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14 WANGARI MAATHAI: AN ECOFEMINIST AT THE CROSSROAD OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA

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INTRODUCTION

Wangari Maathai is renowned, both locally in Kenya and worldwide, as a conservation environmentalist and crusader for gender and social justice.² Maathai is a woman of many firsts – amongst them, the first woman to receive a doctoral degree in East and Central Africa, the first woman to lead the veterinary anatomy department at one of Kenya's oldest and most prestigious universities, the University of Nairobi, and ultimately the first African woman to win one of the most coveted global prizes, the Nobel Peace Prize, in 2004.³ Maathai, however, is best remembered for her relentless work in protecting the environment, fighting for democratic rights and space for Kenya's citizens, advocating for women's empowerment, the eradication of poverty and civic engagement and planting more than 20 million trees through her Green Belt Movement.⁴ Maathai's efforts led to her appointment as the Assistant Minister of Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife during the regime of President Mwai Kibaki, the third president of the Republic of Kenya.

Maathai's works personified that of an ecofeminist throughout her career and embraced environmental conservation, integrating themes of peace and democracy that connected peacemaking with environmental stewardship and delivering a message of peace through sustainable development and proper management of resources. Ecofeminist theorists argue that industrialisation and capitalism have resulted in the domination of both women and nature. It therefore represents a critique of patriarchal frameworks, as well as a grassroots political movement with strategies to bring an ecological revolution. Through her work as founder of the Green Belt Movement, Maathai embodied a new vision of peace that promoted a path to peace through the integration of tree planting and engaging others in issues of consciousness. The Green Belt Movement's mission is "to mobilize community

1 Lecturer, St. Paul's University, Kenya.

2 See Maathai W. 2006. *Unbowed. A Memoir*. London: William Heinemann.

3 The Nobel Prize was founded by Alfred Nobel to reward human ingenuity. First awarded in 1901, the Nobel Prize is still the most respected across the globe.

4 The Green Belt Movement was founded by Wangari Maathai in 1977. The Green Belt Movement has planted more than 20 million trees in Kenya. It works at the grassroots, national, and international levels to advocate for environmental conservation; to build climate resilience and capacity build communities, especially women and girls; to encourage a democratic environment and sustainable livelihoods.

consciousness – using tree planting as an entry point – for self-determination, equity, improved livelihoods and security, and environmental conservation”.⁵ Maathai’s perseverance and promotion of peace through planting brought together community building efforts and environmental awareness.

In analysing Maathai’s life and work through the Green Belt Movement of Kenya, this chapter conceptualises ecofeminism through an African woman focused perspective. It also attempts to show the conflicts that occur between nature and meeting the material needs of development. It also analyses the role of women in conserving nature in a patriarchal society in which men held decision-making power, as well as how men’s participation along with women/s would be the key to conservation for future posterity.

WANGARI MAATHAI AND THE POSTCOLONIAL ENVIRONMENT IN KENYA

Born in 1940 in the foothills of the Aberdare Mountain Range in Nyeri, Central Kenya, in Ithi, Wamagana village, Maathai recalled the land being lush, green, and productive, with regular seasons, “abundant shrubs, creepers, ferns and trees”, where “rain fell regularly and reliably”, “clean drinking water was everywhere” and “[h]unger was virtually unknown”.⁶ All this slowly eroded when Kenya was colonised by the British and the overseers introduced new methods of utilising the rich natural resources that they found. These new methods included logging, incision of indigenous forests, creating plantations of imported trees, hunting wildlife and embarking on unrestrained profit-making agriculture. Indigenous trees were cut to make room for tea and coffee plantations. In Maathai’s words, “Hallowed landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress.”⁷ This environmental destruction, the key being deforestation, has resulted in degradation leading to high levels of risk and poverty. Long after the colonisers left, this exploitation has continued, to date, in the name of development. Other parts of Kenya have too suffered a similar destruction.

Maathai pondered how the clear springs that gave sweet water, the birds chirping that woke all early in the morning and the thick foliage and forest cover no longer existed at the Aberdare range. Indeed, in environmental terms, today Kenya is a shadow of what it used to be. The land has suffered from land depletion in catchment areas such as the Aberdare Range, the Mount Kenya region, the Mau Forest and Mount Elgon, amongst others, through activities such as farming, infringement and

5 Uchil PR. n.d. “The Green Belt Movement. A values-driven society of people who consciously work for continued improvement of their livelihoods and a greener, cleaner world”. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Online at: academia.edu/30533303/GREEN-BELT-MOVEMENT

6 See Maathai, *Unbowed*, 24.

7 See Maathai, *Unbowed*, 32.

unlawful logging of forests. Deforestation has been increased from clearing of forests for farm settlement and illegal tree cutting for fuel use and wood, causing accelerated runoff, flash flooding, reduced penetration, soil erosion and siltation in the dams and other water reservoirs⁸ – conditions that Maathai vowed to fight through her programme of restoring nature by educating communities about the importance of planting trees. This was also in line with the Kenyan government slogan which was: “Cut one tree, plant two.” Unfortunately, it was not always carried out, and excision of forests for human settlement and development was done with approval of government agencies.

