

Florence Ebila

Florence Ebila is affiliated to the School of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda.
Email: febila@ss.mak.ac.ug
ebilaf@yahoo.com

'A proper woman, in the African tradition': The construction of gender and nationalism in Wangari Maathai's autobiography *Unbowed*

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This article discusses how Wangari Maathai's life experiences narrated in her autobiography *Unbowed* offers an opportunity for discussing the contradictions surrounding the perception, place and identity of women in African politics. Against the backdrop of gendered nationalism which glorifies the role and place of women in the construction of nations, the article presents a different reality of how some male leaders of postcolonial nation states like the Kenyan example, silences the voices of women politicians by urging them to behave like 'proper women'. Maathai's autobiography demonstrates that the social construction of womanhood in African politics is influenced by socio-cultural and patriarchal ideologies that construct the ideal African woman as the docile one, the one who does not question male authority. Maathai's autobiography becomes a lens that can be used to view and question the social construction of womanhood versus manhood and the influence on gender power relations on women's participation in the politics of the postcolonial nation states in Africa. **Keywords:** African tradition, gender and nationalism, patriarchy, women's autobiography.

On December 12, *jamhuri*, or Republic day, when Kenyans celebrate independence from the British with a public holiday, the president gave a speech, in Uhuru Park no less. He condemned the Law Society of Kenya for perceived criticisms of the government, and singled me out for opposing the complex. Moi also suggested that if I was to be a proper woman in "the African Tradition"—I should respect men and be quiet (196).

I begin this article with the above quotation from Wangari Maathai's political autobiography which represents the contradictions in gendered perceptions, identity formation and the freedom that the state offered to its citizens in the postcolonial nation state of Kenya of the 1990s. This article critiques the state's social construction of womanhood and manhood in Kenyan politics particularly the state's construction

of the notion of a “proper woman.” I argue that Wangari’s autobiography represents a kind of protest literature where she repudiates the way the Kenyan state perceived her and repositions herself to critique how president Moi alienated her from actively participating in critiquing governance in Kenya. Maathai uses her autobiography to question where the postcolonial nation state went wrong in its interaction with women politicians like her who chose to speak up against bad leadership.

Moi’s statements above, triggers several questions about the social perception of women versus men in Kenyan society and how those perceptions are transferred into the politics of the nation state. Such a statement from such a personality as the President (of Kenya at that time) leaves so many questions unanswered. Questions that need to be asked are; who is a proper woman in the African tradition? What are the parameters used to define her? Who defines a proper woman in the African tradition; is she defined by others, i.e. family, friends, political colleagues, children and work? Can she and does she define herself? By contrast, who is a proper man in the African tradition and in the context of the nation state?

These questions remind us of Ketu Katrak’s idea of body politics; how a woman’s identity is constituted by the socio-cultural perceptions that define her and how these perceptions eventually force her to conform to socially sanctioned and acceptable norms of her society. In the arena of politics, Radika Mohanram’s idea of the body as a metaphor for the nation helps us to understand some of the symbolic insights and images that are used to construct the woman’s body within the nation state. Mohanram perceives the human body as an entity that belongs to a geographical space. In *Black Body* for example, Mohanram conceives of the body as a metaphor that relates to the geography of a place. She explains that the body is often viewed as an entity that belongs to a particular place and time, and that this creates a direct link between the body and the national landscape. “Raced bodies, nations, ideas about places, passports and visas are inextricably linked. Senses of place are linked with ideas of national identity as well as the hierarchy of nations” (Mohanram 4). Referring to Lisa Malkki, Mohanram further explains that people always identify themselves in relation to their motherlands or fatherlands, “each nation is a grand genealogical tree, rooted in the soil that nourishes it” (Malkki in Mohanram 5). Thus the link between the nation and the soil is manifested in the way the postcolonial nation state is imagined as fatherland or motherland.

Mohanram’s metaphorical reading here develops for me a basis for a metaphorical reading that links with the arguments that Anne McClintock and Osei-Nyame Junior present about gender and nationalism. To McClintock and Osei-Nyame, the nation state in Africa is masculinist, yet there is an illusion of female presence represented through metaphors as well as through symbols. In this article I use Mohanram’s metaphorical reading of the link between human beings and their environments to discuss the contradictions in the metaphorical representation of motherhood and

fatherhood within the nation state and the reality of how women and men are actually treated within the nation state.

