



WOMEN AS AGENTS OF POSITIVE CHANGE: A FEMINIST READING OF SEMBENE OUSMANE'S GOD'S BITS OF WOOD

Ejih, Sunday (PhD)
Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa
sundayejih@gmail.com
08068280776

Ebiloma, Moses Samson
GSE Department,
Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa
08037282209

Obaka, Monday
Theatre Arts Department,
Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa
08067075676

Abstract

This paper is an analysis of Sembene Ousmane's portrayal of women as agents of positive change in God's Bits of Wood. It examines critically Ousmane's creative ingenuity in demystifying the myth that women are only fit for the kitchen and reproduction. Sembene Ousmane offers a unique account of women in his work by engaging them in progressive activities. This paper asserts that the work of Ousmane marks a shift from the status quo and an indication that he is a committed feminist writer. The paper equally establishes that his stance offers the needed pretext to make the case for women as agents of positive change in the society. Finally the paper concludes that characterization of women in this novel by Ousmane has created an awareness of the power of the female species as a reliable force in national development. In this perspective, the women can now act, participate in the affairs of the nation and their voices will be heard. In the textual analysis of the chosen text, a feminist approach has been adopted. The study relies on primary and secondary sources. Critical works, mostly from the library and the internet, have provided researcher with information concerning the author. The research is further based on detailed reading and content analysis of selected of Ousmane.

Key words: Feminist, dominance, subjugation, characterization, change.



Introduction

Women have long been portrayed in negative terms over the years in many literary texts, especially those written by men. In the words of Ruth Sheila “as victims of male chauvinism, women are seen as docile, unintelligent, illiterate folks whose voices must not be heard in the assembly of men” (Sheila, 1998). In contemporary African literature, one of the outstanding feminist advocates who through his work, has brought his perspective to bear on the plight of women in Africa, and is Sembene Ousmane. Contrary to the age-long practice in many African cultures where women are destined to play second fiddle to men (as exemplified by the works of Ama Ata Aidoo (1997) and Sembene Ousmane (1966), this author goes out of his way to create a new image for the African woman. He demystifies a popular saying that “A woman has no mouth and must bear her pain and suffering silently” (Lubbungu, 2020). In *God’s Bits of Wood* (1960) Sembene departs from the norm of negative portrayal of women by empowering his female characters in his work. This singular effort of the novelist comes to fore as one examines women as agents of positive change in African novel. His choice of characters contributes immensely to giving impetus to the emancipation of women in traditional African societies.

Ousmane, has touched issues central to the condition of the African woman. He appears to be part of what might be referred to a “movement” that seeks to redress the gender injustice or transformed oppressive gender-relations. However, these restrictions are meant to be fought against through the choice of his female characters who are set to prove a point that given the chance they can stand up to the task of nation building. So, to a large extent, the women in the story do not in any way show themselves as rivals but as partners ready to bring to bear their unique skills as home builders, peace makers, entrepreneurs whose only concern is the quest for harmony and peace at home and, above all, social justice.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses feminism as its theoretical framework. Feminist theory is a sociological theory that analyses the status of women and men in order to empower the female gender; the theory seeks to emancipate the female gender. The feminist believes in the political, social and economic equality of both sexes as they often criticize male supremacy; they fight for equality of women and insist that the female gender should share equally and enjoy the same rights as men. Foremost and leading feminists include Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet and Shulamith Firestone among others.

Feminist writers question the stereotypical roles assigned women by custom and tradition. They do this by allowing the female gender to assume certain roles hitherto reserved for their male counterparts. Women struggle against all odds to be released from the shackles of patriarchal oppression. What the writers often present is a “New Woman,” a feminist ideal that emerged in the nineteenth century. Raising the consciousness of women (empowerment) by feminist writers has changed the notion and behaviour of women, who now feel they can be more relevant



politically and economically. The feminists demonstrate the importance of women in a patriarchal society and reveal that historically women have been subordinate to men. The theory gives a voice to women and highlights the various ways the female gender has contributed to the society.

