

Images of Women in God's Bits of Wood: The Perspective of Sex Role Stereotype

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Abstract: This paper discusses the image of women in Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* from the feminist standpoint. Sembène Ousmane (1962) posits that women can take up leadership positions in the midst of a male-oriented and dominated society. Sembène defies the stereotype that women cannot be leaders and do not possess organizational capacity through his presentation of female characters such as Penda. The author's portrait of the revolutionary idea of the prostitute (Penda) as a political activist raises a degraded woman to respectability and dignity, in contrast to Ekwensi's Jagua Nana, who does not rise above her degradation. Sembène is a resolute advocate of women's rights and demonstrates that women are legitimate partners in the struggle for social justice. He supports the integration of women in the struggle against the exploitation of the masses. *God's Bits of Wood*, therefore, is an artistic work in which the Marxist ideology of equality of people of different social classes coincides with the ideology of women as an entity not subservient to man.

Keywords: Women, stereotype, image, inequality, feminism, Leadership, patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

From the pre-independence to the post-independence epoch, African literature has been portrayed as a masculine entity. The protagonists in novels like Amos Tutuola's *The Palm wine Drinkard*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are men. This is because of the cultural, social, and existential importance attached to men at the expense of women. Also, this was the age of the celebration of valour and tenacity (www.accessmylibrary.com). Hence, women in these novels are relegated to the background. The portrait of the African woman in the novels written by Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, and Cyprian Ekwensi is stereotypical. The ideal female character created by these writers often acts within the framework of her traditional functions as wife and mother, singing and dancing during ceremonies. In fact, she is sentenced to a life of insignificance and subsidiary existence. She is only heard and not seen. A woman in these novels is not recognised as an agent of change.

Later, in the post-independence epoch, some of these writers portray the African woman as even a free one, a courtesan or prostitute. This is to further denigrate the image and status of female folk in the African novel. They are portrayed as mere shadow beings that hover on the fringe of the plot of the novels. The current study discusses the images of women in Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* on a feminist bedrock.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on a combination of theoretical approaches including feminism, stereotype, and patriarchy. Through the lenses of these theories, the paper will try to show to what extent women have been projected out of their status quo. The study, therefore, attempts to identify and analyse the images of women as portrayed in Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood*. Kasonde (2019:12) defines feminism as the belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. The theory focuses on analysing gender inequality. The feminist movement started in the western world in the late 19th century and became a force to reckon with in 1968 when a defender of women's rights, Simone de Beauvoir, started writing pieces that explained why it was difficult for talented women to become successful. Feminism explores themes such as discrimination, objectification (especially sexual objectification), oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping, just to mention a few. Some of the major tenets of feminism are that despite the biological differences between men and women, they are the same and that sexual stereotyping and social conditions only favour men because they are in leadership positions. Kasonde (2019) adds that feminism entails the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of sexual equality. She further says that women are united with a common notion that male dominance is oppressive and that there is a need for liberation from all forms of women's oppression. It is, however, imperative to note that despite the various shades of feminism such as American feminism, African feminism, French feminism, and so on, all feminists believe that the source of women's oppression is patriarchy.

III. IMAGE OF WOMEN IN THE TEXT

In *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembène pays special attention to the influence and contribution of women during the 1947-1948 railroad strike in Senegal. Sembène projects women who are supportive of their striking males especially when they are a group- the women who in Chukuma's (1989) words have "emerged from their cocoon basking free to a mixed reception of surprise and wonder." But at the outset of the strike, the women appear as mere extensions of their husbands. Awa, for example, derives her social status from the fact that her husband is a carpenter foreman (Sembène 1962: 141), and Assitan "lived on the margin of her husband's existence: a life of work, of silence, and of patience" (Sembène 1962: 235).

Traditional Gender Roles of women

Sembène further portrays a situation that justifies the woman's subordinate position in society. He does this through the creation of old Niakoro who seems to embrace gender inequality. From the feminist perspective as observed by Showalter (1979) cited in Whitfield (2007:60), Niakoro could be taken as an example of those women who have been indoctrinated and have accepted the dominant male ideology. She tells young Ad'jibidji:

Why are you always poking your nose in the affairs of the men? They are preparing a strike, and that is not a thing for you. Can't you stay here, for once? (Sembène 1962:4)

Niakoro's caution to Ad'jibidji above cements the story of the marginalization and invisibility of women without a voice widespread in most African fiction (Kasonde, 2019:68). Niakoro further justifies her perception of women as she even considers education a province of men and not for women: 'What is the white man's language to a woman? To be a good mother you have no need of that'. Like Niakoro, Assitan is illiterate and does not question anything that her husband does:

By the ancient standards of African, Assitan was a perfect wife: docile, submissive, and hard-working, she never spoke one word louder than another. She knew nothing whatever of her husband's activities, or, if she did, she gave no appearance.....Her own lot as a woman was to accept things as they were and to remain silent, as she had been taught to do. (Sembène 1962:106).

