

# Narrators, their Voices, and their Philosophies in Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: A Memoir*

**Kesero Tunai, PhD**

Lecturer, Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

## **Abstract**

*This essay examines the use of two narrators' voices in 2004 Peace Prize Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai's autobiography Unbowed. The "showing" and the "commenting" narrators have engaged various voices, stances and points of view to interchangeably present Maathai's life story covering slightly over sixty years. Using the theory of the narrative, I argue that both the "shower" and the "commentator" are of nearly equal essence in the story. The showing narrator describes thus making the reader feel, touch, see and hear the story. The much-maligned commenting narrator (who reflects, interprets and summarizes) is indeed a useful tool in enabling the autobiographical subject advocate her values of human rights and environmental conservation. Through this entity the subject positions her endeavors as life-long struggles and invokes a collaborative and collective consciousness to tackle the struggles beyond Unbowed and into posterity.*

**Keywords:** narrators, voices, *Unbowed*, democracy, environment

In Wangari Muta Maathai's autobiography *Unbowed*, the writer employs various narrative strategies to render the story of Wangari Maathai's life from her childhood in the early 1940s to 2004 just after she receives the Nobel Prize for Peace. These narrative strategies are used to help in the deliverance of Maathai's message, philosophy and vision regarding environmental conservation, the struggle for democracy, and human rights (including women's rights) advocacy in Kenya in particular and in other parts of the world in general. One of the strategies harnessed is the use of narrators who convey the text's message(s) in individualized voices, each narrator from a certain standpoint. This essay will discuss how the "showing-narrator" and the "commenting-narrator" utilize a number of narrative voices in order to interrogate and communicate the pertinent issues in the autobiographical subject's (Wangari Maathai's) life that the autobiography tackles.

The showing-narrator – in other words, the narrator who shows – begins the story, establishes the narrative's conflict and relates the various stages and phases that Maathai goes through in her life – her childhood, education, career, civil society advocacy, pro-democracy agitation, and environmental conservation championing. This narrator organizes the narrative arc and decides that Maathai's opposition to the construction of the Times Media Trust Complex, her involvement in the Release Political Prisoners

Pressure Campaign be major narrative reversals, and her struggle to conserve Karura Forest and save it from land grabbers be the climax of the book. Significantly, these three events occupy a place of prominence in the book in that all the three deal with the key issues of the autobiography i.e. environmental conservation and agitation for democracy – issues for which Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. The narrator who presents these three incidents, for instance, recounts them in scenes, and dramatizes the action by providing the setting and including dialogue. In this mimetic rendering the narrator creates “the illusion that we are ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’ things for ourselves” (Barry 223).

Forty five years ago, at the beginnings of serious critical recognition of autobiography as a field of scholarly study, Barret John Mandel asked autobiographers to write like novelists (223) by employing the fiction writer’s techniques such as point of view and narrative voice. Mandel’s words have been echoed by critics over the years; for instance, half a century later Sherif Herata, in her essay, “The Self and Autobiography” says: “autobiography is at its best when it is written in a language and form that are close to those of fiction, when it moves freely in time, captures the imagination, and lets it soar on an independent flight.... Autobiography is a carrier of creativity...” (124). In being like a novelist the narrator in *Unbowed* heeds Herata’s advice and shows the story.

The showing-narrator starts the story of Wangari Maathai’s life at her birth in 1940 by engaging the first-person voice thus establishing that this narration will be Maathai’s individual story largely told by herself. However just within the first page the first-person voice leaves the story to other voices who continue in the showing mode.

The first-person singular voice that employs the pronoun “I” will return now and again in the course of the book to remind the reader that even though other voices – second-person (“you”) and first-person plural (“we”) – may come in here and there the story primarily remains the story of the “I”. It is this point of view that dominates the book.

An expectant mood is set at the beginning of the book when the first-person narrative voice tells the reader where Maathai was born, and how the water was clean, and the soil and land was green and fertile at the place of her birth. The serene, calm, contented atmosphere that begins the autobiography is somehow put at the background as the environment is continually destroyed, human rights are abused and democracy denied to the people in independent Kenya.

In terms of Maathai championing the planting of trees and environmental conservation the showing-narrator takes the reader to Karura forest several times and narrates the confrontations that Maathai has to put up with in order to save the forest from being taken by so-called private developers who have grabbed it to set up buildings there. The cutting down of trees in Karura would destroy an important water source thus affecting the lives of people in Nairobi, Kenya, and the East and Central African region. The scenes regarding Karura forest are well described such that the reader can see and feel the natural forest which is home to rare species of plants and animals (*Unbowed* 262). The reader also sees and feels Maathai and other members of the Green Belt Movement as they go through marshes and cross a river to enable Maathai to water seedlings that the Movement had earlier planted (265-266).

In the incident of Release Political Prisoners Campaign (217-221) we are also shown, through description, the scene of the struggle. The narrator lets us hear the dialogue and songs of bitter exchanges with the police who represent the Kenya government at the scene. We see the women strip naked and we feel the batons as the police hit the striking women. Our sympathies are evoked through this emotional appeal and our anger and bitterness are directed at the police and the government. We see women’s privacy and naked bodies humiliated and their rights violated. But we also see the women’s determination to succeed even if it means by the use of their bodies as shields, metaphorically speaking.