In the traditional African imaginary according to President Moi, women are expected to be quiet when men speak, respectable by being respectful to men (especially to male leadership), good mothers of the nation and not to challenge authority in general. Moi's sentiments on that *Jamhuri* day echoed his perception based on the African or even Kenyan/Kikuyu traditional expectations. African women politicians are expected to be quiet and not challenge authority. To Moi, Maathai was not behaving like a proper woman in the African tradition by commenting on his government's development plans. She was not living up to the expectations of what an African woman was supposed to be. She was not supposed to be writing letters to him, his ministers and to the press, expressing her open disagreement with the government's planned building of a multi-million dollar complex—the subject which sparked this outrage at Uhuru Park.

A proper woman in the African tradition has always been imagined within the context of the family; she is expected to accept marriage and have children because marriage is assumed to be the end goal for most African women (Maathai 54). A proper woman puts the family interest first before even her own personal interest. A proper African woman is not concerned about trees and the environment; rather she is supposed to be concerned about her family and children. If she were to be concerned about trees, it would be in terms of firewood which she needs to provide fuel for her kitchen.

To Moi, a proper woman in the African tradition was that woman who did not talk back at men. Silence is construed here to mean respect but it is important to critically analyze what makes women silent and the implications of women's silence within the current nation states in Africa. Do women keep quiet out of respect or do they remain quiet out of fear? Given that this speech was made on *jamhuri* day—a republican day, the government should have encouraged Maathai to feel free to speak up her mind, instead she is subtly cautioned to be quiet when spoken to. Moi's advice here is important to our analysis of the gender power relations existing between the male leaders and the female subjects in most current postcolonial nation states in Africa. It is also significant to our analysis of the social construction of gender within nationalism, ideas which Osei-Nyame, McClintock and Ogunyemi have observed to be the idealized representation of women within the construction of nationalism. Women are supposed to be seen but not to be heard. According to Mohanram, the nation is supposed to be presented as one single unit i.e. the family unit (7). Interpersonal/ human bodily relations are repressed under the umbrellas of motherlands and fatherlands so that the nation is forced to have a coherent unitary outlook of state fatherhood and motherhood. Within that configuration, society defines what a proper woman is vis-à-vis what a proper man is. Perhaps there may not even

be such a term as a 'proper man' but rather the adjective a 'real man' may be deemed more appropriate because men are not necessarily expected to be 'proper', they just have to be 'real.'

The idea that proper African women should not speak up therefore was not only a creation of colonialism, it had also been institutionalized within the masculinist state by virtue of their patriarchal inheritance from African traditions. The silencing of oppositional views is equivalent to the othering that patriarchal societies have done to women. A proper African woman is imagined to exist within an ideal African family composed of a real loving husband or father who is usually the head of household, a supporting wife or mother who is expected to mother the children of the household. A proper African woman therefore aspires to be a wife and a mother. Maathai had succeeded in being a mother but was considered to have failed in being a wife. She was also a divorced woman. A proper African woman does not divorce or if she divorces, she does not stand for a position of leadership because she knows that she will be seen to be a bad example (158). A proper African woman was not supposed to be too educated; in fact the question of education sometimes brought division between elite and grassroots women's organizations according to Maathai's autobiography. Maathai says professional women's organizations where the elite women were the majority were seen as not "African" enough because the majority of the rural women weren't that educated (158). Maathai however did not let the difference in education affect her relationship with groups of women that were considered less educated and who formed the majority of her Green Belt Movement. Her approach to empowerment tended to bridge the gap between the educated and the uneducated.

Within Kenyan politics therefore, there were many social expectations that defined the behaviours of "proper African women" and Maathai states quite a few in her autobiography. Before she had even joined politics, she had to behave according to how society expected the wife of a politician to behave. She was conscious that educated women were not considered to be "African" enough. "I was very conscious of the fact that a highly educated woman like me ran a risk of making her husband lose votes and support if I was accused of not being enough of an African woman, of being "a white woman in black skin" (110). Women who are educated are alienated in politics just because people think they are out of touch with the problems that women from the grassroots face. Wives of politicians are denied individuality to the extent that they become measures of success or lack thereof for their husbands. Maathai writes about how she dealt with that kind of victimization. She writes that she learnt to attend to visitors personally, serving them and entertaining all the guests in order to appear proper and African enough. Viewed within this context, education can be seen to pose problems for women.