The above quotation is a clear demonstration of how women have come to accept their status in society. Assitan is like Savithri, Shantaha, and Jayalakshmi whose submissive attitude is one of the striking features in Rao's (2014) *The Serpent and the Rope*. In Mutunda's (2016:521)'s words, "this represents an ideal feminine characteristic expected of a woman, particularly in a conjugal sphere, is an unconditional submission to man." For most feminists, however, the submission of women also translates into subordination.

Therefore, Niakoro and Assitan typify the image of a good woman in Islamic West Africa, the image of the conservative, submissive, and so-called perfect wife, representing the old times where there is no room for change. From the feminist perspective, this is an exaltation of patriarchy which according to Kasonde (2019:12), is a social system in which the males hold primary power, predominate in roles of political leadership, social privilege, and control of the property. In the domain of the family, fathers or father-figures hold authority over women and children.

Sembène 's portraiture of Awa, Assitan, and the old Niakoro's view of the world seems to validate the public perception that 'there is serious inequality between men and women from the start of human existence to date.' Further, this view brings

into focus John Milton's portrayal of women in *Paradise Lost*. The depiction of Adam and Raphael's description of Eve in book 8:285 (Whitfield, 2007:60) illustrates Milton's view of the inequality of men and women. He adds that she (Eve) was already inferior, the property of Adam, the intellectually challenged flaw of humanity as Erickson (1998:163) emphasises 'she is often associated with destructive women who use their "feminine charm" to manipulate men'- a symbol of spiritual degradation. Eve is described as being less worthy than Adam on the inside and that her spirituality is weaker than Adam's. Even her intellect is slightly less developed and her vanity is a serious weakness. Moreover, Eve's decision to leave Raphael and Adam alone, preferring to hear the conversation from Adam afterward, demonstrates her submission to Adam. Indeed, we get the sense that she withdraws, like old Niakoro in *God's Bits of Wood*, because she acknowledges her place in God's hierarchy. Eve's absence from Adam and Raphael's discussion also implies Milton's belief that women are either uninterested or mentally ill-equipped for intellectual pursuits. This should not be the case in the modern world. There is a need for women to discount such negative perceptions about their position in society. They should scale up the interest in undertaking vigorous intellectual pursuits and in the general well-being of their societies and their nations.

Such inequality between men and women is still evident in the world in general and Zambia in particular. The website (<http://uk.oneworld.net/guides/gender>) observes that cultural traditions in developing countries still create the most stubborn obstacle to the essential steps towards women's equality. The belief that girls should work in the home and the fields rather than go to school and the presumption that a woman acquires no right to property on marriage is deeply entrenched in many societies. Legal issues, for instance, are most problematic in Islamic countries where elements of Sharia law governing the behaviour of women remain in place. Zambia also has continued to maintain a plural legal system to preserve customary law status. In fact, under the previous constitution, Article 23 permitted the application of discriminatory personal and customary practices. As a result, women can be and are discriminated against in the name of custom. This is the more reason some non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as Women In Law in Southern Africa (WILSA), Women's Lobby Group (WLG), Women for Change, and NGOCC were formed. One of the main goals is to empower and safeguard women by calling upon the government to ensure that all cultural laws that perpetuate the discrimination of and presupposes the inferiority of women in marriages were outlawed. There is a need to break the cultural enclave, for women to fully realise their leadership potential.

Although Sembène seems to uphold Milton's view of women through the presentation of old Niakoro, Awa, and Assitan in *God's Bits of Wood*, he is a resolute advocate of women. He demonstrates that women are legitimate partners in the struggle for social justice as Jones (2000) has observed. He posits the integration of women in the struggle against the

exploitation of the masses, which of course, include men and women. *God's Bits of Wood*, therefore, is an artistic work in which the Marxist ideology of equality of people of different social classes coincides with the ideology of women as an entity not subservient to men.

Leadership Roles

Sembène in *God's Bits of Wood* (1962) presents women leaders in the midst of a male-oriented and dominated society. Sembène defies the stereotype that women cannot be leaders and do not possess organizational capacity through his presentation of female characters such as Penda who announces, in support of the menfolk, that the women will march on Dakar:

"I speak in the name of all the 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!" (Sembène 1962:185)

Penda, by this speech, has broken the ice, like the Israeli-Palestinian women, and Rosie in *The Guide*, and opened the gate for women's participation on equal footing with their male counterparts. In the words of Kasonde (2019)'s words, 'Penda's role is significant because as a prostitute, she understands that making decisions requires freeing oneself from moral and religious constraints.' Like some of our Zambian female politicians, she mobilizes the women and is the spokesperson in the strike action. She is wearing a soldier's cartridge belt and constantly urging the women forward. When they arrive at the outskirts of Dakar, Penda lets them know 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'll go on'. (Sembène 1962: 145).

As women break out of the cocoon of a patriarchal society, they fight for recognition and dignity. Sembène portrays this through Penda's behaviour 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'. (Sembène 1962:142).

Similarly, the portrait marking 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 and does not fear any man. She tells her husband during the strike:

If you go back to work before the others, I will cut off the only thing that makes you a man.' (Sembène 1962:47)

She has great influence and enjoys popularity and a large following. She is no doubt a leader and organisational abilities like some of the women we know today. She organises the women into a militia to repulse the police, like a general, in complete control. Mame Sofi seems to discount Mirkin's (1984:42) view that 'regardless of a woman's status or situation, her derived economic class, or her sexual preference, a woman remain under the power of the fathers, and can have access only to so much of privilege of influence as the patriarchy is willing to consent.' She bubbles with pride because 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.' (Sembène 1962:47).

