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Navigating African Feminisms: Wangari Maathai as a Portrait

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Introduction

Feminism is a complex term that is connected to wide-ranging concepts and controversies. Feminist author and scholar, bell hooks defines feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (2000, p. 1). While hooks’ definition is overarching, she views it as open-ended and thus recognizes the possibility of other feministic strands outside of the definition. This paper discusses several strands of feminism. Salzman (2018, para. 1) associates contemporary feminism with reproach and demonization of men and defines it as toxic feminism which “is not a liberation from sexism.” Nonetheless, hooks (2000), acknowledges that male support is significant in the advancement of feminism. Similarly, Maathai (2006) recognizes the role of men in the progression of feminism and justice. hooks’ perspective of feminism is influenced by race, class, and gender in America on the one hand. Maathai’s on the other is driven by a struggle against cultural and neo-colonist influences that hinder women’s progress. Both perspectives make sense in discussing Black African feminism.

What is African Feminism?

Black African feminism and Western feminism are not synonymous (hooks, 2000; Atanga, 2013; Kamau, 2014). Thus, feminism is not homogenous (Kamau, 2014). In Africa, Western feminism has remained questionable and perceived as incompatible with African values (Atanga, 2013). Therefore, it has been understood as being anti-men and hence against values of marriage, childbearing, and preservation of the family. The African perception of feminism echoes Salzman’s (2018, para 1) view of feminism which is anti-men and a diversion of the initial goal of Western feminism which was to “challenge male domination and female subordination.” Thus, Salzman recognizes the existence of the inequities between the sexes. Western feminism has failed to address significant issues of race, class, and gender which affect Black African women in America (hooks, 2000). In Africa, Western feminism has been viewed as being authoritarian towards issues of African women (Atanga, 2013). Similarly, Gatwiri & McLaren (2016), note the failure of Western feminism to comprehend some concerns of African women. These criticisms indicate that both feminisms do not share the same reality.

African feminism considers the history and diversity of Africa including colonialism as exemplified by Maathai (2006). It is concerned with the realities of the challenges that Africa women encounter in their daily lives (Atanga, 2013), which can be traced to historical injustices. However, feminism in Africa is contentious and poorly understood. In Kenya for instance, many presume that it pursues equality with men, although it seeks inclusion of women in nation-building and societal participation (Kamau, 2014). Women movements in Kenya are also faced with misunderstandings about feminism (Kamau,

2014). Thus, feminism in Africa carries a stigma. It is noted that Black African feminism in the diaspora may differ from Black African feminism on the continent of Africa (Atanga, 2013). The context and environment influence the perception of Black feminism. For example, North African women may identify with topics from Arab cultures of their origin and not with issues of Black women in Africa (Atanga, 2013). Similarly, White South African women would identify with Western feminism than African feminism (Stuhlhofer, 2020). The realities of the two groups are dissimilar due to cultural and racial differences. Therefore, culture is an important element in understanding feminism. African feminism focuses on the needs of Black women in Africa (Kamau, 2014). However, the social and economic differences within African nations are significant in discoursing African feminism (Gatwiri & McLaren, 2016). This categorization introduces class stratification. The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF, 2019), says the following about feminism:

We have multiple and varied identities as African Feminists. We are African women when we live here in Africa and even when we live elsewhere, our focus is on the lives of African women on the continent. (...) Our current struggles as African Feminists are inextricably linked to our past as a continent, diverse pre-colonial contexts, slavery, colonization, liberation struggles, neocolonialism, globalization, etc. (para. 1).

The charter points at issues that Western feminism has failed to confront and embraces the African diaspora. Yet, beyond the idealization of African feminism, different strands emerge among individuals, groups, and nations. A pursuit of feminism in Africa needs to be tailored to the specific needs and realities of society. This paper discusses African feminism through an exploration of Wangari Maathai's activism. Different strands of feminism are embedded in her renowned struggles and triumphs.

Wangari Maathai: A Portrait of African Feminism(s)?



Figure 1 Prof. Wangari Maathai¹

Kenyan scholar, human rights & environmental activist and Nobel Peace laureate.
01 April 1940-25 September 2011 (Nobel Foundation 2004).