Writing about her experience as the wife of a politician at the time when she was still married to Mathai, Wangari observed that men used their wives' Africanness as

boosters to their political aspirations. In fact she says, the men, “wanted to project their ‘Africanness’ through their wives both at home and in the society. Women are described as carriers and promoters of culture. Yet men are also carriers of culture: Why in these instances couldn’t they express it?” (110–2). Maathai does not accept the unjust practice of loading responsibilities of good behavior on women only, while men are the ones who benefit from it all at the end. Maathai therefore questions why it should be women who should be viewed as promoters of culture and not men. She goes beyond questioning the unfairness and narrates how she learnt to work within the unfair social expectations. For example she said she continued to serve food and drinks to voters personally whenever they dropped by their house not because of the social expectations but rather because she enjoyed serving her guests personally and having personal interactions with them (110). She also learnt to dress “appropriately” especially wearing long dresses. But above all, Maathai did not allow the talk about how to behave like a proper African woman to deter her from enjoying her success as a woman. She says:

At one point it became clear I was being turned into a sacrificial lamb. Anybody who had a grudge against modern, educated, and independent women was being given an opportunity to spit on me. I decided to hold my head high, put my shoulders back, and suffer with dignity: I would give every woman and girl reasons to be proud and never regret being educated, successful, and talented. “What I have,” I told myself, “is something to celebrate and not to ridicule or dishonor (146).

Maathai words above show that self-definition is one tool that is essential to women’s empowerment. Women should define who they are first, before allowing society to define for them who they are. Self-definition involves developing a consciousness. Maathai had developed that consciousness and seen her achievements as something worth celebrating and not hiding. She was a successful, talented and educated African woman. She was knowledgeable enough to realize that restrictive and most times negative social attitudes that influenced how women are perceived, are constructed with the intention of keeping women subordinated. Maathai defined herself and decided to be proud of whom she was. She saw herself as a role model for African girls and women and in that role, she saw the urgent need to lead an exemplary life, to be bold and not to cower when faced with negative patriarchal attitudes. In *Unbowed*, she writes back to the centre and re-defines her position as a woman who was in charge of defining herself and she wouldn’t allow society to define her on society’s terms. She celebrates her life by writing her life story. She includes the challenges as lessons to readers especially girls and women whom she sees herself mentoring. But she also tells the story of how she triumphs over the odds to celebrate her victory. In this way her autobiography becomes a powerful tool of self-identification that recounts

personal experiences and offers lessons to readers about the importance of being in control.

A proper African man by contrast according to popular belief is often considered to be that man who rules over his family with a firm hand. He is the bread winner; he provides for the household. He defends the honour of his family. A proper African man is therefore considered to be the ideal father and husband; a man who nurtures his children according to the rules of the patriarchal family. It is this metaphor of the family that is projected onto the political leaders when they are viewed as fathers of the nation. Michael Schatzberg's study on political metaphors in Africa provides some useful insights into how the gendered images of fatherhood and motherhood have been constructed and operationalized in Africa. He also shows how these perceptions are translated into political practice. In fact Schatzberg's research compliments McClintock's ideas mentioned earlier, particularly how state paternalism has been used as a method of control in Africa. In a study of newspaper articles and reports about heads of states of Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon, Schatzberg describes similarities in the way the general public is encouraged by the mass media to think about heads of states as fathers of the nation.

The head of state is likened to a father because fatherhood is viewed as the most appropriate imagery that reflects authority. Schatzberg says; "Virtually all heads of states in middle Africa have wanted the press to view them as kind, loving, solicitous individuals who were fathers of the nation" (8).¹ The father of the nation is expected to be the moral authority in the country just like a father is the head of household in his own nuclear family. The father of the nation is expected to take care of his children, namely the citizens, nurture and provide paternal care for them. Thus the father of the nation is expected to provide for and feed the national family.

Political fatherhood draws images from the patriarchal nuclear family. The father of the nation is supposed to provide jobs and political positions for his children just like the way a father is supposed to do in a patriarchal family. Following this logic, institutions within the nation are aligned to the family through similar kinds of imagery. Political parties are equated to families with the head of the political party being the father figure. "Ethnic rivalry or political opposition is presented as petty sibling rivalry of "those lacking maturity" (Schatzberg 25). Schatzberg's metaphorical logic enables us to understand better the relationship between Maathai and President Daniel Arap Moi as well as the relationship between Mathaai and the other women who did not agree with her approach of organizing the citizens to carry out forms of civil disobedience as a way of tackling some of the political problems of Kenya. Following the logic of paternalism, views from the opposition are made to appear wayward, childish and disrespectful. When the opposition speaks against a government initiative, their speech is taken as an act of disrespect done by people

who are simple-minded, who actually need paternal understanding from the president, the mature father of the nation. Schatzberg explains the paternalistic relationship in this way:

The regimes can present, therefore, any political protest as the work of “ungrateful” or “misguided” or “wayward children.” They are all brothers and sisters, and like siblings who squabble over inconsequential matters, citizens do also. [...] The political consequences of framing the political discussion in this manner are important because the metaphors contribute to an implicit “infantilization” of the population (24).