Researchers such as Evelyn Kiptot and Steven Franzel emphasise the gendered aspect of the use of trees.⁹ They argue that men and women often have different objectives for planting trees. In a study that they conducted, they found that men are usually interested in trees for commercial purposes, while women are more inclined to tree products for subsistence use such as firewood, soil fertility improvement, fodder and fruits. This is reflected in the tree attributes that women prefer. In Malawi, women in female-headed households consider trees that grow fast as their first choice, followed by trees with good burning qualities and that produce a lot of charcoal. Men ranked trees that grow straight as their first choice; an indication that timber is their number one priority, followed by trees that grow fast. However, as tree products are equally important to men and women, the researchers recommend that it is possible to manage tree enterprises for multiple products in a way that both men and women can benefit. They give an example of the management and utilisation of the *Grevillea robusta* tree in the central highlands of Kenya, which is grown for both timber and fuelwood. This was a philosophy that Maathai used in her work with women and in the communities.

Maathai's illustrious career can be traced to the 1970s, when she began teaching in the department of anatomy and later faculty of veterinary sciences at the University of Nairobi. At that time, very few Kenyan women had managed to attain university education, let alone undertake doctoral studies. Maathai later formed the Green Belt Movement, whose goal was to plant at least a million trees a year. She was also a member of a number of civic organisations, such as the Red Cross, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the National Council of Women (NCWK), to name but a few.

Later, she ventured into politics, vying for a parliamentary seat in her home town of Nyeri in 1982.¹⁰ However, it was not easy going for her, as the ruling party in the then one-party state that Kenya was at the time did not want her in Parliament, due to her activism on social justice and opposition to deforestation. She underwent

8 Kenya Agricultural Productivity and Sustainable Land Management Project (KASLMP)/ Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources. 2016. *Report of land degradation assessment in Kenya*, 5 March. Online at: <https://bit.ly/2ympjHP> [hereinafter LADA Report].

9 Kiptot E and Franzel S. 2011. *Gender and Agroforestry in Africa: Are Women Participating*. Nairobi: World Agroforestry Centre [<https://doi.org/10.5716/OP16988>].

10 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 465.

hardship and great resistance from the political class of her time. This was against the backdrop of Kenya in the 1980s, which has been characterised as a lost development decade in Kenya with unsustainable development, increasing deforestation, desertification, degradation of soils, depletion of wildlife, reduction of biodiversity and escalation of industrial pollution.¹¹

Through it all, Maathai's life appears to have been guided by what humankind is mandated by God to do in the biblical book of Genesis: "And now we will create human beings; they will be similar to and look like us. They will have authority over fish, the birds and all animals, domestic and wild" (Genesis 1:26), including God further command's to man and woman "have many offspring, so that your children will live all over the world and bring it under their command" (Genesis 1:27). Maathai lived by this responsibility that had been bestowed on humankind to nurture, care for and preserve nature for generations to come. She was a real steward of God's earth, as she had been taught by her parents, who were farmers, "respect the soil and its bounty".

Maathai's religious influence is seen from early in her life having studied in a Catholic boarding school called St. Cecilia's Intermediate Primary School for four years in a famous mission station known as Mathari Catholic Mission in Nyeri. It was here where she converted into Catholicism. She was involved with Legion of Mary,¹² within the Catholic Church, whose members motto was to "serve God by serving fellow human beings". She completed her studies there in 1956, was rated first in her primary-school class, and was granted admission to the only Catholic high school for girls in Kenya, Loreto High School in Limuru subcounty, Kiambu County in Kenya and obtained a degree in biological sciences from Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas in 1964.¹³ Her life in environmental conservation followed the teachings of the Catholic Church, operating as a social institution and whose followers, in their individual capacity as members of the society, have a social and moral responsibility to be involved in environmental conservation. The Church believes that nature is a precious resource which the present generation has inherited and must therefore be preserved for future generations. It teaches cares for these natural resources as a measure of its stewardship and respect to the Creator.¹⁴

Though Maathai won the hearts of many and became a hero to thousands, if not millions, she also rubbed a lot of powerful people and the leadership of the day the wrong way. On a number of occasions, Maathai was arrested for protesting against the cutting of forests to give way to human settlement, as well as fighting

11 Wangari E, Thomas-Slayter B and Rocheleau D. 1996. "Gender divisions for survival: Semi-arid regions in Kenya", in Wangari E, Thomas-Slayter B and Rocheleau D (eds). *Feminist political ecology: Global issues and local experiences*. New York: Routledge.

12 Legion of Mary is a lay catholic organisation whose members are giving service to the Church on a voluntary basis in almost every country with Catholic presence.