Through this manner of showing, the first-person voice uses a particular tone which appeals to the reader in specific ways thus highlighting some characteristics of this narrative voice. A voice is identified by its tone and its original use of language (Knorr and Schell 193). In tone the reader looks at the diction, and the level of emphasis given to particular words.

The issues shown in the above two events in *Unbowed* are serious matters that put Wangari Maathai in bitter contest with the government of President Daniel arap Moi who rules Kenya for twenty-four years beginning in 1978. The narrator employs satire with its attendant elements of sarcasm, irony and humour to register optimism in the encounters. At one point the police are astonished to see Maathai watering seedlings in a nursery at Karura and they wonder how Maathai gained entrance into the nursery when they thought that they had manned all entries into the forest (265). We laugh with joy at Maathai's deftness and the police's (read government's) daftness. The state is ridiculed. At another instance Maathai thanks the police for not disturbing her and the delegates of the Euro-African Conference who go to plant trees at Karura forest even if the police are in full force and armed to the teeth (267). The narrator is derisive towards the police and the government that the police represent. It is ironic that they are excessively armed even when they do not actually use the firearms. They are idle. The expression "armed to the teeth" is here used to connote cannibals who use their teeth to tear their prey. The police (government) is inhuman.

Despite the fierce confrontations in Karura and Uhuru Park the narrative of *Unbowed* presents a people determined to fight resiliently to keep their dignity and protect their rights and those of future generations. The mood is gloomy but it is not the type of gloom that is everlasting to a point of breeding hopelessness. For instance, this lack of hopelessness is evidenced when Maathai is knocked down in an affront from the police at Freedom Corner during the Release Political Prisoners campaign. The first-person narrator says: "In the next instance, however, I was knocked unconscious. Even in the mêlée, good Samaritans rescued me and rushed me to the hospital with two other women who were badly hurt" (220). Even amidst the difficult situation, the people are keen and observant, and this act shows that the fight for human rights in Maathai's autobiography has the focus, courage and determination needed to tackle the dictatorship of KANU's 1980s and 1990s and bring about democratic changes in Kenya. The Kenya African National Union (KANU) is Kenya's ruling party and for many years it is the only legalized party.

There is vexation at the level of physical suffering but the striking mothers and their supporters have a strong spirit in which case the philosophy and vision of the book that an oppressed people who wish to be freed from bondage must have a valiant will to oppose dictatorship. They must remember the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." What Ellen W. Gorsevski has observed in relation to Maathai's protest against the construction of Times Tower Media Complex on Uhuru Park can very well apply to all of Maathai's struggles: "Maathai rallied all other women to take over the park's space, standing and singing "We Shall Overcome" from the American Civil Rights Movement.... By singing a song associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s use of non-violent activism, she connected environmental values to human rights" (9). In *Unbowed*, Maathai admits that America had a lot of influence on her (97) and this influence is conspicuous in the use of the civil rights non-violent strategy to mobilize people in order to tackle issues in independent Kenya. The civil rights philosophy says that every individual counts and should be incorporated in a cause that has been set – this guides Maathai in involving people (especially women) to plant trees.

For the showing-narrator to recall the incidents and the details of the events of the narrative this narrator has to rely on memory to remember what happened long ago. For instance the narrator has to record the very outstanding incidents from Wangari Maathai's childhood regarding the subject's father while he worked in the Rift Valley (20, 21). Memory determines which incidents will be described and memory is

guided by the purpose of the text. The incidents shown are also those that stand out in presenting the philosophy and vision of this autobiography.

The showing-narrator loves recounting stories. It is this narrator who uses the opportunity of the autobiographical subject's name – Wangari – to tell the story of the nine daughters of Gikuyu and Mumbi – the first two ancestors of the Gikuyu people (*Unbowed* 4-5). This Kikuyu story of creation is generally well-known among the Gikuyu people and even beyond. The story of the nine daughters belongs to the folk wisdom of the people and we can thus say that the showing-narrator uses the “I” narrative standpoint and appropriates the voice of ordinary people (folk) and shows that she is aware of the folklore of the community that Wangari Maathai was born and raised in. When the narrator tells us of Maathai's mother telling her of her relationship with the leopard through her name “Wangari” (43) and the story of the subject's father taking a he-goat to Mr. Neylan as a sign of friendship (24) the narrator is preserving the lore of the Gikuyu people.

By rendering the folktale of “Konyeki and His Father” (297-303) albeit in the “appendix,” the narrator juxtaposes this narrative with Maathai's story in *Unbowed* and asks us to interpret Maathai's autobiography as we would interpret a folktale. For instance, in a traditional oral tale the storyteller addresses a live audience at the time of rendition and even if the Konyeki story has been transcribed and translated and put on paper the presence of an audience is not lost because the storyteller directly invokes the audience by the use of the second-person pronoun voice. At one point the storyteller says to the audience: “As you can imagine the woman was miserable but she was stuck with her dragon-husband” (300). By asking the audience to perceive the consequences of the woman's actions the narrator is telling the listeners to be more involved in the production of the tale. As Ellen W. Gorsevski has noted, in such a situation the narrative uses “a grounded perspective in which the rhetor's senses become the audience's creating rhetorical potential for them to unite in one perspective” (13). The narrator seeks an active audience which thinks and imagines other possibilities to the material told. In another incident, the narrator in *Unbowed* asks us to imagine Maathai's disgust when she is barred from contesting a parliamentary seat in 1982 after resigning her university teaching job (161).