Maathai and Ecofeminism

The Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory compiled by Buchanan (2018), defines ecofeminism as “a philosophical and political position which posits that there is a connection between the social mentality underpinning the domination of women in patriarchal society and the domination and degradation of nature by industrial capitalism.” The term *écoféminisme* was originally proposed by Françoise d’Eubonne, a French feminist writer in her 1974 work *Feminism or Death*. d’Eubonne condemned Western patriarchy for destroying the earth and argued that only feminist ideals could save the earth from an “eco-death” (Sharnappa, 2016; Buchannan, 2018). d’Eubonne viewed women as “life-givers, life-preservers, and have concern for future generations, whereas men are exploitative, plundering, and subordinate women and nature” (Sharnappa, 2016, para. 8).

What strand of ecofeminism does Wangari Maathai represent? Ecofeminism whether African or Western is primarily concerned with the conservation of nature for posterity through female activism. Are women closer to nature than men? Ecofeminism posits that there is a connection between women and nature (Muthuki, 2006). Although there is no

consensus on the issue, empirical evidence shows that women are the first victims of environmental degradation (Maathai, 2006; Sharnappa, 2016). Such disadvantaged and rural women were the focus of Maathai's activism. Maathai interacted and bonded early with nature and had a deep knowledge of nature.² Thus, her ecofeminism had an epistemological and cultural base. Maathai (2006), describes nature in her rural home in the Aberdare Mountains in Kenya.

We lived in a land abundant with shrubs, creepers, ferns, and trees, like the mĩtũndũ, mĩkeu, and mĩgumo, some of which produced berries and nuts. Because rain fell regularly and reliably, clean drinking water was everywhere. There were large well-watered fields of maize, beans, wheat and vegetables. Hunger was virtually unknown. The soil was rich, dark red-brown and moist (p. 3).

Maathai (2006), maintains that she was “always attentive to nature” (p. 43) and was aware of her “kinship with the soil” (p. 47), which developed as she grew older and which she maintained until the end of her life. Colonialism was the beginning of the deterioration of nature due to industrialization and the extraction of natural resources (Abuya, 2018). Logging of forests, plantations of imported trees which destroyed the eco-system, hunting wildlife, and commercial agriculture were colonial activities that destroyed the environment in Africa (Maathai, 2009, pp. 68-69). The activities made an enduring impact on the environment and its people. Thus, the aims of Maathai's ecofeminism are rooted in imperialism and Western patriarchy which also influences gender inequality (Muthuki, 2006)

The link between Maathai's ecofeminism and d'Eubonne's is the role played by Western patriarchy in the degradation of nature (Stuhlhofer, 2020). However, there is an obvious discrepancy. Similar to fellow Western feminists, d'Eubonne, benefited from the wealth created by the imperial system that degraded nature through industrialization on the one hand (Stuhlhofer, 2020). On the other, Maathai suffered poverty created by imperialism in Kenya, thousands of miles away from France, d'Eubonne's home (Stuhlhofer, 2020). d'Eubonne and Maathai's cause may be the same, but their realities are divergent. Through degradation of nature, Western patriarchy created both poverty and wealth and a sustained dependency (Rodney, 1973; Lumumba, 2018; Di John, 2011) which impacts gender inequalities in Africa. Even in ecofeminism, Western and African feminisms are dissimilar. Feminist and gender movements in Africa need to take into account the colonial factor and its contribution to the current inequities. The conflicting facets of ecofeminism portrayed by the two ecofeminists distinguish Maathai's strand of ecofeminism. While Maathai is aware of the gender-related socio-cultural and economic limitations, her ecofeminism is not driven by gender differences per se. Her biography demonstrates that she was guided by a higher consciousness for nature, justice, and peace. In other words, gender is subordinate to that higher consciousness (Stuhlhofer, 2020).

Education and Intellectual Feminism

Poverty is increasingly associated with women, hence the term “feminization of poverty” (Fredrich, 2018; Pearce, 1978). Female poverty is caused by lack of education among other

factors as shown by studies done in Kenya (Mwakio, 2017; Yatich & Pere 2017). Positive outcomes for individuals, families, and society have been attributed to female education (Syomwene & Kindiki, 2015; Mokua, 2013; UNDP, 2016). Maathai (2006, p. 71) hailed education as a “ticket” out of poverty. In her early years, Maathai termed herself and by extension African women as “beasts of burden” due to the laborious farm work that she did at home (2006, p. 48). Thus, educating women and girls contributes to social and economic development as exemplified by her life. Nevertheless, educated African women who engage in feminism face a dilemma. They are often accused of intellectual feminism which is viewed as foreign and hostile to African values (Atanga, 2013). However, African intellectual feminism views practices such as FGM and early marriages as harmful to girls (Stuhlhofer, 2020).

