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Of Trees and Women: Ecofeminist Memoirs by Wangari Maathai and Vandana Shiva

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Abstract

This master's thesis analyses the memoirs of two prominent ecofeminist writers-activists, Wangari Maathai and Vandana Shiva, to demonstrate the connections between the form, content, and message of their narratives. *Unbowed* (2006) and *Terra Viva* (2022), Maathai's and Shiva's memoirs respectively, are used to explore the connections between their personal experiences and broader social and environmental issues such as sustainability, social justice, and gender equality. The power of memoirs to connect people from all walks of life and provide insight into human experience is discussed in this thesis, with a focus on how ecofeminist memoirs contribute to the larger narrative of fostering social and environmental justice. First, I examine the memoir genre as a whole, focusing on the main characteristics in terms of form and content, where the works of Isabel Durán Giménez-Rico and Julie Rak throw light on the topic in question. Secondly, I propose a dialogue between Maathai's and Shiva's memoirs and examine the authors' contributions to the ecofeminist movement, emphasizing how their personal experiences have shaped their ecofeminist activism through the form, content, and message of their memoirs. In doing so, I employ the works of Maria Mies, Karen Warren, and Greta Gaard, among others, as my ecofeminist theoretical frame. Besides, this essay also highlights the emergence of a new genre: the ecofeminist memoir, which combines personal storytelling with environmental and social justice activism. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of memoirs in breaking down the barriers that separate people and fostering social cohesion.

Keywords: Wangari Maathai, Vandana Shiva, memoirs, ecofeminism, ecofeminist memoirs

Introduction

As humans, we have always been fascinated by stories. From the earliest days of human history, we have told stories to make sense of our world, to connect with others, and to pass on our knowledge to future generations. One form of storytelling that has gained significant attention in recent years is the memoir. Memoirs are unique in that they offer a personal perspective on the events and experiences that shape our lives. In a sense, this genre has the power to transport us to different times and places, to give us a window into another person's life. By doing so, memoirs can help us to develop empathy and assertiveness, to better understand human experience. In some cases, memoirs can also challenge us to blur the boundaries between ourselves and others, encouraging us to think beyond the limits of our own experiences and perspectives. Through their personal narratives, memoirists are using a powerful tool for exploring social and cultural issues, breaking down historical events and bringing to light personal perspectives on important topics. One topic that has gained increasing attention in recent years too is the intersection of environmentalism and feminism: ecofeminism. In this thesis, I will examine the memoirs written by Wangari Maathai and Vandana Shiva respectively, two women who have made significant contributions to ecofeminism through their activism and writings. Through their personal narratives, Maathai and Shiva offer valuable insights into the ways in which environmentalism and feminism intersect, and how these issues affect women specifically. Afterwards, I will explain the aims, methodology, and structure of this master's thesis.

This master's thesis aims to achieve two objectives: first, to demonstrate the connections of form, content, and message in memoirs by ecofeminist writers-activists, in this case Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed* (2006) and Vandana Shiva's *Terra Viva* (2022); secondly, to argue that the ecofeminist memoir is a literary subgenre. For these purposes, a close-reading analysis of both

memoirs will be necessary to gain insights into the relations between them and ultimately establish the ecofeminist memoir as a literary subgenre.

The study of memoirs has garnered much attention among scholars, as evidenced by numerous critical works. One such scholar is Éilís Ní Dhuibhne Almqvist, whose article "Reflections on Memoir as a New Genre" presents an overview of the history and development of the genre, arguing that it has emerged as such in last decades. Another critical work that explores the features of life writing is Isabel Durán Giménez-Rico's "¿Qué es la autobiografía?" in which she surveys the diverse range of critical perspectives on the subject, highlighting the various ways in which life writing can be defined and understood. Julie Rak's "Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity" explores the complex relationship between memoir and autobiography. This work, specifically, argues that the two forms are not interchangeable and that memoirs are a distinct category with their own set of conventions and expectations, which is a crucial point to establish the basis for the ecofeminist memoir as a new subgenre.

Before turning to the analysis of the two ecofeminist memoirs under study, it is important to consider the theoretical and critical works that inform this thesis. Greta Gaard's "Strategies for a Cross-cultural Ecofeminist Literary Criticism" offers a framework for analysing literature through an ecofeminist lens, emphasizing the importance of considering the intersections between gender, race, class, and ecology. Moreover, Gaard's article "Ecofeminism Revisited" further develops this theoretical approach, arguing for a "material feminist environmentalism" (36) that recognizes the agency and subjectivity of nonhuman beings. This idea will be relevant for the analysis of both memoirs, as they transmit the interconnectedness of all beings, which is supported as well by Karen Warren's article "The Power and the Promise of Ecological

Feminism". Furthermore, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's book *Ecofeminism* is a foundational text, outlining the ways in which feminist and environmental concerns intersect; therein, the scholars manifest the importance of ecofeminism to bring about change and build a more inclusive and assertive society.

Since the theoretical framework for this dissertation is based on ecofeminism, it is essential to provide a clear definition of this term. Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that emerged in the 1970s, focusing on the intersection of women's rights and environmentalism. The term "ecofeminism" was first coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 (Estévez-Saá and Lorenzo-Modia 123) and gained popularity in the United States during the 1980s (see Puleo 30). Ecofeminism is based on the idea that there are fundamental connections between the oppression of women and the degradation of the natural world; thus, ecofeminism denounces how patriarchy and capitalism are the ones to blame for the systematic exploitation and domination of nature¹ and women (see Mies and Shiva 2). As Shiva states, "the roots of the domination and exploitation of nature and of women are the same, and ... the liberation of both are also the same, since we are a part of nature, not her masters or owners" (131). Ecofeminism not only denounces the dangerous consequences of "the capitalist patriarchal world system" that currently governs society and perpetuates binary oppositions such as men/women or culture/nature (Mies and Shiva 2), but also stands as a proactive movement. Following the insights of Margarita Estévez-Saá and María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia, ecofeminism

¹ This dissertation does not support the human/nature hierarchy but the interconnection between them (i.e. humans are also nature); nevertheless, I will use the term "nature" in its conventional sense (i.e. as nonhuman) for clarification purposes.

offers “diverse alternative solutions, addressing both gender and ecological vindications,” thereby confirming its vital importance (124).

Furthermore, what makes the contemporary scenario even more serious are the hierarchies built among privileged and non-privileged women to mask the common ground they share and, therefore, frustrate any possibility of collective action (Mies and Shiva 6). In the context of ecofeminism, these hierarchies are particularly problematic because they prevent the formation of a collective movement that could address their interconnected issues. Without recognizing the common ground that all women share, it is difficult to work towards a more just and sustainable world. Nevertheless, ecofeminism aims to broaden our perspective and recognize the positive interdependence between humanity and the Earth, as well as among human beings themselves.

Regarding structure, this master’s thesis is divided into two parts. The first one focuses on the conceptualization of memoirs as a genre, drawing the attention to the main characteristics and the history of the genre; the second part discusses the form, content, and message of the two objects of study: Wangari Maathai’s *Unbowed* and Vandana Shiva’s *Terra Viva*. Within this section, I discuss the Chipko and the Green Belt Movements, two ecofeminist initiatives that had a great impact on both authors and memoirs. I continue with a close-reading analysis of *Unbowed* and *Terra Viva* to finally discuss the messages they convey. Focusing on both form and content, I explore the power of personal narratives in understanding complex issues and argue that ecofeminist memoirs play an important role in shaping and understanding the world. In particular, I consider whether said memoirs can help their authors gain supporters for the ecofeminist cause, by inspiring readers to take action for positive social and environmental change.

1. Part One: The Memoir as a Genre

In this section, I will discuss the genre of the memoir, focusing on the structure, layout, linguistic features, writing style, and conventions, as well as the history and traditional connotations of this genre, downgraded as secondary in literature.

Memoirs are regarded as nonfiction narratives that focus on life writing and may adopt the point of view of the author's own experiences. More specifically, a memoir can be defined as "a written record of a person's knowledge of events or of a person's own experiences" (*Cambridge Dictionary*), which are useful to analyse in more depth those events that had a significant impact on the subject's life experience (see Rak 306). As a form of life writing, memoirs have a long history in literature capturing, for example, the lives of remarkable personalities of ancient times that are still objects of study and analysis due to their valuable content and contribution to society.

