

RESISTING ETHNIC AND NATION - STATE PATRIARCHS AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE IN WANGARI MAATHAI'S *UNBOWED: ONE WOMAN'S STORY*

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Abstract

Wangari Maathai wrote her autobiography after her coronation as Nobel Laureate. This had a consequence on the audience she chose to address and the content she would articulate. This paper employs the concept of the organizing principle to demonstrate how Maathai applies it in the autobiography to selectively construct a transcend persona who grows beyond her Gikuyu ethnic identity and her Kenyan identity to become a global cosmopolitan citizen.

Key Words: Organizing Principle, Persona, Ethnicity, Identity

Introduction

Mandel (1968, p. 221) argues that the autobiographer's purpose is to achieve some end through what he refers to as the organizing principle. The organizing principle is an attempt to reconstruct the autobiographer's life by looking into the past and selecting, however inconsistent, events which inform her/his experience and molding them into some sort of unity. By reconstructing the past into a given structure of life the autobiographer is engaged in a creative act in which the past is reactivated in the present (Gusdorf, 1956, p.118). Whereas the autobiographer's life has many competing and often contradictory selves, s/he structures the narrative in a manner that projects one aspect of self above other recoverable selves. The autobiographer's intention is to foreground one identity above other possible identities. No autobiographer is capable of writing a satisfactory self-study capturing within the covers of the book the entire personality such as modes of behaviour, social roles, and diverse images reflected in the eyes of the family, friends, and enemies among others. Consequently, an autobiographer selects one aspect of personality to stand for the complex whole (Mandel, 1968, p. 223). Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* (Written after the autobiographer's coronation as Nobel Laureate and therefore in the glare of the global stage) is organized around the principle of the narrator's journey to global citizenship. To represent this global citizenship, the autobiographer constructs a transcend persona who

grows beyond her ethnic community and the patriarchs of her nation state to appropriate the global space.

Agency Against Ethnic and Nation State Patriarchs

Wangari Maathai portrays a persona constantly conflicted between interests of self and the demands of ethnic patriarchy on the one hand and that of the nation-state on the other. Ethnic patriarchy is portrayed as attempting to inscribe gender and sex codes on her within the generally accepted social cultural context. She demonstrates how the ethnic social structure attempts to trap the spatial and temporal *performativity* of her body through naming it and restricting it within patriarchal conventions so that she can disengage from social and political discourses. The narrator exploits her position as narrator to construct a protagonist who resists confinement and breaks loose in search of her own identity. The narrator as protagonist demonstrates agency in resisting patriarchal social norms. By foregrounding a series of repeated performances such as marriage, reproduction, child rearing and divorce (in which patriarchy attempts to codify, stylize and restrict her body as female) she constructs her body as site for struggle. She reenacts what Butler calls the “possible reworking of gender performances . . . Cultural codes within the social structure which interpret the human subject’s body imply, a public process of power relations in which everyday interactions take place....” (p. 94). In the narrative, these interactions become sites of contestations not only of power relations but also of knowledge of self and other, and the positions and locations of one against the other within the social structure. Being male or female comes with negotiations of the spaces the human subject occupies within the *culturalist* hierarchy. It is laden with specific do(s) and don’t(s). The narrator dramatizes the ethnic social structure as having constraints within which the human subject must interact by deploying a “... highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1991, p. 33). As Butler suggests, the regulatory frame of codes comes to naturalize our perception of what it means to be a woman or a man. This frame of codes is open to contestations because the basis of their interpretation differs in perspective between the perceived intentions of the social structure and those of the individual agent. *Culturalist* codes may suggest continuity in the sense that they carry forward the agenda of naming and restricting the human subject’s body. They may also suggest discontinuity in the sense that they (re) read the human body as constituting agency. The narrator’s description of her resistance to *masculinist* inscriptions of gender and sex codes suggests that she sees herself as triumphant over ethnic patriarchal networks represented in the narrative by her aunt Nyakweya, her husband Mwangi and a legion of family members and friends.

In the narrative, the politics of location, knowledge and power is constantly played out in the narrator’s interaction with others on the basis of her gender and sexuality. She suggests that her emotions, thoughts and actions are constantly weighted against her sex inscribed and gendered body. Neither her personal and private life nor her public life is sheltered from the *masculinist* gaze. Ethnic patriarchy expects her to be a heterosexual African female. Spatial

metaphors of position, location, movement, practice and ethics in the autobiography are constructed and interrogated around the contestation of this sexualized and gendered identity. The narrator describes her entire childhood, young adulthood and mature adulthood as a contestation between, on the one hand, the prescription by ethnic and nation - statist patriarchy on who she ought to be and on the other, her hopes and aspirations for self-determination. Culturally, it is expected that her education, socialization and acculturation should mould her to be a married and 'self-respecting woman' whose behaviour is acceptable to her Kikuyu ethnic community members:

Like any woman without my academic credentials I attended to my home, personally received and served guests, and made them feel welcome.... Once a woman had fulfilled these obligations, she could sit and talk to guests....Women are commonly described as carriers of culture (p. 111).

