ultimately be saved by an outsider force rather than by the sum of their actions”* (p. 40). Maathai’s statements testify that colonization passivizes Africans and leads them to sit in their houses and wait for a savior to find solutions for the political, social, and environmental problems.

Contrary to the beliefs of passivized Africans perceiving white man as a savior, missionaries take the control of local people’s spiritual life, while administrators and traders rule the economy and socio-political issues as Maathai depicts. The ontological and epistemological destruction initiated by Christian imperialism continues with the introduction of new methods such as “*logging, clear-cutting native forests, establishing plantations of imported trees, hunting wild life and undertaking expansive commercial agriculture”* to exploit the natural sources (Maathai, 2006, p. 4). Local people on the other hand, accept this as “a sign of progress” and become insensitive to the natural destruction. Before the arrival of British colonizers, Maathai notes that people are not aware of the marketability of nature since “*The peoples of Kenya did not look at trees and see timber, or at elephants and see commercial ivory stock, or cheetahs and see beautiful skins for sale”* (Maathai, 2006, p. 175). However, the locals become the part of cash nexus introduced and managed by the colonizers, and they see the “*monetary value*” of the natural resources (Maathai, 2006, p. 175). Confronted with the so-called ecological modernization and market strategies of vast commerce and development, the resilience of local people is shaken and eventually shattered. They are integrated into the capitalist system of British economy and develop a reductionist, exploitative, and profit-oriented relation with nature, being a potential commodity for individual short-term wealth revenue.

The transformation of the village to a colonial base begins with religious education and expands to culture, economy, and politics. The British colonizers start controlling the economy by using cash instead of being paid in goats (Maathai, 2006, p.13). They also create a labor force, cash-based economy rather than livestock-based, offer employment for local people, and introduce income tax. The colonial economy forces local people to leave their farms and move to towns for European economic ventures. This causes separations in the families with redefined roles since fathers leave the nuclear family to work in cities and white-owned farms. Maathai’s father, for instance, works for Mr. Neylan, a British landowner, who gives work to people from different communities. Maathai describes these workers as “glorified slaves” by working for the white land owners (Maathai, 2006, p. 15). Selling crops is

monopolized by the white settlers like Mr. Neylan under cooperative membership. The local farmers are permitted to grow pyrethrum as the only cash crop while growing tea and coffee is restricted to the white settlers (Maathai, 2006, p. 37). The land is overharvested due to the crops and tools for agriculture change.

Local people who resist colonial rules, on the other hand, are brutally killed. During the First World War, Africans were enlisted as the soldiers of British army to fight in East Africa against Germans and Italians (Maathai, 2006, p. 27). People who were reluctant to send their sons to the War were punished by British authorities by confiscating the livestock of the family. After the WWI, the British government established an identification system which forced every male African in Kenya to carry a pass. Furthermore, African associations were banned to prevent coordinated resistance and protests. However, in 1952, the Mau Mau rebellion against the British government was organized by Kenyan veterans who fought for British army in the WWII but did not receive recognition as their British colleagues. With increasing awareness about their expendable position in the colonial mission and military skills they gained due to battlefield experience, they rebelled against the British government and demanded “*land, freedom, and self-governance*” (Maathai, 2006, p. 63). British propaganda defined them as “terrorists” to keep the locals naïve about the resistance while Mau Mau sympathizers consider them as “freedom fighters.” As the ideological division between the supporters of the rebellion and status quo grew, the country was pulled into an inevitable chaos. Due to panic and fear, the British government arrested Mau Mau supporters and put Africans in detentions camps where one hundred thousand died while many were humiliated, lost their land, and families. They were filled with fear and torture to abandon their struggle and suffered due to intergenerational trauma.

The foundation of divisive policies based on pumping fear and the conflict of British rule in Kenya dates back to the Berlin Conference in 1885 when Britain and other European governments met to legitimize the verdict known as “the Scramble for Africa” to share the entire continent. They crossed Africa throughout the nineteenth century, brought Christianity and “*numerous explorers, adventurers, and fortune seekers*” followed missionaries “*prospecting richness in Africa (both natural and human) to exploit*” (Maathai, 2006, p. 8). British authorities gave land to new settlers coming from Australia, Canada, and Germany in the highlands due to fertile soil for grazing livestock and to grow maize, coffee, and tea. With their arrival, local people were displaced, and their land was seized and divided among the new settlers.

