

# Labelling and Othering: (Re)Engaging Wangari Maathai's Madwoman Tag in *Unbowed: A Memoir*

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## Abstract

This article is an interpretive analysis of how Wangari Maathai's autobiography *Unbowed: A Memoir* (2007) revises the author's Otherness through theorising and practising intersectional environmentalism. The article argues that *Unbowed* becomes a space where Maathai's struggle for environmental restoration and democracy intersects with her feminist agency. This article isolates Maathai's practice of feminism as one that took cognisance of ecological justice to revise her Otherness, using it as a space enabling her to speak against societal injustice. To negotiate and, in effect, humanise the environment and use it as a locus for emancipating Kenyan women, Maathai reworks the label of madness attached to her and (re)uses it as a tag with some degree of privilege. Using literary criticism methodologies to engage Maathai's autobiography, this article examines the implications of self-definition for those operating within liminal spaces. Of importance is how Maathai uses the madness label, aimed at silencing her, to create a hierarchy of privilege. The article concludes that through subtly agitating for ecological justice, Maathai found her voice to self-define herself, revising Otherness and liberating *Wanjiku* (the Kenyan poor). She does this by refocusing the hierarchies of subjectification embedded in the label "mad."

**Keywords:** Wangari Maathai; *Wanjiku*; Otherness; madness; environmental activism

## Introduction

Wangari Maathai has structured *Unbowed: A Memoir* as a rhetorical and linguistic means of argumentation, and she turns her whole body of writing into a single—but very convincing—argument for a responsible and holistic approach to the empowerment of women and nation-building in Kenya, by planting trees. (Mukutu, Kabira, and Siundu 2018, 12)

This article engages Wangari Maathai's autobiography *Unbowed: A Memoir* (hereafter *Unbowed*, 2007) to analyse the writer's use of the memoir to document how her conceptualisation of feminism involves using the tag of "madwoman" as a privilege. The article shows how *Unbowed* revises Maathai's Otherness—being labelled and dismissed as a madwoman by the patriarchal Kenyan society. I also argue that this revision is made possible by realising the power of autobiographical recall in rewriting the self. *Unbowed* helps Maathai participate in dualistic thinking in her stance as writer and an autonomous self able to redefine her identity.

In the epigraph above, Mukutu, Kabira and Siundu (2018) argue that while exemplifying the very different levels of autobiographical activity in her life, Maathai uses the text to chart a movement from autobiography as a genre to autobiography as a cultural practice and displays a close relationship between culture and nature. This relationship between culture and ecology had earlier been advanced by Ebila (2015), who reads a strong link between the nation and the environment, manifested in how the postcolonial nation state is imagined as fatherland or motherland (2015, 144). This article builds on these arguments to make a case that indeed *Unbowed* becomes an ideal text to study the "feminist I" and how this "I" revises Otherness to construct the space of madness as imbued with a certain level of privilege. Through Maathai's personal stories, this article reflects on how feminists negotiate agency and its effect on their cultural, political and environmental sensibilities. Illustratively, Mohanram (1999) perceives the human body as belonging to a particular ecological space. When narrated in an autobiography, this geographical space transforms the subject into a bearer of political and cultural responsibility stories.

*Unbowed* traces Maathai's life from her humble beginnings as a young girl growing up in Ihithe, a lush, green and fertile small village in the central highlands of what was then British Kenya (Maathai 2007, 1). In the first part of the text titled "Beginnings," Maathai records that when she was growing up in the 1940s,

[they] lived in a land abundant with shrubs, creepers, ferns, and trees, like the *Mitundu*, *Mikeu*, and *Mugumo*, 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. (2007, 1–2)

However, at the time Maathai began her arduous journey in the struggle for environmental conservation, an effort that led to the establishment of the Green Belt Movement and consequently to her being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, the Kenyan people, especially women, were disempowered; there was malnutrition, scarcity of rainwater, topsoil loss, and erratic rains (2007, 173). Maathai's autobiography demonstrates the author's resilience, courage and commitment to the struggle for environmental restoration, justice and democracy in post-independence Kenya.