In general, memoirs are divided into chapters covering certain time periods, although they could be organised by theme, setting, or major moments in the individual's or writer's life (see Pearsons 10). Thus, the structure does not have to be linear and may instead include time gaps or portray events in a different order from the chronological sequence. Depending on the subject matter, memoirs do not necessarily have to begin with the first years of childhood. They will vary based on the relevance of the events to the writer and the purpose of the memoir regardless of any other particular considerations (see Karr 108). Hence, memoirs may begin with the moment the author considers key and which originates from a specific moment in their lives.

Regarding its linguistic features, there are variations according to the theme of the memoir and whether it is written with a more or less personal focus. Nonetheless, there are a number of traits that are prevalent in memoirs due to their reflexive style, which encourages the

usage of concrete literary features as the “use of metaphor, simile, and synecdoche,” as well as figurative language (Pearsons 10). For example, hyperboles or exaggerations for emphasis and effect are sometimes used while describing or revealing additional information. Owing to its reflexive character and style, the past tense and first person are frequently used (see Pearsons 10), as the subject in question is reliving their past experiences and thoughts while writing. Although these are key elements in memoirs, there are other linguistic aspects to consider. For example, I will argue that the author may also write using the present tense to describe how their thoughts have changed over time and how they are feeling right now as an act of introspection about times past. Concentrating on style, memoirs often use diverse strategies to maintain the reader engaged and interested, for example, using humour as a tool to release tension between stories. As Mary Karr suggests, the author “must ... be unafraid to be direct in telling the truth as they understand it” (105), which may lead to a perception of memoirs as a straightforward or easy reading because of this personal disclosure. Thus, this straightforwardness makes memoirs more accessible for any sort of audience interested in the genre, the theme, or the subject in question expecting an approachable and pleasant reading without complex structures or vocabulary.

Thus, I will argue that this straightforwardness can be identified as a positive quality of memoirs. As Éilís Almqvist says, “[p]eople are becoming more open, transparent, and unafraid to reveal themselves, or the truth about illness, grief, death” (162), and social media is a good example of how “sharing” is a major issue in our society. Therefore, memoirs can be seen as a medium to resignify the current idea of sharing as a synonym of healing and connecting with the self and others through reading and writing about life. What makes memoirs so relevant are not only the content but how it is presented to the reader, as the author reveals personal issues that can be related with “heritage, gender, ethnicity, culture, the spiritual and natural realms, even

time itself” (Meyer xii). Following Isabel Durán, the writer illustrates multiple identities of the self that are retrieved and understood through the act of writing and reflecting upon their memories (see “Autobiografía” 77). This closeness to the self and to the so-called “other” is one of the reasons why memoirs are a valuable piece of art as the writer discovers themselves and interacts with the reader through self-introspection. However, “the original memory no longer exists,” and the limits between fiction and reality become blurred and those memories can be distorted and, therefore, can change over time (Durán “Autobiografía” 78). Regardless of any artistic license, criticism should emphasise the important relationship between the self and the other apart from discussing the fiction component that wraps life writing.

One possible reading of the contemporary increase in the publication of memoirs and the need to share experiences may be related to an openness to the other. In other words, an awareness of other people's experiences that brings us closer so we can build bridges and, to a certain extent, destroy barriers of hatred that separate us. There is a psychological component in both writing and reading a memoir that is related to a therapeutic practice to connect with one's own feelings and experiences (see Almqvist 160), whereas for the reader it is also a medium to connect with the writer and the content. Therefore, this can be linked with the desires of individuals in our time that seek comfort, understanding, and recognition, which makes memoirs a genre that caters for the needs of our society.

One may question, how are memoirs so omnipresent in today's society but, at the same time, regarded as secondary or unrivalled with other literary genres? Writing about life is neither contemporary nor innovative, but it has earned a place in our interests and our shelves, in which one can include biographies, autobiographies, diaries, journals, and memoirs (see Rak 306). However, the genre of memoir has typically been regarded as poor imitations of autobiographies

or as a downgraded version of them, with scarce literary or even professional value, and hence, it has been relegated to an inferior category that cannot compete with them, along with journals and diaries (see 305). The main difference from a diary or a journal is that memoirs are not as immediate or spontaneous and require a further emphasis on reflection, as they propose an exercise of looking back in time from a specific approach.

Autobiographies, being the central point of life writing, were also conceived as the pivot by which to determine which texts could be considered of quality and memoirs were considered as an attempt at autobiography, at literature (see Rak 306). The main target of criticism is the narrator: autobiographies focus on a subject and memoirs on memory rather than a subject, a feature which places them in an inferior status (see 309). In other words, we encounter the binary opposition between active/passive regarding autobiographies and memoirs respectively (see 310). As stated above, memoirs have a person as their subject because memories obviously belong to a particular subject or group of subjects that includes both the experiences and reflections of the subject(s) in question. Therefore, following the autobiographical criticism that relates high literary quality and value with the usage of a subject as the main focus, memoirs can be regarded as valuable and of high quality according to their own terms. From a gender perspective, this interrelation of memoirs as being passive can be linked to the patriarchal conception of women as passive, which is no coincidence considering the history of the use of memoirs as a suitable genre to write and read for women. As Julie Rak states, the use of memoirs generally by women “reflects the distinct historical experience of women as ‘unequal and selfless subjects’” (310). As autobiographies were mainly related to male individuals, this hierarchy among genders and genres can be the consequence of the effects of patriarchy in our society translated into the literary realm.

Besides, considering the legacy of patriarchy today, we should evaluate the proliferation of feminist movements and the publication memoirs in the 20th and 21st century that acknowledge similar struggles: saving from oblivion the so-called “other.” Some feminist critics as Isabel Durán acknowledge the literary and social value of memoirs as a medium, a genre for self-definition (Durán “The Body” 68-9) and, I will argue, a medium to connect with the audience and spread awareness, which is part of the feminist struggle. Memoirs, as a form of life writing, offer the closeness and openness of the author to its receivers. In fact, memoirs can be considered a valuable double dialogue of the author with themselves, but also with the reader, sharing and reshaping their memories by means of the empathy and assertiveness achieved through reading. As Rak claims, memoirs show “how the writer ... actually lives in the world” (309), which outlines the valuable and significant importance of this literary genre as a form of better understanding the self in their environment, baring their soul to the reader as a place of comfort and recognition, a place of remembrance. In other words, memoirs can serve as a tool to fight for the rights of the other, to spread awareness about other realities, and to heal each other’s wounds, as well as a bridge to connect us as individuals.

2. Part Two: Maathai’s and Shiva’s Ecofeminist Memoirs

The second chapter of the thesis is related to Wangari Maathai’s and Vandana Shiva’s ecofeminist memoirs, in which both authors highlight their involvement in the Green Belt and Chipko Movements, respectively, apart from the ecofeminist one. First, I will discuss the origins of both movements as there are similarities between them in terms of theory and praxis. Afterwards, I will analyse each memoir separately focusing on the form and content with emphasising on the most relevant aspects. Finally, I will put the two memoirs in relation to each

other in order to study the ecofeminist message they convey with the aim of building a bridge between the two authors, their memoirs and ecofeminist struggle.

2.1. Similar Beginnings: The Chipko and Green Belt Movements

A useful method of introducing the Chipko Movement is by understanding its meaning. The word “Chipko” in Hindi means "to embrace" or "to cling to," in this case trees, and it gives us an insight into what the movement is about (Petruzzello; Shiva 7). Following Vandana Shiva and Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, the Chipko Movement was founded in the 1973 by rural villagers, particularly women, to answer the massive deforestation of different regions from the Himalayan forests, by means of embracing the trees to avoid their cutting (see 136). It is based on “protecting forests, preserving a culture, and maintaining livelihoods,” where “women ... [are] the main bearers of this culture” (137). This organization of women-power, using peaceful and impactful acts to fight for their rights and the preservation of the environment (considered an equal), shaped Chipko as an ecofeminist movement.

However, the idea behind Chipko stems from the “Forest Satyagraha,” a non-violent and non-cooperative approach led by Mahatma Gandhi to denounce the effects of British colonialism on the environment since 1850 (Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 136). Changes on the landscape were visible in the form of “natural disasters,” threatening all lifeforms with no other origin but the degradation of the environment caused by capitalism and colonialism (140). More specifically, these changes “transformed common village resources into ... private property,” as well as all forms of forest conservation that these communities had perfected over the years (134). In other words, people were facing the direct consequences of the effects of capitalism and colonialism: the impoverishment of every local lifeform for the benefits of the global.

Since this was the social, political, and economic background that shaped the Chipko Movement, it is important to discuss how the activists managed to overcome this situation and empower the environment and themselves. Regardless of the systematic violent responses of the government to their demonstrations, their activism and impulse was ceaseless, especially Mira and Sarala Behn's activism who "contributed silently to the growth of women-power and ecological consciousness" in rural areas from the Himalayan forests (Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 136-37). Women were the main characters of this movement, leading the demonstrations and activism to preserve their lifestyles and the environment as a community.