Maathai notes that “*By the early 1950s, about 40, 000 settlers, most of them British, had moved onto about 2, 500 farms in what became known as the ‘white highlands’*” (2006, p. 10). The white settlers chose to live close to cities and regions that seemed fertile and successful for the farming of wheat, maize, coffee, tea, and grazing livestock. This caused the displacement and transportation of local people forcibly by the British administrators. The “*migration from rural to urban space replicates the alienation of the postcolonial subject from a naturalized homeland, and that while urbanization offers educational opportunities to the protagonist, the very spatial structures of the city often replicate the alienating racial hierarchies of colonialism itself*” (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011, p. 24). In the 1930s, the British colonizers disenfranchised local area residents, restricted them from settling the designated regions belong to natives, and divided the land among new arrivals (Maathai, 2006, p. 10). They invaded the valuable lands known as “white highlands” located on the hills outside of Nairobi. The inseparability of epistemological, cultural, linguistic, and environmental colonialism shows the social and political framework of colonial administration.

Like social and cultural life, the colonial government destroys the forest to establish “*commercial plantation of nonnative trees*” (Maathai, 2006, p. 38). New exotic trees are planted such as pines, eucalyptus, and black wattle as raw materials for the newly emerging timber industry. Farmers were encouraged to plant them in return for free seedlings, and they are pleased due to the commercial value of the trees. However, they damaged the ecosystem by destroying local species and animals. Furthermore, rainwater is no longer retained as underground water which eventually caused the rivers to dry. However, during the decolonization period after the independence of Kenya in 1963, natural devastation continues since the post-independence political rule is a dictatorship system under the rule of a strong man. The government has counter-ecological tendencies of the colonial era, sells public lands, and encourages tree farms for the timber industry.

The ongoing conflict among ethnicities in Kenya is another significant reason of the environmental devastation and rural insecurity. Pastoralists, who move with their livestock to find food and water, cannot find food due to the destruction of vegetation. As ethnic communities, pastoralists and farmers have a conflict over who will use the land. Since the grazing land is converted into farmland, pastoralists are frustrated because they cannot find food for the animals in the Rift Valley. Another ethnic reason is that after independence, although some ethnic groups like the Kikuyus were

allowed to buy land, in the later years under Kenyatta's administration, the non-Kikuyus benefited from resentment, which led to tribal clashes. Furthermore, in the latter years, during the President Moi rule, ethnic factionalism displaced some communities to appease others. People depend on land to survive; therefore, ethnic violence is inevitable when the land is taken from some of the communities.

Slow Healing

Before Maathai started a collective strategy for environmental awareness in the early 1970s, she realized during her graduate studies in the US that "*education was a part of the solution to many of the problems black people were facing everywhere*" (Maathai, 2006, p. 85). While teaching at the University of Nairobi as a female scientist, she engages in civic organizations like the Environment Liaison Center, which has common concerns with Maathai's academic research on environmental issues. In her research, she focuses on deforestation, soil erosion, and rivers silted with topsoil due to the plantation of commercial trees replacing indigenous species in the forest. Landslides becomes common, and clean drinking water was scares. In addition, Kenya's livestock industry is threatened by exponential environmental degradation which ultimately contributes to poverty and malnutrition. Expressing her observations, Maathai writes:

During the rainy season, thousands of tons of topsoil are eroded from Kenya's countryside by rivers and washed into the ocean and lakes. Additionally, soil is lost through wind erosion in areas where the land is devoid of vegetative cover. Losing topsoil should be considered analogous to losing territory to an invading enemy. And indeed, if any country were so threatened, it would mobilize all available resources, including a heavily armed military, to protect the priceless land. Unfortunately, the loss of soil through these elements has yet to be perceived with such urgency (Maathai, 2003, p. 38).