13 Maathai, *Unbowed*, 69.

14 Bett GK. 2015. *The Role of the Catholic Church in Environmental Conservation in Kericho County, Kenya*, MA thesis, Kenyatta University.

for democratic rights of Kenyan citizens, especially those who were arbitrarily arrested and detained for speaking against the excesses of the leadership of the day. Beaten and imprisoned a number of times, Maathai and her activism ultimately helped defeat Kenya's corrupt, authoritarian leadership and created a new path for ecological resilience

Maathai was an ardent crusader for democratic rights, and her efforts in this area saw part of one of Nairobi's biggest garden parks, Uhuru Park, dedicate a corner known as "Freedom Corner", where mothers of detained political prisoners, including Maathai, threatened to strip naked in front of the *askaris* (Swahili for policeman) in agitating for the liberation of political prisoners. During her lifetime, Maathai slept in premier hotels the world over, as well as being a guest of state. The government of President Mwai Kibaki honoured Maathai in the Nairobi City Council by renaming a road in her name; hence, Forest Road is now known as Professor Wangari Maathai Road. She was also honoured by her profile appearing on Kenya stamps. Maathai also entered the political arena and was elected as a Member of Parliament from her hometown of Nyeri, where she continued to work as an MP on issues of social justice and uplifting her community. Maathai encouraged women to add value alongside their subsistence farming by planting trees and fruits for sale and ensuring that food security was attained. In all her work, she articulated a gender perspective in which women's knowledge, experiences and perceptions are given validity and therefore grounded in analysing issues. Gender equality for Maathai was not only a question of fundamental human rights and social justice, but important to the functioning and preservation of the environment.¹⁵

In recognition of her work in environmental conservation, as noted above, Maathai was made Assistant Minister of Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife by President Kibaki. In that role, she continued her active work to expand democratic space and improve the lives of women. Ultimately, is credited with having planted more than 20 million trees through her activism. Maathai's environmental conservation efforts were recognised not only in her home country of Kenya, but also globally, such that the Norwegian Nobel Committee, awarded her the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, basing their decision on her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace. These three key descriptors highlight to a large extent her achievements. In her acceptance speech, Maathai asserted that there can be no development without sustainable management of the environment. Sadly, she died at the age of 71 from ovarian cancer. Even in her death, she lived true to her word and conservation, requesting not to be buried in a wooden coffin and that no tree should be cut on her account. She was cremated in Nairobi in October 2011.

15 Chiuri W and Nzioki A. 1992. "Women: Invisible managers of natural resources", in Khasiani SA (ed). *Groundwork: African women as environmental managers*. Nairobi: African Centre for Technology Studies.

WANGARI MAATHAI AS ECOFEMINIST

Ecofeminism is a theory that was developed in the 1970s and posits that there is a relationship between the control of women and nature under men. Its concerns for the environment and that of women run parallel to each other. In terms of control, ecofeminism argues that man abuses land as it is a commodity belonging to him. Similarly, since women and children have been regarded as the property of men and have been abused by men easily and without any apprehensiveness. Similarly, in the quest to develop, countries like Kenya, the world over, have exploited Mother Earth to satisfy their hunger for development, in some cases at the cost of the environment. Rapid urbanisation has taken place in Kenya, making room for human settlement and increasing population. This has led to trees being cut resulting into deforestation. A case in point is the capital city of Nairobi, where the only forest land, known as Karura Forest,¹⁶ was to be excised in a bold political move for settlement and other development. Through the efforts of Maathai, the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) in partnership with the Friends of Karura Community Forest Association, embarked on an aggressive programme to secure Nairobi's key natural resource. Today, the forest is a symbol of the fight against land grabbing in Kenya.

Ecofeminism, also known as ecological feminism, is a branch of feminism that examines the relationship between women and nature. Its name was coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It uses the central feminist belief of equality amongst genders, a revaluing of non-patriarchal structures, and a view of the world that respects natural processes, holistic relations, and the merits of perception and partnership.¹⁷ Ecofeminism further supports movements and philosophies that relate feminism to environmentalism and connect the misuse and control of women with that of the environment. Ecofeminists contend that the relationship between women and nature is demonstrated through the traditionally "female" values of reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation, which are found amongst women and nature. Conservationist Aldo Leopold also introduced a gender aspect in his analysis of human-nature relationship.¹⁸

16 The Karura Forest Reserve is an urban upland forest on the outskirts of Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. It is a natural resource and one of the largest gazetted forests in the world located within the radius of a city. Its coverage is about 1 000 hectares (2 500 acres), and it is a model of how corporate social responsibility and philanthropy have served the nation tirelessly to save and protect Kenya's natural resources. In a much-publicised campaign, Maathai fought off developers who tried to grab the northern part of Central Karura. The forest became a symbol of the fight against land grabbing in Kenya. For more information on the Karura Forest Reserve, see: www.friendsofkarura.org

17 Leopold A. 1991. "The conservation ethic", in Flader SL and Callicott JB (eds). *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 181-193.

