

## **A Portrait Subverting the Normative Gender Identity**

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**Abstract**

*Autobiographical discourses written by women globally in their perceptions indicate that women are struggling to be given an equal playing field in academia and politics. The paper looks at a portrait of the Legacy of subversion of gender identity in Wangari Maathai's Unbowed, sampled purposively. Tenets of New Historicism and Gender theory are used in analysing data. Qualitative analytical research design with data collected through textual reading and analyzed by content, are used. Findings indicate that Wangari defines herself as a political, feminist, and human rights activist; as well as an environmentalist and a literary artist in Kenya. She narrates how she helps shape up and transforms Kenya's government into a democracy in which she later serves. Her fearless strength in adversity, her creative approach to building a peaceful, healthy planet; her hard work inspiring and empowering women are accolades that culminate into her being crowned a Nobel Peace laureate.*

**KEY WORDS:** Portrait, Subversion, Gender, Normative, Identity

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Portrait Subverting the Normative Gender Identity**

The autobiographical narrative in literature accords the writer space to tell the story of one's own life. The writer has the space and freedom to discuss both the private and public participation in the passing history. According to Helga (2014), the autobiographical sub genre of literature is a case of life writing, signifying a retrogressive narrative that undertakes to tell the authors' attempts at reconstructing her/his personal development from a pseudo present point of narration. Helga continues to assert that as a sub genre of literature, an autobiography has been used by the marginalized to wedge social campaigns aimed at inclusion of the previously marginalized; of the excluded histories, stories, beings both in the private and public. The emblem of life reconstructing particularly makes it a preferred genre for the articulated struggles to ground an authentic self. How the selected author attempt a reconstruction of her portrait interest the paper.

Molara (1987) in Jones et al posits that the female writer has two major responsibilities: first, to tell about being a woman; secondly to describe reality from a woman's point of view, a woman's perspective and to tell her story differently from how men have told it. Maathai's *Unbowed* responds in this direction. As a writer, Molara adds that the female writer must seek to do justice to her art work, stay committed to her dream no matter what and tell about perceptions of women. She must destroy male stereotypes and remain politically conscious.

### **2.0 Literature Review**

The act of writing an autobiographical work of art makes a very private matter public, a very secret moment public. It also co-opts the Narrator into a perception of her/his own anxieties as she/ he reveals his/her innermost self posits Lopez- Carlo, (2012). While studying Barrack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, Lopez did discover that the primary trigger of this self creation was the haunting lack or void created by an absent father figure. Filling this vacuum is a paternal presence that oscillates between the "real" father who had abandoned the son so early in life and a very "mythical father" that he reconstructed through imagination, dreams and stories he had about him. From Obama's autobiographical narrative, we learn about a story within a history. How Wangari subverts her normative portraiture interest our study as she could be undoing certain mythical concepts about the female character.

Scucchi (2015) studies Condoleezza Rice: *A Memoir of My Extraordinary, Ordinary Parents and Me* is a fascinating and inspirational story for young people. Scucchi sees it as. '*a Place for the Personal-* in the US. She quotes Rice as making a strong statement in the process: 'Life is short and what academic investments are we making in the world for our offspring? Scucchi examines Condoleezza Rice's autobiography as a hybrid literary genre through the lens of transformative learning. Through her analysis of the text, Scucchi demonstrates the ways in which literature cultivates, reflects and creates positive changes within lives. Rice's portrait of her parents, John and Angelena, highlights their ambitions and frustrations and shows how much they sacrificed to give their beloved only child the best chance for success. Rice also discusses the challenges of being a precocious child who was passionate about music, ice skating, history, and current affairs. Her memoir reveals with vivid clarity how her early experiences sowed the seeds of her political beliefs and

helped her become a vibrant, successful woman. How Wangari' Mathaai's *Unbowed* depicts a subverted gendered portraiture to model to the male and female worldwide is the subject for analysis in this paper.

Dukule (2010) discusses another exciting autobiography by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf - Liberia: *This Child will be Great* (2009). Ellen is the world's first black female president and Africa's first elected female head of state. She is known internationally as 'Iron Lady.' The great novelty of President Sirleaf's autobiography, *This Child Will Be Great* is that it does not simply address itself to the growing pains of a nation in search of a soul or the life of a political icon who has cast a giant shadow on the recent history of the youngest, yet oldest Republic of Africa. The story of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is made of the stuff that fascinates historians and politicians but not literary scholars. Unlike Wangari's autobiography that use this form to concretize the emerging portraiture in her text. We argue as literary scholars that everybody has a story to tell, because every life is somehow an unscripted drama, where the separate incidents and developments can be put together to make an interesting story. The literary scholar gets more engrossed with the 'how' just as much as with the 'what' that is with the 'form' and 'content' that are reciprocal facets in literature. The study notes however, that the militancy of Sir leaf's text robs it the opportunity to be selected as a literary item for our study. But rare are stories that impact the lives of so many, or transform the destiny of an entire nation and serve as an inspiration to millions like Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed*, because in her autobiographical voice, is a representative tone, of the Kenyan woman during the Moi era.