Witnessing the environmental devastation, Maathai's initial and urgent solution is simply planting trees. This is how the Green Belt Movement on the World Environment Day in 1977 was founded when Maathai planted seeds with women to commemorate the previous women environmental activists. The transnational organization establishes a tree planting program to educate local people through "civic and environmental" seminars where the history of land and forests of Kenya in colonial times and after independence is discussed. In panels and workshops, they generate ideas about what they can do for the environment. Maathai (2012) remarks, "*Promotion of tree planting in both rural and urban areas to the extent possible is vital*

to the existence of our society” (p. 5). Educating and mobilizing women as primary cultivators, the organization provides not only financial income but also agency since rural women are marginalized and vilified both in the colonial and neocolonial era due to land theft and individualizing of property. Through the collective movement, the local power dynamics are revived by raising the participation of women in the development of their environment and society. This naturally leads to the development of self-actualization of African women, whose labor is previously unpaid and exploited by patriarchal power structures. African women’s activism and their gender-political critiques play a vital role in altering women’s position, regulating structured gender relations, and rectifying inequities.

Maathai urges the community to plant trees as a symbol of peace and hope as she mentions, “*Many wars are fought over natural resources. In managing our resources and in sustainable development we plant the seeds of peace*” (Maathai, 2006, p. 57). She helped to found Tribal Clashes Resettlement Volunteer Service, where various activities were organized for tribes to engage with each other and forget their differences. Football tournaments among the youth were one of the activities that connected the community in a positive and peaceful way (Maathai, 2006, p. 239). In addition, tree nurseries were established in designated areas where women were encouraged to grow seedlings and plant them when they were ready. To foster peace among ethnic communities, they planted trees as the symbol of peace. After the tribal clashes, violence, and ethnic cleansing, the Green Belt Movement focused on the idea of nationhood to encourage people to cooperate instead of being divisive and destructive. The community collectively contributed to the resurrection of the local culture and indigenous practices, which were torn apart due to colonization, corruption, and the abuse of power.

Besides being attentive to the conflict between tribes and different ethnic communities, Maathai desires to establish harmony between human and wildlife. Narrating her mother’s advice on seeing a leopard, Maathai writes, “*My mother said ‘be careful not to step on [the leopard’s tail]. Instead, as you keep on walking, tell the leopard, ‘You and I are both leopards so why would we disagree?’*” (2006, p. 43). The mother’s teachings point to the importance of coexistence and respecting the existence of one another. Still, they do not live in harmony at all times, in times of conflict, the locals shoot the animals to protect their lives. Due to a lack of equipment to carry animals to another place, the Kenya Wildlife Service shoots and kills the elephants instead of tranquilizing them. This is due to a “*lack of understanding animal*

behavior, something [her] mother's generation seemed to grasp" (Maathai, 2006, p. 44). Thus, the broken link between generations should be repaired and the significance of indigenous practices should be passed down to younger people to protect both their lives and wildlife. The intergeneration exchange provides the knowledge and tribal experience crucial for the cohabitation of humans and animals.

However, perpetrating the colonial legacy of rampant deforestation policy, the Kenyan government contributes to environmental degradation by allowing the logging and selling of the large areas of forests for ostensible development. Public and forest land are faced with privatization and given to political allies and friends for private use to build luxurious houses and golf courses. The "land-grabbing" practice is widespread, and land has passed into private hands secretly. Office blocks, shopping centers, even churches are built on the land that once belongs to the state. The government loots national assets and resources and sells off forest land. Due to poor governance and corruption, 170,000 acres of forest is given to the members of the government which covered 10% of the remaining land in Kenya (Maathai, 2006, p. 281). The justification of the government is that the previous administrators excised forests for farmlands, plantation of timber trees, and human settlement so that the landless people can own land and a source of income. Allocation of Kaptagat Forest is one of the examples of the misuse of land denied by the minister who claimed that the forest was legally excised to build a monument for his mother (Maathai, 2006, p. 282). By collecting signatures and petitions to stop the government's further land-grabbing plans, Maathai forces the government to take necessary environmental policies that will protect the existing biodiversity and ecological models.

Karura Forests in Nairobi is on the grabbed lands that are allotted to private use by the authoritarian Kenyan government. It is 2,500 acres natural forest as being the home of rare species of flora and fauna, yet, the forest has been cleared. The land was enclosed as a "private property" (Maathai, 2006, p. 264). The Movement informs the public in press and the government officials about the destruction under way and protests the situation by planting trees. However, the protesters are accused of being opposed to the "development" in the forest. Although the privatization and encroachment of the forest stopped, illegal logging continued in the forest until 2002 when the new government and the Movement formed a partnership for restoration and preservation of the forest. Not only forests, but also the parks such as Uhuru Park are subjected to the misuse of the government. However, Maathai writes a letter

to the officials and organized protests to protect Uhuru Park located at the center of Nairobi from demolishing to construct a complex.