The readers/listeners are asked to feel what the narrator feels: “during the cool seasons this was not very pleasant, but it did mean that if you were not awake when you got up you certainly were after you washed your face in the ice-cold water!” (57) and see what she (narrator) sees: “so you can imagine my shock when we climbed the ridge through Ndunduri and I discovered that on the other side of the ridge lay another world” (30) and see and feel: “when you became a *muthomi* (“the person who reads”) you no longer braided your hair or shaved your head”(11). The use of the second-person draws the reader closer to the matters being presented and she can easily empathise with the character who feels.

It is understanding and empathy that is sought from the reader in the incident that Maathai and her Green Belt Movement colleagues go through swampy and marshy land to access the tree nursery that they had established: “you had to balance carefully to make sure you didn't fall into the water” (265). The reader is asked to see and feel the risks and the determination that Maathai and her colleagues take to conserve the environment in Kenya. Using this strategy the reader is asked to emulate Maathai's philosophy and be a champion of human rights and environmental protection.

The voice asks us to appreciate the activities of Wangari Maathai's childhood such as cultivation: “As you remove the weeds and then press the earth around the crops you feel content, and wish the light would last longer so you could cultivate more”(47). A nostalgic atmosphere dominates chapter two on crop cultivation and Maathai's childhood in Ihithe. Here the narrator recalls the serenity and calm in Maathai's upbringing and her community's amicable relationship with the land and the environment. The mutual co-existence between people and land with the former protecting the latter and the latter nurturing the former is

in recognition of the fact that humans are ecologically embedded, depend upon changes of the environment for sustainability and that sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present and keeps in mind needs of future generations (Barry and Wood, 317). It is this view about safeguarding the ecosystem for the present and the future that is one of Maathai's cherished values in *Unbowed*.

The showing-narrator asks the readers to be creative and critical producers of Maathai's life story by reading widely and marshaling all their senses for understanding and interpretation: "As the Sahara desert unfolded beneath me, I could not believe my eyes. You can look at an atlas or read about how large the Sahara is, but you don't realize its vastness until you have flown over it" (*Unbowed* 75). The reader is asked to seek to establish the expansiveness of the Sahara in order to further appreciate what the narrator is talking about, and the narrator asks the reader to immerse herself in the experience of reading *Unbowed*. The reference to the atlas (a written text) reveals that apart from *Unbowed* being reconstructed from the imagination, it is also a narrative constituted out of research and critical study. The reader is asked to be a researcher and critic too echoing the words of Wolfgang Iser, phenomenological theorist that "a literary text must... be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (1220). After all, as we shall discuss later, the first-person narrative voice is a critical, researching, historian's voice, therefore active and seeking reciprocation from the reader.

Since the second-person narrative voice addresses an audience within the text – an entity that narratology calls the narratee – the reader feels (and hears) the presence of this entity. By talking to this narratee, the narrator delineates a particular audience for *Unbowed*. The autobiography seeks a reader/listener with the same or similar ideological values as those of the autobiographical subject. Now and again the narrator addresses a narratee who cherishes working on the land and nurtures the environment, advocates for gender rights and fights for democracy.

Early in the autobiography the narrator informs us that: "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 foggy you would not be able to see ten feet in front of you..."(3). The individual being addressed here is one used to life on the land and is at ease with the various seasons that come and go in the village. Through this mechanism of narration the narrator is asking us to be companion and fellow-traveller in the journey to witness how the environment has changed since Wangari Maathai's childhood. During Maathai's childhood there was predictability since the environment was well-tended. The tone in the above quotation is one of bliss but this will change in the course of the text to a tone of admonition and even condemnation.

Apart from the entity who addresses a reader in the text, there are also other entities who emerge in the book. Another second-person speaker addresses an audience that is outside the text, an audience who are not necessarily the physical readers reading the autobiography. This particular "you" voice seems to define the intended audience for particular parts of Maathai's book. For instance a Western audience has a special place as readers of this text. When the narrator says that *ugali* is "a maize cake, something like cornbread" (16) she is addressing Americans and other westerners who know what corn is and asking them to compare it with African maize. And again: "when you are the first girl in a Kikuyu family, you become almost like the second woman of the house. You do what your mother does and you are always with her" (13) is intended for a non-African audience because this statement sounds obvious for African readers. Further when the narrator talks of a "kikuyu family" she is informing people not Kikuyu (read African) and making matters accessible to this readership. Even more directed at a Western audience is the following: "Today many Kenyans, even in the rural areas, build houses made of bricks and metal and in shape of squares or rectangles.... To see a "traditional" Kenyan homestead, you have to go to the National Museum in Nairobi" (18).

Ignoring some of the half-truths of the above observation it seems obvious to me that there are still many traditional Kenyan homesteads in the country and a Kenyan does not have to travel from a rural area to the National Museum in Kenya's capital city to see a traditional homestead. The above could be an African narrator addressing a Western audience but I am more inclined to think that the narrator is a Westerner. Furthermore two collaborating authors – Mia MacDonald and Martin Rowe (see “acknowledgments” in *Unbowed*) are themselves Westerners and they likely carried western narrators and voices into the narrating of Maathai's story. Through these western narrators, and even what I call African narrators, the book thanks those who have assisted in Maathai's struggles (mentioned in the “acknowledgements” and in the narrative itself) and appeals for continued strident measures to protect the environment, democracy and human rights.