According to Kathrada (2013) while studying Winnie Mandela's autobiography *Part of my Soul Went with Him*, demonstrates how empowered women hunger for open space where they could express their ideas. He states that Winnie depicts an outstanding strong personality; and an impressive capacity to speak her mind in an extremely hostile environment which records the very horror of apartheid as she experienced it. She says that doing her dairy made solitary confinement manageable, the difficulty experienced during the era of apartheid would have killed her but writing saved her from despair. Winnie's autobiography is the case of a story within a history; the history of apartheid. Winnie indicates that she wrote for her daughters and grand children. Kathrada argues further, that the rise of global, multiethnic, and women's literature – works in which writers reflect on experiences shaped by culture, colour, and gender endows autobiography with a special fascination. How Wangari embroiders upon her experience in an attempt to define self in a literary form disclosing her 'private' life in a public discourse intrigued this paper.

Ochieng (2005) posits that autobiographies provide interpretation not merely records. He explains that this genre wrestles with the truth of personal identity; trying to record the sense of self, to discover it. He goes on to say that autobiographies assure the author of his existence beyond any possibility of philosophical denial. Through it he/she comes to terms with his/her past or exorcises it. The author presents for public scrutiny and contemplation of a version of the self that he/she wants the society to see. In Ochieng's view the primary concern of autobiographies is with the formulation of an image of the authors themselves that is not contaminated by subjectivity. Ochieng's study however uses a historical approach, unlike this particular one, that is literary.

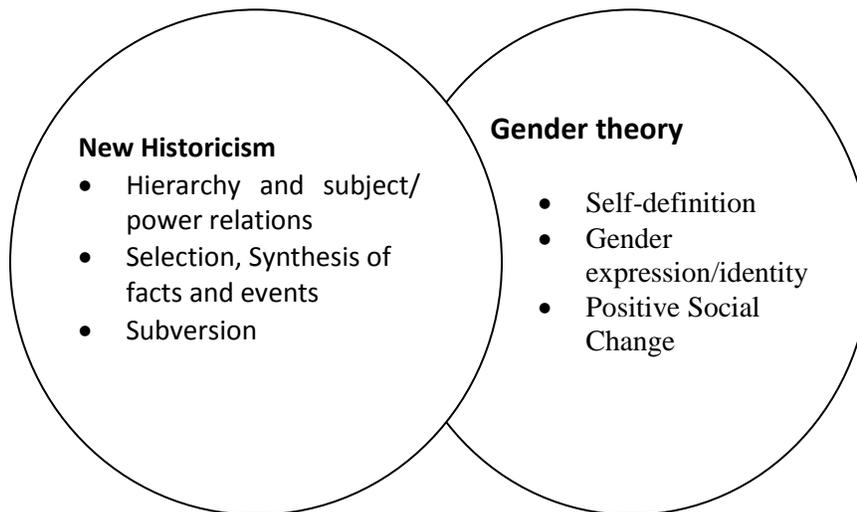
The portrait that the paper is interested in, closely resembles a thematic memoir which focuses on relationships, except that the portrait emphasizes the subjects' concentration on achievements, disappointments and the political milestone made as well as on the societal expectations, generally. These

portraits subvert the normative gender identity. In our choice of Wangari's *Unbowed* is simultaneously demonstrated a coming of age of a female literary artist and environmentalist 'coming of age par excellence' thus becoming both a response to her environment and a representation of a woman attempting to laud a female perspective.

The growing consciousness inspires women and their supporters globally to mount campaigns to claim equal opportunities in all sectors of development including the political and the literary arena. The selected autobiography depicts an arch type of such an empowered woman. In studying the texts, a modelling of high achievers is depicted. The so called gender issues that relegated women to the periphery when it came to power struggle is challenged by the appearance of the female power. This is a phenomenon the female auto biographer depicts. How she utilizes the space she creates in her literary debut, and how the male folk and fellow female folk are described as perceiving of her new status offer pleasurable reading as it also instructs on certain new developments in the society.

### **3.0 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for the proposed study integrates two theories: the theory of New Historicism and the Gender theory. According to Abrams (1999) New Historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. Bem (1981) shows how the gender theory highlights particular phenomena like male/ female dichotomy as both real and as social constructs. This view is quite consistent with the autobiographical female gender portraiture that our study is interested in. Specifically this paper looks at an autobiographical portrait of a subverted normative gender identity in Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed*.