### Maathai's Intersectionalism

*Unbowed* is a space where Maathai's struggle for environmental restoration and democracy intersects with her feminist agency. This article isolates Maathai's practice of feminism as one that took cognisance of ecological justice to revise her Otherness, using it as a space to speak against societal injustice. Maathai, standing outside the societal frame of reference of the 1980s and 1990s, linked environmental injustice with poverty and gender oppression. For her, environmental injustice affected women on several levels. According to the text, Maathai became convinced that women suffered severely from losing firewood, from malnutrition and scarcity of clean water (see the subsection "Seeds of Change" in Chapter 8 of *Unbowed*). According to this autobiography, the forces advancing myriad environmental injustices are the same forces sustaining hierarchies of privilege that reinforce social relations of oppression on women. Therefore, to dislodge them, one needs to know how they intersect.

This is where the idea of intersectionality, which is applied in Maathai's autobiography, becomes vital. Intersectionality is a term that addresses how various practices of inequity and identity interrelate in different contexts and over time (Crenshaw 1995; Davis 2008). The notion of intersectionality has two main elements: the first is an empirical basis denoting that an intersectional approach is needed to understand better the nature of social inequities and the processes that create and sustain them; the second is a core activist component, which means that an intersectional approach aims to generate coalitions between different groups to resist and change the status quo (Gillborn 2015). Maathai's approach to environmental justice helps us to "see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects" (Crenshaw 2017, 1), making us aware of the gendered dimensions of environmental struggles.

The theory of intersectionality asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression, depending on their race, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, culture, and other identity markers. For example, in *Unbowed*, Maathai's "madwoman" tag arises from being too educated, successful and talented (2007, 146). The accusation of madness levelled against her intersects with other identity markers, overlapping and resulting in a complex convergence of oppression. According to her detractors, the madwoman tag that intersects with her education made her a headstrong, uncontrollable woman. However, through this very intersection, Maathai recognises the overlapping nature of injustices happening to *Wanjiku* (the Kenyan poor) and the earth

and identifies how they are interconnected. This knowledge births an inclusive version of environmentalism that simultaneously advocates for justice for all people and the planet. Maathai realises that you cannot separate people from the environment. The correlations between environmental degradation and oppression towards *Wanjiku* are no coincidence.

There is a nexus between patriarchy, political Othering and gender Othering, which Maathai's life in *Unbowed* portrays. While colonialists saw colonies as women (virgin lands) for sexual exploration (McClintock 1995), President Moi oppressed the woman Maathai—by labelling her a madwoman, using the police to beat her, and jailing her several times—and destroyed the physical environment. There are theoretical and political overlaps between Maathai's use of environmental intersectionalism and her label as a “madwoman.” Starting with her renaming herself Maathai rather than Mathai (her marital name), it is important to note how Maathai transcends the confines of intersecting oppressions in her workspace, gender, environmental activism and politics. Renaming herself (dis)connects her from her husband who rejected her because, as the Kenyan political system asserted, she had become mad. Yet, through renaming herself, she acquires a new identity, a new destiny, and freedom from the burden associated with her former name.

### Maathai's Madwoman Tag

Through self-renaming, Maathai sheds her supposed elitism and associates with the poor women in the villages, using the environment to launch her fight for democracy, peace, and ending gender oppression. It is through her association with poor Kenyan women and the defence of the environment that she earned the politically weaponised label of a madwoman. The label sustains hierarchies of privilege, helping to reinforce social relations of domination. It is in these tags and the weaponisation of identities that, I argue, politically motivated silencing occurs. Feminists who take the debate out of boardrooms to where *Wanjiku* are located are marked as mad. The boardroom is a symbol of the coveted class that is maintained by Maendeleo ya Wanawake (a women's non-governmental organisation dealing with women's rights and gender equity issues in Kenya), a marginal and inferior space (Nyongesa et al. 2021). However, as this article will demonstrate, the discourse of madness in Africa can be a space of privilege: the label of madness that is usually used to isolate, silence and oppress women can be cleverly used to talk out, talk back, and talk otherwise. I engage the idea of madness to enter the discursive field that interrogates epistemological, methodological and theoretical approaches to studying African feminist expression and consciousness. I will engage this idea further using Foucault's (1961) ideas on madness and civilisation.