Sometimes the reader hears the subtle voice of an interviewer and an equally inconspicuous replying voice of an interviewee. This gives us the impression that an interviewer interviews the autobiographical subject on certain aspects concerning her life, and the interviewer with tape recorder, and notebook and pen ticks items as the two continue with the conversation. When the narrator says that “during my time at St. Cecilia's...I decided to become a Catholic...I don't remember discussing this decision with my family” (*Unbowed* 61), it is as if an interviewer has asked Maathai if she ever consulted her family – particularly her parents on the important matter of religious choice. And a little later when the character says: “while there are many theories about the term “Mau Mau” the one that I find most interesting is this: ...” (63) the subject (character) is likely answering a question regarding the Mau Mau theories that the interviewer has read about and she is now asking about. And when Maathai talks about the Vietnam War (94) it seems to me that this issue has been reluctantly pulled into the narrative leading me to infer that the interviewer may have posed such questions as: What was the atmosphere like in your campus during the America –Vietnam war? Did the students at your college support the war? After receiving rather general responses such as, that by 1966 most of her colleagues at the University of Pittsburg had not decided for or against the war, the interviewer likely asks this question: What was your personal experience during this war? To which Maathai says that an African American from her department recruited to the war died in combat. I imagine a scenario in which the interviewer persistently probes Maathai in order to get issues clarified, explained and even interpreted.

So we can see that the interviewer who in essence is a collaborator to the narrators in the text is another voice that helps to produce and shape this book. The collaborating figures play a role in narrating this life story. In the “acknowledgements” to *Unbowed* the author has thanked Mia MacDonald and Martin Rowe who during the production of the book worked with Maathai skillfully and professionally (xi – xii). These are the collaborating authors who are not mentioned on the cover page or title page but are briefly mentioned in the “acknowledgements.” Mia MacDonald and Martin Rowe are human rights activists and photographers. They are behind the interviewing voices that ask questions. They later get outside the text to organize the book and construct Maathai's life on paper so that the life becomes a story with a narrative arc of conflict, reversals, climax and resolution. The collaborator-interviewers are keen to situate Maathai's life within the historical context of Kenya and the rest of the world that influences her as she propagates her values and philosophy and that is why, for instance, the interviewer(s) seek her comments on Mau Mau war of independence in Kenya and the USA-Vietnam war. These are academic voices that take a critical distance from the matters under narration.

From the foregoing interpretation of narratee, interviewee and interviewer in the text we can see that *Unbowed* is a text whose coming into being is as a result of interactions of various performers and the audience. With each performance a particular identity of Maathai emerges and a certain value is championed for Kenya and the world. This is in line with what is stated in the “acknowledgements” in Michael

Ondaatje's memoir *Running in the Family* that a literary work is a communal act (p 364) and this is supported by Ann Phoenix's argument that research interviews are spaces in which relations are negotiated and interviewer and interviewee "establish their right to speak on the topics being discussed." (70)

The collaborators in *Unbowed* also narrate Maathai's story in photographs, aware that a picture is worth a thousand words. Being photographers, Mia MacDonald and Martin Rowe likely play a significant role in choosing the photographs to be included in the book from Maathai's personal album and from Kenya's newspaper archives. And where they notice a lacuna (in terms of telling the Wangari Maathai story) they shoot photos purposely for inclusion in this autobiography. For example, MacDonald and Rowe take photographs of Ithethe path and the valley near Ithethe as they are today (time of text's writing) to try and reconnect us, make us have a feel, of the environment at Wangari Maathai's home sixty years before. Although the "I" narrator provides the captions to these photographs there is always the voice of the photographer who takes a particular view of the place and through that view a particular voice tells a particular story. It is in recognition of the many voices involved in rendering the photographs that some of the captions are not outrightly owned by a first-person voice, for instance the picture that contains a signboard by the Green Belt movement that acknowledges the planting of trees at Uhuru Park's Freedom Corner. This is left for collective ownership, a matter that we shall discuss later.

In the beginning page of Maathai's autobiography, the narrator moves from first-person singular to second-person to first-person plural voice that employs a collective pronoun "we": "We lived in a land abundant with shrubs, creepers, ferns, and trees ..." (3). The showing-narrator lays the ground for the associations and interactions of the various voices and establishes that this network will be the hallmark of this book. We have already examined the first-person singular and second-person voices. Now we turn our attention to the first-person plural voice that employs the pronoun "we". The pronoun "we" quoted above (p 3) is used to refer to the village. The narrator tells of the entire village community's experiences and rituals; for example, what happened when a baby was born (p.4). The narrator implies that apart from her narrative being Wangari Maathai's story it is also the story of a community. After all Wangari Maathai is a product of her family and community: "I am as much a child of my native soil as I am of my father Muta Njugi, and my mother Wanjiru Kibicho..." (4). Here "native soil" refers to her Kikuyu community and the mention of her parents is a reference to her family. This text is then an engagement among individual, family and community and we shall discuss how as Wangari Muta grows up and visits and lives in many other places, community's canvas spreads beyond Kikuyuland to include Kenya, Africa and the rest of the world. By the nature of the narrative the author shows us how family and community shape and influence the growth of the autobiographical subject.

The narrative seamlessly moves from the singular (my) to the plural (we):

'My mother had Maasai blood in her. Like my father, she was lithe, with high cheekbones and straight hair, characteristics more typical of Maasais than Kikuyus. *We* were told that my great-great-grandmother on my father's side was a Maasai... (emphasis mine pp 7-8).

