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## Theory and Praxis: Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

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Theory which derives from the Greek ‘theoria’ is defined by Raymond Williams as contemplation, spectacle, and mental conception (*Culture and Society*). Reading of a text involves reflection, contemplation or theorizing which is a mental activity. The study of theory, by itself, may at times appear to be abstract. In order to avoid the pitfalls of abstract reasoning, we apply various theoretical perspectives to literary texts. But reading theory does not take place in some isolated utopian space. We read in order to make sense of what we read (at some level). Theory helps in revealing the mystery of textual interpretation. In other words, we need to engage in theoretical thinking. We need theory.

### Theory or Theories?

The study of literature cannot exist without theory. But can we approach a text from a theoretical standpoint that is pure? We have a plethora of theories from various schools, ranging from Psychoanalysis, Marxism, Feminism, New Historicism, Post colonialism, Structuralism and Deconstruction to Ecocriticism and Queer Theory. This brings us to the vexed question of which theory/theories we should choose for a particular text. Does a psychoanalytical approach rule out a postcolonial one? Or alternately when we, for example wed Marxism to Feminism, in the process we evolve a new theoretical standpoint, and so on. When we use various theories to the same or different texts, we are continuously engaging in theoretical reflections. Clearly, the field of literary theory is a dynamic and a heterogeneous one. In such a context, we can only conclude that all theory is temporary, contingent, and ongoing.

Theory, however, does not exist as a separate activity of the human mind unrelated to society. To theorize is to contemplate on the world’s stage, and we do so in order to make us better players. In other words, theory exists in relation to practice. This approach is heuristic. The development of the meaning of a theoretical endeavor to include its practice brings literature out of academics into the material lived lives of human beings. Here, I would like to take the example of Ecofeminism as a theoretical activity to engage with text, and explore the different ways in which its practice influences the life of humankind.

## Theory and Praxis.

The ecology movement in theory and practice, attempts to speak for nature- the ‘other’ - that has no voice or subjectivity. Two major images have been used to achieve man’s separation from nature. Nature which has been imaged as female is the raw material out of which culture and masculine self-identity are formed. In pre-patriarchal societies nature and the female were revered. By the time of the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, a totally new world view had emerged. The woman fell, a prey to the sly snake. Consequently, since Nature is allied with woman it too shares her fate and is desacralized. The second image is that of nature as mindless matter, which exists to serve the needs of superior, rational Man. Both Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy contributed to the conception of nature as inert or mindless matter. It was the Aristotelian notion of the natural hierarchical ordering of the world that shaped the western world’s instrumental treatment of nature and woman. Matter, significantly enough, derives from the same root word as ‘Mother’. Behind both images lies a single theme- the subjugation and objectification of woman and nature. They represent single points on the same scale. Such images in Lynn White’s view, reinforces the belief that, ‘Man and Nature are two things, and man is the master’ (“The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” 1203). History has proved that the destruction of nature has increased manifold times since the conceptualization of nature as matter. As Carolyn Merchant points out, the image of earth as a living organism and nurturing mother, has historically served as a cultural constraint restricting the acts of human beings. “After all”, she says, “one does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body” (The Death of Nature 3).

Yet, today the image of earth as a living being is insufficient in itself to bring a halt to the current destruction of the natural world. As the destruction of nature proceeds, nature ethicists and ecophilosophers have searched for a theory that can serve to bring this destruction to a halt. As debates continue to rage over what theory, if any, should constitute the appropriate one for the natural world, others have concentrated on exposing the underlying mentality of exploitation that is directed against both nature and women. With feminism entering the fray in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the issue now is not merely to rescue the distressed damsel, but also to interrogate the prevailing circumstances which made the damsel arrive at her present plight. The theories emerging from the different approaches to resolve the current crisis in nature, have at times been mutually supportive, but at other times argued against each other.

Ecofeminism emerged from various social movements – feminism, peace, and ecology- during the 1970s and 1980s. The term was first used by Francis D’Eaubonne and became popular in the context of numerous resistance movements, protests and activities against environmental destructions. Unfortunately, by the 1990s ecofeminism was critiqued as essentialist and effectively discarded. Today, after more than two decades, there is a conscious attempt to retrieve the knowledge developed by the early ecofeminists. Ecofeminism has diversified its analysis: Intersections of ecofeminism and queer theory by Greta Gaard along with ecofeminist perspectives on eco-social movements by Mary Mellor and Ariel Salleh, theories of democracy and identity by Val Plumwood and the intersections of ecofeminism and environmental justice by Noel Sturgeon and Karen Warren. In fact, no theory put forward by any of these theorists is universally believed to be the most powerful or compelling one. The plurality of voices has woven together a rich and variegated tapestry which helps to provide a portrait of the world in which we currently live.

## Green Belt Movement - An Ecofeminist Praxis.

Ynestra King in the first ecofeminist conference ‘Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Eco-Feminism’ in the nineteen eighties, observed that Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. An examination of the many local struggles against environmental destruction, like the Chipko movement in the Himalayas, against atomic power plants in Germany, the Green Belt movement of Kenya, poor women’s efforts in Ecuador to save the mangrove forests to quote a few, confirm that many women worldwide feel the same sense of responsibility to preserve nature. Movements initiated by women for the environment are one of the strongest progressive forces of the new millennium. The two tools of resistance – the word and the sword – are used with finesse by the women to negotiate a space in the literary and the socio-political realm.