Maathai was highly learned having received her education in biological sciences during the colonial era when it was not the norm for African women. As a result, she was confronted by gender prejudices in male-dominated spheres (Maathai, 2006). Her pioneering educational achievements were uncelebrated, setting a trend that devalues female achievements. Maathai’s education did not alienate her from her roots (2006, p. 71) contrary to her opponents’ arguments. She valued indigenous knowledge and involved rural women with less or no education in ecological conservation. Moreover, she recognized that Western education can be culturally alienating since education is a vehicle of cultural transmission (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Nonetheless, Maathai strived to uphold intellectual feminism and respect for cultural wisdom. The Nobel Peace Prize committee noted that “She thinks globally and acts locally” (nobelprize.org, 2004, para. 3). She became an inspiration for African girls and women (Namulundah, 2017, para. 1).

Neo-colonialism and Gender Inequality

Imperialism in Africa left an enduring impact on women, the economy, and the environment (Maathai, 2006; Muthuki, 2006). During her studies in the USA, Maathai witnessed racism towards Blacks while colonialism reigned back home in Kenya. The dual experience gave Maathai a holistic understanding of the predicament of Africans at home and in the diaspora. Maathai’s activism for gender equality started in the 70s when she was a veterinary anatomy lecturer at the University of Nairobi. The discipline was male-dominated and male colleagues doubted her competence and asked, “Do you really have a master’s degree in biology?” (Maathai, 2006, pp. 103-104). As a lecturer, Maathai agitated for equal pay against colonial laws that were prejudiced against indigenous Kenyan women and won.

Maathai protested a political system that supported neocolonialist practices that degraded the environment. One of them was the plan to build a skyscraper at a green recreational land in the city. The investor was a British national whom Maathai confronted for lack of moral and corporate social responsibility. Maathai decried the irony of Western conservationism which destroyed nature while advocating for the same (Maathai, 2009, pp. 68-69). The second protest involved deforestation of the Karura forest and its allocation to private developers associated with political leadership. In both instances, Maathai suffered severe police brutality. However, both pursuits were successful. In her activism for women's empowerment, justice, and environmental preservation, Maathai’s feminism was distinctive

from Western feminism. Yet, she was able to interact internationally with tact, diplomacy, and objectivity.

Culture and Gender Inequality

Culture is an important factor in navigating Africa feminism (Atanga, 2013; Stuhlhofer, 2020). Moreover, family values have been emphasized in African feminism (Atanga, 2013). Despite Maathai's marital challenges, she valued marriage, an important element in mainstream African feminism (Kamau, 2014). Maathai made sacrificial gestures to appease her husband and perhaps save her marriage. She reinvented ways of portraying a culturally decent and appropriate wife by her dressing. She recognized that her education could be a risk to her husband's political career and remained cautious. It is not surprising that when her marriage ended in public disgrace that she equated it with the death of a loved one (Maathai, 2006, p. 145).

Maathai's activism was challenged using male constructed cultural norms which attacked her female anatomy and identity for encroaching on gender perceived boundaries (Stuhlhofer, 2020). When she challenged Kenya's leadership for environmental degradation and corruption, she was termed "un African," "a divorcee" and criticized for "not behaving like a proper African woman" (Maathai, 2006, pp. 196, 235). Her respect was tied to her marriage and not her professional performance. She was isolated and her knowledge was belittled. It became a battle for cultural and gender supremacy (Stuhlhofer, 2020). Maathai's divorce was traumatic. She suffered the stigma of a "Western-style divorce" (Maathai, 2006, p. 145), which portrayed her as "too educated, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control" (p. 146). The divorce became a platform for a cultural war against education. The two dispositions are at the core of African feminism. Thus, Maathai's marriage and her career were at cross purposes. Some African women face a similar dilemma: they abandon the pursuit of feministic values, supposing them to be discordant with marital values (Kamau, 2014). It is not surprising. Feminism has been viewed as radical and even toxic (Salzman, 2018), while marriage is the foundation of family and society (Mbiti, 1969, 1973; Kiome-Gatobu, 2013). Maathai realized that family values superseded the quest for equality (Stuhlhofer, 2020).