It is pertinent, at this point, to quickly distinguish between Western feminism and African feminist movement. Western feminists refuse to be mother (radical feminists) because motherhood, the bearing and raising of children, is an obstacle to the fulfillment of feminists' aspirations. Woolf (1919) and later Beauvoir (1949) both called for women's voices to be heard by revolting against false cultural notions about gender which sought to make women inferior to men. In the *Second Sex* published in 1949, de Beauvoir calls on women to break patriarchal construct of women by men by fighting to be 'significant' in society. For Millet (1969), women must revolt against the power centre of culture which is male dominated by breaking down existing structures that tend to see women as passive, meek and weak. In brief, Western feminism then, is, combative revolt oriented and, hence, calls for a destruction of the status quo.

In African feminism is a mixed bag of ideas and theories on the status and role of the African woman in particular, and the universal woman in general. Kolawole Mary (1987) argues that the African woman did not learn about self-assertion from the West, and that

In West Africa, feminism and feminist criticism began in the 1960s with the study of writings of women. The literature emphasized the social and political roles of women in society. It became more pronounced in the 1990s as more women with a liberated voice called for a restructuring of the social order, giving space to women's concerns while emphasizing the positive roles that women can play in nation building. African feminism differs greatly from Western radical, in that its primary goal is to serve as a voice for the voiceless in a culture where the woman is seen as the 'insignificant one.' For Ogundipe, feminism has to do with motherhood; she thus asks women to claim it as strength. Women must make their voices heard because they have a lot to say, notes Mariama Ba (1981). This position is opposed to radical feminists' view on motherhood.

Finally, in this discussion on the theoretical framework, there is need to refer to Lubungu (2020), who thinks that feminism in the African context should entail creating spaces for women to participate in the management of their societies. This involves empowering them through access to resources such as health, education and housing. However, women in Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* do not wait for the opportunity to present itself. They only capitalize on the void created by their male counterparts to make their impact felt in the strike.

The Role of Women in Installing the Desired Social Changes

God's Bits of Wood emanates from a Francophone African background in patriarchal society where the status of women is inextricably linked to culture, politics and economics of the society.



Sembene portrays a polygamous Muslim setting, which brings out the exploitative nature of the male-female relationship in his work. It is from this ideological dungeon that the writer cries loud for every society to take a second look at the role of the feminine gender.

Female empowerment is portrayed in the text where women are empowered to challenge the forces of law and the exploitative agencies of the French government. Ousmane demonstrates that women can function successfully outside their immediate families. They have a more challenging political role to play and are indeed important elements in shaping the environment. He uses his work to promote the image of women. In the words of Chukwukere Gloria (1995):

Ousmane Sembene... demonstrated convincingly that if people are to change, grow and become socially and politically aware, everybody, men and women, must participate in bringing about the new consciousness.... The heroines possess great revolutionary potentials and constitute essential forces through which society aspires to a new order of awareness. They are shown to transcend their traditionally limiting roles to become politically and economically significant. If it is a war or revolution, they operate beside and not behind their male counterparts. (p.80)

Ousmane's tradition Moslem women recognize and question the injustice of their situation and together with their male counterparts, they fight the imperialists. In *God's Bits of Wood*, the revolutionary conscious women play active roles in the demonstration of the rail workers. Ousmane gives his female characters a privileged and dynamic role. The women of Dakar dare the police by marching to the police station to support the heroic Ramatoulaye. Ousmane mirrors the revolutionary conscious Senegalese women in characters like Maimouna, the blind mother of the twins, and Ramatoulaye. Thus, Ousmane, in *God's Bits of Wood* redefines the Female Gender role as demonstrated when Ramatoulaye kills Vendredi, the Whiteman's Ram assuring members of her household of the ram's meat. It is worthy of note that:

The women were on the verge of panic, they scarcely recognized the woman beside them as the Ramatoulaye; they had always known, and they asked themselves where she had found this new strength. She had always been quiet and unassuming and gentle... what was the source of this energy so suddenly unleashed? (*God's Bits of Wood*, 74)

In *God's Bits of Wood*, Ousmane's female characters are so crafted as to convey his vision of an egalitarian socialist society where women are ever ready to step into the shoes of their men folk when the going gets tough. As the writer aptly puts it 'it is the women who wear the trousers in the homes.' (*God's Bits of Wood* 87). The housewives in the novel transform themselves into breadwinners as the strike wears on and the men had nowhere to turn for support. A case in point



is the episode of the courageous housewife who resolves to feed her family in place of her jobless husband. This also depicts the industrious nature of a traditional African woman who can sacrifice her personal comfort and dignity for the family's survival. She is selfless and full of motherly care. She is not ashamed to go begging just to feed the family. All this is worth noting because it underscores the resilience and tenacity of an otherwise unlettered housewife. These qualities of a hitherto unsung hero in the home are those the writer seeks to extol through the episode cited above.