Through this portrait, Sembène seems to suggest that women should not be viewed as weak and as sexual objects - their thighs should not be treated as tables on which contracts are signed. Moreover, Sembène projects yet another epitome of courage and determination through Maimouna, the blind woman as if to announce, "Disability is not Inability." She is committed to the struggle as anybody else. Neither her blindness nor her loss of her child deters Maimouna's determination to 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, and Sembène (1962:198) describes her as "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.

In terms of female empowerment, instances abound in the text. At the beginning of the narrative, most of the power is in the hands of the directors of the railroad and smoothly shifts from its hands to the trainmen, and at last, the whole struggle seems to be conducted by women. The author destroys the myth that women are only fit for the kitchen and reproduction. The characters like Ramatoulaye, Mame Sofi, HoudiaM'baye, Penda, among others, wield the reality of power during the strike of the railroad workers. Unlike in Achebe's *Arrow of God* where women keep a low profile while Ezeulu, the priest, and the other men monopolize the scene, the wives of the railroad workers in *God's Bits of Wood* filled in the void left by their powerless husbands.

The author's portrait of the revolutionary idea of the prostitute (Penda) as a political activist raises a degraded woman to respectability and dignity, in contrast to Ekwensi's Jagua Nana, who does not rise above her degradation. Sembène seems to be saying that if societal pressures have led a woman to the degradation of earning her living through selling sex, she need not wallow in that degradation but must have

sufficient vision to raise her from the gutter, as it were, and contribute to the well-being of her society. Indeed, this seems to be a replica of what the civil society, especially the women movements, in Zambia have been preaching about, the empowerment of women and that women should rise to everyday challenges.

Sembène also reverses traditional gender roles to show the revolutionary effect of the strike when the men fetch water and walk behind the women marchers (Sembène 195 & 190). 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. Sembène depicts Ramatoulaye as head of her compound. She is entrusted to take care of all the affairs in the compound and Case (2002) believes "the men have simply abandoned" (284). Her primary responsibility is to provide food for her family. Like the first, 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.....'(Sembène 1962:51).

As a result of the strike, family roles have been reversed. Women here are stereotyped as providers/carers and homemakers, unlike Ndungo's (2006) women who are portrayed negatively. No longer is the father the head of the family, the woman is. So Ramatoulaye must take up that responsibility. This portraiture of the reversal of the roles seems to be in tandem with the current Zambian, if not the whole world, a scenario where women especially those widowed as a result of HIV and AIDS have taken up men's responsibilities. That is, providing for their families. 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. Ramatoulaye is actually a clear representation of morality, maturity, and justice.

Ad'jibidji 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. Sembène portrays her as a message courier between her home and the dragnet of the police during the strike. Perhaps this is why Moore (1985:14) describes her as "a prototype of a new woman, articulate and aware. Unlike Anand's (1981) women are portrayed as a silent sufferer and constantly being victimized in the patriarchal world, "Ad'jibidji 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."(Moore, 1958:14) Similarly, Sembène 's presentation of Ad'jibidji as one who believes so much in what her father says, and her attending the striking workers' meetings seem to

suggest that Ad'jibidji represents the future of an African liberated woman.

There has been a worrying perception of women as being enemies of them. Our society argues that women do not support each other when they happen to acquire power and that they have always been renowned as the worst leaders in history. In God's Bits of Wood, Sembène does not seem to embrace this view as evidenced by his portrayal of women who offer their abilities. This and their determination changed history. They were even more organized than the men and carried out their task to the very end. They worked together, unlike in the men's circle where one was always opposing the other. (Sembène, 1962: 9). In contrast, the women are well organised:

But in the midst of this unleashed tumult, a little group of women managed to make its way through the crush and approach the delegates...It was Penda who addressed them...I speaking the name of all of the women, but I am just the voice they have chosen to tell you what they have decided to do" (Sembène,1962:185).

Though few in numbers, the voice of the women was so strong that it commanded the attention of the men. It was because of the women marching to Dakar that Thies was able to survive the strike. Indeed, Sembène succeeds in challenging the cultural constructs that disempower women in Africa. By putting men and women on the same footing in God's Bits of Wood, he claims that time has come when men should come to the realization that they cannot do without their wives.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that *God's Bits of Wood* emphasizes that women are a formidable instrument of social and economic change if they are given the latitude to exercise their hidden potential. In the novel, women are satisfied with their participation in the struggle and they feel, and rightly so, that a new era has dawned for them. They are convinced that their role will no longer be that of a submissive, victim, silent, and passive woman. Henceforth, they will act, participate in the affairs of the nation, and their voice will be heard. The present study has also revealed women who defied the notion that women are sexual objects, immoral, stubborn and destructive, unreliable and unpredictable, mothers, and homemakers. Of all these women, Penda, the prostitute, stands out as an image of what it means to challenge a patriarchal society.

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