***Fig 1: Theoretical Framework***

Miles and Huberman (1994) define a theoretical framework as a visual or written product, one that “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied; the key factors, concepts, or variables—and the presumed relationships among them” (Huberman 1994: 18). Here, we use the term in a broader sense, to refer to the actual ideas and beliefs that the research holds about the autobiographical portrait of a subverted normative gender identity in Wangari Maathai’s *Unbowed*. New Historicists concern themselves with the political function of literature and with the concept of power, the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority, not a ‘truth’ but a ‘cultural construct’ reflected in a given work. The selected text; Wangari’s *Unbowed* is testimony of such a reflection.

The New Histo- Gender Theoretical Framework allows the Researcher to view the literary data that has evolved historically, through the gender lens. The lens demonstrate that there have been social changes that allow women who were previously marginalised to take more active roles; although minimal acceptance of women in public service and politics could be demonstrated as still standing on the way of strong women. The defined gender portrait of a subverted normative gender identity provides an avenue for a recreated self, that this paper is interrogating.

### **3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study adopted analytical research design. This design allows for extraction of information and analysis from the selected text. The study area is literary and Wangari Maathai’s *unbowed* was purposively sampled. The autobiographical narrative allow for the female portrait to be defined in reality and space, allowing for the emerging identity to be re-enacted.

#### **4.0 Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion**

Wangari crafts an inspirational story that she hands over as a legacy to her readers. She depicts several character traits that are easily emulated by her readers. She is no doubt a role model and a heroine. She depicts self differently from how other female characters have been depicted in literature.

**4.1 A literary Artist.** In this inspiring memoir, *Unbowed*, Wangari Maathai, recounts her life as a literary artist who is conscious of the need to conserve the environment in Africa. Her work offers readers new eyes and an awakened soul, in other words an eye opener to environmental conservation. The various roles she performs suggest a self reflection that she uses to define the childhood landscape she recreates. This recreation questions the notion of perception, including that of the self.

Wangari uses well crafted language patterns to pass across information to the audience. Over her choice to use the autobiographical narrative, she says:

‘Writing a memoir was like walking down my life through a journey of some sixty years. It brought up many memories and reflections of past, current events, relationships, friendships and collaborations, as well as times of great difficulty and great joy... along the journey, I never walked alone...’ (*Unbowed: xi*)

In the quote above Wangari Maathai mentions a deliberate choice to use a memoir. She is therefore in agreement with Spengeman (1980) who states that an autobiography is a literary form that would resort to a limited range of expression: giving a deep human side to one's story of her own life. In the process she lets others know or understand why the author made certain decisions. Indeed in the autobiographical narrative, Wangari does tell her audience why she made certain decisions. The choice to use autobiography in telling the story of her life, is also in agreement with Atlick (1960)'s view that such work of art are bound always to be representative of their period, within a range that will vary with the intensity of the authors' participation in contemporary life and with the sphere in which they moved.

The title of Maathai's autobiography, *Unbowed*, published in 2006, indicates a literary artistic self definition of character. The writer's belief in her heroic and the daring valour with which she puts in a spirited fight in order to achieve her dreams. To begin with, Wangari Maathai was born on April 1<sup>st</sup>, a day recognised globally as April Fools' Day. April Fools' Day is a day that people tell and escape with the lies they tell about. She narrates:

I was born the third of six children, and the first girl after two sons on April 1, 1940, in the small village of Ithite in the Central highlands of what was then British Kenya. My grandparents and parents were also born in this region near the provincial capital of Nyeri, in the foothills of the Aberdare Mountain Range. To the North, jutting into the sky, is Mount Kenya (Wangari: 3)

The above extract is an example of the attention to detail that Wangari pays to the circumstances surrounding her birth. This implies that Wangari is going to take centre stage and invite the world to question certain phenomenon inherent in the society. To unpack the April Fools' Day symbol a little further; her life turns out to be the opposite in that she succeeds beyond imagination. She is not a fool either in that she achieves high intellectual accolades unexpected of a village woman born in a conservative society. This is an indication that she is going to challenge (to fool) or better still subvert her normative allotted place in the society. Wangari points to a time in the future when she would dismantle societal structures that interfere with peace, a New Historicist view. As a gender activist, Wangari is 'doing gender' in her autobiography. Butler (1990) and Zimmerman (1987) indicate that gender roles as prescribed by society are not fixed and can be performed. Wangari demonstrates as performing in several of these roles in her autobiography.