The organization practically emerges in response to the attritional environmental calamity, while it insists on establishing sustainable security against the neocolonial land politics—new forms and modes of colonialism—and illicit deforestation of the authoritarian government. The organization resists on land seizures and points out the government as one of the agents of destruction. Thus, its practical and utopic initial approach evolves into intersectional environmentalism, which defends not only the environment but also women's and human rights. The movement is *"reintroducing a sense of security among ordinary people so they do not feel so marginalized and so terrorized by the state"* (Maathai, 2006, p. 60). It integrates social and political issues to be addressed and becomes a form of civil disobedience and political resistance against the neocolonial rule and Kenyan government's resource mismanagement. It is a movement of democracy by lobbying for constitutional reforms. For Maathai and her allies, *"To plant trees was to metaphorically cultivate democratic change; with a slight vegetative tweak, the gesture could breathe new life into the dead metaphor of grassroots democracy"* (Nixon, 2011, p. 133). Tree planting is the core activity of the Movement against soil erosion and deforestation, denied and neglected by the Kenyan authoritarian rule. However, the Movement demands political accountability and cultivates democratic transformation for environmental and social justice.

To form international pressure on the authoritarian government to abandon its insensitive land politics, the Movement follows an intersectional approach by building an alliance with other campaigns globally and gets media attention and international support from the United Nations and Scandinavian funders. By doing so, Maathai gains not only financial and technical assistance for the Movement's operations, but also demands for western intervention to address abuse of power, violation of human freedom, and environmental degradation. African women like Maathai *"believe that now may be the time to utilize the expanding political space to correct legal inequities related to the control of resources, which made them the paramount victims of the economic crises of the 1980s"* (Mikell, 1995, p. 418). As a response to the entrenched patriarchal and sexist government excluding women from administrative and political roles, she frees herself from political, social, and cultural dominations and shows the capability of women leaders by expanding the boundaries of the organization and making it an internationally known organization working not only for Kenya but also

for the African continent. With the international expansion, the Green Belt Movement becomes a vehicle for the historically marginalized women's expression of their environmental, gender equality, and social justice advocacy.

Conclusion

Postcolonial and ecocritical discourses are globally engaged and both share a commitment to an interdisciplinary dialogue about a diverse view of epistemologies, traditions, histories, and experiences of nonhuman nature. Investigating environmental crisis and the legacies of colonialism through a transnational and transdisciplinary perspective, postcolonial ecocritical theory aims to dismantle forms of political and social ascendancy, tyrannizing both human and nature in diverse ways. Embedded in history and the politics of land, dehumanizing colonial history embodies and conducts different forms of subtle but devastating "slow violence" and contributes to the accretion of alienation and disfranchisement of people and land over time. Interventions against colonial exploitation and environmental genocide through theoretical frameworks inform praxis, which creates diverse ways of literary expressions like ecologically-oriented literature. Various forms of social and political dominations can be addressed through the increasing literary and artistic representations of ecological, social, and political challenges.

As an environmentally-oriented life writing, Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006) exposes an ecological devastation and hegemony due to human intervention and mismanagement. Critiquing the institutions which perpetuate social injustice and inequalities and revealing the relationship between pernicious slow violence and structural systematic violence, Maathai as a writer-activist makes slow violence visible, tangible, and comprehensible for mass audience. Juxtaposing personal and ecological concerns, her life writing explores the relationship between the self and nature with an explicit suggestion of concurrent personal and environmental healing. Furthermore, the personal narrative proposes indigenous knowledge, traditional wisdom, and the local agricultural practices as the most immediate and material resistance to the (neo)colonial local and global abuses. Her intersectional activism embraces the idea of turning to the roots by engaging local people with tree planting and their environment. Compared to the human-centered environmental approach, which has been historically and traditionally Eurocentric/anthropocentric, Maathai's narrative promotes ecocentric values and seeks the ways in which the urgent need for a sustainable environmental epistemic model is acknowledged and implemented by both the local community and the policy

makers. Mobilizing public sentiment, and empowering and equipping women with skills for social transformation, Maathai provides an indigenous perspective and stands against the political and environmental status quo.

