

AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE MASCULINITY IN OUSMANE SEMBENE'S *GOD'S BITS OF WOOD*

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Abstract

Masculinity studies have focused almost exclusively on masculinity performed by men. This paper focuses on masculinity produced by female bodies in Sembene Ousmane's novel *God's Bits of Wood*. It examines the techniques that Sembene uses to bring out the masculine qualities in females in colonial West Africa. The paper further explores roles assigned to women characters and how females deliver the oppressed and exploited masses that include railway workers and their families. The paper deploys Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Judith Halberstam's theory of female masculinity to bring out the representation of female masculinity in the novel. The depiction of masculine females (which is an acknowledgment of women's contribution to society) may serve to change the negative attitudes towards females.

Key words: Masculinity, female masculinity, Sembene Ousmane, *God's Bits of Wood*.

Introduction

The interest of most masculinity studies is in men only, focusing almost exclusively on masculinity performed by men. Halberstam (1998) laments that scholars have shown "absolutely no interest in masculinity without men" (p. 13). This paper focuses on masculinity produced by female bodies in Sembene Ousmane's most acclaimed novel *God's Bits of Wood* (1962). It examines ways in which the novel has portrayed masculine qualities in female bodies during colonial times. The paper explores the roles assigned to women characters, and which roles deliver the oppressed and exploited railway workers and their families. The paper uses Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Judith Halberstam's theory of female masculinity, and Lindsay and Miescher's arguments to bring out the representation of female masculinity in Sembene's novel.

Masculinity has been defined as "of or characteristic of men" and when applied to women, "having qualities considered appropriate to a man" (Barber, 1998, p. 888). However, Berger, Wallis, and Watson (1995), in their introduction to *Constructing Masculinity*, insist that masculinity is multiple and that "far from just being about men, the idea of masculinity engages, inflects, and shapes every one" (p. 7). In the same book, Sedgwick (1995), in her essay "Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity," proposes that masculinity may have little to do with men. She says, "Like men, I as a woman am also

a producer of masculinities and a performer of them" (p. 13). In other words, masculine qualities may be expressed by male bodies and female bodies alike. Sedgwick, however, does not give examples to illustrate her statement, and neither do the other essays in the same volume give case studies on female masculinity, even though they hint at it in the introduction. Lindsay and Miescher (2003) note that female masculinity means "women's attainment of positions or characteristics usually regarded as the preserve of men" (p. 5).

Halberstam (1998) notes that "heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies" (p. 2). In studying masculinity outside the male sphere, she gives examples of female and lesbian masculinity in fiction, film, and lived experience. She argues that in female masculinity appearance is very important, though she adds that it is not only about how one looks. Masculine women experience their masculinity as an "internal identity effect." She refutes the notion of reserving masculinity for people with male bodies and denying it to those with female bodies (Halberstam, 1998, p. 269).

Halberstam (1998) gives an example of "butch theater" – a queer performance art piece called "You're Just Like My Father," by Peggy Shaw. Shaw represents female masculinity as a staging of the reorganization of family dynamics via the butch daughter. Shaw's character moves easily back and forth between various personae: She is involved in masculine activities such as boxing; "she is a crooner,



the soldier, the breadwinner, the Romeo, the patriarch” (p. 32).

Devor (1989) examines female masculinity in fifteen women who lived with gender blending. The women had been mistaken for males from childhood through to their teen years and adulthood. Their physical characteristics, which were socially defined as masculine, contributed to this misrecognition. Some of the women appeared masculine to the public because they assumed the dress code, the haircuts (most of them maintained short hair), facial hair, low-pitched speaking voices, height and muscular bodies of men. Others defined themselves by playing male roles in games even when they were children.

The film *Set It Off* (1996) represents black butchness. It is about four black women who become robbers in response to overwhelming social injustice, and discrimination. Queen Latifah, who acts as Cleopatra Simms – a butch lesbian with a girlfriend, “is a loudmouthed, bullying, tough, criminal butch. Her depiction of black female masculinity plays into stereotypical conceptions of black women as less feminine than white femininity, but it also rearranges the terms of the stereotype. Latifah successfully exploits the association between blackness and violent masculinity” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 29).

From the foregoing discussion, it can be safely asserted that female masculinity in the West has been described in terms of female looks or appearance – butch, drug king, trans-gendered man. It has been tied to lesbianism, with emphasis on the physical body and appearance. This paper is concerned with non-lesbian female masculinities. The paper therefore loosely defines female masculinity as a performance of masculinity by female bodies that take up behavior or characteristics commonly considered masculine, for instance, show of strength, courage, aggressiveness, leadership, assertiveness, dominance, and violence (Abele, 2003). Butler (1990) says that gender is not fixed on a woman’s body or a man’s body but rather articulated by an individual’s performance of gender. She asserts that we ‘do’ gender. “Gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always doing, though not doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Butler, 1990, p. 34). Thus, what we do creates our gender identity.