18 Leopold, "The conservation ethic", 181. Leopold argued, "Conservation is not practical as it is contrary with the Abrahamic concept of land. Man, exploits land because it is regarded as a product belonging to us. He does however offer a solution when he states that when humankind sees land as a community to which we go humankind will start to

Ecofeminism sees the oppression of nature as equivalent to oppression of women. It is a response to the perception that both women and the environment have been devalued in Western capitalist patriarchy.¹⁹ According to gender and environment researchers Melissa Leach and Cathy Green, Western patriarchy focused on profits exclusively and did not pay much attention to the subsistence economy run primarily by women, consequently leading to the impoverishment of women and their diminished status relative to men.²⁰

Maathai spent many years fighting for women's rights and empowerment in a quest to end women's poverty. She encouraged women to plant trees and engage in social change. Maathai's movement addressed the urgency of climate justice. In a tribute written for Maathai, Pregs Govender of South African Human Rights Commission stated:

People around the world are suffering the effects of climate change now, and for these people climate change is an issue of justice. Women are living on the forefront of climate change ... From food shortages to forest degradation and novel and more complex health risks, as well as an augmented likelihood of conflict over resources, the brunt of climate change intimidate to further put at risk the lives of women and girls. But just as most women bear the heaviest load of climate change because of their role as providers for their families; they are the ones coming up with answers that will save our planet from the brunt of global warming.²¹

In addition to calling for an end to oppression and gender inequality, ecofeminism also stands for peace. This was demonstrated by Maathai and her Green Belt Movement, which tried to build bridges across artificial divides and conflicts in society. Maathai's movement offered saplings from tree nurseries as tokens of peace to be exchanged between communities. Through her movement, she changed the ecological and economic landscape for generations of Kenyans to come, as well as modelling to the rest of the world a new form of agency by standing up nature and humanity as an indivisible whole.²²

utilise it with love and respect. Land is a community and a basic concept of ecology, to be loved and respected as an edition of ethics".

19 Gaard G. 1993. "Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature", in Gaard G (ed). *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Online at: <https://books.google.com/books?id=AGYqIogjQvIC>

20 Leach M and Green C. 1997. "Gender and Environmental History: From Representation of women and nature to Gender Analysis of Ecology and Politics", *Environment and History* 3(3):343-370 [<https://doi.org/10.3197/096734097779555818>].

21 Govender P. 2011. "Heed Wangari's Maathai's Wisdom", tribute written for Wangari Maathai by Pregs Govender, South Africa Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) Deputy Chairperson, responsible for basic services and health.

22 Popova M. n.d. "Planting Trees as Resistance and Empowerment: The Remarkable Illustrated Story of Wangari Maathai, the First African Woman to Win the Nobel Peace Prize", *Brainpickings.org*.

Ecofeminism blends both a commitment to the environment and an awareness of the associations made between women and nature. Ecofeminist philosophy also asserts that patriarchal norms lead to an incomplete view of the world, and its adherents support an alternative worldview that values the earth as sacred, distinguishes humanity's dependency on the natural world and embraces all life as valuable.²³ In one of her famous run-ins with powerful members of the government of the day, Maathai protested against the cutting of trees in Karura Forest. The politicians were having none of it. Maathai and members of the Green Belt Movement camped at Karura to ensure this did not happen, and it was one of the many occasions that she was beaten up and seriously injured. Maathai and her team were the forcibly ejected from the forest and arrested. Maathai was called "a crazy woman" who was a danger to the stability of Kenya. Unfortunately, painful sacrifices like this have to be made in the course of many social justice movements, and the negative attention that this incident raised both locally and internationally caused the developers and politicians to slow down in their deforestation. To date, Kenyans have Maathai to thank, as Karura Forest has remained intact and environmentally friendly, consistent with ecofeminist values.

Today, the world is witness to the effects of deforestation, which has caused global warming and has become the most pressing environmental concern. The excessive cutting of trees and pollutants emitted from industries and from waste has seen temperatures rising and changes have occurred to the natural season cycles of most countries. Rain has become unpredictable and adverse weather conditions have resulted, contributing to natural calamities and hunger. Further, a study of land degradation conducted in 2015 in Kenya confirmed largely a declining vegetation cover in the last twenty-year period. This was recognised through a deteriorating vegetation cover as depicted by the Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) translating into increasing barren lands, change of natural vegetation into agricultural lands and soil erosion. Cultivated areas increased by 7.3% and bare lands by 2.6%.²⁴ If this trend of land degradation continues without any intervention, clearly Kenya will be heading towards an ecological disaster or, worse still, desert-like conditions.