The plural here is likely referring to family, therefore incorporating the collective voice of the family in Maathai's life story for there are certain experiences which do not involve Maathai alone but are experienced by the entire family.

The first-person plural narrative voice uses the opportunity of the subject's name – Wangari – to tell us the story of creation of the Kikuyu people and the ten daughters of Gikuyu and Mumbi (4-5). One of the daughters was called Wangari. As Samuel Ndogo has said: "the art of storytelling and naming system... may be regarded as ways through which the community remembers the past and also perpetuates a sense of continuity" (16). The Kikuyu community voice, that relates folk narratives of the community such as the one on creation, is the voice of the oral custodian of traditional lore (*Unbowed* 50), a teller of folktales who

speaks as if it is the entire community speaking at one go. This role is prevalent in chapter two “Cultivation” which presents Wangari Maathai’s childhood in Ihithe and her primary school life. For instance while talking about routine life at St. Cecilia’s Primary Boarding School the narrator uses the collective voice since the issues involve the entire St. Cecilia’s community: “We would spring out of bed, get down on *our* knees and say *our* morning prayers. Then *we* would all rush out to wash *our* faces...” (emphasis mine p 55). Here the narrator describes matter-of-factly what anyone at the school would have witnessed. This shows a sort of programme that bound the pupils in harmony and companionship. About shoes, the narrator says: “To keep them clean once we had washed, my friends and I would take turns carrying each other to bed chatting and laughing as we did” (56). This narrative voice unites narrator with characters in collegiality and camaraderie. The tone is one of playful joy and satisfaction.

As the subject grows up and interacts with people beyond the village the canvas covered by the “we” voice widens. The collective voice becomes the Green Belt Movement (a non-governmental organization that Maathai establishes in the 1970s to plant trees and conserve the environment), the pro-democracy movement in Kenya, and humanity in general. To a large extent *Unbowed* is also the life story of the Green Belt Movement as a collective entity. The narrator shows that unity of a group with a determined spirit and an unwavering focus succeeds even amidst many obstacles. The collective voice is used to show that the Green Belt movement (GBM) members face and confront challenges as a group: “As we went along, we constantly examined what we were doing” (136) may be a reference to the leadership but it moves to encompass the entire Movement since this group-examination is replicated at the grassroots throughout Kenya. The GBM involves people right from the villagers planting trees in their own villages and this activity is articulated using the collective voice – the narrator presents the collective nature of the undertaking of planting trees. The GBM plants trees as community in one voice (literally and metaphorically).

It is a similar stance that is articulated in Wangari Maathai’s Nobel acceptance speech in which she states that the Peace Prize belongs more to all the people in the Green Belt Movement than it belongs to her as an individual. The speech is dominated by plurals - our, we, us - outlining the work of the GBM and drawing in all participants who have worked with Maathai in her crusade for the environment and democracy, and saluting their resilience.

Mia MacDonald says in her personal reflection on Maathai winning the Nobel that when Maathai receives news that she has won the Prize she says that “we won it” (1). MacDonald comments that: “‘we’ is a common word for her [Maathai]; ‘I’ is less favoured. I caught this: “I want to say that I am the person the world sees, but behind me are millions of people, millions of hands throughout the world, but mostly here in Kenya who tried to do what we asked them to do: to take care of the Earth” (3). It is this spirit that Maathai imbues in the narrators of her autobiography. The collective voice despises individualism and appreciates that groups and communities can achieve more than each individual alone. The people “in Kenya who tried to do what we asked them to do” is a reference to Kenyans who tirelessly fought for human rights and respect for the environment during the KANU party rule of strongman President Daniel arap Moi.

In the Karura forest and Release Political Prisoners campaigns the first-person plural voice is used to underline the people’s collective determination and will to succeed. Sometimes the campaigners sing songs and tell stories (both communal activities) to give one another companionship and this collectivity for emotional support is very much akin to the role that the group plays in Charlotte Delbo’s holocaust memoir *Auschwitz and After*. Stressing this view in Delbo’s work, Nicole Thatcher has said that in focusing on the group “there is emphasis on mutual help to face the dangers, the sufferings or just to prop up the failing hope of survival and return” (46). This is exactly what happens in the anti-government campaigns in *Unbowed* and the “we” voice aptly captures the feelings of the campaigners.



To incorporate the many people all over the world who have influenced Maathai's life, the showing-narrator uses the collective voice in which Maathai thanks the people. The narrator uses Maathai's favoured image of the African stool (294) and for our case we can say that this image can be appropriately applied to represent the various voices in *Unbowed*. All the voices are necessary to complement one another and tell the full story and advance the three values that Maathai considers as pillars of good governance: democratic space for respect of human rights, sustainable and accountable management of natural resources for the present and posterity, and cultures of peace – fairness, respect, compassion, forgiveness, recompense and justice. These are the beliefs advocated for by the narrative of *Unbowed*.

In the foregoing pages, I have argued that *Unbowed* employs a showing-narrator to describe the events in the life of Wangari Maathai. In the remaining part of this essay I will discuss the use of a commenting-narrator (narrator-commentator) in the text. Many critics on the narrative – such as Wayne Booth and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan – have argued that no story can be rendered entirely only through showing. Booth, for instance, has stated that novelists Henry James and D. H. Lawrence's admonitions to creative writers to keep comments away and let the story show itself are not wholly tenable. In Booth's landmark text, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* he argues favourably for the use of commentary in the novel and urges critics not to condemn commentary but seek to discover the effects that commentary sets out to achieve in any particular work (169). In commentary, the narrator sets aside the story per se and gives reflections, judgements, interpretations and moral instructions.