Analysis of Female Masculinity in the Novel

The female masculinities presented by Ousmane Sembene in the novel are not defined by mere outward appearance but by unconventional female behavior. Moreover, all his female characters are heterosexual and not lesbian. Ousmane’s adult female characters become masculine in a variety of ways: they work and become breadwinners; they are courageous and assertive leaders, and aggressive fighters, yet they remain dutiful wives and mothers who conform to the expectations of women. Their masculinity is more than a social construct or an innate biological characteristic; these women take on masculine identities out of necessity.

Ousmane Sembene, unlike most male African writers, depicts females with masculine behavior and attitudes. In *God’s Bit of Wood*, Ad’jibid’ji (Ibrahim Bakayoko’s nine or ten-year old daughter) comes close to Devor’s and Halberstam’s kind of female masculinity. She is raised as if she were a boy. The narrator testifies to her being physically active: “She helped with the work of the house, and she ran the errands, but there were moments, such as this when Assitan would have preferred to have a son” (Sembene, 1962, p. 6). We are told Ibrahim Bakayoko takes her to meetings of the men to learn. Niakoro, the grandmother, however, is not happy with the way Ad’jibid’ji hangs out with men instead of engaging in something more feminine. Ad’jibid’ji eschews any interest in typical female pastimes. Niakoro accuses her of not even knowing “how to prepare *couscous*. That’s what comes of always hanging about with the men, instead of staying beside your mother, where you belong” (p. 5).

Halberstam (1998) observes that *tomboyism*, which is an “extended childhood period of female masculinity” and which is evident in Ad’jibid’ji, is “tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent; however, as soon as puberty begins, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl” (pp. 5, 6). Niakoro does not want Ad’jibid’ji to interfere with the onset of adolescent femininity. Ad’jibid’ji, the boyish girl, tells her grandfather, Fa Keita, however, that she has “to start learning what it means to be a man” (Sembene, 1962, p. 97) and this is why she attends men’s meetings. Moreover, she wants to grow up and have a masculine job; she aspires to be a driver of a train, just like her father (p. 97). It can be concluded that Bakayoko’s father-figure activities influence her tomboyism. She confesses that Bakayoko, her “little father” always used to take her with him to men’s

meetings (Sembene, 1962, p. 4).

Traditionally, men are breadwinners; they provide food and shelter for their families as exclusive or primary wage earners (Wood, 2008). Indeed, work is an important area in the performance of masculinity. Work grants men power, influence, and money. In her study, Rubin (2001) notes that work is a factor by which men define themselves and, by all accounts, a test of their masculinity. Men seek out jobs so that they can provide for the family and earn respect. In the text under study, female masculinity is presented in women who turn into breadwinners on account of the workers' strike. Originally, it is the employed men, as wage-earners, who provided for their families. Their demand to improve the welfare of their families prompts the strike. They demand an increase in salaries, an introduction of family allowances and a pension for the black workers. Mamadou Keita, the old one, admits that they have a trade but it does not bring them what it should. They therefore vote to go on strike so that they can "live decently" (Sembene, 1962, p. 8). The workers also push for family allowances which have been denied them on the pretext that if they earn more they would only marry more wives. During her unprecedented address to members of her community, Penda, the prostitute, announces that for them as women "this strike still means the possibility of a better life tomorrow" (Sembene, 1962, p. 187). She thus drums up support for the original breadwinners.

During the strike, when the men could no longer be the providers, the women took over this responsibility. We are told when "foodstuffs were gone, the meager savings eaten up, and there was no money in the house" (Sembene, 1962, p. 33), the men "would seek the arms of his wife, without thinking, or caring whether she was the first or the third. And seeing the burdened shoulders, the listless walk, the women became conscious that a change was coming for them as well" (pp. 33-34). The strike brought "forth a new breed of women" (p. 34). Ramatoulaye observes that "the men know it, too, but they go away in the morning and don't come back until the night has come and they do not see ... Being the head of a family is a heavy burden – too heavy for a woman" (p. 69). The narrator says:

Since the beginning of the strike Ramatoulaye had become more withdrawn, and perhaps more stern. There was no longer time for gossiping. Her responsibilities had

become very great, because the house of which she was the eldest was large: there were no less than twenty of 'God's bits of wood' (Sembene, 1962, p. 40).

Ramatoulaye had been to Hadrame the shopkeeper to get rice on credit, but had been denied it and advised to tell their men to go back to work.