Embracing trees is one of the main actions against deforestation but not the only key strategy they perfected. Likewise, "[women] tied sacred threads to the trees as a token of vow protection," connecting their culture with nature and the Chipko Movement (Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 137). Here, one can see how this movement's activism demonstrates its appreciation for the local and popular knowledge it had about their community and how it was applied to bring about change. Spirituality was part of their culture, and it is represented through these "ceremonial" acts (see 135), as well as through different poems and songs that continued to raise awareness of the critical situation they had to face, which "were central to the mobilization of support for these protests" (137). The use of poetry as a vehicle for raising awareness is a remarkable way to connect the community with the cause, as it is an eye-opener for the heart and soul, linking the verses with their cause. Hence, one can infer how spirituality is acknowledged as a tool for change, where poetry and songs are valuable instruments to fight for rights and beliefs in a peaceful and significant manner. People were not only aware of the situation but committed to the cause thanks to the resources used, as poetry and music are part of their culture and, to some extent, their way of understanding the world.

The Green Belt Movement (GBM) was founded in 1977 by Wangari Maathai as an initiative led by rural women to plant trees in deforested areas of rural Kenya to preserve the environment and the life of the villagers (see Maathai 130). As Maathai explains, “[this] land [was] previously used to produce food for people to eat” (123), but after deforestation, the same land had plantations of different crops to serve international demands, without benefiting the local community. Deforestation did not happen by itself; it was a consequence of the British colonization, changing and shaping the landscape for commercial interests at the cost of the natives’ survival (see 123). It was a critical and extreme situation, damaging not only the environment but also the quality of life of the families living there, left without resources or agency over their land. Since the land was devastated and unemployment was also high (see 125), replanting the land was a mutually beneficial idea as women and the community would be occupied in a task that preserves the environment and also generates income and independence. As “everything they lacked depended on the environment,” Maathai’s proposal was to empower the land by empowering villagers, especially rural women, encouraging them to take control of the entire process of producing the necessary supplies for their survival (see 124). Such reaction illustrates the need for an ecofeminist movement, which could curb the consequences of capitalist patriarchy and promote change across all lifeforms to produce a new paradigm for our society.

One of the key elements that make the GBM as powerful as it is nowadays were the efforts to make people aware of how “trees were desperately needed to regenerate the land” as well as their livelihoods (Maathai 128-29). The idea was to involve people in this initiative, making them participants of the change, since these changes needed to start locally and within every individual; following Maathai, “if you don’t have local people who are committed to the process ... the projects will not survive” (132). Nevertheless, the GBM directly suffered the

consequences of capitalism, as the supplies and workforce were not affordable at all, challenging the awareness and reach of this cause (see 134-35). If there were no profit with or from the GBM's initiative, there won't be any support for it, in this case, no environmental preservation or women's empowerment. This was one of the main reasons for Maathai to empower rural women and make them leading actors of the Green Belt Movement. Most of them were "poor and illiterate," who did not need any formal training to plant these trees because, having been farmers all of their lives, it was a job they were familiar with (135-36). Thanks to the efforts of the Green Belt Movement, the women's work, passion, and commitment is proved crucial for the liberation of both women and nature.

As ecofeminist movements, the Chipko and Green Belt Movements share the same roots regarding the liberation of women and nature from the hands of their mutual oppressor: capitalist patriarchy and colonialism. More specifically, they denounce the environmental degradation and damage done by British colonialism and capitalism in India and Kenya respectively, besides the consequences of patriarchy that systematically oppress women (Maathai 135; Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 137).

Apart from having broadly similar origins, both movements focus on holding their main actors accountable for environmental disasters, inequality and oppression by making their communities aware of how they were (and are) paying the cost of this damage. Whether through demonstrations, songs and poems, lectures and talks, or representative acts such as planting or caring for these areas, both movements were and continue working non-stop to fight for environmental and women's rights through collective power. Regardless of the difference between planting and embracing trees, the idea underlying these actions is the same for both, which is to preserve the environment with whatever source and resource they had (see Maathai

125; Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 137). On the one hand, their struggles were almost the same, fighting against the effects and consequences of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism that are manifested in their ecofeminist activism and response. In both cases, women were disempowered and the land, taken away by colonisers, was screaming for salvation too. On the other hand, women were the main characters in both movements, improving their quality of life above all; this is what Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva define as the “subsistence perspective,” which focuses on “developing a vision of freedom, happiness, the ‘good life’ within the limits of necessity, of nature” (8).

Finally, the role of women was imperative and crucial to convey changes, which had a great impact on their lives as they were (maybe for the first time) able to empower themselves and the future of their communities (Maathai 136; Shiva and Bandyopadhyay 137); this “subsistence perspective” was precisely what the Chipko and the Green Belt movements focused on: bringing about change and emancipation without neglecting nature (Mies and Shiva 8). Therefore, one can affirm that both movements shared similar roots, a common ground founded on ecofeminism to defend the lives of the so-called “other”: women and nature.

2.2. Maathai’s *Unbowed: Living among Trees*

2.2.1. Questions of Style

In her 2006 memoir, Maathai combines heart-warming and very personal stories that even lead the reader to laugh or smile, with the crudest narrations of the current situation in her community. From the environmental degradation and forced cultural changes to the oppression of women imposed by colonialism and capitalism, the impact of these systems is a central theme in her writing, incorporating her personal thoughts and experiences, engaging readers in every line.

Organised into thirteen chapters, Maathai shares her priceless experiences with the reader describing different events that to some extent were significant in her life and shaped her personality and confidence. As readers, we are able to appreciate her passion for the environment by means of her detailed descriptions and stories about gardening and cultivating: “As you remove the weeds and press the earth around the crops you feel content, and wish the light would last longer so you could cultivate more” (Maathai 47). Her writing, layered with brushstrokes that denote her intention to share her passion with the public, similar to that of a teacher, delivers, through numerous details, so vivid imagery that we are easily immersed in her story.

Even though Maathai’s writing follows a lineal structure of events, from birth to adulthood, it is interesting how she constantly links her thoughts with the moment in which she writes. For example, when she is discussing how the lack of knowledge about wildlife is threatening the lives of villagers and species, she connects these events with the present: “Recently, I received a call at six o’clock in the morning” (Maathai 43). A similar instance, when Maathai is remembering the nickname of one of her friends, she uses “[e]ven today” (58) to express how they still address each other this way, combining events from the past with the present. Furthermore, these links of her memoirs with her present can be observed through other examples, as when she is describing a specific landscape and says, “I can envision this stream now” (46), illustrating how vivid her memories are. In other words, Maathai is interconnecting memories, experiences and thoughts that belong to the past with present thoughts and reflections, mirroring how memories work; this approach changes completely the message of her memoir, making her message almost atemporal by engaging the reader directly.

In general terms, Maathai’s memoir demonstrates the most elemental features of this genre, following a certain structure and using a writing style that engages the reader with

reflections and critical opinions about anything that caught her attention. For example, throughout *Unbowed*, the author illustrates how her relationship with her mother was a pivotal element in her development as an individual and as an ecofeminist, committed to caring for her community and nature. The author often describes her qualities focusing on personal aspects, which Maathai values the most, acknowledging that “she was [her] anchor in life” (Maathai 13). With the use of this metaphor, the average reader is instantly connecting with her description and their relationship as its meaning is straightforward and, hence, a good engagement tool. There are further elements that elevate her writing and memoir to a higher position.

Humour, as women’s empowerment, is one of the main features in Maathai’s memoir. There is clear instance when Maathai comments about how early she had to wake up one time, drawing the attention to the reader: “Now, I don’t care how much of an early riser you are, four o’clock is early for anyone!” (Maathai 70). It is a direct sentence to the readership, making us part of her story and trying to build a bridge between her experiences, her beliefs, and the audience at the same time. The use of exclamation marks can be also understood as features to emphasize the meaning of the sentence and the situation, as she uses them throughout her memoir to express how impactful events were for her.

There is another situation in which she is remembering how she learnt English, using the repetition of words and structures her teacher used that can make us smile if not laugh (Maathai 42). At the end of the sentence Maathai says, “you don’t need me to tell you where he went,” implicating the readers directly and making them participants on the story as if they were present (42). Here, Maathai combines a more direct and subtle sense of humour that engages the reader in way that simulates a conversation between the reader and the author, making *Unbowed* even more personal. In fact, the use of irony and humour can be considered “a very powerful

subversive discourse” (Costa 363), which enriches significantly her writing with a different and deeper message than might appear analogous to the Galician *retranca*.² Therefore, one can appreciate how Maathai is aware of this feature and uses it in many ways. First, as a way to engage with the audience and secondly, to denounce and criticise the oppression and struggles in a subtler and closer manner that displaces the public demonstrating great writing skills.