It is the infantilization of the opposition that I want to draw attention to in analyzing the dialogue between Maathai and President Moi. When Maathai protested against the Moi regime, her opposition was actually treated as part of this childlike squabble and Maathai was advised to behave like a proper woman in the African sense as earlier discussed. The reaction of the state’s sympathetic women’s organization *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* to Moi’s statements typified the way women in the political family behave as reported by Maathai.

“Prompted by President Moi, who wondered in that speech why the women of Kenya had not spoken against this “wayward” woman, the leadership of *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, our former National Council of Women colleagues and now a faithful branch of KANU, criticized me for “having belittled the President and the government.” They held rallies and press conferences to denounce me. At one point they suggested that I had “gone astray and should seek guidance from [my] fellow women” (196).

Maendeleo labeled Maathai wayward too, following in the logic of President Moi. She had gone astray meaning, she was not behaving like a proper African woman, (like them) and so they advised her to seek counsel from fellow women, in other words from them (196). As the umbrella women’s organization, the political language spoken by *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* in this case was a language of compromise. In the political family women are expected to abide by making compromises. These kinds of compromises prevent women from competing with men. Women who voice their concerns in public are seen to be disrespectful. *Maendeleo* was therefore acting its role as the political counselor and advisor to a fellow woman whom they considered to be behaving disrespectfully. This is what Schatzberg identifies as the more general role of such state owned women’s organizations in the maintenance of the paternal order. If women transgress and go beyond boundaries designated for them by the masculinist state otherwise known as family, they are threatened, cajoled or punished either by the state directly or admonished through state owned women’s organizations. The woman “transgressor” is made to appear to be out of order, and the order is usually the patriarchal order.

For her waywardness, Maathai was punished by the government through imprisonment more than once. She was also threatened: "A KANU MP bluntly threatened to have me forcibly circumcised if I entered the rift valley province again: a chilling attempt to try to control me as a woman" (244). The threat to circumcise Maathai can be understood in the context of the metaphors of the body which Finnstrom Sverker and Katrak propose for the analysis of gender and nationalism. The threat to circumcise Maathai for speaking out is equivalent to the kind of body politics that Katrak wrote about, where culture is used as a means to silence women. Circumcision in this case is presented as a cultural tool which society uses to assert their power over women's sexuality. As Finnstrom and Ogunyemi would say, Maathai's body is reduced to a passage, a place where men can exercise their power to rape, harm or destroy the woman, who ironically symbolizes the nation. The Member of Parliament's threat aimed at attacking Maathai's biological status as a woman and threatened to control her activities through emphasizing that if she continued poking at the patriarchal family, her punishment would be a direct attack on her biology as a woman. The suggested incision was to emphasize to her that her biology could be used as a tool to punish her. Although Maathai did not protest back at the radically sexual discriminatory nature of the attack from this particular Member of Parliament, there is evidence in the text that shows that the protest against her environmentalism was mostly done because she was a woman. Her marital issues were always brought into the discussion even when she tried to keep the debate on the environment. Sometimes she ignored them like in the above, but at times she shot back. For example, when she wrote a letter to Philip Leakey, her area Member of Parliament and Assistant Minister to the environment, about the *Times Complex*² she reminded them that her marital status was not important, neither was her sex. It was the issues at table, the environmental issues that needed to be discussed, not the sex of the one proposing the discussion. She says:

At another time and in another forum, I told Mr. Leakey, I would discuss my marital status with the MPs, since they were so interested, but that I wanted to keep the focus on the issue at hand. "The debate is on the proposed *Times Complex* at Uhuru Park," I wrote, and MPs should not be distracted by, as I put it, "the anatomy below the line (if they know what I mean)." In spite of what the MPs might think, I assured him, my being a woman was irrelevant. Instead, the debate over the complex required the use of "the anatomy of whatever lies above the neck!" (192)

This was a rebuff from Maathai to the Members of Parliament to concentrate on the issues and not on the sex of the person who was advocating for the issues. The suggestion about the need to concentrate on the "anatomy of whatever lies above the neck," was a veiled questioning of the level of intelligence of the MPs. She mocks

their inability to concentrate on issues of sustainable development that protects the environment which was the most important issue at hand and laughs at them for concentrating on issues that do not matter.