Wangari defines self as a literary artist. Concurrently, Wangari puts her child like imaginations into good use. She is using fictional writing to some extent. The nexus between historical facts and fiction in the autobiographical genre needs to be explored further here, in as far as the narrator takes us back and forward in her narration. Since taking us back in time to when she was very young, implies that she is imagining and writing a long. Again the writer is chronological as she takes us on a gradual expedition of her experiences from birth to adulthood, to adventures, to achievements, to fame and even to disappointments and heartaches in her life's journey. The linear plot of this autobiography points to Wangari as desirous of having full control of her life such that she relates proceedings of her life as vividly as possible. The study concurs with Myer (1993) a New Historicist theorist, who traces the origin of this idea of being in control to economic determinism. In her view this idea ought to be transformed to suit current times. Thus, the empirical self and the criticism voiced by a woman who does not see self included in the generic woman subject- compose the

ideology. In this paper, Wangari depicts self as an ideal character in charge; she has refused to remain unheard like several women in her village who wallowed in the miasma of polygamy. She narrates:

as a child I did not realize that some of the children were not my full siblings. In a polygamous homestead, we learned to live with our half siblings as part of a small community... In the traditional Kikuyu society, a man had the freedom to marry as many women as he wanted. But unlike today, he was required by culture to take care of all his children. The society would not allow men to escape these duties. For one a man was under strong peer pressure to enhance his responsibilities... He could marry as many wives as he could look after. My father had six wives. (Wangari:18)

The author defines self differently from how society has defined women in the past. She is proud and patriotic. Wangari demonstrates a performative role of a woman who observes the privileges presented to the male folk in her society. However, Wangari delineates self as not being defenceless in the eye of the society like the other women who readily accepted their allotted place and remained silent. She explores self as a feminist literary activist using her autobiography to wedge gender battles. Wangari depicts how patriarchal culture fictionalizes a woman, and denies her voice. In retrospect, a woman's autobiographical narrative challenges the gender ideologies surrounding her in order to write differently but truly about her role in the passing history. This opening strategically points to a kind of embellishment of individuality on her part because she does not acknowledge the idea of being voiceless and being counted as a fifth or sixth wife, to be seen and not to be heard.

**4.2 An Environmentalist** Wangari's early childhood is denoted with several references to the seasons and the environment as they exist in her village. She acknowledges having been born two weeks into the season of the long rains, in a traditional mud walled house with no electricity or running water. The narrator draws attention to the environment and the climatic seasons. She is defining self as an ardent environmentalist who has a lot of interest in nature from a tender age. This foreshadows her attempts at environmental conservation later in the autobiography. She narrates:

In July you knew that it would be so foggy you wouldn't be able to see ten feet in front of you, and so cold in the morning that the grass would be silvery-white with frost. In Kikuyu, July is known as mworia nyoni, the month when birds rot, because birds would freeze to death and fall from the trees. We lived in a land abundant with shrubs, creepers, ferns and trees like the Mutuindi, Mikeu and migumo, some of which produced berries and nuts. Because rain fell regularly and reliably, clean drinking water was everywhere. There were well large watered fields of maize, beans, wheat and vegetables. (Wangari: 3)

The quote above indicates the love the narrator has toward her environment right from birth. When later in the text, she graduates into a renowned environmentalist; we understand the genesis of it. Wangari defines self as a nurturing and as a care giver- in the image of Mother Nature. She is going to perform in the role of nurturing and protecting the environment. This is because she has crafted her story from the vantage of a child who loves and closely observes the environment she is growing up in. According to Montrose (1996), a proponent of the New Historicist theory, the ideology seeks to change the world view with regard to domination. In this context Wangari who is the narrator in this story does not allow somebody else to tell the story even when she

is still so young, the narrator relates her observations from her own point of view. She is expressing her participation in this passing History herself. Wangari as a high achiever puts herself in control from the onset of her narration. She is the narrator in control, observing the environment she is growing up in keenly. Wangari subverts the position of the dominated, as she tells her story herself not through somebody else much as these observations are made while she is still a baby. The narrator, having distinguished self as an ardent environmentalist, seeks to give the reader a series of illustrations toward this endeavour. There is an element of significance to note in the author's relationship to nature. She says:

At the time of my birth, the land around Ithi was still lush, green, and fertile. The seasons were so regular that you could almost predict that the long, monsoon rains would start falling in mid-March. In July you knew it would be so foggy you would not be able to see ten feet in front of you, and so cold in the morning that the grass would be silvery- white with frost.  
(Wangari: 3)

The recurrent phenomenon of Wangari's love for the environment, keeps featuring as early as the time surrounding her birth, showing and foreshadowing the role she will play later on in life; that of being an acknowledged environmentalist. Wangari forges ahead as an environmental activist under the Green Belt Movement which she single handed initiates in the 1970's. Her desire to plant trees coincides with women's desire worldwide to seek a difference in their lives. The quote below demonstrates this global desire:

At the same time, women throughout the world in other countries were recognizing the need to make changes in their own communities and bring their perspectives and experiences to the global arena, and their governments were giving them increasing space to do so. In June 1975, to coincide with the International Women's Year, 133 governments and about 4000 women from around the world gathered in Mexico City for the first UN conference on women (Wangari:124)

Wangari maintains a concerted dominance as she highlights her tenacity to protect womanhood and the environment. This is demonstrated in 1989 when she leads the fight against the building of a 60 story monument in Nairobi's Uhuru Park. Wangari defines the happenings around her by their history juxtaposed with her story, stating clearly the processes she goes through to the current state. She gives dates that authenticate the autobiography, like the date and day of her realization that Uhuru park was lined up for grabs. In a vivid description Maathai's efforts are recapped:

In autumn of 1989, I was working late in the office, as was often the case, when a young law student knocked on my door...he told me that he had learnt from reliable sources that the government was planning to build a skyscraper in Uhuru park...the young man had learned this information because he had overheard his father and uncles, who were very close to powerful people in the government, discussing the planned building project and commenting on how terrible it was. He knew they wouldn't make their concerns public and he didn't want to jeopardize their positions, since at this time whoever publicly questioned the government actions was arrested and detained, and journals and newspapers were closed down. The young man was however aware of my concern for the environment and knew that I was not afraid to speak on such matters.  
(Wangari: 184)

Wangari demonstrates fearlessness in adversity. She is so intrepid particularly where the government of the day's mismanagement of public resources was concerned. Uhuru Park is a public site for relaxation- a social amenity for many Kenyans to use. She does prove herself an ardent environmentalist. She exhibits a success story toward this endeavour. She displays wanton courage and optimism in wedging environmental battles and in negotiating balance between the fight to protect Uhuru Park and the strong will to join the Kenyan politics but play a nationalist league, not tribal politics. Thanks to her effort the project never took off, it was abandoned but members of the 6th parliament referred to the Green Belt Movement members as a bogus organization whose members were a bunch of divorcees.

She has an urgency to use the environment as a tool for correcting her society and doing her 'self' advancement. She punctuates her love for the environment with educational pursuits.

**4.3 Educationist/ Academician.** At the onset of her tale, Wangari indicates that she was an iconoclast as a child, determined to get education even though most African girls were uneducated at the time. Wangari's love for education is demonstrated as an eye opener in her career path. Her parents prevail upon her to join St. Cecilia's Intermediate Primary School, a boarding school at the Mathari Catholic Mission on the slopes of Nyeri hills. She posits:

I would join my cousin Wangari at St. Cecelia Intermediate Primary School, a boarding school. The school was run by the Consolata Missionary Sisters from Italy... St. Cecelia had a reputation for good teaching and discipline. As a boarding school it was thought to offer no distractions or disruptions to studies. I later learnt that my family had one concern about St. Cecelia that I might convert to Catholicism and that the catholic sisters would woo me to become one of them. The nun's way of life was completely unknown to the Kikuyu community which expected girls to marry and have children. Becoming a nun was considered a major loss to the community. (Wangari:54)

The family's decision to take her to boarding, presents her and her family with two major challenges: First, that Wangari would convert to Catholicism and second, that she would become celibate. Her parents feared that the catholic sisters would woo her and influence her to become one of them. The best influence they impact on her, however, is love for the environment and detailed attention toward its conservation, as well as strong roots for the academic

In retrospect, Wangari tells us that, upon coming back to Kenya after her 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree studies, she lands a job to teach at the University of Nairobi and is therefore optimistic about the role she can play in serving independent Kenya. She however discovers that the professor of Zoology has offered her teaching post to someone else on the basis of ethnicity and gender. As a result of this, she buttresses herself for a struggle against ethnic and gender discrimination she faces. She discovers that her being a high female achiever might be a hindrance to her advancement in the then male dominated field:

It was the first time I had encountered that form of discrimination. Was it also because I was a woman? Perhaps not, but it wasn't long after that, when seeking another job at the same institution as a woman was shunned. Both ethnic and gender barriers now were placed in a way of myself advancement. I

realized then that the sky would not be my limit! Most likely, my gender and my ethnicity would be. (Wangari: 101)

The social dimension of the autobiography comes into play at an intra textual level. Whereby the protagonist character acquires the role of a narratee to communicate and to seem to be the one listening and observing other than the one narrating the story. She is making a realistic first hand observation that the society is gender biased. The narrative process allows her an opportunity to look back introspectively and take stock of the hurdles she has had to clear to become who she is at the time of writing her autobiography. Although she later gets a job as a Research Assistant in the Department of Veterinary Anatomy in the same institution, she confesses that as a young female lecturer, it was not easy to deal with male students who doubted her qualification and capability on account of her gender. She observes:

When I began teaching, all the students were male and they found it hard to believe that I had the qualifications to be their instructor in anatomy. I was a woman after all and in my twenties, so not older than them. It wasn't always easy to deal with the students or my male colleagues. The later would often tease me: do you really have a Masters Degree in Biology/. I knew deep inside that they doubted my capabilities ( Wangari: 103)

Fedewa reckons that interpretation of a literary text through the gender lens helps identify, inequalities locally and globally. Fedewa's argument on gender theory suggests that it explores relationships in society. This fact is revealed from the foregoing analysis: Wangari was only able to hold the position of Chair Person of the Department of Veterinary Science by merit. Therefore, if women are given equal opportunities to go to school like their male counterparts, then the social attributes the society has ascribed to them will be broken down and more women will fight to hold positions of decision making. The education Wangari receives enables her unbind herself from retrogressive stereotypical expectations of the society. She rises above the position of subjugation to serve in several senior positions of authority. In her empowered roles, she enacts enlightenment in decision making. Again here, she is seen to be subverting roles and daring the male field. Wangari was the first woman South of the Sahara to attain a PhD.