Referring to men, Mame Sofi says: "Before this, they thought they owned the earth just because they fed us, and now it is the women who are feeding them" (p. 48). "The wives of the strikers roam the villages in the countryside to search for food" (p. 103). Assitan explains to her mother-in-law that "she and other women have to walk to a market at Goume to buy food and they hope to be back in three or four days time because of the long distance" (p. 98). Women exercise some degree of authority and independence. Despite the hard and difficult life, the women persevere and continue supporting their husbands and children.

Bem discusses gendered qualities and lists "acts as a leader" as a masculine attribute (1974, p. 157). Penda, the alleged prostitute, assumes a masculine role in mobilizing and leading the women to march from Thies to Dakar. She conceives the idea of creating a "committee of women" (Sembene, 1962, p. 160) and it is she who leads them on the march. Penda, who "from her earliest childhood ... had demonstrated a resolute independence which only increased as she grew up" (p. 138), addresses a crowd of strikers and their women; this audacity was unprecedented. She transcends the limits levied against women. The narrator says that "it was the first time in living memory that a woman had spoken in public in Thies, and even the onslaught of night could not still the arguments" (p. 187). She firmly says:

I speak in the name of all the women, to tell you what they have decided to do. Yesterday we all laughed together, men and women, and today we weep together, but for us women this strike still means the possibility of a better life tomorrow. We owe it to ourselves to hold up our heads and not to give in now. So we have decided that tomorrow we will march together to Dakar (Sembene, 1962, p. 187).

After the committee members had agreed on the women's march to Dakar, Penda was charged with ensuring that no accompanying males bothered the women. The women gathered the following morning,



at dawn, and left under Penda's watchful command. During the march, Penda encourages and coerces the weary stragglers to walk on as they brave the harsh climate and the long journey. At some point, during the march, she gets violent and beats up the stubborn women whose resolve was slackening; she becomes so irritated by Awa's unkind remarks that she hurls herself at Awa: "Her fists were as hard as a man's, and she hammered at the other woman's face and stomach until she stumbled and fell against the foot of a tree, screaming with pain and fear" (p. 201). This violent, aggressive behavior reflects the only way she knew how to be in a position of authority.

In addition, as they approach the suburbs of Dakar, they are told of soldiers stationed at the entrance of the city who would not allow the women to enter. However, while other women are gripped with fear, Penda climbs up a little slope and announces: "The soldiers can't eat us! [...] They can't even kill us; there are too many of us! Don't be afraid – our friends are waiting for us in Dakar! We'll go on!" (203). The women-marchers then move on. When they approach the soldiers, they are told by the captain, "Go back to Thies women! We cannot let you pass!" Penda defiantly retorts, "We will pass if we have to walk on the body of your mother" (204). She comes out as assertive and defiant like any man. The soldiers are pushed back by the wall of people and, unfortunately, when shots are fired, Penda is shot together with a man called Samba N'Doulougou. Her temerity cost her her life, but she became a hero and a martyr whose untimely death galvanized other women. Penda's assertiveness is further seen when she violently protests against sexual harassment in the union office. The narrator says that "one day, when one of the workmen had stupidly patted her on the behind, she gave him a resounding smack. A woman slapping a man in public was something no one had ever seen before" (Sembene, 1962, p. 143).

In the novel, other women's masculinity is also defined by courage, strength, aggression and violence. Violence is a pillar of the stereotypical construction of masculinity. It is widely believed to be a male issue. Women in this novel exhibit an aggressive masculinity. During the battle in Thies between workers and the soldiers, Dieynaba, a market woman, bravely "rallied the women of the market place, and like a band of Amazons they came to the rescue, armed with clubs, with iron bars, and bottles" (p. 22) to fight off the soldiers. Dieynaba shames the cowering Bachirou; she

refers to him as a 'coward' as she hands him a rock to throw at the soldiers. Bachirou's cowardice suggests that masculinity does not lie in the body but rather in one's behavior or character traits, such as bravery. Essentialist notions of gender indicate that bravery is associated with men while cowardice is associated with women. But gender is performative. So, women can be just as manly as men.

Courage and violence in women is further displayed in the character of Ramatoulaye. In an article published in 2008, Agho and Oseghale called her a "patriarch" who "has an element of masculinity in her" (p. 609). When she is told that Vendredi, Mabigüe's ram, has spilled their food in such times of starvation, she sends for a knife. She then struggles with the ram and finally slaughters it to the astonishment of the other women and children. She tells the women present:

When you know that the life and the spirit of others depend on your life and your spirit, you have no right to be afraid – even when you are terribly afraid. In the cruel times we are living through we must find our own strength, somehow, and force ourselves to be hard (Sembene, 1962, p. 69).