Foucault (1961) and Reid (2002) see madness as a creation of society such that anyone who deviates from the norms (the Other) is described as mad. Foucault sees Otherness (invented by culture) as madness. It would seem that those who destabilise normativity in Africa occupy the space of the mad: they are not part of the communal; they are the accursed marked “Other.” Deliberate labelling is therefore a dangerous and problematic

form of erasure. Maathai's humanising of the environment and raising the Kenyan poor women's economic, social and political consciousness is the locus upon which the discourse of madness will be discussed. Her political resistance utilised the power of *Wanjiku* with her understanding of ecological violence (Iheka 2018) and its persistence (Nixon 2011). Oscillating among particular concepts and how they are utilised in an African intersectional methodology, this article shows that nature, self-definition, and madness are sites of continual contestation and privilege. Relying on the intersectional lens, the article uses Maathai's environmental activism as a locus within which the argument is advanced.

## Ecological (In)justice and the Madwoman Label

The idea of madness as constructed by society is Foucault's central idea in *Madness and Civilisation* (1961). Foucault (1961) insists that madness is not something that is natural and unchanging, but rather depends on the society in which it exists. Various cultural, intellectual and economic structures determine how madness is known and experienced within a given society. In this way, society constructs its experience of madness. Ultimately, Foucault sees madness as being located in a certain cultural space within society; the shape of this space and its effects on the "mad" person depend on society itself. The idea of structure is implicit in all of Foucault's work. In writing a history of madness, he goes beneath the surface of society to find the cultural, intellectual and economic structures that dictate how madness is constructed. He is concerned with changing patterns of knowledge, sets of relations, and broad themes.

In the Kenyan context, especially President Moi's era, madness became popularised as a space occupied by those who disturbed political and social normativity. Most of these were women who questioned the state's actions or their husbands' decisions in the home. During the same time, Members of Parliament (MPs), primarily men, who supported women's causes were nicknamed "seven bearded sisters" by the then Attorney General, Charles Njonjo. These MPs were the first in post-independent Kenya to openly and vocally defy the government in parliament. They laid the foundation for the fight for multi-party democracy, leading to the repeal of section 2A of the Kenyan Constitution in 1992 (Hornsby 2012; Wa Wamwere 2003). In *Unbowed*, Maathai postulates that women tagged as mad were seen as having "insects in their heads" (2007, 196) and viewed as women who "could not respect men and be quiet" (196). Women were also deemed mad because they were "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control" (146). Because of these labels, Maathai "deserved to be whipped publicly ... to serve to warn other such educated women that if they also dared to challenge authority, the same fate would befall them" (146).

But it is in this "marginal and inferior space" (Nyongesa et al. 2021, 1) that Maathai is able to answer and speak back to her accusers. She advises the MPs to stop getting "distracted by the anatomy below the line," because winning the battle "required the use of the anatomy of whatever lies above the neck" (Maathai 2007, 192). Telling the MPs to concentrate on using their intellect was audacious, much like the audacity of a

madwoman. Maathai was afforded this courage by the space she was pushed into—the space of madness. She notes that in this space she could not

go into the women's hearts and tell them, "it's all right. I haven't done anything wrong. Its them, not me." It was okay for me to be called crazy and told I had insects in my head: that is the way people using their own mirror saw me. But I offered women a different mirror—my own. (2007, 197)

The fiercest battles that Maathai fought, as can be deciphered from *Unbowed*, are not her divorce and activism but the agitation against the construction of the Times Media Trust business complex at Uhuru Park in Nairobi's central business district and the fight for the release of 52 political prisoners in Kenya. Maathai dedicated the whole of Chapter 9 of *Unbowed*, titled "Fighting for Freedom," to the first battle (2007, 184–205). The second battle, captured in Chapter 10 and titled "Freedom Turns a Corner" (206–29), is punctuated with recollections of assassinations of prominent opposition leaders and government officers through direct assassinations or targeted "accidents" (206). It is through this agitation that Maathai is accused of engaging in "loose talk" (209), a phrase that is synonymous with madness in Kenyan parlance. While the first battle resulted in the saving of Uhuru Park from capitalist destruction and the empowerment of women by showing them that they can question the government's violation of citizens' human rights, the second battle led to the release of the 52 political prisoners. Maathai therefore went an extra mile to do what other activists of the time could not do. This extra mile, I argue, was made possible by the space of madness that the Kenyan state had pushed her into.

