

Women As Green Agents of Change (A Study of Wangari Maathai As An Environmentalist)

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Dr. Wangari Maathai is the first African woman to win the prize for demonstrating the intricate links between the environment, democracy and peace through Kenya's Green Belt Movement. Maathai works everyday to preserve and foster peace through the protection of environment because she believes that environment is the steward of world's natural resources. The environment provides the basics of survival including food, water, energy and medicine. When natural resources are lost through climate change and poor resource use, war and conflict increase dramatically. Thanks to Wangari Maathai for planting seeds of peace. Those seeds led to environment, economic and political stability. In short, Dr. Maathai was able to show that environmental protection is a two way street: the loss of natural resource drives war and conflict, but the restoration of natural resources drives peace and security. When Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977, her goal was simple: to help improve the lives of rural women by improving the environment on which they depend for water, food, fuel, and medicine by planting trees. Wangari Maathai knew that the role of women in environmental stewardship is powerful. Unlocking women's potential as "green agents of change" is necessary to realize the full potential of investments in conservation in the region, and around the world and to ensure the long-term sustainability of world's natural capital. The 'Green Belt' Movement fosters environmental conservation and promotes sound natural resource management and livelihood improvement through tree planting, women's rights, civic empowerment and good governance. The Green Belt Movement has continued to involve women as the discussion makers and given them leadership over their own circumstances. Women are given the knowledge and agency to build a network, take direct action and stand up against the face of oppression. Mathai's legacy has empowered a whole new generation of women to take actions that benefit their families and the planet

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I. Introduction

The Green Belt Movement has had a sustained lifespan and has become one of the most recognizable non-governmental organizations in Africa. GBM has planted over 30 million trees in Kenya since 1977 and has successfully stemmed the tide of deforestation and land erosion in many parts of rural Kenya. The Green Belt Movement is an example of a successful development project by the people rather than for the people. It was structured to avoid the urge to work for rather than with them. This approach is empowering the local people. In time the tree also became a symbol for peace and conflict resolution, especially during ethnic conflicts in Kenya when the green belt movement used peace trees to reconcile disputing communities. During the ongoing re-writing of the Kenyan constitution, similar trees of peace were planted in many parts of the country to promote a culture of peace. Using trees as a symbol of peace is in keeping with a widespread African tradition. For example, the elders of kikuyu carried a staff from the thigi tree that, when placed between two disputing sides, caused them to stop fighting and seek reconciliation. Many communities in Africa have these traditions. Maathai also notes that during the pro-democracy campaigns of the late 1980s, trees of peace were planted to draw attention to the plight of political prisoners. In her own protracted struggle with Moi's government over, democratization, land grabbing and privatization schemes, Maathai was maltreated and imprisoned. Her recent involvements have been with the jubilee 2000 campaign and in a recent speech at the Beijing plus ten UN conferences in New York City. She reiterated the need for a cancellation of unplayable foreign debt of countries in the global south. Although initially the Green Belt Movement's tree planting activities did not address issues of democracy and peace, it soon became clear that responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space. Therefore, the tree became a symbol for the democratic struggle in Kenya. Citizens were mobilized to challenge widespread abuses of power, corruption and environmental mismanagement.

Body

Women have been in the forefront of the environmental struggle, from New York's Love Canal to Kenya's Green Belt, ecological concerns have often be merged with politics/identity issues of motherhood. Bearing the brunt of water shortages and environmental degradation and pollution, women have become politicized (or conscientized) to take back the land and connect it with land claims, human rights, and peace issues. Within the global South, "eco-feminist" struggles have not been held up by the worries of having a correct set of theoretical positions, rather eco-feminism in development discourse is "not so much an immutable set of theoretical positions as it is a political intervention that continually shifts its discourse in relation to its negotiation with dominant forces in development politics". Feminist activists in the global South have had to contend with various theoretical presuppositions. In the 1970s, development discourse added a gender component, which came to be known as the "women in development" paradigm. The western development model was kept in tact but complemented by the following theory. Women are fuel gatherers, consumers of firewood and therefore responsible for environmental degradation, population explosion, malnutrition and poverty. (Sturgeon, 143) By the 1970s Southern (rural) women were seen by development planners as 'having too many children and destroying their habitat.' They became convenient scapegoats for northern industrial elites and nations, consuming most of the world's fossil fuels and other natural resources.