In Wangari Maathai's autobiography the commentator's voice reflects by exploring the meanings of actions and decisions that the autobiographical subject takes. The commentator puts matters of the present and past into perspective and contrasts the autobiographical subject's current actions with her past philosophy. This narrator explains the protagonist's ideas and indicates that Maathai's later life and her decisions as an adult were shaped by her childhood: "What I know now is that my parents raised me in an environment that did not give reasons for fear or uncertainties" (19). In my earlier analysis the showing-narrator described to us Maathai in action without fear; in hindsight a reflecting-narrator here remembers and attaches meaning and a slice of wisdom to Maathai's fearless pursuits. Most of the reflections are given in the present tense to emphasize the role that the time of writing plays in the reconstruction of a person's past life. As many critics of autobiography have noted a person's life story is as much the story of his past as the story at the time of writing. What Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan observes regarding narratives of illness may well apply to all life writing narratives: "Subjects are prone to telling different illness narratives at different stages of the illness, because their needs change with time. The act of narration is, at least partly, a response to the needs of the present, as distinct from an attempt at a faithful representation of the past" (15).

It is with the above in mind that we examine how the reflecting-narrator in *Unbowed* views narrative time and narrating time. The narrator says: "I know now as a mother myself that it was a great gift and privilege that she [her mother] lived long and that I was able to take care of her ..." (21). The use of the present tense shows that the present has significance on the past. For instance when the narrator talks of the Chania river being still there as it was during her childhood although today it is very narrow (61), the presence of internally displaced people in Kenya even at the time she recounts this her story (249), and the presence of the ever-towering Mount Kenya (6) she reveals how things may have changed and underlying a similar significance.

The commentator who contrasts present with past employs all the three narrative voices that use "I", "you" and "we" pronouns – that we have discussed in relation to the showing-narrator. Now and again the commentator tells the reader of how the present natural environment differs from the one that Wangari Maathai lived in as a child. The narrator laments that the natural habitat that protected birds that sung in the

evenings has been destroyed so the protagonist as an adult no longer hears the birds as often as she did as a child (*Unbowed* 44).

Reflecting in a first-person narrative voice the commentator is nostalgic at a past that may never return but all is not lost as the commentator asks children to interact and learn from the wisdom of the adults (44). Further the narrator reveals the protagonist's nostalgia when the narrator comments that "imagine that very few people have been lucky enough to see the source of a river" (45), as she did when she was a child. With fondness she recalls the stream at which she played trying to pick frogs' eggs and tried to catch what seemed like an army of black tadpoles.

But even with this sentimentality about the past all is not gloom. Many years after the victory over the struggle against the construction of the Times Media Trust complex on Uhuru Park the narrator reflects that the struggle was won partly because the media reported about the issue: "Looking back, I can see that there were two main reasons we stopped the destruction of Uhuru Park. For one, the government's mismanagement of resources was exposed by the Press.... The Press was fantastic. I would never have gotten anywhere without them" (203-204). This is a direct commentary in which the first-person voice departs from the narrative of the autobiography to look back and reflect on a particular occurrence in the story. After thanking the press the narrator also thanks donor governments and donor organizations and completes the chapter. This end of chapter commentary is akin to the summaries and conclusions that one frequently finds in reports and essays. The reflective voice summarizes and concludes, at times irritating the reader with repetitions on matters which have already been made clear, disobeying Wayne Booth's counsel that a commentator should only tell the reader about facts that he could not easily learn otherwise (169). Through these summaries, I see Wangari Maathai's civil society hand "intruding" after co-authors Mia MacDonald and Martin Rowe have done the descriptions and shown the story. Maathai most likely puts her fingers on the keyboard and, as it were, in her own hand appends the statements that we encounter at the end of most chapters in the autobiography. In *Unbowed* there are plenty of these NGO report-like conclusions, some of which even come in the middle of chapters. Such a style is also present in Shirin Ebadi's autobiography *Iran Awakening* which traces Shirin Ebadi's life from her childhood through her career as judge and her civic activism in defense of human rights in Muslim Iran. Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2003.

As we have demonstrated earlier, the various incidents of the struggle to preserve Karura Forest have been well-described by the showing-narrator. At the end of the Karura struggle the commenting-narrator comes in to say that it was persistence that made the struggle succeed (*Unbowed* 272). The first-person narrator reflects on the protagonist's philosophy of perseverance – her guiding belief that she always wants to solve problems that she has set out to tackle and while she is focused on the solution she sees no danger (272). The narrator uses the reflective voice in hindsight to propound on Maathai's guiding ideals in all her pursuits. These pursuits include the Release Political Prisoners and Times Media Trust Complex. Regarding the Times Media Complex, the narrator says: "I didn't experience fear on a daily basis. I don't tend to invite challenges, but I meet them. And once I do, I stick with it. I know the situation is not going to be resolved overnight, and I don't hurry to meet a second challenge until the first is concluded. That, perhaps, has been my strong point" (194).

Maathai always remains at the core of pursuit of an issue and this helps her fight dictatorship and gives hope to the people she leads. The narrator's comments project determination, strong will and hope to overcome any obstacles and the subject wishes to root this insight into the reader, echoing Wayne Booth's view that some of a text's beliefs "must be implanted or reinforced" through direct commentary (177).