The narrator seems to appreciate the role academic achievement plays in differentiating her as a unique individual among a generalized group lumped together as women. However, ethnic patriarchy, by spelling out specific chores for women, differentiates her from men by generalizing her alongside all women. In other words, ethnic patriarchy does not pay adequate attention to the unique differences between and amongst women in their beliefs, thoughts and talents. Having collectively *otherized* women as different from men, patriarchy turns a blind eye to the unique achievements of individual women. This, metaphorically, locates her position and delineates her expected relationship with her male counterpart. The chores ascribed to her also delineate her spatial movement in the sense that she cannot sit at the high table with guests until she has fulfilled her duty of receiving and serving them. The kitchen here becomes a site for reading cultural codes constructed by ethnic patriarchy to play out gender differences and to exclude the female gender from certain social and cultural *performativity*.

It is ironical that women and not men are expected to be carriers of culture. Yet, inscriptions of ethnic cultural codes relegate them from centralist public spaces (such as sitting at the high table with guests and be served) to marginal spaces of playing the servant. Ethnic patriarchy expects women to conform with rather than resist the static gender constructs. Consistently in the narrative, we get to see this kind of expectation from ethnic patriarchy and the attendant surprise it invites when the narrator or the community of women collaborating with her resist these discriminatory cultural codes. By constantly relegating women to marginal spaces but conversely making them appropriate the means of upholding the status quo (as carriers of culture), patriarchy sets up women to work against their own power to influence the circulation of public discourses.

In the narrative, the woman's voice is portrayed as muzzled from critiquing the circumstances of her condition. The narrator appropriates the autobiographical space available to her to define self and to determine self. We, therefore, see various tensions and

negotiations of identity formations between the narrator and patriarchy. For instance, ethnic patriarchy is portrayed to have a dogged insistence on her heterosexual marriage. Before her marriage, her status as a single woman is treated with discomfiture while after her marriage; it is prohibitive for her to sue for divorce. Spinsterhood and single motherhood are seen as a form of deviance. When the narrator goes to the United States and Europe, to advance her studies, her aunt Nyakweya gets worried that her studies will consume much of her time which in turn would impede her from fulfilling her duty as a woman (p. 105). The woman's primary responsibility is seen to be child birth and child rearing. This is expected to earn her respect amongst members of her ethnic community. Ethnic patriarchy having placed the highest possible premium of womanhood in the woman's ability to give birth it becomes important that she should marry early before she loses her value with the passage of time. It is with significant relief, therefore, that Nyakweya learns of the narrator's engagement to Mwangi: her future husband. And, as tradition demands, Nyakweya ululates four times in honour of the narrator and publicly celebrates the narrator's supposed cultural achievement and the sense of communal inclusion it beholds (p. 106). Social inclusion, as the narrator shows over and over is defined by a woman's proximity to the masculine gender and the performance of her femininity. A woman is not expected to exploit public spaces available to her to seek her independence.

One of the ways, the narrator suggests, patriarchy undermines the woman's independence is to restrict her possible existence outside marriage. Whatever identity a woman tries to construct is deemed subservient to her identity as a wife or mother. For instance, the narrator's husband, Mwangi, seems in a hurry to have his bride despite her struggle to attain education and achieve some level of social independence and personal fulfillment, "...Mwangi was obviously worried I might stay in Germany longer than was good for his plans. Therefore, he wrote me many letters and sent emissaries to persuade me to return to Kenya so we could start our family" (p. 107). Although, Mwangi does not directly impede the narrator's progress in education, there is little doubt that he lays greater premium on her role as his possible future wife and as the possible future mother of his children than he does in her professional growth and the attendant identity as an independent professional. Nyakweya's and Mwangi's anxieties suggest that the narrator's struggle to attain education is an act towards her possible social exclusion while her impending marriage is an act towards her possible social inclusion.