Environmental justice is intrinsically intertwined with social justice as the abuse of natural resources and the oppression of people, women in particular, intersect. Encouraging women's full participation in public life, Maathai contributes to the democratization of the nation and liberation of rural women, whose agrarian strategies benefited to both them and their communities by reconstructing their relationship with the land and the environment. Against the appropriation of native land, the woman-oriented constituency combats the deterioration of the environment as well as cultural, ethnic and gender barriers. Mobilizing the national and international thought on the issues of "slow violence," the personal narrative instills in people the environmental responsibility for slow healing. The collective act on the environmental devastation is integral to reversing epistemological and environmental degradation and restoring the broken connection between human and non-human.

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Summary

In *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2006), Wangari Maathai presents the ongoing legacies of (neo)colonial violence that insidiously, persistently, and pervasively damage the bond between human and nonhuman. The life narrative portrays the attritional environmental damage and how individual and collective efforts strive to restore environmental and social justice. The personal narrative is a form of civil disobedience against the authoritarian government and hegemonic social systems that systematically marginalize women by preventing them from being part of

the decision-making process about their future and the environment. Maathai's life writing as a site of agency and resistance which accentuates the interconnectedness of environmental justice and basic human rights such as accessing education, voting, and freedom of expression. Integrating social and political issues and mobilizing local community, The Green Belt Movement, founded by Maathai in 1977, addresses (neo)colonial practices, unsustainable resource mismanagement and undemocratic government policies by planting trees, education community, and raising awareness. It vehemently demands democratic change and political accountability for environmental and social justice.

Postcolonial ecocritical approach investigates environmental issues, the impact of colonial and neo-colonial practices, the human and nature struggle within their socio-political origins. Situating ecological approaches within a postcolonial framework, the ontological and ecological histories of the empire and colonies can be extensively studied. The transnational and transdisciplinary aspects of ecocritical thought offer a diverse approach to the relationship between local, regional, national, social, and environmental issues due to Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism, employed to justify colonist exploitation of nature and indigenous people. Ecocritical engagement within the postcolonial methodologies contributes to positioning human in nature within local as well as global contexts to investigate representation, totality, and alterity to dismantle the homogenizing networks of power and forms of dominance.

It is almost impossible to separate the history of the empire from the politics of the environment since colonialism is not only about the exploitation of human for sovereignty, but also about the exploitation of nature for further accumulation of the imperialist economy. To examine historically and culturally destructive process of colonialism as an act of violence against human, it is significant to define it as an act of violence against nature as well. The concept of "slow violence" draws our attention to gradual, long-lasting, and unobserved attritional practices over time that invade the land of the global poor. In the narrative, "slow violence" is observed when the local, cultural, and spiritual practices are replaced by European missionaries, traders, and administrative who introduce new names as a denial of Indigenous subjectivity, commercial agriculture as supposedly a model of progress and development, and profit-oriented relation with nature. In order to reverse the impact of the neoliberal and (neo)colonial damage, I define Maathai's environmental and social justice efforts as "slow healing," which is gradual, yet visible, observed, and restorative. The personal narrative emphasizes the impact of collective movement and grassroots organizations like The Green Belt Movement in order to educate local inhabitants about deforestation, soil erosion, and natural resource use and how to establish a sustainable connection between human and nature. It is crucial to see "slow violence" and address the casualties of it through "slow healing," preventative environmental legislations, and policy changes as well as imaginative writing and various literary modes.

It is significant to arouse public sentiment to the catastrophic acts and their long-term implications through creative writing as it makes ecologically-oriented social and political advocacy accessible and tangible for international readership. Life writing is one of the literary forms in which personal and ecological concerns converge. Furthermore, the therapeutic function of nature and writing provides an aesthetic space for expression as well as healing for the self and environment. It is a creative way to establish a mutual consciousness between human and other life forms. Life writing is a process and a cycle similar to natural cycle that has various phases providing critical understanding about our place in the larger knowledge systems. It is self-reflective and fosters self-awareness about diverse human and nonhuman relations, and embeddedness within the earth. Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir* is an ecologically-oriented life narrative which juxtaposes personal and environmental crisis and provides a transformative site for the resolution of both predicaments through exploring the ways in which the self and nature are simultaneously restored owing to slow healing.