The 2015 study confirmed Maathai's worst fears of a land that was slowly being degraded for development. Other than reduced productivity, the land degradation that Kenya has experienced has also led to socio-economic challenges, such as food insecurity, insufficient water and frequent loss of livestock. Moreover, the study found that the current land-use practices were not suitable for the particular environmental zones. For instance, large tracts of land in high potential agricultural

23 Miles K. 2018. "Ecofeminism. Sociology and Environmentalism", *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Online at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ecofeminism>

24 The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources commissioned a study of land degradation assessment in Kenya for a period of six months beginning July to December 2015. See LADA Report.

areas have been subdivided for development into uneconomic parcels, while some parts of land in the medium and low potential areas are quickly being converted into agriculture, despite their poor environmental condition.²⁵ Maathai witnessed her own rural home, Ihithe, near the Aberdare Ranges, turn from one with lush vegetation and abundant fresh spring water to a drier one, causing changes in land use that gave way to human settlement and to tea and coffee plantations. It was the beginning of her ecofeminist commitments.

RELIGION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Various faiths across the world teach about taking care of the environment. In Christianity, the Bible talks about God requesting humanity to take responsibility of His Creation. God authorised humankind to be wardens of the environment. Isaiah and Jeremiah foretold grim consequences if humans were to disobey God and fall short of taking care of the Earth.²⁶ Though God gave humanity the mandate to rule over the sea and land, He still cautioned human beings to be responsible stewards and not destroy what is under our care. The Bible declares God's wrath if His resources and the land that He has so graciously bestowed on humankind are destroyed.²⁷ God further gives instructions, in the biblical book of Leviticus,²⁸ that humankind are sojourners on earth whose owner is real owner is Our Creator and our role is to emancipate it. God delighted in the creation and desires for its wholeness and well-being.

Preservation of the environment is important for humankind, as they depend on it for their physical needs such as food, water, air, shelter and clothing, which are necessary for their survival. This mandates them, therefore, to prudently use the resources in the environment, to guarantee their survival. Over time, however, natural environments that store water, protect the soil, or are habitats to distinctive plants and animals have been degraded or converted to other uses. The church has a role to manage and protect the environment on which human beings and other creatures thrive, as the Creator has entrusted these natural resources to human beings. Christians are co-creators and co-workers with God and, therefore, should protect the environment. Human beings have been given the responsibility by God

25 LADA Report, 4

26 Bible, Genesis 1:26 states, "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground'." All biblical citations in this chapter are to the New International Version (NIV).

27 Bible, Jeremiah 2:7 states, "I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and tainted it and made my inheritance repugnant." Leviticus 25:23-24 states: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land."

28 Bible, Leviticus 25:33.

to guard, protect and to take care of creation.²⁹ Christians, therefore, have a role to play through procreation, planting of trees, protecting water catchment areas and conserving wildlife.

PATRIARCHY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

It is argued that in the traditional environment, patriarchy overpowered matriarchy. Patriarchy may be understood as the “rule of the father”, broadening beyond the periphery of the family to include the authority of men and the control of male values over society as a whole. Patriarchal supremacy, whether that of male heads of extended families or the “andrarchy”³⁰ of senior men within a given political dispensation, gives men control over the familial and political economy, limits women’s freedom of sexual expression and alliance, marginalises or excludes them from political and religious leadership and limits their education and sometimes their freedom of movement.³¹ Ecofeminism contends that women and nature are also integrated through their common history of subjugation by a patriarchal society and that devaluation and abuse of nature and women have gone hand in hand. Specifically, ecofeminist philosophy highlights how nature and women are treated by patriarchal society. Ecofeminists analyse the outcome of gender groupings in order to reveal the ways in which social norms exercise unfair power over women and nature in a male-centred society. The philosophy also states that those customs lead to an incomplete view of the world, and its followers campaign for a substitute that rates the earth as sacrosanct and distinguishes humanity’s reliance on the natural world in a way that holds all life to be important and invaluable.

This argument tends to suggest an element of exploitation. Just as women’s reproduction and production are exploited by men, who are the main decision-makers and wield power in a male-centred world, so do they extend these exploitative tendencies to nature. This power can make men feel invincible, such that they are only answerable to themselves. In their quest to acquire resources and their socialisation into the bread-winner role, it might make some turn a blind eye to the effects on nature and the environment by their worldly exploits. There is a tendency for men to concentrate on the macro-level, on big projects and to ignore the micro-level effects where women’s production tends to be.

This was evident when Maathai stood in the path of the powers that be when they to strategised to build the tallest building in the capital Nairobi on the only green park, Uhuru Park, that existed in the city. Uhuru Park is famous to Kenyans and foreigners as the only park where people can rest on the benches or lie on the grass.

29 Bible, Genesis 2:15 states, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”

30 Bamberger J. 1974. “The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society”, in Rosaldo MZ and Lamphere L (ed). *Women, Culture, and Society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 263-280.

31 Ruether RR. 1996. “Patriarchy”, in Isherwood L and Dorothea McEwan (ed). *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 173-174.