Maathai's environmental activism was couched in feminist agency. To the government, raising seedlings was trivial, nonsensical and useless, yet it became the central idea of the Green Belt Movement. Maathai states:

As long as the Green Belt Movement was perceived as a few women raising seedlings, we didn't matter to the government. But as soon as we began to explain how trees disappear and why it is important for citizens to stand up for their rights—whether environmental, women's, or human—senior officials in the government and members of parliament began to take notice. [...] [W]e were organising women (and men) to do things for themselves that, in most cases, the government had no interest in doing. (2007, 180)

Essentially, Maathai was using the environment as a locus within which to render visible the hidden web of interconnectedness between environmental injustice and women's oppression. Reading through her argument, we understand that environmentalism needs to be reimagined through the experiences of *Wanjiku* who are barely visible in the socio-economic and political calculus in the Kenyan state.

Environmental justice becomes for Maathai an invaluable locus upon which to focus the battle between the poor *Wanjiku* in their indigeneity and the plundering rich Kenyan

elite. Nixon (2011), while drawing an example of Nigerian Ken-Saro Wiwa and his defence of the land of his Ogoni people against the plunder by multinationals, advocates a measure of ethnic federalism in which environmental self-determination would be acknowledged as indispensable to cultural survival. According to Nixon's formulation, the indigenous Ogoni people understand that their humanism is tied to the environment and mediated through culture. Paying homage to Maathai, Nixon (2011) argues that the Green Belt Movement serves as an animating instance of environmental activism among poor communities who have mobilised against slow violence, in this case the gradual violence of deforestation and soil erosion. In other words, Maathai's intersectional activism took cognisance of the Kenyan poor and their daily interaction with the environment. Maathai used the discourse of environmental justice and interlocked it with local discursive traditions, adaptively redeploying it as a strategic resource. However, through this activism, she was perceived as a threat to socially constructed realities.

These socially constructed realities inform Maathai's tag of a madwoman. Maathai reports in *Unbowed* that Kenya's second president, Daniel Moi, described her as a "madwoman" and "a threat to the order and security of the country" (2007, 135). This came in the wake of Maathai's persistent defence of the environment against continual destruction by multinationals, with President Moi's blessing. One such destruction was being actualised through the proposed construction of a \$200 million 62-storey skyscraper at Uhuru Park in Nairobi. It is important to note that Uhuru Park land provides Nairobi city with clean air and it is also recreational grounds for the *Wanjiku* of the city. Against police violence and tagging, Maathai challenged the president and won a high-profile battle over the proposed skyscraper. She was driven by her connection of environmental degradation with debilitating patriarchal forces that engender the oppression of women. She mobilised women in Kenya's grassroots to plant more than 30 million trees and inspired the United Nations to launch a campaign that led to the planting of 11 billion trees worldwide. More than 900,000 Kenyan women benefited from her tree-planting campaign by selling seedlings for reforestation. This ability to mobilise the grassroots earned her the tag of "madwoman." Through the label, Maathai uses the power of the underprivileged—the poor Kenyan women—to bring change to her society and to the world at large.

To President Moi, who represented the masculine power in a state establishment, a woman could not muster up such capabilities unless she was mad. Illustratively, Connell (1995, 70) argues that "masculinity is the place of symbolic authority. The phallus is master-signifier, and femininity is symbolically defined by lack." Hegemonic masculinity is expressed very much through politics. According to a masculine definition, a real woman should occupy a tameable space. Thus, Moi's masculine reasoning constitutes a scheme to capture and tame Maathai and the Green Belt Movement project. Maathai's madness is not contingent on but directly related to her femininity—consisting, precisely, in its loss. This may explain why the women leaders of the Maendeleo ya Wanawake called her "an improper, wayward woman [who] had

gone astray and should seek guidance from fellow women” (Maathai 2007, 196). Following this trajectory, Maathai’s madness, as understood from the perspective of Kenyan gender heteronormativity, is the loss of her womanhood.