The recognition, though at the later time by the men folk the unique role played by their wives in preserving the family brings to the fore the urgent need for society to rethink its handling of women with a view to giving them their proper place in society. For Ousmane therefore, the strike provides the wake up call to women emancipation.

In *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembene draws readers' attention to the influence and special contribution of women during the 1947-1948 railroad strike in Senegal. Ousmane projects women who are supportive of their striking males especially, when they are a group- the women, who in the words of Chukuma (1989) have "emerged from their cocoon basking free to a mixed reception of surprise and wonder." But at the beginning of the strike, the women appear as mere extensions of their husbands. Awa, for instance, derives her social status from the fact that her husband is a carpenter foreman, and Assitan "lived on the margin of her husband's existence: a life of work, of silence, and of patience." (*God's Bits of Wood*.235)

In the story, Sembene presents women leaders in the midst of a male-oriented society. Sembene defies the stereotype that women cannot be leaders and do not possess organizational capacity through his positive presentation of female characters such as Penda, who announces in support of the men folk that the women will march on to Dakar:

I speak in the name of all women, but I am just the voice they have chosen 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. ... Men, you must allow your wives to come with us! Every woman here who is capable of walking should be with us tomorrow! (*God's Bits of Wood*.185)

Penda, by this speech, has broken the ice. Her role is significant because as a prostitute, she understands that making decisions requires freeing oneself from moral and religious constraints. Like some of our modern Nigerian women politicians, she mobilizes the women and she is the spokesperson in the strike action. She is wearing a soldier's cartridge belt and constantly urging the women forward. When they arrived at the outskirts of Dakar, Penda informs them that, "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 will go on." (*God's Bits of Wood*.142)



As women break out of their cocoon in a patriarchal society, they fight for recognition and dignity. Ousmane portrays this through Penda's behavior who forced even men to respect her:

She came to the union office frequently to help with the work, and 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. (*God's Bits of Wood* p.142)

Similarly, the representation of Mame Sofi, the tough one, as she is referred to, is a clear demonstration of the women's defiance against male chauvinism. Mame is a tough and strong-willed woman who does not fear any man. She tells her husband during the strike, "If you go back to work before the others, I will cut the only thing that makes you a man." (*God's Bits of Wood* p.47)

She has great influence and enjoys popularity and large followers. She is, no doubt, a leader and has organizational abilities like some of the women we know today- Aisha Yesuf and Oby Ezekwesili (both from Nigeria). They have been a voice for women in Nigeria and beyond. Mame organizes the women into a militia to repulse the police, like a general, in total control. Evidently, she is proud of her achievements, "You will see ... the men will consult us before they go out on another strike. Before this, they thought they owned the earth just because they feed us, and now it is the women who are feeding them." (*God's Bits of Wood* p.47)

From this, it is now obvious that the women in this story have spoken for themselves. The role they have played in the strike has proved the fact that they are more than what the male-dominated society thinks they are. To them, nobody within the context of this story would view them as mere sex objects.

Sembene also projects yet another epitome of courage and determination through Maimouna, the blind woman. Maimouna is as committed to the struggle as anybody else. Blindness or the loss of her child does not deter her from pursuing the cause of the strikers. She encourages the fighters with a traditional song, the legend of Goumba in which she calls the valour and power of a female warrior. As Sembene (1960) describes her, she is "the woman who had measured her strengths against that of men." Later, she is accepted as a leader as she marched the women of Thies to Dakar. Maimouna is a healer, a counselor, and somewhat of a spiritual guide for the women.

Ousmane differs in his perception of gender relations within the context of traditional gender roles to show the revolutionary effect of the strike when the men fetch water and walk behind their women marchers. This reversal of gender roles can also be seen through the author's portrayal of Ramatoulaye in the novel. Her personality is ideal for change. Ousmane depicts Ramatoulaye as a head of her compound. She is entrusted to take care of all the affairs in the compound. Case F. at this point opines that, "the men have simply abandoned their role" (p.284). For Ramatoulaye her primary responsibility now is to provide food for her family. In fact, she is



accountable for everyone in the family, “you’ve been eating dirt again, HoudiaM’Baye said.’ ‘I am hungry,’ the child screamed, bursting into tears. ‘Wait until Ramatoulaye returns- you will all have something to eat ...’” (p.51).

