

Solidarity of Men and Women in Class Struggle in Sembebe Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi WA Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*

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ABSTRACT

Class struggle has been a pertinent issue in Literature. Literary texts have always presented conflicts between the oppressed and the oppressor. These conflicts emerge as the oppressed group try to free themselves from the yoke of oppression. While the struggle for a better society used to be carried out by men because they were believed to be brave and strong, women joined them. When this occurred, they work as a united team to complement each other in liberating the society. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine how solidarity of men and women triggers class struggle in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*. The texts under study were selected because their thematic content is largely based on class struggle. The analysis was done using Marxism theory which urges the oppressed group to rise and unite so that they can demand for what belongs to them. This tenet was employed in the study to examine how men and women have not only risen but also united to complement each other in the struggle. The study went further to examine the changes that occur in the novels under study when men and women work together to demand for better working conditions and developments. The researcher used qualitative approach in data analysis because the data from the texts under study was non-numerical. The study is significant because it provides an insight on how the unity of men and women can trigger class struggle.

Key words: Class Struggle, Solidarity, Complementarity, Gender, Conflict

INTRODUCTION

Class struggle not only occurred in the human history but is still witnessed even today. The history of all the society is about class struggle (Bedford, 2022). Class struggle also known as class conflict entails the struggle of the proletariat or lower class against the bourgeoisie. The dispute between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is a common issue in the modern society. The conflict emerges as the oppressed demand for what has been accumulated by the oppressor. The African literature has continued to map out the cultural and political consciousness as part of the whole project of liberating the oppressed people from harsh realities and conditions created by neocolonialism and imperialism ((Williams, 2019).

The confrontation between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is evident through events such as strikes of the workers. Such confrontations are found in works of the writers such as Ngugi and Sembene. Ngugi's literary works give an account of the Kenyan people during the struggle for independence as people fought to liberate themselves from the bondage of the white man. He presents the Mau-Mau struggle which was the culmination of resistance of the oppressive rule of the colonizer. Ngugi also presents the struggle of the Kenyan people upon the attainment of independence. For Ngugi, the struggle for a better society did not end with the attainment of independence for people still suffer because of poor leadership, corruption, dictatorship among other issues. Like Ngugi, Sembene in *God's Bits of Wood* presents conflict between the railway workers and the Europeans in

Senegal. The African people struggle to enjoy various benefits that are enjoyed by the European workers in the same railway company.

While women used to be presented voiceless and inactive people in the society, Ngugi and Sembene demonstrate that struggle for a better society require complementarity of men and women. Women do no work under men but with men to an extent of taking the frontline in the struggle with men behind them something that is new in the African society. Both Ngugi and Sembene in *Petals of Blood* and *God's Bits of Wood* respectively present women characters as agents of the struggle for liberation. Men and women work interdependently by supporting each other so that the struggle can be successful. The aim of this study therefore is to examine how gender complementarity enhance class struggle in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*.

Objective

The aim of the study is to examine how gender complementarity enhances class struggle in Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*.

Research Question

How does gender complementarity enhance class struggle in Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*?

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Marxism theory that has continued to influence literary works. According to Eagleton (2006), Marxist literary criticism is based on the ideas and the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Karl Marx advocated for struggle against injustice. Together with Friedrich Engels, they supported the struggle of the oppressed to liberate themselves from oppression. Perry (2021) argues that Marx saw human history as a source of struggles between classes, the oppressor and the oppressed. Karl Marx, through his writings expresses his thoughts on the misery and sorrow of the exploited group. He argues that social change can be possible through a struggle of the exploited against the exploiters. For liberty and freedom, the workers should start a revolution. The workers fight the capitalist class because of the challenges of low wages, unemployment and bad working conditions tend to increase their misery. Marxists trigger the spirit of revolution by calling people to rise and unite so that they can take back all that belong to them (Ngara, 1985). This tenet is applied in this study to explore how Ngugi and Ousmane have presented solidarity between men and women in the endless struggle to dismantle dictatorship, corruption, neo-colonialism and oppression that stand in the way of a better African continent.