Work of some of the important thinkers like Anupam Mishra, Wangari Maathai, Chico Mendes, Anil Agarwal, Vandana Shiva, José Antônio Lutzenberger, Marina Silva, Ken Saro Wiwa, Micahel Werikhe, and many others has been significant in seeking the corrective and reclaiming the field of understanding and knowledge of what constitutes environmentalism. These environmentalists have worked extensively to record and highlight the causes of environmental degradation, role of power across caste, class, gender, tribal, and regional lines in dispossession of the people involved in environmental conflicts or situations, and also redefining conservation and role of indigenous and local communities in conservation of habitats and livelihoods. Additionally, a closer look at their work will also reveal the social bases that give rise to differing demands for conservation and preservation of ecological resources and thus, different environmentalisms. The terrain of environmentalism in the global south is vast and encompasses different actors and stakeholders located in varied geographies and spaces that are involved in various contestations around environmental resources. These contestations are a result of uneven power structure and the non-linear and unequal effect of process of colonization, capitalism and contemporary globalization. These actors and stakeholders also interact with their counterparts across the globe at various forums and inform the debate around environmental degradation and solutions that are being sought for it (Rodrigues 2004: 6-12). Notably, this conversation between actors in differential power positions and locations is not without its divergences and contestations. Environmentalism as a phenomenon is the social and political movement that seeks to protect the natural environment by limiting or stopping the harm done to it by the range of human activities undertaken in its quest for subsistence, continuation and progress of the human race. Thus, there is an argument of reconsideration of our economic, social, and political system and organization that are conducive to the benign treatment of the environment. Environmentalism in the global south, thus, tries to understand and analyze the movements, ideologies and processes that seek to preserve environment while at the same time dealing with the questions of livelihood and development. Environmentalism has become an important issue theme in international politics ever since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment of 1972, also better known as Stockholm Conference. Politics around it has also intensified. Given widespread natural resource depletion and cases of pollution –air, water, land, soil-the concerns regarding environmental degradation and destruction has resulted in environmental activism and movements. Environmental goals are nearly always factors in wider campaigns for greater political and economic clout (Haynes, 1999:222). Over the last quarter century, tens of thousands of environmental groups have emerged in the developing countries (Fisher, 1993:209 in Haynes, 1997:223) with majority located in Latin America or Asia fewer in sub-Saharan Africa and hardly in the Middle East. These movements and activisms are instigated and informed by various watershed events and are carried forward by leaders and thinkers who try to conceptualize on these so as to understand the processes at work and also seek solutions. Therefore, a systematic reading of the work of the environmentalists and including the context of their situation can add to understanding of central themes and underlined bases that guide environmental thinking. Anupam Mishra, Wangari Maathai and Chico Mendes are the three important environmentalists who have impacted the work and activism around environmental issues in their respective countries. Their work has not been studied in detailed fashion to derive their environmental philosophies. This study aims at understanding their philosophies, locate it within the larger environmental discourse, and investigate how it has shaped thoughts on Environmentalism in Brazil, India and Kenya. Works of other important thinkers like Anil Agarwal, Vandana Shiva, Helen Gichohi, Marina Silva, Jose Antonio Lutzenberger and others engaged in the debates around equity, justice and rights of people in management of natural resources and ecosystems in the three countries will also be analyzed in a conversation with those of the selected environmentalists. An effort will also be made to capture the voices and concerns of the newer actors that are located in the urban spaces and have

concerns that many deem- bourgeoisie 'in nature. The extent to which livelihood concerns and issues of justice, equity and rights find reverberations with these newer actors will also be assessed. The body of work of the thinkers also aims to understand the nature of environmental problems and conflicts; the location of these in the social, economic, political and cultural bases; resilience of the traditional knowledge systems in providing with the broad range of context- specific solutions for dealing with the environmental problems of both global and local nature like that of climate change, biodiversity and water scarcity.

Throughout Africa (as in much of the world) women hold primary responsibility for tilling the fields, deciding what to plant, nurturing the crops, and harvesting the food. They are the first to become aware of environmental damage that harms agricultural production: If the well goes dry, they are the ones concerned about finding new sources of water and who must walk long distances to fetch it. As mothers, they notice when the food they feed their family is tainted with pollutants or impurities: they can see it in the tears of their children and hear it in their babies' cries. Wangari Maathai, Kenya's foremost environmentalist and women's rights advocate, founded the Green Belt Movement on Earth Day 1977, encouraging farmers (70 percent of whom are women) to plant "greenbelts" to stop soil erosion, provide shade, and create a source of lumber and firewood. She distributed seedlings to rural women and set up an incentive system for each seedling that survived. To date, the movement has planted more than fifteen million trees, produced income for eighty thousand people in Kenya alone, and has expanded its efforts to more than thirty African countries, the United States, and Haiti. Maathai won the Africa Prize for her work in preventing hunger, and was heralded by the Kenyan government—controlled press as an exemplary citizen. A few years later, when Maathai denounced President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi's proposal to erect a sixty-two-story skyscraper in the middle of Nairobi's largest park (graced by a four-story statue of Moi himself), officials warned her to curtail her criticism. When she took her campaign public, she was visited by security forces. When she still refused to be silenced, she was subjected to a harassment campaign and threats. Members of parliament denounced Maathai, dismissing her organization as "a bunch of divorcées." The government-run newspaper questioned her sexual past, and police detained and interrogated her, without ever pressing charges. Eventually Moi was forced to forego the project, in large measure because of the pressure Maathai successfully generated. Years later, when she returned to the park to lead a rally on behalf of political prisoners, Maathai was hospitalized after pro-government thugs beat her and other women protesters. Following the incident, Moi's ruling party parliamentarians threatened to mutilate her genitals in order to force Maathai to behave "like women should." But Wangari Maathai was more determined than ever, and continued her work for environmental protection, women's rights, and democratic reform. From one seedling, an organization for empowerment and political participation has grown many strong branches. In 2004 Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her efforts. In 2005, Maathai was selected to preside over the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council. She was named one of the 100 most influential people by Time magazine and one of the 100 most powerful women by Forbes magazine. She was honored in 2006 with the Legion d'Honneur, France's highest award.

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