In the revised version of her seminal work, *Women and Madness*, Chesler (2005) argues that insofar as masculinity conditions femininity as its universal equivalent, as what determines and measures its value, the textual paradox can be created according to which the woman is madness, while at the same time madness is the very absence of womanhood. The woman is mad to the extent that she is the “Other,” different from man. But madness is the absence of femininity to the extent that womanhood precisely resembles the masculine universal equivalent in the binary division of sexual roles. If so, femininity is madness since the woman is constituted by difference; but madness is non-woman since madness lacks resemblance. The narcissistic economy of the masculine universal equivalent tries to eliminate, under the label madness, nothing other than the feminine difference (Chesler 2005). The global capitalist power, the \$200 million 62-storey Uhuru Park skyscraper financiers, and the local state power represented by President Moi thus show how the male narcissistic political ambition operates. To restore Maathai’s proper womanness signifies reinstating her “femininity” to make her recognise Moi’s power, whose presidency she saw as problematic. The leadership of Maendeleo ya Wanawake (Development for Women), supporting the president against a fellow woman, shows the problematique occasioned by tagging. The madwoman tag was supposed to isolate, Other and silence Maathai, yet it is within this tag that Maathai was able to go an extra mile in her agitation for her own freedom, the freedom of the poor women in Nairobi, and the freedom of the environment.

The literature on lunacy in Africa today helps us see the link between Otherness and madness as projected in Maathai’s *Unbowed*. For example, Vaughan (1991, 118) observes, “the madness of colonial subjects is to be feared, for it is indicative of ‘deculturation’ and the breaking of barriers of difference and silence.” Vaughan (1991, 125) suggests that “individuals who had ‘forgotten’ who they were and had ceased to conform to the notion of the African subject” were the ones who “most often found themselves behind the walls of the asylum.” In addition, Edgar and Sapire (2000, 34) argue that colonial authorities

invariably only confined deranged Africans in asylums when they disrupted the regimes and disciplines of work on white farms, in the kitchens, and mines or when they threatened social peace more generally, whether in the street or “native reserves”. The primary concern in confining mad Africans thus was less with “curing” or alleviating their mental pain than with removing them as a source of disturbance to society as a whole.

Therefore, in the colonial system, the label “mad” was an arm of “the colonial state’s repressive power apparatus,” targeting the “insufficiently other” (Jackson 2005, 14). Jackson (2005) notes that the most common reason for admitting African women to the colonial mental hospital was “strayness,” meaning that African female admissions were

generally those who, for one reason or another, were thought to be in the wrong place. However, this space provides these ostracised individuals the freedom to say what a sane person would usually not say. Maathai was in wrong places almost her entire life: she was the first woman in East and Central Africa to attain a doctoral degree; she, and not her husband, had a PhD and taught in a university; she was the first woman in Africa to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (Maathai 2007). In short, she was a “stray” woman by the standards of many Kenyans. Women in the pioneering Maendeleo ya Wanawake called her “an improper, wayward woman [who] had gone astray and should seek guidance from fellow women” (Maathai 2007, 196). This was just a softer version of being called a “madwoman.” However, it was in this space of “madness” that Maathai became a trailblazer per excellence; it was in this space that she could challenge the unchallengeable—President Moi’s government, even questioning the president directly. She states in *Unbowed*:

Just a few days later, however, the registrar general ordered the GBM to provide its audited accounts for the past five consecutive years. I saw this as another attempt by the government to deregister the movement and make its activities illegal. But I wanted to beat them at their own game. [...] [I]n the letter that accompanied the records, I asked the government to supply me with one year of its audited accounts for the ruling party. (2007, 198–99)

In the Kenya of the 1980s and 1990s, hardly any sane person would dare to make such a demand of the ruling party. In asking the government to supply her with one year of its audited accounts for the ruling party Maathai was exercising the privilege embedded within the madwoman tag. The critical lesson here is that women’s ambition should not be limited by masculine fragility; rather, women should exploit the privileges that come with being Othered to make their voices heard.

It is important to note that Maathai’s environmental activism responded to the increasing problems that rural Kenyan women were experiencing in sourcing food, water and firewood, owing to intense deforestation and soil erosion. Fertile soil was being washed away as a result of climate change and environmental exploitation, leaving only arid land behind. To combat this problem, the Green Belt Movement advocated planting trees, which would work to bind and sustain the soil to support vegetation. In this context, planting trees was not only ecologically beneficial and economically necessary, but it was also a political act. As Nixon (2011) argues, planting became an “iconic act of civil disobedience” that has grown far beyond its humble beginnings. The Green Belt Movement highlights how practical responses to environmental change developed by ordinary women have subversive potential. For Maathai, this kind of intersectional activism makes the madness tag a space of privilege.