**4.4 Wangari depicts self as women's rights activist championing women rights.** In a flashback, Wangari tells us how she discovers the need to struggle for gender equity and justice with regard to benefits while teaching at the university. The autobiography heralds the need for equality and inclusivity in the day-to-day running of independent Kenya. The university administration denies female lecturers housing allowance, health insurance, and pension on the basis that they are married, yet give these benefits to the male lecturers. They also pay the women less than their male colleagues. With her friend and female colleague, Vetistine Mbaya, she fights for better terms of service, and the university administration yields to their demands. Gender battles at the university are waged by women whose consciences have been pricked by their education. They thus seek equality as members of staff in the then University of Nairobi. Fedewa's (2007) argument on gender suggests that it explores history and diverse experiences of men and women; that are players in politics and intimate lives. Gender is depicted as playing itself out in culture and the work place as well as in social injustice activism. Wangari again destabilizes the structures at the work place that suffocate women benefits.

According to Greenblatt (1981), the portrait is subverting the old order and replacing it with another. In other words roles are beside the point.

**4.5** Wangari brings her portrait out as **stoic/ unbowed**. She defines self as brilliant, courageous and hardworking. She depicts a portrait of a gripping account of an individual's trials and triumphs, a universal story of courage, persistence and success against great odds in a noble cause. She levels these against, and in parallelism to the African continents' struggles to fight disease, famine and poor governance. She depicts self as hugely charismatic, and with a rare determination to achieve what she has set her eyes on hence, the title *Unbowed*, to mean resilient. Faced with odd challenges, she does not relent or break or accept defeat. The definition of 'Unbowed' explores a woman who bestows herself with strength of character to achieve what she has set out to do.

The society Wangari grows up in is male dominated and she narrates how she had to work particularly hard to counter it. Wangari explores her world of academia at a point in time, in the history of mankind when women were subjugated and relegated to the private space. It is this private space that Wangari unveils. She depicts an outstanding strong personality bestowed with an impressive psychological capacity to speak her mind in an extremely hostile world. Her story invites readers to share the experiences of a woman who is bold enough to declare her courage publicly. This initial declaration of courage portrays a person who is proud of her achievements over the years and who certainly is satisfied with the way she has lived her life. The insinuation of resilience in the title of the autobiography also points to the egocentric nature of a subverted self in the narrative, where as writer she puts herself at the centre of the action and creates an image of strength and endurance a break from the norm of a woman as timid, submissive and easily subdued, (Grambs 1978).

**4.6 Champion of her Traditional Culture** Wangari demonstrates regard for her traditional roots. The inclusion of the Agikuyu myth is an attempt at preservation of culture and a proud identification with her roots, although she has been to the US for a number of years, she does not allow herself to be culturally alienated. Her determination to obtain higher education pays off and she details how she receives a scholarship to go for university studies in the United States of America. Of import to note here, is that the writer does not allow self to lose the sense of identity. She identifies with her African community.

Her association with, and link, to the Anjiru clan are attempts at a conviction of her portraiture as a courageous leader. Wangari is defining herself as coming from the Anjiru clan- famed for its leadership qualities that are unmatched among the other nine clans of the Agikuyu community. She narrates:

Gikuyu took them home and each daughter married the man who was the same height as she was and together they gave rise to the ten clans to which all Kikuyu's belong. (Even though the youngest Wamuyu did not get married, she had children.) Each clan is known for particular trade or quality; such as prophesy craftsmanship and medicine. My clan Anjiru is associated with leadership. The daughters made the clans matrilineal but many privileges, such as inheritance and ownership of land, livestock and perennial crops, were gradually transferred to men. It is not explained how women lost their rights and privileges (Wangari: 5)

To create an African sensibility and realize its experience, Wangari Maathai borrows heavily from the oral traditional archive; by exploring and discovering herself as a woman with her regional background of identity and as a member of the Agikuyu community. She is evoking the gender lens in viewing her role in the society. Orature provides her with a sense of identity and aid in her journey to self-discovery. She relates the Agikuyu myth of origin. She notes that god showed Agikuyu and Mumbi the wife, the land on which they were to settle, between four mountain peaks, that Kikuyu prayed under a holy fig tree, the daughters collected sticks to aid them get suitors from the forest, and Kikuyu sacrificed a lamb under the fig tree. She thus further underscores the importance of the environment in the socio-cultural identity of a people; and of her own self as leader.