Nonetheless, there are other aspects that demonstrate the great writing qualities that are present in Maathai’s memoir. One can appreciate how she switches between styles depending on what type of content she is delivering. That is, the narrator employs formal language when describing historical events and switches towards a more personal and colloquial language as she relates personal experiences and memories. For example, when she is talking about a time when she was very young and had an accident, she tells the reader, “I didn’t have a clue what to do” (Maathai 48). This example can be seen as a form of writing that can simulate a conversation with a friend, using humour to engage the audience even more.

However, when she describes the challenges and obstacles she faced as a woman fighting for environmental conservation and social justice, her reflections and emotions make a powerful connection with the reader. For instance, she uses a more formal language when she is denouncing the consequences of British colonisation: “The appropriation and redistribution of land became a feature of the British presence in Kenya” (Maathai 62). Therefore, as she dives into more complex issues, as capitalism and patriarchy, Maathai uses a formal style to discuss them providing the reader with well-reasoned and sensible arguments. In fact, following

² Maathai’s use of humour exemplifies Galician *retranca*, where the listener is not sure about the intentions or purposes behind the affirmations. Thus, humour can be understood as a form of coping mechanism for marginalized communities enduring tough situations in which discretion and subtleness are imperative for survival.

Guangwei Hu and Miller Reyes, nominalisation, the process of turning verbs or adjectives into nouns, can be used in order to formalise or reshape one's argument into a more academic discourse (31). In this case, following the previous example, Maathai uses nominalisation with the words "appropriation" and "redistribution" instead of "appropriate" and "redistribute," thus emphasizing the formal style discussed. Therefore, her experiences as an activist and thinker are visible through her writing communicating complex topics with clarity and precision.

This hybrid style allows Maathai to question and discuss complex topics in a clever and accessible way combining academic and everyday language, making *Unbowed* informative, inspiring and engaging for a wider public. Overall, Maathai's writing style is an evidence of her skill as a writer and her ability to convey relevant and significant messages to the reader, spreading awareness about environmental and women's rights, challenging the reader to think critically, take action and make a difference.

2.2.2. Issues of Content

Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed* is a reflection about the memories associated with her involvement and commitment for environmental and feminist concerns. In each chapter, the author demonstrates empathy, assertiveness, and dedication to the cause she defended her entire life: to physically and spiritually recover the environment and community in which she was born. As she dives into her memories, the reader is drawn into the socio-political context and the physical and psychological changes that accompany the events unfolded. In other words, Maathai tells the history of her community through her own eyes, experiences, and memories, drawing the attention to the environment and its changes, including issues of gender, race, and class. As she developed a sense of care for the environment and her community, Maathai put her efforts on

trying to convey changes as much as possible while being aware of the effects of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy in her surroundings.

While Maathai may not have explicitly identified herself as an ecofeminist, her work is closely linked with many of the core principles of ecofeminism which are present in the GBM, an environmental organization that empowers women through sustainable agriculture and reforestation. However, her work is not limited to the foundation of this movement but filled with endless actions that started in early childhood and continued through her life as a form of ecofeminist activism. Therefore, I will discuss the most relevant aspects of her memoir that relate to her journey into ecofeminism and political activism.

Born in 1940, Wangari Maathai grew up in rural Kenya being the first and oldest daughter of her family (see Maathai 3), where her childhood experiences being constantly in touch with nature and her community shaped her ecofeminist activism. From the outset, the author lets us glimpse her deep and lifelong connection with nature, providing descriptions of the landscape, native species and climate that characterised Kenya in the mid-20th century: “The land 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” (3). As she shares intimate details of her birth, the reader is immersed in the world she reminisces about: “We lived in a land abundant with shrubs, creepers, ferns, and trees, like the *mĩtũndũ*, *mĩkeu*, and *mĩgumo* ... There were large well-watered fields of maize, beans, wheat, and vegetables” (3-4). Living as farmers, Maathai early developed skills to work with the soil as well as love and care for gardening and harvesting activities (see 38). As she states, “[she] was always attentive to nature” (43), not only through its care but also through such close contact where she was always aware of her surroundings and their changes. These descriptions of the lush landscapes and diverse native species in Kenya

resonate deeply with Maathai's agricultural background, as she intimately understood the interconnectedness between the fertile land and the abundance it produced. Thus, her childhood in the middle of lush beauty and abundant fields moulded her knowledge of the complex interaction between humans and their environment, motivating her passion to environmental preservation and sustainable practises.

What is also worth noting about her writing is the intentionality of the message. In the same way Maathai acknowledges the work and passion of her community to preserve the environment and their livelihoods, she also denounces the main actors of their struggle. Throughout *Unbowed*, Maathai depicts the two sides of the same coin: on one side, the state prior to change, and on the other, the effects of changes in the environment. For example, when describing the agricultural strategies of the British administration deforesting areas of native species to plant foreign and profitable ones, Maathai outlines the causes and consequences of change: “[The British administration] eliminated local plants and animals, destroying the natural ecosystem that helped gather and retain rainwater. When rains fell, much of the water ran downstream. Over the subsequent decades, underground water levels decreased markedly and, eventually, rivers and streams either dried up or were greatly reduced” (Maathai 39). Therein, it is possible to discern Maathai's intentions in criticizing the consequences of capitalism and colonialism, which is, once more, another indicator of the ecofeminist struggle present in her philosophy.

First of all, she reveals how the colonizers changed the balance of the environment and secondly, the consequences of these acts, which is environmental degradation and impoverishment of the land and, thus, of the villagers. Therefore, Maathai holds colonialism and capitalism accountable for the impoverishment of the land and their villagers, as colonizers were

changing the landscape to serve their own interests. Furthermore, Maathai denounces how these consequences would have not existed if one can value the knowledge and experience of the natives. As she claims, “without conscious or deliberate effort, these cultural and spiritual practices contributed to the conservation of biodiversity” (Maathai 46). That is the ultimate acknowledgment of the role of the community and their popular knowledge as more than valuable, crucial to preserve nature and their way of living. In a sense, her passion for nature was cultivated by her mother and other women who taught her how to preserve the land and their livelihoods by means of their popular knowledge. Maathai’s mother, as the majority of women in her community, might not know about the science behind farming, cultivating, and gardening. Nonetheless, as Maathai describes, “[her mother] didn’t know anything about pollination” but her knowledge, built from experience and dedication, was the key to success and her field crops blossomed regardless (38).

Maathai acknowledges the valuable knowledge her community had, especially women, as they were in charge of taking care of the land and their livelihoods, transforming their experience into knowledge for the future generations. Following Mies and Shiva, this is part of the ecofeminist struggle, recognizing local women’s knowledge and experiences as they “respect both the diversity and the limits of nature which cannot be violated if they want to survive” (19). In a way, Maathai is denouncing and making people aware of what and who are the main actors of their suffering (community and nature together), as well as empowering them by acknowledging their life experiences and knowledge as valuable and essential. Consequently, in *Unbowed*, Maathai is not only validating women’s popular knowledge by considering it imperative for environmental preservation, but she also seeds her ecofeminist activism which will constitute the roots of the Green Belt Movement.

Maathai's academic background, beyond non-formal education, was also possible thanks to her mother, which enabled her to attend school and be the first woman in her family to have formal education (see Maathai 53). Throughout *Unbowed*, the author emphasizes the necessity of educating women for their liberation and growth outside oppression, in this case, patriarchy. For example, Maathai describes how in her community, being a woman did not translate into having the right to an education or other opportunities than being a wife or a mother (see 39); only a few could aim for other future through education, which was becoming a teacher or a nurse (see 72). Even though Maathai was an ambitious and passionate woman who had the opportunity to study abroad and become a biologist, this was not the reality of every woman in her community. On the one hand, she was attentive to changes in her environment and, on the other, critical of gender issues in terms of opportunity, access, and poverty, paying attention to the elements of oppression that, since the beginning, sentenced their future, leaving them powerless.