Another reason Maathai was labelled mad was because of her choice to commit class suicide: to reject the elite and identify with the poor. However, this actually made her into an “organic” individual. Gramsci argues that overturning or revising a hegemonic ideology requires *organic intellectuals*. According to Gramsci (1971), these

intellectuals are not credentialed or “sanctioned” as trustworthy social mouthpieces; instead, they are concerned primarily with daily living practical matters. To this end, Maathai’s feminist demeanour, thoughts, political engagements, and practical experiences within the Green Belt Movement encapsulate the spirit of a true African feminist organic intellectual. We see evidence of this in *Unbowed*:

As the Green Belt Movement developed, I became convinced that we needed to identify the roots of the disempowerment that plagued the Kenyan people. We had to understand why we were losing firewood, malnutrition, scarcity of clean water, topsoil loss, and erratic rains; why people could not pay school fees; and why the infrastructure was falling apart. [...] Why were we robbing ourselves of the future? (2007, 173)

Through her action to involve *Wanjiku*, rural women, in growing tree seedlings to not only combat climate change but to also use the symbol of a tree to fight for democracy in Kenya, Maathai’s feminist stance closes the rift that exists within the Africanist feminist thought: the divide between theoretical prescriptions and the practical realities of Kenyan women. The kind of African feminism that she fronts is one that works against the assumption that elite African engineered feminist undertakings are model worldviews to which Kenyan women should aspire for liberation.

Targeting the rural, poor women, the ones who understood full well the vagaries of climate change in their lives, the ones who were watching “drying streams” (2007, 23) and “reduced harvest” (24), Maathai appealed to new solidarities of a forgotten group—the deliberately unheard. Being the ones who, in the Kenyan culture, are the carriers of Africanness, the caregivers, the protectors not only of the culture but also the environment, Maathai allowed these poor women to gain some degree of power over their lives, in the environment, and in the family. Like the trees being violently felled by the greedy capitalist patriarchal state, the rural women were violently oppressed by their men. In this sense, patriarchy and postcolonial environmental destruction were the same things: oppressive forces. The tree and the Kenyan woman faced the same fate. Patriarchy, therefore, has no *utu*<sup>1</sup> (humanity): it destroys trees, and it causes climate change. The concept of *utu* is a variant of *ubuntu*<sup>2</sup> (I am because we are) in East Africa. Like its counterpart, *utu* is anchored on a profound respect for life (of both human and non-human beings), making it a potential drive for sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. Riding on the power of *utu*, Maathai was then able to launch

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<sup>1</sup> The capacity to possess humanly feelings and virtues; the quality that differentiates humans from beasts; the feeling one has that prevents one from inflicting pain on another human being

<sup>2</sup> According to Ramose (1999), ubuntu is a multifaceted philosophical system that involves logic, metaphysics, epistemology and ethics; it is a philosophy of life that is concerned with the reinforcement of unity, oneness and solidarity among the Bantu people—the so-called humanness. It is the distinctive elasticity and practical nature of ubuntu that makes it applicable in almost all facets of human life. As such, the concept has been widely exported as an underlying philosophy or code of conduct into business, legal systems, education, theology/religion, health and academic disciplines such as African philosophy and ethics.

a feminist, democratic quest from the margins. In *utu*, all women are sisters, irrespective of their age, class or social standing.

### (Dis)occupying Subjectivity, (Re)theorising Silence

As already argued in this article, in her autobiography *Unbowed* Maathai presents a kind of intersectional activism that makes the madness tag a space of privilege. In this section, I look at how Maathai constructs subjectivity and theorises silence in *Unbowed*. Using the metaphor of a traditional three-legged stool, she draws an interconnection between environmental subjectivity and human subjectivity. Musila (2019) contends that this stool is an eloquent metaphor for the importance of a healthy interface between democratic governance, resource management and peace for the well-being of society. De-subjectifying the environment presents one of the most challenging injustices of contemporary society.