METHODOLOGY

The method of collecting and analyzing data in this study was basically textual analysis of Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*. Purposive sampling was used because it guides the researcher to identify the specific portions of the novel that are related to objective of the study.

Solidarity of Men and Women in Class Struggle

According to Marxism theory, the oppressed people should arise and unite in making demand on what they have been denied (Brown and Brown, 2019). Ngugi presents conscious people who are vigilant so that they can benefit from the government. In *Petals of Blood*, the people of Ilmorog have been sidelined by the government institutions and political class. This calls for the need for both men and women to come together to demand for their unalienable rights. They decide to go to the city to demand developments a thing that they had never done before, "It would be the first time that they would be demanding anything from him...." (p.145). The fact that it is their first time to demand for anything from their Member of Parliament implies that the people of Ilmorog have become conscious about their wellbeing as a community. They are annoyed of their Member of Parliament and the government because they pay taxes but they do not receive any developments, "They send others who come every now and then to take taxes," (p.118). Apart from paying taxes that does not help them, the people of Ilmorog contributes money for installing water as requested by their Member of Parliament. When the Member

of Parliament collects the money, he never comes back, “The MP also came once and made us give two shillings each for Harambee. Have we seen him since?” (p. 118). The irresponsibility of the Member of Parliament annoys people of Ilmorog to an extent that they decide to walk a hazardous journey to meet him. Men and women from Ilmorog trek to the city as a united force.

Marxists argue that the working class should start a revolution to liberate themselves from oppression (Davidson, 2020). This suggests that the oppressed group should speak and demand for change in the society so that they can have a just society. In Sembene’s *God’s Bits of Wood*, class struggle is revealed through the railway workers who start a strike to demand for fair working conditions. The solidarity of men and women is evident during the plan for the strike as the meeting is attended by both men and women. Sembene presents men and women who are united to free themselves from injustices and mistreatment. Women attend the meetings of the strike so that they can have a voice as the decisions are being made. Bakayoko goes with Ad’jibid’ji to then men’s meeting about strike. She attests that Bakayoko, her “little father” always used to take her with him to men’s meetings. (p. 4). It can be argued that when men and women plan for the strike, they are able to make decisions upon listening to the opinions from both men and women. It can also be argued that the cooperation and interdependence between men and women makes the plans for the strike effective.

Gender complementarity create a space for women to contribute to class struggle, (Dill, 2024). Dill suggest that when men and women work together, women are able to take part in the liberation of the society. Ngugi reveals that the trek to the city entails unity of men and women where women play a great role as they complement each other. Through Nyakinyua, Ngugi reveals the contribution of women in class struggle. She is determined to ensure that they have a successful journey to the city so that their society can change. She encourages people not to lose hope when they get thirsty and hungry as the writer puts it, “Nyakinyua encouraged them after they had rested a bit, pointing out that they were bound to find water and wild fruits further up the slopes,” (p. 146). Her words of hope to the people of Ilmorog trigger them to continue with the trek optimistically. Ngugi also displays solidarity of men and women when Nyakinyua refuses to ride the cart and walks with men just like Abdulla although she is old. “Where did she get the strength, this old woman who, like Abdulla, had refused a ride in the cart?” (p. 146). Nyakinyua’s decision of walking with other people boasts the trek as she encourages other people who might lose hope because the journey is long. Ngugi reveals that women are determined to work with men despite their so that they can change the society.

Gender complementarity calls for unity between men and women when a problem arises (Olusola, 2025). This implies that men and women should work as united team to solve problems in the society. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi presents men and women who are united to solves problems that they encounter so that the trek to the city can be successful. When the donkey that is pulling the cart keep slipping in the slopes. Men and women push it for them to continue with the journey. “Munira, Karega and Wanja helped push the cart, and this way, panting and sweating, they eventually came to the top and joined the tamarc road,” (p 147). This reveals their determination to arrive at the city to demand their share of developments that their Member of Parliament had promised them during campaigns such as water and better roads. Ngugi shows that the trek to city is a communal affair that is triggered by unity of men and women. The success of their trek is as a result of solidarity where the characters, men and women, embrace humanism that calls for solidarity which is a pivotal wheel in the African communities.