In her marriage, she symbolically loses her independence with her loss of name. She acquires her husband's surname, Mathai, at the expense of her maiden name, Muta, which is mutilated from her identity. The narrator's loss of her maiden name and the corresponding acquisition of her husband's surname signify an important shift in her identity. Her husband's name is an identity marker imposed on her as a requirement for marriage and therefore as a requirement for social inclusion. This acquisition mutes her female identity. Naming is an important identity marker. In the narrative, naming goes beyond marking the narrator's gendered body. It equally marks her acquisitions and material wellbeing. For

instance, after a long battle with the university administration to have the university recognize her right to get emoluments equivalent to her male counterpart, the narrator is paid lump sum money which she uses to buy a house with her husband. However, the title deed is registered in her husband's name. Although she contributes to the investment it is her husband who officially owns it. This leads to her loss of property after their divorce (p. 117).

The narrator's expected subordination on the basis of gender plays out at her work place as well. She demonstrates how she and her friend Vertistine Mbaya work under an oppressive payment structure which allows junior male technical assistants to get a better pay than they despite their superior training. They fight for equal treatment partly to raise consciousness of similarity and difference among the community of women at the university. They militate against a *culturalist* hierarchy in which women are ranked below the masculine gender. After a long drawn protracted struggle both women are finally recognized not on their own right as women but rather as honorary male professors, "the university must have decided that to maintain peace the two of us should be given what we were asking for... although women colleagues continued to be paid less than male counterparts and did not receive equal benefits. Vert and I were treated like honorary male professors!" (p. 116). To circumvent the duo's resistance and to forestall future resistance patriarchy symbolized by the university administration renegotiates the duo's power to earn by bestowing upon them the ultimate identity marker to power: manhood.

At various intersections of the narrative, the narrator shows awareness that she is expected to appreciate various codes of *culturalist* hierarchy (such as names, salaries, title deeds etc) which place the woman at a secondary position to her male counterpart. Any sign of independence is repulsive and seen to be in opposition to patriarchal authority. However, the narrator develops a great sense of self awareness. This puts her at odds with the ethnic patriarchy and later with patriarchy managing the state. The narrator's education sharpens her critical appreciation of self. This leads her to question cultural codes and to ferment resistance. The narrator's resistance to cultural codes puts her in direct antagonism with expectations of patriarchy which demand her submission. The narrator believes that she can sufficiently exercise a level of independence and is, therefore, highly conscious of levels of similarity and difference in her interaction within social networks. This partly leads to the destruction of her marriage. During the divorce the press quotes Mwangi as having argued that the narrator is, "too educated, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control" (p. 146).

The narrator's consciousness of levels of gender similarity and difference can be discerned during the court proceedings of her divorce case. In court, the narrator disrupts the highly *masculinist* spaces at display. The courtroom symbolises a *culturalist* code for interpreting conventions written and perpetuated by patriarchy. The courtroom also symbolizes a space for display of patriarchal power: a male judge adjudicates in a case by a male complainant and the contestants are male lawyers. The discourse of patriarchy as a meta-language plays

out in the courtroom proceedings. She is expected to respond with either a yes or a no to given questions which she feels restricts her from fully expressing herself. Although this requirement affects either gender in court her level of consciousness of gender difference makes her feel the oppression of this requirement. According to her the aura in the courtroom is meant to intimidate her (p. 146). The narrator resists this intimidation. At one time, instead of answering a question from her husband's lawyer, she subverts the discourse of the power play between them by asking him a question of her own: "Why did you ask me that question?" (p. 146) she asks him. This subversion of the courtroom discourse challenges the essence of patriarchal spaces of knowledge and display and partly contributes to her subsequent loss of the case. Following her loss, she opines that for the Judge to have made that kind of ruling he would have been either corrupt or incompetent. This assertion infuriates the judge who slaps a sentence on her for contempt of court. Consequently, she is jailed at the Langata women prison (p. 149).

Following the divorce case, her sexuality as a divorcee is brought into sharp focus. Having been constructed as a heterosexual African female her identity is presumed to be anchored on a man. Her status as a divorcee negates this presumption and leads to her ostracism and exclusion from participating in public discourses. Patriarchy doesn't envisage that a divorcee should participate in the circulation of knowledge within the social structure. On one occasion, during a national conversation on the suitability of building a skyscraper at Uhuru Park, parliament decides to discuss her status as a divorcee:

To the cheers of a packed house, one MP said that because I had supposedly repudiated my husband in public, I could not be taken seriously and that my behavior had damaged his respect for all women. He accused me of incitement and warned Green Belt Movement (my 'clique of women' as he called them) to tread carefully. "I don't see the sense at all in a bunch of divorcees coming out to criticize such a complex," he concluded (p. 191).