Access to education is one of the most representative points of oppression against women, a means of keeping them under control and, therefore, still subordinated to male-figures that have control over knowledge, women, and nature. Furthermore, knowledge over nature is necessary to understand its dynamics and actively participate in its preservation and conservation. Depriving women of an education that could improve their lives and the lives of all living beings is an act of oppression against both women and nature. As Greta Gard states, "the culture/nature dualism of western culture is gendered: that is, men and masculinity are associated with culture and culture is valued, whereas women and femaleness are associated with nature and both are devalued" (48). This is exactly what Maathai reflects upon as well, the hierarchy of males over females, knowledge over nature which oppressed her in her career and women in her community (see 139). Therefore, Maathai understands that the only chance for survival of women and nature is

empowerment by giving them education, tools, and strategies to keep their livelihoods and preserve their culture and nature. Since women and nature are oppressed by patriarchy and capitalism, following an ecofeminist approach can be seen as not only necessary but crucial to empower both of them (see Mies and Shiva 8).

Through her experiences, her passion for nature and her sense of justice, Maathai was able to make her way as an activist and scholar to turn around the disempowerment that haunted her community. As described above, Maathai was the founder of the Green Belt Movement. It started with a “tree nursery” on a privileged area of Lang’ata, Kenya, but her idea, however, was not warmly welcomed, neither other initiatives she had, which “was dispiriting” for her (see Maathai 128-29). Maathai suffered from backlash at every point in her life: from the lack of access to education and the academic sphere to starting her own initiative and continue in politics; as she states, she was surviving on a considered “man’s world” (139). As an ecofeminist movement, suffered from backlash as it implied a transformation on what had traditionally been their way of living. Focused on women’s empowerment, Maathai was reversing the roles and women were gaining agency and power over themselves, their livelihoods and communities, challenging the patriarchal system that oppresses women worldwide.

Following Mies and Shiva, women bear the main burden of environmental damage and disasters (see 2-3), as Maathai explores in her reflections about women’s life conditions who work on a once fertile land. Adding this to patriarchal oppression, Maathai aimed to focus her efforts on those who were invisible and undervalued in order to empower them and the land that sustained them. Rural women and women who suffered from the ultimate consequences of patriarchy, as sexual assault, were also encouraged to join the Green Belt Movement and offered the possibility to fight for their lives with this initiative.

It is interesting how linked ecofeminism is with the Green Belt Movement and Maathai's philosophy of life. Gardening and nurturing the land can be perceived as an act of love and of care that is therapeutic to the mind and soul. Since all struggle needs a place to heal, ecofeminism has the potential to serve as a healing force for our relationships with nature, starting with oneself and expanding this care and love to the rest of nature. As Mies and Shiva advocate, "life in nature ... is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love" (6). The fact that Maathai gave native families not only the opportunity to gain income and preserve the environment, but also a place to heal their burdens and acknowledge their value as individuals nurturing and healing the land shows a true symbiotic relationship. As Maathai states, "the Green Belt Movement grew from a tree-planting program into one that planted ideas as well" (173), introducing those rural women to participate in further actions than planting but planning and questioning over their struggle through seminars and gatherings.

Maathai's political presence also helped to deepen her convictions and safeguard both the environment and the community in which she grew up, leaving no one behind and providing every possibility for change (see Maathai 256). This can also be considered another feature of ecofeminist activism, focused on spreading awareness over the necessity of women's and nature's rights as part of the change (see Mies and Shiva 6). In this case, Maathai's initiative, her political activism and participation in endless organisations are clear examples of her ecofeminist roots and beliefs. As a consequence of her activism and determination towards women and environmental rights, she was imprisoned twice: first, because of ending her marriage and having troubles with the process (see Maathai 149-50); the second time, for being regarded as a troublemaker for putting upside down the patriarchal and capitalist system with the Green Belt Movement (see 213). The author describes the crudeness of the conditions she had to endure and

how difficult those times were as she thought she could have died (see 213-14). Despite the fact that the GBM was a peaceful movement and the protests they carried were peaceful as well, those actions were violently contested, and supporters were numerous times injured in the process (see 279). Regardless of any obstacle in her way, Maathai can be considered a reference for resilience and constancy, for inspiration and encouragement to follow one's own beliefs and protect the rights of the so-called "other".

The ecofeminist activism of Wangari Maathai was a significant influence on transformation in Kenya and beyond. Her contribution with the Green Belt Movement empowered women by giving them access to labour, education and leadership positions in environmental preservation. She aimed to enhance the lives of all people, especially rural women who were living in poverty, by encouraging environmentally—friendly development. People all around the world were inspired by Maathai's commitment to environmental sustainability and women's rights, and her legacy still serves as a source of inspiration and motivation for activists and ecofeminism today. Even though Maathai did not identify herself as an ecofeminist, her philosophy, theory, and praxis prove otherwise and are a valuable contribution to the ecofeminist struggle. All in all, Wangari Maathai can be regarded as a powerful reminder of the value of grassroots activity and collective organisation in fostering a better world.

2.3. Shiva's *Terra Viva*: From Trees to Seeds

2.3.1. Questions of Style

Vandana Shiva is a renowned Indian scholar and ecofeminist activist known for her work in sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and social justice. In *Terra Viva* (2022), the author's charisma is effectively conveyed combining her personal experiences and ecofeminist

struggle, thereby engaging the reader, and creating an atmosphere for mutual understanding and assertiveness. As a prolific author, she has received numerous awards for her work and has become a leading voice promoting ecofeminism and social and environmental justice (see “Vandana Shiva”). Thus, *Terra Viva* is a testament of her writing abilities, restless activism, and profound commitment to ecofeminism through the compilation of her experiences, thoughts, and insights.

There is a total of 9 chapters, each one of them focused on Shiva’s activism and the different movements and organisations that had an impact on her life. The author follows a lineal structure as she starts the first chapter with an exploration of her early childhood and her family dynamics that influenced her passion and commitment for social and environmental rights (see Shiva 3). Although, unlike traditional memoirs that focus on the author's personal experiences, Shiva discusses broader issues such as capitalist patriarchy and colonialism. Rather than recounting her own experiences, the author examines the historical and societal implications of these issues in our society and the environment. In other words, Shiva is notably more concerned with the discussion of ecofeminism and the consequences of capitalist patriarchy and colonialism than with reflecting on her memories and experiences. However, the absence of an intimate tone in her memoir does not necessarily have a negative impact. On the contrary, her reflections on issues that have persisted throughout history give her work a timeless quality. By focusing on broader themes, Shiva is able to present a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues of environmental degradation, colonialism, or capitalist-patriarchy, making this memoir an essential read for anyone interested in the ecofeminist struggle.

Throughout *Terra Viva*, Shiva describes her involvement and commitment to ecofeminism, demonstrating her passion towards it and inspiring us to take action and make a

difference. She is a persuasive and impactful writer who effectively captures the reader's attention and raises awareness about women's and environmental rights. Since the very beginning, Shiva discloses her passion with nature in many ways. For instance, she deliberately uses metaphors to connect with the reader on a deeper level and to demonstrate how powerful her connection with the environment is. When Shiva is remembering her childhood and her involvement with nature, she says "[she] feel[s] a deep umbilical connection to forests ... and mountain streams" (Shiva 3). By means of this figure of speech, Shiva illustrates the strong emotional bond between her and the environment. However, this connection is not limited to her alone but can be extrapolated to a broader connection between all humans and nature. Therefore, this metaphor can be linked to the ecofeminist struggle, which seeks to emphasize and reinforce the interconnectedness of all living beings and promote a more harmonious relationship with nature (see Mies and Shiva 6).

This concept of belongingness with nature is also illustrated at the end of the first chapter, in which Shiva discusses the importance of this relationship highlighting the necessity to "[return] to our membership in the earth family" (Shiva 23). The author suggests that humans are not separate from nature, but rather are a part of it, and that we have a responsibility to care for the Earth in the same way we care for our own families. By encouraging us to "return" to this membership, the metaphor invites us to recognize and embrace our connection with the Earth and to work towards a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the environment. Once more, Shiva reveals commitment and passion for nature and, therefore, her connection with ecofeminism, as she had done before (see Mies and Shiva 6).

Worth noting, Shiva's academic background and extensive body of written works have significantly influenced the way she conveys her messages. This influence is evident not only in

the formal language, structure, and content of her writing but also in her approach to specific topics and features. The author explicitly cites different scholars and personalities, with clear indentations and following a specific format as if she were writing an article or an essay, a style of writing that shapes the memoir into a different genre. For instance, as she addresses the relevance of forests for the Indian community, she writes, “[a]ccording to Rabindranath Tagore” (Shiva 32), which demonstrates how her academic journey transforms her messages into a less personal reading. In a sense, Shiva is switching between a formal and a personal style while changing the layout in which the message is delivered. In memoirs, it is common to use inverted commas to state one’s own or other’s words (see Karr 110) but using indented paragraphs mirrors the academic writing that encapsulates her messages. Instead of being a collection of Shiva’s memories, *Terra Viva* adopts the format of a work journal, chronicling and documenting her observations and events, including references, regarding her activism and involvement with ecofeminism. Although this view may be affected by preconceived notions concerning the genre of memoirs, the considerations outlined above ultimately support the notion that this piece is more similar to a work diary than to a memoir.