The political class tend to assume the role of decision making with the members of the society at the receiving end (Scharpf, 2019). This argument implies that the leaders become omniscient about the interests of the people hence they do not consult them at any time. Ngugi presents men and women who are united to end dominance of people by the leaders. In *Petals of Blood*, the Member of Parliament make decisions for the people of Ilmorog without involving them. He then sends his messengers to inform them on what they should do. In solidarity, men and women oppose the message of their Member of Parliament where they are urged to go to Gatundu to sing and enjoy tea. Ruoro stands up and answers back:

Where was Gatundu? Why would anybody want Ilmorog people to go and drink tea? How come that out there they were threatened by other tribes? Had they piled enough property as to excite envy from other tribes? Here, people were threatened by lack of water; lack of road; lack of hospitals. But what really was expected of them? (p. 87).

Ruoro is supported by women who are led by Nyakinyua, "...did he mean that they had to pay all that in order to go and sing and drink tea? (p. 87). The messengers try to calm the violent men and women by promising them free transport upon paying twelve shillings but Nyakinyua opposes the idea. She says, "You are worse than a tax gatherer.... twelve shillings and fifty cents! From what hole are we to dig up the money? Why should we pay to sing/ Go back and tell them this: here we need water, not songs? We need food." (p. 87). Nyakinyua words imply that people need to be consulted on what should be done the government instead of being made passive members yet they pay taxes. Women take the entire event and appear to enjoy it. Some of them make threatening cries and a slight commotion ensues. "Let us pull out their penises and see if they are really men," one woman shouted, (p. 87). The messengers are chased away by the angry men and women. Ngugi demonstrates that the people of Ilmorog, men and women are united to oppose decision of the leaders that do not favour them. To him, people refuse to be at the receiving end. He presents men and women who are determined to fight for development as opposed to unimportant things such as tea. Ruoro and Nyakinyua are used to display how men and women fearlessly oppose the decisions that are not beneficial.

Sembene reveals that solidarity of men and women through men who work under women to support them they decide to fight for freedom and justice. He changes the view that it is men who should be in forefront in the struggle with women behind them. This evident throughout the march of women to Dakar as men follow them with bicycles so that they can carry those who may be unable to walk. "The men of the little escort followed at some distance behind women, and several of them had brought bicycles in the event that they should be needed," (p. 190). When women get tired or sick on the way, men place them on the bicycles and carry them as the journey continues.

Boubacar, some of the men will have to carry the women who are sick, she said, pointing at Awathe weeping Yacine, and Seni, who was now sitting up, with her head resting calmly on Maimouna's shoulder, next to that of the baby sleeping on her mother's back. The men lifted her from the ground and installed her on the seat of a bicycle, where they could support her as they pushed it along (p. 199).

Women appreciate the support of men in the march and describe them good. "The men have been good, though. Did you see how the smith was sweating while he was carrying Awa?" (p. 201). This reveals that men are of great value to women as they are their backbone during the march. It can be deduced that the support given to women by men empowers them to soldier on with the journey. A conclusion can be made this strengthens class struggle as women are able to arrive at Dakar to address their issues to *toubabs*.

Police officers tend to arrest and oppress people who fight to free themselves from oppressive and discriminative leadership (Cooper, 2021). Such police officers are used by the oppressing bodies to silence those who fight for change. While the aim of police brutality is to maim people who fight for change, Ngugi presents men and women who are united to end mistreatment of freedom fighters by the police officers. When Karega is arrested, men and women confront the police officers as they demand for his release. They march to the police station to face the police officers as the writer reports, "Within a few hours, word had spread. The workers in a hostile mood marched towards the police station demanding his release," (p.4). The courage of men and women to storm the police station is triggered by their solidarity. The angry men and women denounce the exploitation of people by police officers, "Out with foreign rule policed by colonized blackskins! Out with exploitation of our sweat!" (p. 4). Ngugi also demonstrates that the police fear the solidarity of men and women. This is evident through the fact that the police do not use violence to disband the protesters but urge them to peacefully disband. "Please, disband" appealed the officer desperately. "Disband yourself ..." (p.4). Ngugi implies that gender complementarity triggers the struggle for justice as the perpetrators of injustices and oppression tend to fear united men and women.