Parliament is a symbol of the political power of the citizens within the state. At the time, described in the narrative, parliament was largely constituted by men, and was therefore also a symbol of the social network of patriarchy. Diverting a national debate about the efficacy of building a white elephant in a national park to discuss her marital status suggests that her status as a divorcee has equal import to matters of national concern (as far as patriarchy is concerned). Although details of the court proceedings on the divorce case are not entirely known to her critics, she shoulders the blame, suffers humiliation, and is excluded from the materiality of knowledge discourse and power. Her social and political participation in public spaces is interrogated because of her status as a divorcee. Her participation in public discourses is deemed to upset the *culturalist* hierarchy in which a functional family is essential to actors within the social structure and is validated by the presence of a man. The presence of the family as constituted by this *culturalist* hierarchy is deemed to be essential

for one to be recognized by patriarchy. The production of knowledge identities and relations of power are therefore negotiated through these cultural codes.

The narrator demonstrates that the social configuration of her gendered identity intends to impede and limit her *performativity*. The roles she is expected to play by ethnic and nation statist patriarchy and the spaces within which she is expected to perform them appear to her to be inadequate and in some cases demeaning. She, therefore, resists and struggles to negotiate for greater roles for herself and also to negotiate for greater public and private spaces for her *performativity*. Although she is expected to be a heterosexual female schooled in mannerisms acceptable to her Kikuyu patriarchal cultural set up she (re) inscribes her gender and sex identity as a divorced and independent single parent devoid of the masculine sanctuary provided for by the community in which she lives. This demands that she resists inscriptions imposed on her by various institutions within the ethnic and nation statist social structure which want to control her *performativity*. This leads to the playing out of tensions in the struggle between her and the various ethnic and nation statist networks.

One of the ways in which she defies patriarchy is to rename herself. Renaming oneself renegotiates the spaces of knowledge and power. It implies a level of independence and a reinsertion of self-presence. The narrator's husband, being male, attempts to position himself within the borders of hegemonic masculinity. Using metaphors of space and movement he attempts to define the identity of the narrator which she resists. After their divorce he demands that she drops his name Mathai. The narrator resists by adding an 'a' in the middle of her name thus becoming Maathai. This struggle suggests the playing out of gender identity politics in which either gender tries to control the discourse of defining self and other within the context of marriage. This resistance symbolically reconfigures her identity by suggesting that she does not have to be what ethnic and nation statist patriarchs intend her to be.

In this struggle, the narrator seems to transcend the boundaries of the canon of woman narratives which often explore the psychological afflictions of the woman condition. She plunges into wider social and political challenges afflicting nascent post-colonial states especially in Africa. In these struggles, she seeks to liberate not just her community of women but also the dominated masculinity. Her role in the struggle to protect Uhuru Park and in the release of political prisoners detained by then president Moi, rattles the establishment. Moi calls her 'a mad woman' who is 'a threat' to the order and security of the country. The government's fear of her growing potential to mobilize the populace against the government's mismanagement of resources and bad governance leads it to unleash state machinery on her. Nevertheless, the run-ins with state actors prepare ground for the narrator to construct an emerging identity as a global citizen.

Crossing the Border into Global Citizenship

Advocates of a cosmopolitan global order present it as moving beyond the state. Martin Kohler (1998, p.123) sees a cosmopolitan global order as a movement from the national to the cosmopolitan public sphere with a world developing as a single whole as a consequence of the social activity and the will of a population sharing common values and interests such as human rights, democratic participation, the rule of law and the preservation of the world's ecological order. Following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Ulrich Beck (2003, p. 24) described the cosmopolitan global order as "politics of post nationalism" in which the cosmopolitan project contradicts and replaces the nation state project. More recent global activities such as Brexit and the resurgent America first narrative in the USA following the election of President Donald Trump may depress Beck's optimism. However, advancements in technology especially the opening up of the cyberspace has increased the free flow of information leading to greater interaction of citizens of the world.

The innate desire for the convergence of global humanity creates a globalised identity which is a *deteriorised* distancing affirming a person's sense of self, transcending national boundaries. It is underpinned by the appreciation of our similarity and difference as human beings. This identity resists ethnic peculiarities or even particularities while relating to shared global humanity. The defining feature of globalised identity is the identification with all peoples of the world, transcending immediate community and national boundaries. This shared humanity develops solidarity with others in the world irrespective of their territorial location, religious affiliation, racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Having constructed self as an agent resisting the domination of ethnic and nation state patriarchs, the narrator represents her persona as one in transcendence from the ethnic and national space in search of the global arena where she expects to engage in conviviality and solidarity with citizens of the world to make the globe a better place. Although the globalised identity the narrator constructs is spatially transient, going through the motions of ethnic and nation state identities, the retrospective nature of the narrative enables her to construe her global cosmopolitanism as a pre-given fact. She thus, reconstructs the trajectory of her life to reflect this global cosmopolitan vision right from the events which surround her childhood. Her level of interaction from childhood to adulthood is constructed as having had the gradual ability to go beyond immediate local boundaries and networks.