In 2004, when the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai for her contribution to sustainable environment, democracy and peace, it opened a new chapter in the history of ecology. They said,

Peace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment. Maathai stands at the front of the fight to promote ecologically viable social, economic and cultural development in Kenya and in Africa. She has taken such a holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights and women’s rights in particular. She thinks globally and acts locally. (*The Green Belt Movement* ix)

Wangari Muta Maathai in her autobiography, *Unbowed: A Memoir* reflects on how her life’s work evolved out of the simple idea of planting trees in her native Kenya. Over the past, much of individual and community owned lands in Africa have been lost to a variety of forces, both man-made and ecological. Deserts have spread, top soil has been washed away as forests and other vegetation have been cleared, and the land’s fertility has been reduced through too many cycles of planting, grazing and use of chemicals. The Green Belt Movement (GBM) was founded by Maathai in the 1970s especially to counter this deterioration. Local women grew indigenous tree seedlings and planted them in the forest. For each seedling that survived, the women and men were compensated with a small financial incentive to continue their work. If a woman planted many trees and ensured that they survived, she could earn a decent income to look after the needs of her family. By late 1977, the tree planting initiatives had gained wide popularity with the slogan, “One person, one tree,” and communities themselves were mobilizing in support of the Movement. It was the women who put in hard work, establishing tree nurseries, planting and nurturing seedlings. For every seedling that they planted they were also given a small amount of money as incentive. These women were “foresters without diplomas,” the backbone of the Movement. As communities of women replicated the process, it was hoped that one day the earth would be restored and rejuvenated to its “cloth of green” (*Unbowed* 137). It is this kind of holistic approach to the environment that made the GBM a success in Africa. By planting trees, she planted ideas and hope for a better living among the people. By providing education, access to water, and equity, GBM empowers people- most of them poor and women.

Karen Warren observes that, “A feminist ethics is, of necessity, a contextualist ethic....” (“The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism” 139). She believes that the best way for women to develop their skills, confidence, and their sense of justice is by living the action for themselves. From tree-planting initiatives to the Parliament may appear to be a huge leap, but

Wangari Maathai by virtue of sheer courage manages it. Civil War, Africa's self-inflicted wound, had taken a severe toll on lives, communal and kinship relations, individual and collective livelihood and on the natural environment. Women's contribution to peace building process has long been under-represented. V.Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan say that by the very act of "taking on so-called public-sphere institutions and issues – often at risk of death and imprisonment or, at the very least, censure by governments and mainstream societies- these women challenge the idea that women are weak passive victims who can only mourn their fate on the home front" ("The politics of resistance" 229). The activities of GBM brought to light the corruption, and the hypocritical and autocratic attitudes of the Daniel Arap Moi government. Maathai's protest movements against government policies resulted in her imprisonment. *Unbowed* documents the challenges she faced, and her tactics for negotiating change. She says her trees are "trees of peace. We are not interested in conflict. We want to foster peace" (239). She had to face all kinds of harassment but her efforts to rebuild a nation fractured by conflicts bore fruit. The first completely democratic elections in Kenya were held on December 2002, where Moi transferred the instruments of power to the newly elected President Kibaki and Wangari Maathai was appointed as Assistant Minister in the Ministry for Environment and Natural Resources.

According to Maathai, a traditional African stool has three legs with a basin to sit on. The three legs represent three important pillars of a just society. The first leg represents democratic space, the second sustainable and equitable management of resources and the third stands for cultures of peace. The basin or the seat represents society and its prospects for development. The triple pillars together with their seat needs to be cherished, or the edifice will fall. If it does so the present crisis in nature will not only be extended but it will magnify. What began as a tree-planting initiative soon changed to a people's movement for peace and democracy. The Green Belt Movement thus also planted seeds of change, hope, unity, freedom, and trust among the people. The Green Belt also extended to other African countries like Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Mozambique and became a Pan African Movement. As Mittelman and Chin say, "Integration of the local and the global can bring to the fore the conditions in which forms, agents, sites, and strategies of resistance emerge from the conjunctures and disjunctures in the global political economy" ("Conceptualizing resistance to globalization" 26).

There are, today, many citizens working to reduce the adverse impact of globalisation and privatisation on the environment. "As women and men continue this work of clothing this naked earth, we are in the company of many others throughout the world who care deeply for this blue planet" (*Unbowed* 294). Wangari Maathai has become the symbol of the eco-collective working to heal the earth. She fuses the hitherto parallel discourses on the environment, human rights, democracy, women's rights, and peace building by proving the interconnections between them. She concludes her remarkable narrative thus, "We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk" (295). Wangari Muta Maathai is no longer amongst us. Her work however lives on, for the task of founding a just society is not yet over. The mantle falls on those who are left, but we have miles to go before we can sleep.

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