Furthermore, Shiva’s formal writing style is notable as well for the use of expressions that reveal her academic background and expertise. As the author is discussing the necessity to create unique and specialised systems to recognise and protect women’s knowledge, she uses the phrase “sui generis” to convey this meaning (Shiva 138). As a Latin term, this indicates that Shiva is drawing on a deep knowledge and understanding of the issues she is discussing and can articulate her arguments in a precise and sophisticated manner. Therefore, her use of formal expressions and structures may also contribute to enhancing the credibility and authority of her writing, transforming her memoir into a valuable and rich literary work.

Since *Terra Viva* is characterized by a strong formal and academic writing style, the accessibility of this memoir can be more restricted compared to a regular one, regarded as a straightforward reading. Even though Shiva is determined to share her experiences and thoughts, the average reader may encounter this text as more complex than expected. Notwithstanding this question of formality, Shiva demonstrates her commitment and closeness to the reader by occasionally transforming her thoughts into almost verses of a poem. As the author describes in detail the founding of her own movement, Navdanya, she devotes these lines to acknowledge the importance of women's work to support this initiative: "As rural women sow the seeds of hope and resilience in times of multiple emergencies—health, hunger, climate and extinction—they grow gardens of hope for the health of the planet and of our communities" (Shiva 143). First, it is observable how the author lowers her approach leaving formalities aside and employing a more persuasive and personal style inspiring the readership to take action. Secondly, the use of metaphors, as in "seeds of hope" and "grow gardens of hope," can be a deliberate strategy to convey her message in a more aesthetic manner (see Karr 108).

Despite Shiva's formal and academic writing style, her emotive and compelling arguments about the ecofeminist struggle make for a captivating reading experience. Her use of metaphors and personal anecdotes³, in particular, help to connect with readers on a deeper emotional level, inspiring them to join the fight against the destructive forces of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. Shiva's arguments and proposals are not limited to the academic field but are accessible to anyone who cares about the future of our planet. By providing alternative examples

³ For instance, when Shiva talks about the last time she spent with Maria Mies, where she "joined [Shiva] on stage and sang a song [Maria Mies] composed against genetic engineering in the 1980's" (Shiva 133).

to safeguard the environment and their livelihoods by controlling their food systems, Shiva demonstrates that change is possible, and encourages readers to take part in shaping a more sustainable and equitable future. *Terra Viva* ultimately serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness and inspiring action towards a more harmonious relationship between humans and the environment.

2.3.2. Issues of Content

Terra Viva is an impressive compilation of Vandana Shiva's activism, insights, and expertise on topics such as ecofeminism, environmental preservation, and sustainability. It also serves as a testament to her commitment to community involvement and recognition of rural women's knowledge as key for the liberation of both women and nature from oppression. In every chapter, Shiva highlights the pressing challenges faced by society in terms of human and nature rights, while providing valuable guidance for empowering communities and women to improve their environment and livelihoods both as a collective and individually. As we will see, from her participation in various organizations and associations throughout her life to the establishment of her own initiative inspired by her family's legacy and the Chipko Movement, Shiva's life is marked by a deep commitment to ecofeminist activism. Therefore, this section discusses the origins and development of Shiva's ecofeminist activism throughout her life, which are prominently reflected in her memoir *Terra Viva*.

Since the beginning, Shiva reveals her close connection with the environment: "Nature was my first inspiration—and the study of nature my first passion—which is how I ended up becoming a physicist" (Shiva 3). Living surrounded by nature in the Himalayan forests and taking care of the land as farmers (see 5), Shiva's ecofeminist philosophy has its roots in her

childhood experiences and memories. In this area, the Chipko Movement started and had a great impact on both society and the environment. As Shiva states, “[t]his is why when the forests started to disappear, I joined the Chipko movement to protect them” (5). By means of this example, it is visible how the author was concerned and aware of the relevance of protecting the environment to secure their life in the forest.

Thanks to the rural women that worked with Chipko, Shiva developed a sense of caring and love for environmental preservation and women’s empowerment. Even though she has a PhD in physics, she says that “Chipko was clearly [her] university for ecology,” demonstrating how valuable the knowledge of the women that worked with this movement was (Shiva 11). More specifically, Shiva states that “women and indigenous communities, the excluded of the industrial world, are the real custodians of biodiversity-related knowledge” (11). This perspective challenges the dominant patriarchal and capitalist systems that have led to the exploitation of both women and nature, considering their knowledge as lacking value and even “anecdotal” (see Curtin 87). Due to her involvement with Chipko, Shiva was able to meet relevant activists and members that contributed as well to her development of “ecological values and values of social and economic equality basic to [her] life and work” (Shiva 7). In this sense, her acknowledgement of the role of women in the Chipko Movement can be observed as an example of ecofeminist praxis, where feminist and environmentalist concerns are intertwined.

Regarding the informal education discussed, her family played a significant role in her feminist mindset as well. As Shiva states, “[her] parents were the ultimate feminists,” as they both did not perpetuate harmful stereotypes about gender roles by any means, including the freedom they gave to their children to decide about their names and pronouns (Shiva 16-7). By rejecting traditional gender roles, Shiva’s parents were also rejecting the oppressive patriarchal

structures that perpetuate the exploitation of women, which ecofeminism aims to challenge and dismantle. Following Judith Plant: “Ecofeminists recognize that women, especially those from groups most marginalized and oppressed by patriarchy and imperialism, have not been allowed to define themselves” (127). In this sense, the ecofeminist struggle is closely related to the idea of autonomy and self-determination and not be confined to the narrow roles that patriarchal society has assigned to them, which is exactly what her parents allowed her to experience. Ultimately, Shiva was learning how to empower herself by means of the opportunity to define herself without constraints.

Shiva’s family legacy was one of the reasons why Shiva was able to empower herself and her life. Her mother, who was able to have formal education, was a significant activist that defended the rights of her community and the environment, publishing her own book rooted in Chipko, Gandhi and Indian feminism (see Shiva 16). Besides, Shiva’s grandfather’s story influenced her life enormously, as his devotion for human rights and women’s access to education lead him to die “fasting for girls’ education” (15-6). Therefore, growing up with a family legacy of activism and commitment towards social and environmental rights had a great impact on Shiva’s life and career. The access to education is one of the main points in the feminist and ecofeminist agendas, as it is linked with the liberation of women and nature from the oppression caused by patriarchy, as well as with the key to liberate nature as well (see Warren “Ecofeminist Philosophy” 8-9). Therefore, thanks to her childhood experiences with her family and the environment, and her work with Chipko, Shiva was able to develop her profound commitment and activism towards the ecofeminist struggle.

Considering these were the origins of Shiva’s activism, it is important to focus on how she transformed the seeds of love and care for all life forms into an ecosystem of activism and

dedication to ecofeminism. Thanks to her academic background studying physics, she was able to access the academic realm and discuss and explore the causes of environmental degradation and impoverishment of the community and nature. Besides her involvement with the Chipko movement, Shiva attended numerous conferences where women discussed issues of gender, race and environmental degradation that influenced her ecofeminist activism and philosophy (see Shiva 131). Therefore, her extensive knowledge of feminism, agroecology, and ecofeminism can be attributed to her life experiences and academic background. Throughout *Terra Viva*, the author has demonstrated a deep understanding of the intersectionality of issues such as “[e]cology, economics and gender,” as they relate to environmental degradation and social inequality (143).

As Greta Gaard argues, ecofeminism is concerned with the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality in environmental degradation that rejects the essentialist attribution that has characterized it in the past (see “Ecofeminism Revisited” 32). Thanks to Shiva’s contributions to the ecofeminist struggle conducting environmental conservation studies (see Shiva 12) and the publication of books such as *Staying Alive*, or *Ecofeminism* with Maria Mies (see 131-32), she is now considered a referent in ecofeminism. However, it is interesting to know that she was reluctant at first to continue publishing as she believed that she would be contributing to “the publishing rat race” but, in the end, she understood that “writing, too, can be a subversive activity” (131). Revealing this notion to the reader is powerful to the extent that writing this memoir can be a subversive act as well, dismantling capitalist patriarchy and providing solid and grounded solutions for people to make a change.