Born into a polygamous family at the foothills of the Aberdare Mountain Range and named after one of the ten mythical daughters of the founding primordial parents: Gikuyu and Mumbi, she recalls her father as being part of the first generation in Kenya to leave their homes and families in search of jobs and the accumulation of money in the British cash economy. She also recalls that earlier, one of her uncle's had suffered historical erasure after he was killed in the First World War and subsequently left out of the naming system which she argues retains historical memory of generations among her people. She too, would after

only three years after her birth leave her home for the more cosmopolitan Nakuru where her father worked as a driver for a European man, Mr. Neylan. Her early journey to Nakuru can be seen as the beginning of many journeys: Physical, social, political and psychological, which would include border criss-crossings in the many negotiations she would make in her entire life.

According to her, the cosmopolitan appeal stems from what she perceives to be the polarizing tensions in the Kenyan state resulting from a strong sense of ethnic nationalism. By forging a globalised cosmopolitan identity the narrator does not necessarily try to underestimate the importance of national and more local relationships of solidarity. Rather, she demonstrates that local identities such as articulated by ethnicity and race, relevant as they could be, can be transcended when other forms of the self are affirmed especially in the intensely interconnected contemporary world. Although ethnic tensions such as she describes are preventable by leaders of the state it is not until she invites the press especially the international press to beam these images “ in the glare of the world” that the leaders start to pay attention (p. 240). Media such as Deutsche Welle and the Kenya press bear witness to these accounts; with the German crew taking some important footage of those who had suffered from the tribal clashes and beaming them across the world, giving them global attention. The Kenyan police as instruments of state coercion resist such coverage from the media. They especially don’t want the international press filming meetings held by the narrator and other activists for fear of international publicity (p. 242).

The narrator demonstrates that the rising sense of ethnic nationalism directly correlates with state failure. The narrator describes how the ruling party becomes increasingly dictatorial and oppressive as it violates the rights of its citizens. Citizens are excluded from active participation in matters of state. This deprives them of a sense of national belonging. Instead of constructing their sense of belonging within the borders of the state, citizens seek refuge in their ethnic cocoons, on the one hand, or look up to interventions from beyond the borders of the state, on the other. For instance, it takes the efforts of foreign diplomats from several countries to intervene and ensure the safety of human rights activists such as the narrator.

An important expression of her globalised identity is her involvement as an activist in many activities with global organizations. Her involvement convinces her that her immediate locale is fraught with a myriad of challenges which need redress. She tries to connect local challenges like the loss of firewood; the existence of malnutrition amongst local children; scarcity of clean water for rural folk; loss of topsoil in local farms; erratic rains leading to food shortages and famines; lack of school fees for local children and the falling apart of local infrastructure with how these can be understood as part of the global neighbourhood watch (p. 173). These concerns lead her to try and connect these local experiences with the experiences of people beyond the Kenyan borders and to contemplate not only a global connection but also global interventionist strategies. The narrator makes an implied argument that globalised identity becomes appealing to the citizens of African states because

of weak instruments for a civic nationalist identity. Challenges of African states such as: disrespect for the rule of law, repression of civil liberties and rights; ethnic tensions arising from strong ethno - nationalist citizenship; the debt crisis; depletion of forest cover and the destruction of the environment, among others, lead to the belief among its citizens that the global space is the solution to these challenges. Such challenges suggest a failure to consolidate a strong sense of civic nationalism, making globalised identity attractive as citizens look beyond their borders not only for intervention to local challenges but also for solidarities and a sense of security.

Conclusion

Unbowed: One Woman's Story, having been written by a Nobel Laureate, was inevitably written to appeal to a global audience rather than a national one. By using Barret Mandel's organizing principle in autobiography, the paper demonstrates that, Wangari Maathai writes in retrospection and selects her journey through her ethnic community, the Agikuyu, and her nation - state, Kenya, to the global stage where she conceives herself as a global cosmopolitan citizen. She also suggests her willingness to transcend ethnic, gender, and generational boundaries. Her cross gender, trans-ethnic and trans-generational efforts (quite apart from giving her a cosmopolitan space to engage the state) enables her to canvass for greater sensibilities to the environment as a dialogic imperative that transcends ethnic, national and generational boundaries.

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