Maathai has been criticized for using her earnings to purchase a house whose deed bore only her husband's name (Namulundah, 2017). While the decision is viewed as contradictory to feministic pursuits, it indicates that African feminism is poorly understood. However, in a country where only 1% of the women own land (Kenya National Bureau of Standards, 2017), Maathai's decision seems odd. Was Maathai's gesture a cry for acceptance due to intellectual isolation? Was it an attempt to neutralize feminism and show acceptance of male leadership? Whatever the case, any inconsistencies in Maathai's life could be rooted in the endless shift between the strong forces of elitism and cultural identity (Stuhlhofer, 2020). Similarly, Gatwiri & McLaren (2016), note that shifting between cultures and knowledge has an impact on some aspects of self-identity. Maathai demonstrates this shift as she *re-invents* herself to cope with the demands of persistent challenges that characterized her entire life.

Despite local and international debates on gender inequality in Africa (UNDP, 2016; Syomwene & Kindiki, 2015; Mokuu, 2013), female unity has often proved problematic (Maathai, 2006, p. 116). Maathai failed to secure the support of African women, especially in critical situations. In her agitation for equal pay, her female colleagues withheld their support fearing for their marriages. During her divorce, women maligned her, leaving her to male defamation (Maathai, 2006, pp. 196). Similarly, during the Rift Valley ethnic clashes, Christian women termed her rebellious, while a male politician threatened her with circumcision. Moreover, when she was taken to prison, female wardens disgraced her by cutting off her braids, (Stuhlhofer, 2020) suggesting that she was fighting a wrong battle. Likewise, Kamau (2014), notes the inability of female leaders to oppose policies that marginalize women. Thus, Maathai notes that “fighting battles with women can be very difficult” (2006, p. 116). Maathai’s victories were preceded by hard and lone battles.

While Maathai’s activism might entirely seem like a battle of sexes, it was not anti-men per se. She confronted established neo-colonist social-cultural and political structures that are oppressive to women (Kamau, 2014). Men, including the clergy, were Maathai’s most ardent supporters. Like hooks (2000), Maathai recognized that men were an essential part of women’s equality. She employed men at her NGO, a gesture that surprised Western funding agencies (Maathai, 2006) whose feministic approach was different. Men also participated heavily in Maathai’s civic education campaigns in preparation for multiparty democracy.

Conclusion

Feminism is a controversial concept which becomes even more differential when it crosses racial and cultural boundaries. There are misconceptions of feminism within similar cultures and genders. African feminists face challenges in navigating perceived feministic values. Men are an integral part of gender equality in Africa by supporting female education and participation. It was predictable that Maathai would face fierce resistance in her pursuits. Nonetheless, her activism blossomed amidst the adversity and gained global recognition. Namulundah (2017, para. 19), termed Maathai “one of Africa’s cultural Oak Trees.” Maathai is an exemplary illustration of the popular African proverb: “If you educate a man you simply educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate a whole nation” (Ephson, 1969, p. 105)

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Endnotes

¹ Wangari Muta Maathai was a Kenyan scholar, human rights and environmental activist and Nobel Peace laureate. A female pioneer in academia, Prof. Maathai was the first woman in central and eastern Africa to earn a doctorate degree, the first Kenyan female to head a university department (Maathai, 2006), and the first Black African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Maathai received 50 awards and more than a dozen honorary degrees but the most distinguished was the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 (Green Belt Movement [GBM], 2019). Maathai came from a humble rural background in colonial Kenya. Her early life experiences shaped her vision and activism. Her struggles and triumphs are a personification of African women and girls in their struggle to fulfil their purpose. Her activism is a projection of “different strands of African feminisms that continue to exist in disharmony” (Stuhlhofer, 2020). These strands are discussed in this paper and are informed by Maathai’s biography, *Unbowed*.

² Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977, a grassroots organisation that “empowers communities, particularly women, to conserve the environment and improve livelihoods” (GBM, 2019, para. 1). GBM has planted over 51 million trees in Kenya and generates income for many families while conserving nature through tree planting.