Wangari's use of 'Anjiru' gives her the artistic licence to import meaning to her role in the artistic work. Through the gender lens provided in this myth, she explores the role of a woman in nurturing the society especially in her community where clans are matrilineal. Wangari notes that with time, however, women have lost this control of the society as men take on land and leadership rights originally in the women's docket. This partly explains her efforts to empower women through the Green Belt Movement, conceivably with an anticipation of rediscovering the woman's powerful position in the Agikuyu society. She looks forward to enhancing positive social change.

To foreground her traditional enculturation into her roots, Wangari gives another Agikuyu story. She says the stories were told around the fire place in the evening after a hard day's work. The Agikuyu were a story telling community. Similarly, the story "*Konyeki and his father*" (Wangari: 50-51) is a story the author reflects on as being told by the aunt. She narrates how among four ladies who went to watch a dance fell in love with one man who was extremely handsome and a beautiful dancer. As the evening passed, three of the women noticed that the young man behaved strangely. She narrates:

At one point as she danced, he broke one of his fingernails, took the nail, and popped it into another... Still, the lady who fell in love was too blind at heart to notice all these. The man behaved strangely severally till the three other women decided to escape from this compound, they tried to persuade the other lady but she refused and accepted to marry this man till finally after getting a child who takes after the father, eating human beings, this is when she changed her mind and decided to escape . The mouth was hidden at the back of his neck. As the other mouth opened a swarm of flies came out buzzing noisily...' ( Wangari:51).

This is just one of the stories that Wangari used to listen to as she was growing up. The Agikuyu community was a story telling community, and used these ogre narratives to impart moral lessons to the young. The trait of a woman's naiveté is explored here - where one is gullible and refuses to see the obvious. Wangari is alive and sensitive to what defines her as an African woman and although she is about to interact with another culture, she acknowledges her own oral tradition as flourishing. Wangari is preparing the reader that she does not want to have to embrace fully a culture she cannot call her own, since she was properly socialized in her own Agikuyu community. Moreover, her Agikuyu oral traditions have helped her develop as an individual and she has become a patriotic member of the Agikuyu clan. Going abroad therefore will not make her abandon her community.

Wangari playfully performs in her role as an oral artist. The contributory character of the folk stories presents the narrator as proud of her ancestry. The nexus between historical facts and Wangari's story depict her as an artist who destabilizes conventional contractions of meaning. The "Irimu" monster story: *Konyeki* could be explored further here. She construes the two stories to her own purposes of continuing her African traditional heritage as a legacy- She is reclaiming her female ancestors' story to sustain herself through their empowerment. In any case, power was originally in the hands of the womenfolk. So she should not be seen as undermining the original order. She is, in fact trying to take her clan members to reclaim what was originally theirs according to the Agikuyu myth.

This high sense of pride in her oral traditions makes her an interactive oral performer, as it bequeaths the narrative with authenticity and a sense of immediacy. It presents a carefully constructed oral heritage. The Agikuyu myth fused into her life story creates a collaborative oral narrative. The autobiographical narrator here locates a geographical site for her resistance in history. She is from a formidable clan that is not easily tossed around. Wangari's self portrayal in *Unbowed* is a story which traces the development of her character from childhood in South Tetu, her home constituency to the peak of her rise to power and to international recognition.

**4.7 In Control/ Independent Minded** Wangari is a strong character who has refused dominance. According to the New Historicist theorist Montrose (1996), such a strong character in literature seeks to change the worldview with regard to domination. New Historicism contends that domination is often achieved through culturally- orchestrated consent rather than force. These are critical underpinnings to the new historicist perspective. It also comprises political and economic practices aimed at putting individual high achievers in control over their lives.

Indeed Wangari looks at her plight as a woman in Kenya in the 1970's, as a result of the society's making in the sense that the society approves a subordinate position for the women. Through the Gender theory, Bem (1981) and Fedewa (2007) argue that all social differences between men and women are the result of oppressive stereotypes and should be eliminated in order to promote gender mainstreaming. In principle, there is nothing wrong between the biological reality and the cultural or personal expression of masculinity and femininity- this phenomenon should not be used to prevent one from achieving their full potentials. As a result of these factors, attaining statistical equalities in positions of responsibility have become elusive to a large extent, globally. Wangari depicts self as a character striving to add 'gender identity and gender expression to anti discriminatory laws in her self- narrative. Wangari's portraiture depicts a woman, who seeks to be at the top level hierarchy of power but suffers, as a result. The plausible explanation she gives is that, she suffers the way she does not because she is on the wrong but because the society has in essence predated the power hierarchy that is affecting the social interaction. In retrospect, she explores the possible causes of her marital problems and suggests that her academic qualifications might have contributed to the edgy relationship between her and Mwangi, her husband. Her husband had a problem leaving with a woman who was independent and in control. She narrates:

Nobody told me that men would be threatened by the high academic achievements of women like me....therefore, it was an unspoken problem that I and not my husband had a PhD and taught in the university' (Wangari:139).