Sembene manifest the support of women to men during the confrontation of the police and the strikers. When the oppressed fight for change, the oppressor tends to use police to maim them. Since the police officers have guns, they tend to overpower the masses. This hinders the fight for change in the society. In *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembene reveals that gender complementarity empowers the strikers as they confront the police. When the African men workers are overpowered by the police, some of them opt to retreat perhaps due to lack of objects such as stones which are their weapons. Women providing them with objects that they can throw at the armed soldiers. Dieynaba provides a rock to Bachirou who is about to withdraw from the fight. "Where are you going,

coward?" she said, handing him a rock to throw; but he just stammered something and ran off again (p. 23). Although she blames him for cowardice, it can be inferred that he withdraws because he had exhausted his materials. For Sembene, the strike cannot be effective without contribution of women. Women are presented as facilitators of the strike and source of courage for men as they discourage men who are cowards during the strike. It can be argued that the empowerment of men by women through provision of objects to men by women can trigger the struggle as men are able to continue with struggle without running of the objects.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi presents characters in relation to Marxism ideology that urges the proletariat to develop class consciousness so that they can unite in their fight against the bourgeoisie (Wekesa et al., 2020). To Ngugi, change cannot be achieved without struggle. Nyakinyua calls for solidarity by urging the whole community, men, women and children, to get together and fight for the land. "Nyakinyua, the old woman, tried to fight back. She tramped from hut to hut calling on the peasants of Ilmorog to get together and fight out...she tried to convince them that all these were one and that she would fight them (p. 275). She incites the people towards the fight for the land and urges them to unite so that they can win. According to her, all will not be well until when the peasants will return to the knowledge about themselves. She aims at organising the people into a protest so that they can raise an outcry expressing what they are going through even after attainment of independence in the hands of their fellow black people. She aims at attaining solidarity not only between men and women but among men, women and young people. Ngugi reveals that the oppressed believe in unity of the entire community men, women and children in the struggle for liberation. It implies that women believe that struggle is not just for men but it is task of all members of the community.

In *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembene reveals that solidarity of men and women enables them to defend the society from injustices. When the children; Little Ka, Sene and Gorgui are attacked by Isnard by being shot while hunting lizard, men and women in solidarity move to streets to demand for justice. Penda joins Lahbib and Boubacar, Doudou and Sene Masene the father of one of the dead boys. She is wearing a cartridge of a soldier because she was a member of the strike committee. When news about their death spreads to the entire courtyard and men, women and children move to the street and march towards the railroad yards. Women carry children with their arms and they gather up weapons as they move. Gorgui who had not died is carried home as women led by Penda, Dieynaba and Mariame Sonko weep, mourn and scream with insults bursting from their throats as they pass through the houses of European employees (p.161). In solidarity, men and women blame the Europeans as they fight for justice for the children. As a result of solidarity, the directors of the company inform the strikers that their representatives would be received, (p. 161). Sembene reveals that through the solidarity of men and women, class struggle is enhanced and the oppressor is obliged to listen to their grievances.

Ngugi reveals that gender complementarity in class struggle can bring about developments (Nwokolo & Iyanya, 2020). He presents conscious men and women who know that developments are their rights because they pay taxes. They are united to agitate for change in the society. He demonstrates that through a united effort of men and women in the demand for development, the leaders can be responsible. The people of Ilmorog vote in Nderi wa Riera as their Member of Parliament after promising to give them water. However, he betrays them because he does not do anything nor visit them. He sends his messenger but people, men and women, team up and chase them away. They also meet him in the city and attack him as he addresses them. As a result of the trek to city, the people of Ilmorog get various projects. Security is installed in Ilmorog through construction of administrative office and a police station; "... Munira's interpretation of events that followed their journey to the city. An administrative office for a government chief and a police post were the first things to be set up in the area," (p. 196). This suggests that gender complementarity in class struggle can result to developments in the neglected communities.