It is the only park where families over the weekends can come to rest, take a stroll, have lunch after church service on Saturdays or Sundays and take boat rides in the artificial lake. Citizens were going to lose their only park to make way for a skyscraper, and when Maathai got wind of the information, no sacrifice was too much to stop this exploitation in the name of modernisation. She almost paid with her life, but she survived and so did the park.

For a woman to have the guts to oppose powerful men in leadership was a bitter pill to swallow. A “good” woman was supposed to be one who was quiet, did not speak back, and did not question “men’s authority”. Maathai made many powerful enemies, and the good that she was doing was turned into negativity. At one time she was discussed in Parliament, with members agitating for the closure of the Green Belt Movement, which was seen as a noisy interference by foreign-funded NGOs who wanted to destabilise the country. Many members of Parliament who were Maathai’s colleagues failed to share her vision, as it was interfering with their profit making. Members of Parliament demanded the banning of her Green Belt Movement and shouted her down in a bid to show their loyalty to the leadership. At that time, Maathai received such hostility from her colleagues in Parliament due to her activism, that she eventually made her famous statement, “I would rather be an MP of trees.”³²

Further, in its press statements, the government describes the Green Belt Movement as driven by divorcees which was construed as a sexist statement. Maathai was driven out of office, but she persisted in alerting the international community, who instituted an investigation to the claims of environmental degradation and deforestation. Eventually, the exploitative plans were abandoned by the government, prompting one man to comment of Maathai that “she was the only man standing” for taking on the government and pointing out where they were wrong.³³ Such incidents prove what feminist literature, history and ethics reveal, namely, that females are sometimes victims of the patriarchy that becomes instrumental to their own spiritual and practical experiences of conflict. For example, Maathai claimed that mismanagement of the environment due to undemocratic practices led to conflict over scarce resources and the abuse of human rights. In Maathai’s view, it was always the women who shouldered the main burden of poverty and conflict.³⁴ The situation is complicated further by the fact that worldwide, especially in the developing world, women have unequal rights and insecure access to land and other natural resources.

Maathai refused to be tied down by the shackles by which patriarchy had relegated women to subordinate status. Maathai was a formidable force to reckon with. Great minds live by strong principles. Are humans forgetting their values in their quest for development? King argued that education gives us facts, while religion gives us

32 Gathu M. 2004. I would rather be MP for Trees – Wangari”, *The Independent*, 18 October.

33 Popova, “Planting Trees as Resistance and Empowerment”, 4.

34 Maathai W. 2004. *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the approach and the experience*. New York: Lantern Books.

values, and that the two are not contradictory. The populace today is more educated and thus can critically analyse situations like environmental degradation; however, one wonders why the value part is being left behind.

THE GREEN BELT MOVEMENT AND THE NURTURING ROLE OF WOMEN

Women are socialised to nurture and care for others and to be sensitive to their needs. Ecofeminism brings out how this role is extended to animals and nature. The Green Belt Movement was founded by Maathai in 1977 as a reaction to the needs of rural women, who were undergoing suffering due to the ravages of nature from the effects of modernisation. Streams were drying up, there was food insecurity and firewood was becoming scarce. The Green Belt Movement encouraged the women to plant seedlings and plant trees to stop soil erosion, store rainwater and provide food and fuel.

Maathai saw that behind the everyday hardships of the poor – environmental degradation, deforestation, and food insecurity – were deeper issues of disempowerment, disenfranchisement and a loss of the traditional values that had previously enabled communities to protect their environment, to work together for mutual benefit and to do both of these selflessly and honestly. Maathai saw opportunities even in the most difficult moments and decided to turn a bad situation for the better with her Green Belt Movement. She worked with the women and families to empower them and redeem them from poverty by planting trees and enjoying the proceeds. Maathai believed that women were important players in the development of society and the engines of the enhancements of their own livelihoods. Women were vital players in the progress, stability and development of our society; they are the engines of the enhancement of livelihoods and initiators of growth and poverty reduction.

Maathai's work deconstructed the dualities of mind versus body and man versus woman, respectively, through her engagement in the realm of reason. Maathai's academic and professional qualifications continued to challenge the norms of the Kenyan patriarchal society, which associated men with mind and reason and women with emotion. This served to deconstruct the information that ecofeminism has presented. Therefore, Maathai, through her Green Belt Movement offered the possibility of agency for women through ecological activism. Further, Maathai and her work underscored an African feminist ecological activism that resisted Kenyan patriarchal oppression of women, which was entrenched within culture, as well as within capitalist patriarchy.³⁵

35 Muthuki J. 2006. *Rethinking ecofeminism: Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya*, MA thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

Environmental conflicts are not isolated to Kenya. Other countries around the world have suffered from the same. In Brazil, activists staged protests after the government decided to reduce forest protection, giving farmers, loggers and land grabbers an opportune time to grab forest land and a sense of impunity and increasing violence in rural areas amongst grabbers, squatters and conservationists. Many were killed trying to get a piece of land of the Amazon forests.³⁶ In recent decades, in Brazil, Argentina and other Latin American countries, environmental conflict has escalated relative to the access, availability, misuse and administration of natural resources.