Earlier in *Unbowed*, the narrator shows us the subject's relationship with the environment and when the narrator-commentator states that "these were the experiences that made me feel very close to the land

and appreciate the beauty of the environment” (48), some readers notice superfluity. The commenting voice comes in many times as critic and interpreter of matters already narrated. In another instance, after the incident in which women of the Release Political Prisoners group strip naked an interpreting narrator analyses the symbolic meaning of the act by saying that through the nakedness the women were cursing the male policemen – most of them young people (*Unbowed* 221). This interpretation may be necessary for some readers, likely those not familiar with African folk systems; for me, as an African reader I get the meaning by simply “watching” the incident. So we can say that this particular commentary is to assist a section of the audience to delineate the meaning of women’s nudity in this context. Each narrator safeguards the reading interests of a particular audience – the narrators therefore complement each other. Sometimes the interpreter is an interrogator using rhetorical tools to pose questions and leaving most for the reader to answer. One such instance is when the narrator questions the logic of constructing the Times Media Trust Complex and asks questions for the reader to interrogate (186). As Wayne Booth has argued the chief purpose for a piece of writing is persuasive communication and that the writer (rhetorician) should use all rhetorical resources available to him to impose his world view upon the reader.

At times the commentator is a critic who takes a position by castigating and condemning certain occurrences. After the story of Wangari Maathai’s uncle, who died fighting for the British in the Second World War, has been narrated by the showing-narrator, the commenting-narrator comes in at the end of chapter one in a first-person voice and criticizes the British in a demanding angry tone that asks the former colonizers to explain the disappearance of the subject’s uncle and offer compensation (*Unbowed* 28). This is in line with the autobiography’s championing of human rights such as the right to life.

Closely aligned to the critical stance that the narrator takes is her position as a historian thus an academic, and this makes *Unbowed* a source of history of at least the issues surrounding significant events in the Kenya of twenty years up to the end of colonialism and for forty years after the end of colonialism. Instances of colonial history stated in the book include the scramble for Africa (7), the creation of European settlements (9), and the British annexation of African land (10) but of course in autobiography, a narrator-historian reconstructs the subject’s life to enable the life to resonate with the historical period (Snipes 242). A tone of near-innocence dominates the first chapter of *Unbowed* and systems like the scramble for Africa, land alienation, and forced labour are mentioned nearly as a matter-of-fact. In essence I find no bitterness and vehement condemnation of these aspects of colonialism as I have found in other Kenyan autobiographies on the period such as Josiah Mwangi Kariuki’s *Mau Mau Detainee* and Oginga Odinga’s *Not Yet Uhuru*. The narrator in Maathai’s story is likely keeping true to the point of view of a child of a driver-father living in a white man’s farm in the Rift Valley before agitation for equality and independence begins. Being the child of a privileged African (a driver) Wangari Maathai is shielded from the hardships that the children of the African labourers have to face.

The intellectual-historian narrator is a researcher who is well-read and well-informed and she purposes to pass her knowledge to the readers. It is this narrator who tells us about the Mau Mau movement, the betrayals of colonialism, land appropriation, the *kipande* system, forced labour and taxation, and summarizes the events of political parties’ resistance. This narrator tells us of Ghana attaining independence in 1957 (73) echoing a major theme – struggle for freedom – in the book. One reading Maathai’s book gets the feeling of a well-researched work, even if there are no quotations and footnotes and bibliography as happens in a number of other autobiographies. In the “acknowledgements” Maathai mentions some of the books that informed the writing of her book but we do not see references and quotations from these texts as is the case with an autobiography like *Beyond Expectations: From Charcoal to Gold* by Njenga Karume. Maathai’s book is an intellectual work that does not trumpet this fact. When the historian-researcher says that new historical research has been done on the Mau Mau movement she is likely referring to books such

as Caroline Elkin's *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* and David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged* which detail the torture of Kenyans during the struggle for independence. These two texts reveal a history of exploitation, discrimination and human rights abuses never before written in such detail, and they form an important background when the Mau Mau veterans sue the British government for compensation after 2003. The narrator-historian in *Unbowed* uses a dispassionate tone that creates an emotional distance from the matters being narrated. The narrator wishes that atrocities committed during colonialism be addressed as a matter of human rights so that healing and reconciliation can occur (65).

Apart from offering conclusions and interpretations, commentaries in *Unbowed* give moral lessons, sometimes rather directly. According to the commenting-narrator in this autobiography "every experience has a lesson" (*Unbowed*, 165) and this lesson needs to be unambiguously articulated so that its teaching (wisdom) is not lost on the reader. The book is replete with statements of moralizing; for instance, that it is experiences in Maathai's childhood that moulded her (52), and in reference to Maathai's education at St. Cecilia's, the narrator says that "when you focus and do well, school becomes a pleasant experience" (56). This moralizing voice is derived from the adult Maathai looking at what occurred to her earlier in life and using present recollective and reflective faculties to comment on past occurrences. The reader is therefore aware that the moral lesson is one that the (adult) narrator postulates for the experiences of child character so that the adult's point of view at the time of writing shapes and influences what is told and how it is told. A moral statement is really a form of concluding wise statement of an encounter or incident.