Moi's perception of women who defied cultural boundaries seemed no different from the generally negative perception of the Kenyan public. Maathai writes yet again about Moi's statement at a women's seminar in Nairobi, a statement that reflected the same mentality of masculine superiority. It showed a father's justified anger at a child who did not know what they want. "President Moi, opening a women's seminar in Nairobi, had told the women assembled that "because of your little minds, you cannot get what you are expected to get" (282). It wasn't bad enough for the President to equate women to children who could be wayward, this time he thought women were mentally less developed and confused; they did not know what they wanted. State paternal authority as shown in Moi's reaction here, is meant to silence alternate views from women. Women are expected to be only on the receiving end of authority but not to contest authority. The allegation that women have "little minds" resonates with the biological myth and misperception that informed science in the nineteenth century, a myth which was widely used to put women down. Moi was living his gender Darwinism in the 1980s and basking in the glory of the identity of father of the nation—*Baba Moi*.

Titles like *Baba Moi* and *Mzee* created the cult of the respectable father and wise old man that characterized the regimes of Moi and his contemporaries. The father figure was expected to be mature and forgiving. In Kenya, both Kenyatta and Moi after him were referred to with reference as *Mzee*, a Kiswahili word for "old man." Thus political children of the nation, create some kind of iconography within which political leaders like Moi and Kenyatta became immortalized in the public eye. It should be noted however that Maathai does not paint a picture of all Kenyan male leaders as bad and as being against women. She shows great respect for Kenyatta, the first President of Kenya. She also shows admiration for Mwai Kibaki who appointed her minister during his regime. Not all past Presidents of Kenya and or men are therefore demonized in Maathai's narration. There were some men who even worked with her like Dr Makanga to promote the work of the Green Belt Movement.

Speaking from within, Flora Igoki Terah, one of the women politicians in Kenya explains that politics in Kenya is still a domain for men. Despite the many manifestoes about women that political parties may have, she says the practice hasn't changed much in the 2000s:

in practice politics in Kenya and within all parties is still run as a "big boys club." Each party has a women's wing which, on paper, sounds great but in reality serves to sideline women politicians and stop them from taking part in actual decision-making. All important decisions are taken in late night meetings by small cliques of men over a drink.

Terah's view echoes what Maathai writes about in her autobiography. The Kenyan public was not yet ready for women politicians and they made life hard for women. Politics became like a men's club where transparency was sacrificed at the expense of clientelism. It is difficult for women to penetrate these male dominated political clubs. It is made even more difficult when paternalism or the "Big man syndrome" exists within the already patriarchal setting as was evident in Kenyan politics (Maathai 258).

Although Maathai's text does not offer us a lot of opportunities to discuss state motherhood or the conflict between women political leaders, there is one instance which exposes the perception about the expected and acceptable relationship between women who compete for political positions. When Maathai ran for the presidency, Charity Ngilu another woman who had been a Member of Parliament before also stood for the same position. Maathai was accused of being a spoiler for Ngilu (257). In other words according to public opinion, it was okay for men to compete with fellow men for political positions but for two women to stand for the same position, it was not okay. It was considered sabotage for women to compete with fellow women. It is this kind of attitude that keeps the number of women politicians down. By the end of the 1990s there was some little increase in the number of women politicians in Kenya. Maathai reports that, "A record nineteen women ran for parliament and six of them were elected, the most ever. Five of the women MPs represented the opposition. Many more women won seats in local and town councils. I knew how tough they must have survived parliamentary elections in a country where a good African woman was not supposed to be involved in politics" (235). This was a landmark change for Kenya to have more women join politics. Perhaps with the increase in the number of women at the local level, the needs of women will be addressed even better and Kenyan politics will become more gender sensitive and inclusive.

In conclusion Maathai's autobiography exposes the vulnerability as well as the resilience of women who engage in politics both individually like her and those who participate collectively like the Green Belt Movement. In postcolonial nation states, women are vulnerable to attacks from state machineries. The patrimonial relationship that the government of Kenya had with its female citizens required silence and humility in the face of oppression not challenges and protests which Maathai engaged in. The article therefore exposes that contradiction that exists between the way the state perceives itself in a genealogical gendered imagination which includes women and how at the same time it excludes and silences women from participating actively in challenging how society is governed.

Notes

1. The location middle of Africa is used in this context to refer to African countries that Schatzberg selected, those which he considered to have been almost literally positioned in the middle of Africa (6).
2. The Times Complex was a multi-million dollar shopping complex which government had proposed to erect at the Uhuru Park in Nairobi city.

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