An example is the clash over the pulp mills on the Uruguay River in The Republic of Uruguay. The “pulp mills case”, as the petitioners called it, began in 2003 at the initiative of Uruguayan activists who objected to the construction of what then was a paper pulp production plant owned and operated by Spanish transnational corporation ENCE at the Uruguayan locality of Fray Bentos, on the Uruguay River, bordering Argentina. Their report cited water contaminated at dangerous levels, industrial effluents without regulation, open-air dumping sites and inhabited zones without drinking water or sewage piping. The issue of the Uruguay River conflict the progressive politics gradually captured public opinion.³⁷

These conflicts contributed positively to the construction of the social and political environment in Argentina. This was done in a composite and powerful way, as the events had an impact on the social collection of the issues, which are the focus of public concern. As in the case of Maathai’s activism, the media highlighted the issues and brought them to fore in the public space. The activists in Argentina however feel that there is an extensive list of environmental clashes that do not receive much publicity, for example, those related to land ownership, deforestation, open-pit mining, extensive agriculture, use of agrochemicals, the location of waste management facilities and related issues. The report states that, in most of the cases, the populace has challenges in being heard and the environmental activists remain publicly unseen, with no power over regions where rich industrialists have great scope to dispose of the natural resources, the infrastructure and the use of the land. In many of the cases, the local citizens are forced to cooperate and be relocated to other areas, as they are not seen by the industrialists as utilising the land they occupy well. Thus, the locals find themselves displaced to make way for development.³⁸

In Africa, countries like Nigeria, with its population over 120 million, inevitably leave an environmental footprint on the land. Urbanisation, deforestation, desertification, overpopulation and different types of pollution are just some the

36 Phillips D. 2019. “Environmentalists in Brazil blame government for Amazon land violence”, *The Guardian*, 9 July.

37 Merlinsky MG. 2017. “Environmental Conflicts and Public Deliberations Arenas around the Environmental Issue in Argentina”, *Ambiente & Sociedad* [Environment & Society] 20(2):121-138 [<https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-4422asoc265r1v2022017>].

38 See Merlinsky, “Environmental Conflicts and Public Deliberations Arenas”.

outcomes of the human interaction with the environment. These outcomes have come about through efforts by the populace to acquire to meet their needs for food, shelter, leisure and infrastructural facilities. Though the industry and production needed to meet these needs and desires adds to the development of the country, the reckless utilisation of the land and its wealth produce negative effects on the environment.³⁹

Water, in particular, is a diminishing a natural resource. Irma Molen and Antoinette Hilderling, scholars of public policy and public law, respectively, have warned the global community that the swelling scarcity of freshwater resources may cause national and international conflicts. Climate change predictions show that climate change will have a major effect on the accessibility of freshwater resources, on water quality and on the demand for water, which is disquieting news for humanity, as it puts pressure on human security.⁴⁰ Water is for sharing, and there must be enough water for all.

Maathai warned leaders of the G8 and G20 that in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the persistent pursuit of oil and gas to provide for a world dependent on fossil fuels was the cause of the constant violence and instability. Often such conflicts are branded as inter-ethnic or inter-religious, overlooking the contributions of climate change, environmental degradation and the quest for fossil fuels as the source of much of the conflict in the world today. While leaders of the world's wealthiest countries accept the greatest blame for rising global temperatures, it is those already living on the edge of poverty who will feel the effects most acutely from the daily reality of climate change. These include the nationals of small island states, who will lose their homes as the seas devour the coastline, and the female farmers of Africa, whose crops will dry up and whose children will face malnutrition. For them, as well as millions of others, global warming is a matter of life and death"⁴¹

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION

Can the world develop without being in conflict with nature? Can nature sustain development? I believe it is possible to answer affirmatively to both the questions. Today, the world is moving towards sustainability and use of renewable resources. Rather than cut trees for fuel, solar energy can be used, as well as wind energy, where applicable. Animal and human waste is being used to make biogas. Biodigesters are being used today to recycle and clean used water for irrigation and other uses. The Japanese are renowned for conservation and for their rich culture.

39 Omofonmwan S and Osa-Edoh G. 2008. "The Challenges of Environmental Problems in Nigeria", *Journal of Human Ecology* 23(1):53-57 [<https://doi.org/10.1080/09709274.2008.11906054>].

40 Van der Molen I and Hilderling A. 2005. "Water: Cause for conflict or co-operation?", *ISYP Journal on Science and World Affairs* 1(2):133-143.