In *Terra Viva*, one can appreciate Shiva’s passion for and commitment to the ecofeminist cause thanks to the depiction of the damages of capitalist patriarchy and colonialism. As Shiva says, there is a “vision [based on] the illusion that nature is dead or inert matter, and that women

are passive—they have bodies without minds” (Shiva 133). This is precisely what capitalist patriarchy and colonialism are perpetuating in our society: this narrow vision of both nature and women that justifies their oppression for economic purposes. The exemplification of this idea is represented in Shiva’s denounce of how monocultures and the trivialization of women’s knowledge towards the environment are damaging all life forms in nature. As the author declares: “Non-sustainability is rooted in separation and the invisibility of women’s knowledge and work” (Shiva 139-40), which harms the ecosystems of their community and nature as a whole, as the ecofeminist struggle denounces (see Mies and Shiva 14). This example demonstrates Shiva’s awareness and knowledge of the effects and consequences of capitalist patriarchy, ultimately sharing this knowledge with the readers and providing them the opportunity to make a change.

Shiva not only denounces the consequences of capitalist patriarchy but inspires readers to think critically. For instance, when she describes the current consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, those being “chronic diseases, ...unhealthy, industrial ultra-processed [food],” she adds that “this Climate Chaos ... [is] a threat to the very survival of the human species” (Shiva 139). As one can appreciate, this is a call for everyone to recognise how destructive are policies that do not consider the consequences of capitalist-patriarchy on the environment and on our own development and future as a species. Shiva's writing on the consequences of the pandemic can be understood as a powerful example of ecofeminist thought, as it highlights the interconnectedness of nature and humans, and the consequences of an anthropocentric perspective: a situation of oppression that leads to chaos and impoverishment. As she advocates, “[a]ll life forms have an inherent right to life” (Shiva 201), which aligns with the basis of ecofeminism: acknowledging the value and interconnectedness of every life form to recognise the common ground towards our mutual liberation from oppression (see Mies and Shiva 16). Furthermore, the culmination of her

activism, which builds upon her academic, professional, and personal contributions to ecofeminism, is embodied in the foundation of her own movement, Navdanya.

Founded by Shiva in 1987, Navdanya, which means "nine seeds" in Hindi (Shiva 20), is a movement that focuses on the conservation of indigenous seeds and biodiversity, as well as the promotion of organic farming and sustainable agriculture practices ("Navdanya"). Shiva's motivations for founding this movement were rooted in her experiences working with rural communities in India, especially with the Chipko women. She thus observed the devastating impacts of industrial agriculture, including the loss of biodiversity, the displacement of rural communities, and the depletion of soil fertility that encouraged her to found Navdanya (see Shiva 19). The problem was not just environmental but also social and economic, and Shiva believed that the solution lay in empowering local communities to take control of their own food systems (see 135). In this case, the community was mainly rural women where the main source of income but also food was achieved through farming and preserving the forest and the environment around them. As the author states, Navdanya is "[a]n earth-centred, women-centred movement" that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life forms and lives by means of "cooperation and reciprocity" (19-20). Therefore, her focus was to acknowledge women's knowledge and ultimately use it in regard of every life form's interest and benefit: shape and design a healthy future for all living beings on Earth.

One of the most important ideas behind Navdanya is the promotion of seed sovereignty, which means that farmers have the right to save, exchange, and sell their own seeds (see Shiva 20). This contrasts with the current global agricultural system, which is dominated by the control over food production and distribution due to capitalism; ecofeminism fights against this but also towards a more sustainable ecosystem (see Mies and Shiva 10). Additionally, Navdanya

advocates for the use of organic farming practices that are based on traditional knowledge and are suited to local ecological conditions (see Shiva 20); that is, making the most of the resources that are available in a particular area and rely on its specific conditions to nurture it and preserve it in the most efficient and assertive manner. Following Mies and Shiva, ecofeminism values and considers essential women's knowledge and support to make a change and heal our planet (see 13). As the author advocates, "earth care is healthcare, of people and the planet" (250) and this is exactly what Navdanya is trying to achieve, demonstrating once more her and Navdanya's commitment and involvement with ecofeminism.

Navdanya also emphasizes the importance of biodiversity conservation, recognizing that the loss of genetic diversity in crops and livestock poses a serious threat to food security and ecosystem health (see Shiva 22). The way in which capitalism tries to homogenise cultures, communities as well as food is damaging life on Earth. The movement includes a network of seed banks, farmer training programs, and organic farming initiatives, as well as advocacy efforts to promote policy changes at the national and international level (see Shiva 20-1). One can understand this accumulation of seeds as the main strategy to defeat capitalism, so concerned with accumulation of goods. Shiva is empowering her community and rural women with the opportunity to gain income and provide for their families and nature; besides, she is able to empower them on another level by means of this system of food security that encourages them to be autonomous from the capitalist system and play with their own rules. In other words, Shiva is giving women and her community the key for their own liberation and nature's liberation in harmony. In essence, Navdanya endorses ecofeminism as it recognizes the interconnectedness of social, environmental, and economic issues, and seeks to empower marginalized communities to take control of their own food systems (see Shiva 135). Additionally, this movement highlights

the role of women in agriculture, recognizing that they often play a crucial role in maintaining seed diversity and ecological balance, and preserving their indigenous knowledge (see Mies and Shiva 10; Shiva 20).

Nonetheless, one of the main challenges in the making of Navdanya was the resistance of the Indian government and multinational corporations to its goals. As mentioned before, capitalism is ruling the way food is produced and controlled, so having a movement that seeks to debunk it can be understood as a threat to the system. The Indian government had been promoting industrial agriculture and chemical inputs, and multinational corporations had been aggressively encouraging genetically modified crops and hybrid seeds (see Shiva 96). Navdanya faced legal challenges and harassment from these entities, as well as from local authorities who were often hostile to this initiative (see 95). It is not a surprise that any step forward in terms of inclusivity, environmental preservation, and women's empowerment is seen, again, as a threat. Thanks to initiatives such as Navdanya and inspiring ecofeminist leaders like Vandana Shiva, ecofeminism can progress towards a society and planet that is more environmentally conscious and compassionate with the so-called "other": women and nature.

In a world where the effects of climate change are increasingly evident, it is crucial to recognize the importance of initiatives as Navdanya that foster sustainable development and empower communities. Shiva's memoir offers hope and empowerment to those who are committed to creating a more just and sustainable world, recognizing the value and interconnectedness of every life form and promoting sustainable development practices. Ultimately, *Terra Viva* can be regarded as a guiding resource for achieving a more equitable future for all.

2.4. Putting the Memoirs into Dialogue

In this final section, I will explore the ways in which Wangari Maathai's and Vandana Shiva's memoirs can be put into dialogue regarding the authors' experiences and insights as well as the messages they convey. As we have seen in the previous sections, Maathai and Shiva are two environmental activists who have dedicated their lives to fighting against environmental degradation and social injustice. While their experiences and contexts are different, their memoirs share stylistic features, themes, and values, such as the importance of grassroots activism, the interdependence of humans and nature, and the need for sustainable development practices. By putting their memoirs into dialogue, we can uncover the similarities and differences between them. In doing so, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of environmental activism and the urgent need for global action to address the challenges facing our planet.

Both memoirs provide a unique opportunity to explore the transculturality and transnationality of the ecofeminist movement. Following Wolfgang Welsch, "transculturality" refers to the idea that seemingly diverse cultures blend into one another as the so-called boundaries that seem to separate them can blur (see 6). This perspective promotes inclusivity rather than exclusion, as former definitions of culture did (2). Thus, transculturality offers the possibility to examine different issues within communities to show the existing overlaps and connections across cultures (15). One can infer how *Unbowed* and *Terra Viva* demonstrate the transculturality of the ecofeminist struggle, where both women and nature have been oppressed by means of capitalist patriarchy. By reading both memoirs together, we gain a deeper understanding of the shared struggles faced by women and marginalized communities around the world, and the ways in which these struggles are interconnected with environmental degradation and social injustice. Regardless of their different backgrounds and contexts, Maathai and Shiva

describe how their experiences and communities share a common ground in terms of oppression but, most importantly, in terms of women's and nature's liberation. Actually, the ecofeminist fight, about environmental issues and challenges that are present in diverse communities and regions, is "irrespective of different racial, ethnic, cultural or class backgrounds" (Mies and Shiva 3). Therefore, both memoirs contribute to the transmission of this concept through the authors' reflections, experiences, and anecdotes that illustrate how rural women from different communities suffered and continue to suffer from the same oppressors.