As a result of the strike, family roles have been reversed. Women here are now providers and homemakers. No longer is the father the head of the family, the woman is. So, Ramatoulaye must take up that responsibility. Ramatoulaye handles the tasks well as she is accountable to a whole compound. Though visited with opposition and intimidation from her brother, El HadjMabique the selfish, self-righteous devout Muslim, Ramatoulaye is not moved. She is willing to battle her brother, his well-fed goat, and the police if it meant ensuring peace, safety, and comfort for her family.

Ad’jibbji is another female character who stands out in the rank and file of leadership during the strike action. She is capable of distinguishing between good and evil, between justice and injustice. She is portrayed as a message courier between her home and the dragnet of the police during the strike. This, perhaps, is why Moore (1985) describes her as “a prototype of a new woman. Ad’jibbji stands out as a symbolic representation of the new African woman, brought up in a new world, who has ideas which she can express without fear, and to whom many a woman will aspire. Sembene’s representation of Ad’jibidji as one who believes so much in what her father says, and her attending the striking workers’ meeting seems to suggest that she represents the future of an African liberated woman.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that in *God’s Bits of Wood*, Sembene has, to a great extent, demystified the myth that women are only fit for the kitchen and reproduction. His characters like Ramatoulaye, Mame Sofi, Houdia M’baye, Penda, among others, wield the reality of power, especially during the strike of the railroad workers. The wives of the railroad workers in the story quickly filled in the void left by their incapacitated husbands. The author’s portrait of Penda, the prostitute as apolitical activist raises a degraded woman to respectability. Through this, Sembene suggests that women should not be viewed as weak entities and as sexual objects. Similarly, the projection of Maimouna, the blind woman, as an epitome of courage and determination is a powerful expression that disability is not inability. Neither her blindness nor the loss of her child affects her commitment to the cause of the strikers. The study asserts strongly that the role of women, especially during the success of the strike has eventually changed the past misconceptions about women. Finally, the paper reveals that the women are, indeed, satisfied with their participation in the struggle- with it, a new era has dawned for them. In this perspective, they can now act, participate in the affairs of the nation and their voices will be heard. Penda, the prostitute, no doubt, stands out of all women as symbols of change in patriarchal society. Now that women are aware of their situations and the discoveries of their potentials; it will prompt them to struggle an improved status. This consciousness represents a breakthrough in the ancient role patterns.



References

- Aidoo, A.A. (1997). *The girl who can and other stories*. Sub-Saharan Publishers.
- Anand, M.R. (1981). *Gauri*. Amold Heinemann.
- Ba, M. (1981). *La fonction politique des literatures africaines ecrites, Ecriture africaine dans le monde, No. 3, 6*
- Beauvoir, D. S. (1949). *The second sex*. Knopf Inc.
- Chukuma, H. (1998). Positivism and the female crisis: The novels of Buchi Emecheta. In H. Otokunfor & O. Nwodo (Eds.). *Nigerian Female Writers: A Critical Perspective*. Malthouse Press Ltd.
- Ellmann, M. (1984). Blanche. In J. Hawthorn (ed.). *Criticism and Critical Theory*. Arnold, 99-110
- Case, F. (1981). Worker's movements: Revolution and women's consciousness in God's bits of wood. *Canadian Journal of African Studies/ Revue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines*, 5 (2), 277-292.
- Lubbungu, J. (2020). Images of women in God's bits of wood: The perspective of sex role stereotype. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation*, 7, 11, 2321-2705.
- Millet, C. (1970). *Sexual politics*. Doubleday.
- Moore, G. (1962). *The seven African writers*. Oxford University Press.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, M. (1994). *Recreating ourselves: African womanhood and critical transformation*. African World Press.
- Ruth, S. (1998). *Issues in feminis: An introduction to women studies (4th Edition)*. Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Rutherford, A. [Ed.] (1993). *Unbecoming daughters of the Empire*. Kanjaroo.
- Schulman, K. (1982). Dancing in the revolutions: Emma Goldman's feminism. *Socialist Review*, 85-104.
- Sembene, O. (1960). *God's bits of wood*. Heinemann.
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A room of one's own*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.