In addition, the people of Ilmorog witness things that had never happened before when they trek to the city. After the trek, a government official, a minister visit Ilmorog something that had never happened before, "Why! A minister of the Government would visit Ilmorog. We had never before seen a minister in our lives." (p. 265). The solidarity of the people of Ilmorog makes Nderi wa Riera feel guilty as he apologises for failing them, "Nderi spoke to us and apologized for inconveniences and the false expectations," (p. 266). The Member of Parliament also tells the people of Ilmorog about the plans to of setting up a sewaged shopping center at Ilmorog and a

tourist center as well as a game park, “....he had proposed - and indeed the plans were under way – for Chiri Country Council to set up a properly planned, sewaged shopping center in Ilmorog.....A tourist center would be set up and a game park further on would be enclosed and made out of bounds...” (p. 266). This reveals that people, men and women should unite and demand developments from their leaders whenever they fail to perform.

In *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembene reveals that gender complementarity makes the class struggle successful. The African workers of the Railway Company, men and women, fight for fair treatment and equality as a united force. As a result of their unity, they fearlessly confront the management of the company and the police officers who used to silence them. When this occurs, the management of the company promises to consider their grievances. This is evident when Edouard who is sent from Dakar to mediate between the management of the company and the representatives of the African workers says that some of the issues raised by the strikers will be put into consideration, “The matter of pensions will have to be studied in relation to the technical employment level of all parties concerned; and, lastly any increases in salary and pay back on such increases must be considered in relation to the cost of living,” (p.173-174). Furthermore, the governor speaks in favour of the workers by promising them that they will not be sanctioned and that all the requests that they have made will be considered, “...contrary to the rumours spread by a few malcontents, no sanctions will be taken against the strikers, and I personally promise all of them that their requests will be studied and satisfied insofar as possible, in the near future,” (p. 214). Sembene reveals that solidarity of men and women in class struggle cannot be in vain, as governor has decided to listen to the demands of the strikers.

Furthermore, the epilogue marks the victory of the strikers. When women join men in the struggle and march to Dakar, they overpower the managers of the railway company. Having failed to control the united men and women, some of the managers flee away. Edouard confesses that they do not have anything else to do. “Look, I know it's difficult, but there is nothing else to be done. I didn't believe it myself, but it happened. Dejean is already gone. And the whole line is blocked by their men.” (p. 243). Isnard adds that if the continued attacks of the Europeans by Africans continue, all the Europeans might be forced to vacate, “You'll see, if this goes on. It won't be long before there isn't a single European left in Africa.” (p.244). Sembene reveals that the Europeans have lost to the strikers, African men and women, who have fought in solidarity to free themselves from exploitation and discrimination at railway company. Maimouna's song which is a legend of Goumba reveals victory of the strikers.

From one sun to another

The combat lasted

After fighting together, blood covered

They transfixed their enemies.

But happy is the man who does battle without hatred. (p.245)

The line “After fighting together, blood covered,” implies the African men and women have been confronting the managers of the railway company as a united force while the line “They transfixed their enemies,” reveals the victory of the strikers as the managers of the strikers were overpowered.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ngugi and Sembene bring out a perception of gender that only enhances class struggle but also brings about gender harmony. When men and women work together with a common goal, they build a good working relationship as opposed to the idea of gender equality that may bring about gender conflict as men fight to maintain their dominating position. Their works are a call for men and women to unite and work together to free the society. The study has revealed that the support that men and women offer to each other enhances class struggle. This is demonstrated through the developments that are witnessed in Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood* and

the governor in *God's Bits of Wood* who promises that the demands of railway workers who are on strike will be considered.

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