Through the plural 'men, 'she unveils Mwangi's individuality by considering him part of the dominant community of males. She explains that after staying married for eight years, Mwangi walked out on her without offering any explanation and later humiliates her by making their divorce proceedings public. Wangari in reminiscence describes her anxiety and distress after her husband leaves using a series of rhetorical questions not only meant to explore her new status as a divorced woman, but also to let the reader into her anguish and invite the reader to sympathise with her. She takes her readers into her confidence as she searches her life to identify what she might have done wrong to warrant Mwangi's departure. The reader comes along with her when she makes these confessions:

I thought I had done everything: humbled myself, helped with his public role, served him, and loved him. I had tried to be a good mother, a good politician's wife, a good African woman, and a successful university teacher. Is it that those were just too many roles for one person to excel in? Did I miss something I should have paid attention to? Where did I go wrong? Because of the nature of our work, did we spend too much time apart? How could I have done so much for somebody, only to find it had not been enough to keep him with me? How was I going to cope with three children by myself? (Wangari: 142)

Wangari describes her different responsibilities in the process exploring the roles that she as a wife and mother plays, discovering that it is not easy to strike a balance between all of them. She repeats the word 'good' several times to present herself as having done her best to save her marriage and although she does not blame Mwangi directly for the failed relationship, she pauses as a first person narrator who is perturbed by the outcome of an ironical situation. The repetition of 'good' convincingly depicts her plight. However, her reference to herself as *Unbowed* in the title of her autobiography paints a different picture of her as uncompromising, and the reader is persuaded to believe that her inflexibility, being in control and independent minded rather than her husband's discomfort with her academic qualifications and job, may have been part of the cause of her marital woes. Wangari tells the reader that when the ruling was made:

it went against me, I was now divorced. I felt cheated, betrayed, taken advantage of and misused. I walked away in pain. I was in pieces, and worse was yet to come. ( Wangari: 147)

In the process of narrating her story, she explores her new identity as a divorced woman. The educated woman demonstrates a dual identity of sorts. Her ambivalent disposition is evident in her attempt to simultaneously conform to the African expectations of what defines a good woman as well as carrying out self as an educated woman. The African society has a negative attitude toward divorced women. According to Swati (2014) despite advances in the standard of living of people, the condition of widows and divorced women remains deplorable in society. Wives who cheat on their husbands are viewed badly while husbands who cheat on their wives do so because their wives failed to meet their 'need' for love/affection/sex. Paying no heed to whatever the reason may be for divorce, women are made responsible for divorce and it is considered as a sin in society. Wangari narrates her circumstance in such circles. She was short of being viewed as the source of her marital woes.

**4.8 Matriot** The word Matriot is a synonym for patriot but deliberately subverts the spelling to incline meaning toward a gender a gender. According to Mugo (1994) in her poem: *Mother Afrika's Matriot's*, a contribution toward the urgent task of engendering Pan-Africanism is echoed. The / k/ sound in Afrika is corrupted to depict a new continent that was initially raped by the colonizer and was now being further plundered by the greedy African leaders. The word Matriot is also a corruption of Patriot to imply that women are now joining in the fight to save the continent. The paper sees Wangari joining Michere and other women in an effort to save the face of Kenya as a Nation.

According to Greenblatt (1994) New Historicists regard history and fiction as intertwined stating that literature could be telling a story as a disguise to destroying the power or influence of a given governments' established system. Two systems come to the fore here, the patriarchal society and the Moi era. Besides attacking patriarchy, Wangari is also strategizing to attack the Moi era in Kenya as we see in her fronted and spirited fights to protect; Uhuru Park, Karura forest and liaising with the mother's of political prisoners to make a statement. In other words producing stories of the past is beside the point. Greenblatt goes on to state that literary artists use historiography to attack power bases. Wangari indeed uses her autobiography to wedge attacks on the dictatorship of the Moi era.

Wangari's attacks of the power bases are masked under the umbrella of environmental protectionism. She is also doing peace through her Green Belt Movement; instead of using bullets she negotiates for it. She is making democracy out of difference- by mobilizing women to plant trees, and also by mobilizing mothers of political prisoners to make a political statement. In reminiscence, she recalls, Ex- president Moi referring to the entire group of women camping at the freedom corner as *a bunch of divorcees*. These unconstructive terminologies were meant to put her down and kill her resolve in participating in the then so called manly field: the political arena of the day.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

Wangari has given the reader of her autobiography, a clearly subverted normative gender portrait that gives the female roles, earlier allotted to the male members of the society. The narrator jumps many hurdles put on the way of women's upward mobility and leaves behind legacies as she pioneers many other feats in Africa; the greatest of all being winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Wangari is dismantling structures put up by the patriarchal society and replacing them with new ones.

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