41 Govender, "Heed Wangari's Maathai's Wisdom".

From the Japanese, Maathai borrowed a concept known as *mottainai*⁴² for the Green Belt Movement, which emphasises reuse, reduction and recycling, so that waste is not tolerated and people are encouraged to be grateful and to appreciate what they have.⁴³ The Japanese also use a cloth for gift wrapping known as *furoshiki* instead of paper as a way of sustainable management, good governance, justice and equity. Countries can borrow such practices from Japan, which is a model example of a developed country that has been able to development without necessary destroying its natural resources and losing their values in the process.⁴⁴

Everyone can play a role, no matter how small, in taking care and nurturing nature so that in turn it can take care of and nurture us. Maathai often shared the story of a little hummingbird that decided to use its little power to fight an intense fire that threatened to exterminate the forest. Strong animals like elephants, turned helpless by the sheer size of the task, mocked the hummingbird instead of assisting. However, their mockery did not prevent the hummingbird, which persisted in carrying water from the river to the forest using its tiny beak. Like the hummingbird, Maathai did something so small it seemed insignificant to the powerful “elephants”. She persevered and took the unappreciated, unvalued work of hundreds, nameless rural women and intertwined it into a group that had worldwide impact. Maathai provides clear direction on the acts we must make to stop the annihilation of our planet. Though Maathai has died, her wisdom will live forever.⁴⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

Concerted effort by all needs to be made to mitigate the unintended adverse land degradation brought about by unplanned and runaway development. The Bible has many teachings on conservation. The Church, apart from teaching about spiritual nourishment, needs to include environmental conservation and sustainability as one of its agendas. Kenya’s welfare depends on healing the broken relationship between a wrecked economy and broken ecology. Conserving our environment by not cutting trees needs to be seen more than just an economic resource, and instead as a source of water, food, and life itself. Environmental conservation needs to be integrated into Kenya’s school’s curriculum, so that from a young age, citizens can learn its importance. The media can also play a prominent role in highlighting issues of climate, pollution and nature the prominence it deserves.

More trees need to be planted and provision of clean water made to all. Preservation of the environment and planting of trees can sustain streams and rivers and the creatures that live therein and are beneficial to people. Trees are our future, and

42 *Mottainai* is an ancient Buddhist term from Japan that means to have respect for the resources around you, to not waste resources, and to use them with a sense of responsibility. It has a colloquial equivalent in the English expression, “What a waste!”

43 Maathai, *Unbowed*.

44 See Maathai, *Unbowed*.

45 Govender, “Heed Wangari’s Maathai’s Wisdom”.

without them our future is bleak. For sustainability, there is need to use more renewable energy, to recycle waste into reusable material, to reduce pollution and, most of all, for governments to strive to have an educated populace, as it is easier to implement conservation for people who have alternative means and skills of survival. There is great need to reconcile the earth and restore it to its former glory, as was bequeathed to humanity.

The Kenyan government should also be held accountable to its promises in Vision 2030 and other international conventions it has signed regarding mitigating adverse land degradation and guaranteeing sustainable development, the administration and conservation of the environment and natural resources and enabling fair sharing of the accrued benefits. Civil society groups like the Green Belt Movement should be commended and supported for their efforts in environmental conservation and not seen to be in conflict with the government. More public participation should be encouraged in the management and protection of the environment. Indigenous knowledge of management and biodiversity protection should be acknowledged and utilised. Further, the government needs to address issues of poverty as a contributor towards environmental degradation and therefore to utilise natural resources for the benefit of the people of Kenya. Homegrown environmental conservation measures may also work better for each country, for example, consolidating land for better food production, rather than land fragmentation into small land parcels that are not viable.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, significant issues to be considered from the ecofeminist perspective are that women and nature are closely linked. Just as Mother Earth has feminine attributes of giving, nurturing and sustaining life, ecofeminism highlights the devaluation of this very important role and the abuse of both women and nature. Jesus Christ, a male, demonstrated a nurturing and caring side in His mission on earth and was not ashamed to show it. From the beginning, humankind was given a privileged position on earth to rule over the land and animals and to nurture and sustain God's creation. However, human greed and the effects of development have led to the degradation of the environment.

To overcome this problem of the exploitation of women and nature requires the development of ideals that can liberate both men and women to work harmoniously together in respect of each other's roles and the environment that sustains us. The duality between men and women, and between nature and culture, should not be so stringent that one has to win over the other. The two can work together harmoniously to produce a better result. No role is insignificant, for as Maathai noted well, modest grassroots people can transform the world.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Maathai, *Unbowed*.

14. *Wangari Maathai, an ecofeminist at the crossroad*

Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land, but instil in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position to understand what is being lost. The future of the planet concerns all of us, and all of us should do what we can to protect it. As Maathai told the foresters and the women, “you do not need a diploma to plant a tree”.⁴⁷ We can make it our passion and interest to conserve nature. Indeed, Maathai demonstrated that countries can develop without necessarily coming into conflict with nature. Conservation does not deprive people, but makes them richer and more resourceful. We need to nurture nature, for it to work for us.

⁴⁷ Maathai, *Unbowed*, 138.