Maathai and Shiva share similar perspectives towards different aspects of the ecofeminist struggle, each one of them in their own terms and with a unique approach. For instance, *Unbowed* and *Terra Viva* convey a similar message regarding nature. On the one hand, Shiva says that "nature is alive and has rights" (132). On the other, Maathai also expresses a similar sentiment when she describes her childhood experiences with nature, saying that "[w]hen you rubbed [the soil] between your fingers you could almost feel the life it held" (37). In essence, both authors acknowledge that nature is a living entity and deserves to be treated with respect and dignity. This perspective is central to the ecofeminist struggle, which seeks to challenge the dominant capitalist patriarchal worldview that sees nature as a resource to be exploited for human gain (see Gaard "Ecofeminism Revisited" 28). By recognizing the inherent value of nature and its right to exist and thrive, ecofeminism aims to create a more just and equitable world that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all beings. Thus, Shiva and Maathai's shared understanding of the significance of nature in the ecofeminist struggle highlights the importance of recognizing the agency and autonomy of non-human entities and our responsibility towards women's and nature's liberation.

Moreover, both authors point out the marginalization and devaluation of women, particularly rural women and their knowledge. Throughout *Unbowed*, Maathai emphasizes how rural women, despite being "poor and illiterate," possess a wealth of knowledge and experience as farmers that is often overlooked or dismissed by their communities and capitalist patriarchy in general (see 135-36). This neglect of women's knowledge has contributed to the perpetuation of environmental degradation, as well as the marginalization and oppression of women themselves. However, Maathai recognizes the immense value of this knowledge describing them as "foresters without diplomas" (136), whose expertise and skills are crucial to the liberation of both women and nature. Similarly, Shiva highlights the ways in which traditional ecological knowledge, often held by women, has been dismissed and undervalued by dominant patriarchal systems. As she states, "[rural women] have remained invisible as farmers in spite of their contributions to farming," perpetuating the pervasive notion that women's efforts and qualities are often deemed insufficient or never enough (Shiva 136). Nonetheless, Shiva recognizes the value of their contributions acknowledging that "[t]his rich biodiversity of living knowledge is conserved and generated in every culture by rural women" (142), advocating for returning to them all the respect and recognition they deserve. Therefore, both authors stress the need to recognize and empower women and their knowledge in order to liberate both nature and women from oppression. Valuing and empowering women and their knowledge is a fundamental aspect of the ecofeminist struggle to dismantle the intersecting systems of oppression of patriarchy, capitalism, and environmental degradation (see Mies and Shiva 16-7). By acknowledging the skills and qualities of rural women, it is possible to develop more sustainable and just practices that benefit all beings, as Maathai and Shiva demonstrate through their ecofeminist activism and commitment.

Unbowed and *Terra Viva* explore the history and experiences of Maathai's and Shiva's

communities from an ecofeminist perspective, drawing attention to the damages and oppression of women and nature caused by capitalist patriarchy and colonialism. To convey this message, both authors rely on different strategies that bring the reader closer to their narratives and encourage them to take action and think critically about their communities. Maathai's memoir is deeply personal and reflects on the challenges she faced as a woman in a patriarchal society, as well as her successes and failures as an activist and a politician. Shiva's memoir covers a broad range of topics related to globalization and environmental justice, drawing on her experiences in India and beyond. Whilst her memoir is less personal than *Unbowed*, *Terra Viva* is rich in information and analysis, providing a detailed and nuanced perspective on the issues being examined. Nonetheless, Maathai and Shiva share a deep passion for and commitment to ecofeminism as a means of building a fair and sustainable world.

In addition to their distinct approaches, Maathai and Shiva use persuasive language to engage their readers and inspire action. Through anecdotes and personal reflections, Maathai emphasizes the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their communities and the environment (e.g., “[w]e needed to make local people feel invested in the projects so they would mobilize themselves and their neighbours to take responsibility for sustaining [their community and ecosystem]” (Maathai 133)). Shiva employs vivid descriptions and powerful metaphors to highlight the devastating effects of capitalist patriarchy on marginalized communities and ecosystems (e.g., “[Cotton] are seeds of suicide and seeds of slavery” (Shiva 22)). Through their work, Maathai and Shiva demonstrate that ecofeminism is not just a theory but a reality that demands action and engagement from all individuals who aspire to create a world that is more caring and assertive towards all life forms.

Together, *Unbowed* and *Terra Viva* complement each other, providing a more broadened and comprehensive picture of the ecofeminist struggle and the challenges faced by women and marginalized communities around the world. Maathai's and Shiva's memoirs make an impressive contribution to the ecofeminist struggle, as they convey similar ideas through a genre that engages the readers in conversation with ecofeminism and its activism. Therefore, the combination of personal experiences and critical analysis in both memoirs demonstrates how personal stories can contribute to larger political movements. Furthermore, I will argue that both *Unbowed* and *Terra Viva* are powerful examples of the potential of the ecofeminist memoir as a new sub-genre that fosters the transmission of ecofeminist values, activism, and thought to a wider audience. Characterized by the combination of personal experiences with the examination of the consequences of capitalist patriarchy and colonialism, said memoirs can be among the first examples of this new-born genre.

Memoirs serve as a powerful means to redefine the traditional perception of women and the natural world as passive and detached from the essence of life. Through the authors' personal experiences and illuminating insights into their own unique journeys, these narratives offer readers an intimate and inspiring standpoint, fostering a deeper connection with the ecofeminist struggle. Thanks to their messages of hope and wisdom, *Unbowed* and *Terra Viva* contribute to a paradigm shift towards a more conscious society that recognizes the interconnection between humans and nature, that embraces diversity and brings about change in communion with the Earth. As Maathai and Shiva advocate, nature is not dead, nature is alive and memoirs are too; therefore, the ecofeminist memoir can be used as the medium to spread awareness about the ecofeminist struggle and to build an inclusive and assertive society that acknowledges and respects our interconnectedness with nature, the no longer the "other."

Conclusion

Memoirs have a long history in literature providing pieces to a puzzle known as human experience. As a medium used to share personal stories, memoirs allow readers to gain insight into the lives of others and the various identities of the self. Every story has a unique perspective, adding to the collective understanding of what it means to be alive. These personal narratives can offer a sense of empathy and understanding that can help to break down barriers and enhance social cohesion. By sharing their own struggles, triumphs, and moments of growth, memoirists contribute to a larger narrative that connects people from all walks of life and that does not understand boundaries of any kind.

However, some memoirists go beyond sharing personal stories to contribute to a larger social and environmental narrative. Wangari Maathai and Vandana Shiva are two ecofeminist writers-activists who have done exactly that. Maathai, in her memoir *Unbowed*, tells the story of her life as a Kenyan woman and how she became the founder of the Green Belt Movement. Through *Unbowed*, she shares her struggles, triumphs, and moments of growth, while also raising awareness about environmental and social issues in her country. Her personal experiences are interwoven with larger socio-political events, making the memoir a powerful tool for advocacy and social change. Similarly, Shiva's *Terra Viva* also blends personal narrative with social and political commentary. As an environmental activist and ecofeminist, Shiva's memoir reflects on her experiences fighting against the negative impact of globalization and the destruction of traditional farming practices. Throughout her memoir, she highlights the interconnectedness of environmental and social issues, emphasizing the importance of recognizing the value of indigenous knowledge and traditional practices.

Maathai's and Shiva's memoirs explore the connections between their personal lives and the larger social and environmental issues they care about. In doing so, they contribute to the ecofeminist movement by raising awareness about the importance of sustainability, social justice, and gender equality, as well as the development of a new literary subgenre: the ecofeminist memoir. This subgenre combines personal narratives with ecofeminist values of environmental and social justice. Moreover, the form, content, and messages in their memoirs are very similar and interconnected, creating a powerful dialogue between personal experiences and larger socio-political issues. The ecofeminist memoir, therefore, is an important genre as it offers a unique perspective on the intersections between gender, race, class, and the environment. Thus, said subgenre is not only a form of personal expression but also a means of political resistance and activism. By emphasizing these connections, Maathai and Shiva offer an alternative way of understanding the world and their place in it: one that is rooted in the personal experiences of women and marginalized communities.

All in all, *Unbowed* and *Terra Viva* provide a powerful message of hope, as Maathai's and Shiva's personal storytelling about activism and environmentalism can inspire readers to take action for positive social and environmental change. By demonstrating the connections of form, content, and message in ecofeminist memoirs, we can appreciate how personal narratives can serve to explore larger social and environmental issues and foster social and environmental justice. Life writing has the power to connect diverse people and provide a deeper understanding of human experience, and ecofeminist memoirs can help building bridges towards a more just and equitable world.

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