Such de-subjectification of the environment effectively silences the environment and, as Dietrich (2017) has argued, silences women. Both women and the environment are de-subjectified, and the injustices towards these two occur at many levels, as their quality of life is simultaneously reduced by changing vectors of harm. For women, injustices of the environment cause “failed efforts at economic development, and political disenfranchisement” (Dietrich 2017, 1). Addressing these injustices requires first recognising the multiple drivers of inequality and suffering and then creating pathways towards alternative visions and spaces for community empowerment and policy improvements. Admittedly, dehumanising the environment creates new vulnerabilities for women in Kenya who are already subjected to other forms of inequality. As Cohen (2012) contends, degradation of the environment in the form of occupation is never simply a takeover and appropriation but always involves destroying what it claims. The viral migration of the “occupy” motif covertly consists of a premise of disoccupation (Cohen 2012, 18).

To negotiate and, in effect, humanise the environment and use it as a locus for emancipating the Kenyan women, Maathai reworks the label of madness attached to her and (re)uses it as a tag with some degree of privilege. She does this by refocusing and perverting the hierarchies of de-subjectification embedded in the label “mad.” In her reimagining of the label, she becomes the only person expected to say things contrary to societal expectations. Her given space allows her to operate in what the society deems an imaginary, inflexible and delusory state associated with lunacy. It is this identity that Maathai entangled with the African culture of the taboo and curse agency to scare the policemen who came to arrest or harass her, as she notes in *Unbowed*. By threatening that she was going to strip naked, she was using the privilege of her new label, her new name as a madwoman. She becomes the Freudian societal unconscious. According to Freud, the subject harbours an unconscious that remains inaccessible to itself, except indirectly through its effects. The unconscious is the discourse of the “Other,” that part of a subject that is “not I” and renders every subject alien from itself (Fortier 1997). Thus, because we have no direct access to the real or our unconscious, Maathai can say

the truth about the ills of debt burden, environmental mismanagement, and lack of democracy in President Moi's Kenya.

Maathai's experience in President Moi's undemocratic Kenya births her multiple identities that coalesce around her persona and helps shed light on the unique experiences produced when various forms of injustices intersect with these converging identities. Here, as can be understood within Maathai's prism, intersectionality serves as a theoretical-methodological framing and an epistemic sensitisation towards the entangled character of an African woman. Maathai's personal life in *Unbowed* portrays how social positioning, for example based on marital status and profession, is seen as essential identity categories in African contexts that converge in subjectivising a person. This means that African self-identifications are determined by various factors such as a person's profession (she was a university professor), marital status (she was married, then divorced), or even age (she was mature and was in a position capable of cursing). All these social positions are marked by numerous interlocking factors of exclusion, oppression and privilege. In *Unbowed*, Maathai avers:

When we go through profound experiences, they change us. We risk our relationships with friends and family. They may not like the direction we have taken or may feel threatened or judged by our decisions. They may wonder what happened to the person they once knew. [...] [N]obody told me that men would be threatened by the high academic achievements of women like me. (2007, 139)

In using the tag of a "madwoman" as a space in which to talk out, talk back and talk otherwise, Maathai reconstitutes it into a weapon of self-subjectification, a weapon that affords women a voice. When madness is understood as a space with a certain degree of privilege, it helps us understand the various interlocking matrixes of oppression that underpin every level of women's changing identities. Although in her marriage she faced oppression as well as challenges with property ownership when she was divorced, Maathai remained stoic and defended her subjectivity, refusing to be silenced by the many oppressive forces she was facing. She states the following about her divorce from Mwangi Mathai:

During the trial, Mwangi was quoted as saying that he wanted a divorce because I was "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control." [Everybody] assumed that if a marriage fails it is the woman who is not doing her job properly and obeying her husband. As far as they were concerned I deserved to be whipped publicly for challenging the authority of my husband. And since I was an educated woman, being publicly humiliated would also serve to warn other such educated women that if they also dared to challenge such authority, the same fate would befall them [...] 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 dishonour." (2007, 146)

From this quotation, it can be argued that Maathai defends her identity by publicly resisting patriarchal de-subjectification. Kenyan culture detests the public humiliation of a woman. Nevertheless, the patriarchal Kenyan political establishment aimed to punish not a single woman but her community of like-minded women by resorting to publicly shaming Maathai. Significantly, just as Maathai uses madness as a space of privilege, she uses this public shaming to upset the patriarchal tables: to “give every woman and girl reasons to be proud and never regret being educated, successful and talented” (2007, 146).