Aside from the second-person narrative voice the other voices also provide moral comments in *Unbowed*. On a number of occasions the first-person narrator gives moral comments in the course of narrating incidents but more frequently this is done at the end of the incidents. In one instance the narrator remembers an event in Wangari Maathai's childhood when she leaned against the wall of their house and sung instead of assisting her mother sweep the compound and her mother did not admonish her and let her be: "I never talked to my mother about the incident, but it taught me profound lessons – to question myself and assess my action and then do what is right" (22). This philosophy has assisted Maathai throughout her life.

In her struggles for gender equality in university employment, the narrative moves from first-person to second-person and the narrator comments: "what the struggle for equality at the university also taught me was that sometimes you have to hold on to what you believe in because not everybody wishes you well or will give you what you deserve – not even your fellow women" (117). Here the narrative carries the experience from the individual to the group and beyond. The commenting-narrator uses this opportunity to articulate one of the beliefs of Maathai regarding gender discrimination and reiterates Maathai's position that one needs conviction to succeed in whatever she sets out to do, thus underlining Wayne Booth's support for overt commentary in order to "reinforce norms" that the writer is propounding (178).

In another moralizing statement the narrator passes from first-person to second-person to incorporate the reader and seek more audience involvement. After the Green Belt Movement's attempt to use donkeys to transport water in Maasailand fails, the narrator says:

This showed me that we needed to make local people feel invested in the projects so they would mobilize themselves and their neighbours to take responsibility for sustaining them. It also demonstrated to me that aspects of people's lives such as culture are very important. You may think you are doing the right thing but in the local context, you are completely off track (133).

The narrator draws us into the narrative by the pronouns used so that at the end of our reading we have been good participants in the production of the text as critics on the reading process have advised. As much as possible the narrators attempt to make the creating of Maathai's autobiography a communal act, an act of performance.

Each narrator creates an identity of herself and that of the subject and the reader. As we have seen over and over again *Unbowed* argues that the past, present and future are intertwined and this is articulated by the use of commentaries. The voice that takes the narrative from narrative time (time of the story's events) to narrating time (time when the events are narrated) is a commenting voice that offers contrast between the past and the present. For instance the narrator comments on how beliefs and traditions have changed among the Kikuyu (5-6), on the disappearance of *managu* plants (16), and contrasts the way houses were built (during Maathai's childhood) and how they are built today (at the time Maathai is writing i.e. early twenty-first century), and the use of fibre baskets then and plastic bags now (35). Most contrasts point to a past that was more environmentally friendly and the book asks us to retrieve from our "cultural past an understanding or a standpoint of ways that environmentally unsustainable practices harm both people and the environment" (Gorsevski 12).

Throughout the book the commentator takes moments to reflect on the meaning of events that Maathai has participated in in the past. For example after narrating about Maathai's Karura forest environmental crusades the narrator notes: "Today, that beautiful forest is still there, helping Nairobi breathe and, more trees are being planted to reseed what was lost and restore its biodiversity and beauty" (273). From this statement we can see that what Maathai began in the 1990s is still ongoing a decade later and there is an indication that this will go on into the future. This postulation into the future is a key aspect of the narrative in *Unbowed*. The present generation has a responsibility to protect the environment for the future generations. In ending the autobiography the commenting-narrator uses the collective voice ("we") and asks humanity to be watchful over the environment and thereby indicates that the task ahead of us cannot be achieved by any single individual alone:

We are in the company of many others throughout the world who care deeply for this blue planet. Those of us who witness the degraded state of the environment and the suffering that comes with it cannot afford to be complacent. We continue to be restless. If we really carry the burden we are driven to action. We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk (*Unbowed* 295).

Even with what has been achieved in *Unbowed*, environmentalist Wangari Maathai asks people never to tire in environmental conservation.

In wrapping up the autobiography the commentator uses a hopeful tone – even of momentary joy. As Mwai Kibaki is sworn in as President of Kenya in December 2002 to succeed Arap Moi, a ray of hope shines over a dark past of corruption, environmental degradation and oppression (289, 290) but the commentator cautions the reader and humankind to be vigilant: "even as I savoured the peaceful exchange of power, in the back of my mind lingered the knowledge of the many challenges that awaited Kenya" (289). The narrator urges the reader to be forever committed and persistent in her environmental conservation, giving counsel to the reader "that the trees they are cutting today were not planted by them, but by those who came before .... they must plant trees that will benefit communities in the future" (289). *Unbowed* advocates patience and determination in the pursuit of one's values and philosophy. Maathai makes a similar argument in *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* in which she says that the wounds inflicted on this earth are deep and will take time to heal, and talking in the collective voice she asks for the end of environmental destruction that is causing climate change which is in turn harming humanity and all other species that inhabit mother earth (Replenishing 24-25).

We are asked to leave the world better than we found it. The narrative in *Unbowed* shows that the past, present and future are interdependent. This interdependence is well articulated by the use of the two narrators – showing-narrator and commenting-narrator – who employ various voices to present Wangari Maathai's philosophy of hard work, persistence and determination in the fight for the environment,

democracy and human rights. The narrators and voices interact throughout the book thus making the autobiography a performed text which has dialogue and action woven together. The interaction between the narrators extends to include the reader who is asked to emulate the values and philosophy espoused by the book.

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## BIO

**Kesero Tunai** obtained a PhD in Creative Writing and Literary Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa where he took courses at the university's renowned Biographical Research Centre. He has published critical works on the narrative in the novel. Currently he teaches literature at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kakamega, Kenya.