As a result of Ramatoulaye's act, Mabigüe notifies the police. Meanwhile, Mame Sofi advises the other women: "Let us get ready to receive them" (p. 69). She begins to fill an empty bottle with sand and the others soon get busy, copying her. When the policemen go to arrest Ramatoulaye and to take away the meat, she (Ramatoulaye) courageously and defiantly tells the police officer: "I know Vendredi does not leave here. He ate our rice; I killed him. The children were hungry; Vendredi ate the children's rice. I'll come with you, but Vendredi does not come. Vendredi will be eaten" (p. 74). She then rebukes some women for weeping about as if someone had passed away. Many women who knew Ramatoulaye as an "unsuspecting and gentle woman, one who never argued or spoke badly of her neighbors," wondered "where she had found this new strength" and where this violent behavior had been born" (p. 74). The narrator answers this question thus: "it had been born beside a cold fireplace, in an empty kitchen" (p. 74).

As the police officer discusses with Ramatoulaye, the other women begin to brandish their sand-filled bottles, flatirons and clubs of all shapes and sizes, as they also encircle the policemen. They all adopt masculine identities when they acquire the crude

weapons for protection and aggression. In the streets, more policemen and soldiers have arrived a battle ensues. "The commotion spread instantly to the courtyard. Mame Sofi, Bineta, and Houdia M'Baye led the attack, and the rest of the women followed, seizing upon anything that could be used as a weapon" (p. 75). The policemen are overcome in this battle by the big numbers of women. Some women, happy with their victory, form themselves into little groups and begin to patrol the streets of the neighborhood, armed with their sand-filled bottles. In defense of their homes and meager possessions, the women adopt the aggressive behavior which is traditionally associated with men, and forsaking all signs of weakness become the protectors of their villages while the men are away.

Mame Sofi and a group of women courageously and violently raid Hadji Mabigue's home. They disregard the servants' pleas not to enter the premises. Mame Sofi hits one servant in the forehead with a bottle and beckons the others: "Come with me –we'll see what's in the kitchen" (110). While the other women ransack the house for food, Mame Sofi chides: "Mabigue! ... come out! Come out if you are a man! You only have courage when you're hiding behind the *toubabs!* You made them close down the fountains; now come out here and see if you are man enough to make me close my mouth!" (p. 110). She challenges him to prove his masculinity against hers and that of her followers who are told to carry away everything that can be eaten. Mame Sofi's actions also show that she can put prudish behavior aside if need be; during the battle with the policemen, she is reported to have grabbed a soldier's private parts and asked Ramatoulaye to piss in the soldier's mouth. When Mame Sofi revels in beating men, she shows that she is not intimidated by authority and that in fact she has no respect for power that does not serve the people.

Moreover, when the "spahis" (soldiers on horses) attack at night for a renewed battle, the women ingenuously seek to fight back with fire to scare away the horses. Many women collect straw and live coals and embers. They then line up in the street to wait for a signal from Mame Sofi before attacking. Pandemonium breaks out when the shouting women throw sheaves of flaming straw at the horsemen. The narrator states:

Mame Sofi and her group of women pulled the leader of the platoon from his horse, and when they had him on the ground they dragged him by his boots to a little ditch where the people of the neighborhood relieved themselves at

night and thrust his head in the accumulated filth (Sembene, 1962, pp. 113-114).

The women's ingenuity and quick thinking, however, backfires as the fire accidentally gets to the workers' hovels and burns down a number of homes.

Earlier on in the novel, Mame Sofi had already been presented as an intimidating woman, exuding a violent masculinity in her confrontation with a water carrier. The tall man, a Toecouleur, empties his jug into Mame Sofi's vessel and she tells him to come back another day for his money. The man protests that he does not sell his water on credit and stands there to demand his money. Mame Sofi repeatedly tells him that he will not be paid that day, but he insists on payment, so "Mame Sofi slapped him hard across the face" (p. 56) as she screamed for help. The water carrier flees, leaving behind his torn shirt and a jug. Mame Sofi and other women feel victorious. They had been able to get some much needed water and they were not intimidated by the man's menacing persistence.

Conclusion

The female protagonists in the text take on masculine roles because the situation at hand demands it. However, these women do not abandon their feminine roles; they still wash, mend clothes, and cook, even after the famous march to Dakar (Sembene, 1962, p. 242). The text suggests that the behaviours perceived "masculine" have nothing to do with one's sex; they are social constructs that can be taken on by females and males alike. Moreover, these aggressive women are not confined to literary texts only but are found in real life as well as observed by Professor Egara Kabaji who takes the position that today's "women are encroaching into male territory and are redefining themselves as assertive, independent and willing to take risks" (Kabaji, 2016, p.19).

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