Of note is the point that Maathai withstood a humiliating public divorce while managing to establish the Green Belt Movement. She viewed the humiliating and publicised divorce trial as an attack on educated women who considered confronting patriarchal authority, and thus she vowed to lobby for policy to counter marital abuses. Through these experiences, Maathai redefined herself and questioned established structures of cultural gender definitions as much as she charted alternative ways of being a professional African woman.

Narratives of women’s agency illustrate an ongoing contestation of gendered ideologies in various forums as well as inevitable cultural transformations across Kenyan communities. As Florence (2017, 64) notes, when marginalised people voice their goals, however “minimal or discrete,” they “raise the spectre of a more fundamental change in power.” In this light, Maathai’s autobiography embodies the complexities of women’s empowerment and the dilemma of adequately negotiating a viable cultural identity. The dynamism of culture illustrates how neither the past nor present worldviews are comprehensive, static or definitive. Calling for a middle ground, Florence (2017) advocates the analysis of the past to recover and affirm women’s autonomy by celebrating a more hybrid tradition. Maathai is neither the first nor the last woman to transgress traditional gender roles in Kenya, but she will always be an iconic example of a strong woman who resisted de-subjectification to change power dynamics in contemporary Kenya.

Fuelled by her education, Maathai’s confrontations in domestic and public spheres, which helped sanction alternative gender roles and environmental activism, demonstrate the fallibility of an autocratic political regime. Forced out of the University of Nairobi for her political activism, Maathai reinvented herself within Kenya’s civil society and later mounted a successful campaign against a sitting president’s kleptocratic abuse of power. President Daniel arap Moi disparaged Maathai as “un-African” despite her role as chair of the national women’s group Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (Nasong’o and Ayot 2007, 167). The regime’s critique of Maathai as “un-African” was erroneous, given her consistent attempts to maintain links with her Gikuyu roots and value structures. In a patriarchal society, prevailing hierarchically sanctioned cultural relations dictate much of the lives of particular members of a group. Conversely, “deviations from prescribed or culturally sanctioned norms” or, in this particular case, gender roles and expectations, threaten to “undermine the unity and justice of society” (Okin 1994, 30). Assertive

women who defy “traditional custom pay dearly in public ridicule and indignation” (Noddings 1989, 80). Moi’s regime also vilified Maathai for being “too forthright, educated and uncompromising, with some labels bordering on the personal (the errant sheep and an ill-informed divorcee) when she opposed his \$200 million 62-storey Uhuru Park skyscraper project in 1989” (Florence 2017, 57). Though predictable, Moi’s dismissal of Maathai as “un-African” because she transgressed gender roles and confronted a man evinces the flawed distinctions between a “real” African woman and a Westernised one. Such thinking is very problematic in associating social progress with European traditions, education, religion and cultural values, as if African cultures did not believe in egalitarian gender relationships. Maathai can be seen as a hybrid African woman who embraced the best of her African culture and Western education to redefine herself as a socially empowered woman who could take a stand against Kenya’s political autocratic government and successfully run an activist campaign for environmental justice. This is what this article has conceptualised as transforming the space of madness into a space of privilege.

## Conclusion

While there are theoretical and political overlaps between Maathai’s use of environmental intersectionalism and her label as a “madwoman,” this article has established that there are privileges that Maathai taps within this overlap. The article has rendered these intersections explicit by arguing that Maathai’s *Unbowed* shows us that women’s oppression and environmental injustices are inextricable and implicitly gendered relationships. Secondly, the article has shown that tagging Maathai as a “madwoman” was associated with her ecological activism, education and success, and *Unbowed* is a testament to how Maathai negotiated this label, reproducing hierarchies of privilege that revise Otherness. Lastly, the article drew illustrations on the tag of “madness” from the subjective autobiographical voice, a testimony of a single woman navigating the conditions of oppressive politico-patriarchal male power. Accepting the “mad” tag, she employs intersectional environmentalism to launch a new feminist stance that is less hierarchical and draws its impulse from the Kenyan poor women and the dehumanised environment.

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