



GOING AGAINST THE TIDE: WOMEN IN OUSMANE SEMBÈNE'S *GOD'S BITS OF WOOD*

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly attested that women are downgraded in the first generation of African male-authored novels of the sixties. However, a combination of feminist and Marxist theories as reading grids locates Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* as an exception to this rule through its empowerment of the female figure regarding the role played by the latter therein. This essay uncovers how the novelist empowers his female characters in the framework of his masterpiece, demonstrating that females are a force to be reckoned with.

Keywords: Male writer, patriarchy, women, feminism, strike, empowerment.

RESUME

Il est communément établi que les femmes ne sont pas valorisées dans les romans africains de la première génération des années soixante, romans écrits par les hommes. Cependant, une lecture féministe-Marxiste positionne *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* d'Ousmane Sembène comme une exception, avec son récit qui déroge à cette règle, considérant sa responsabilisation de la femme quant au rôle joué par cette dernière dans ladite œuvre. Cet essai révèle comment ce romancier a autonomisé ses personnages féminins dans le cadre de son chef-d'œuvre et établit que les femmes demeurent une force incontournable.

Mots-clés: Auteur masculin, patriarcat, femmes, féminisme, grève, autonomisation

INTRODUCTION

Deployed worldwide “to serve a political purpose” (Beier, 1979, p. viii), literature plays a transformative role in society, with gender role as the epicentre of African literature from pre-colonial era to date. Through its creative writings, literature expresses concerns about the metamorphoses of African cultures via contact with the white man. The early wave of African writers addressed the socio-political and cultural issues of the continent devolving from colonisation. Because it “aims at reducing human suffering and inequality caused by class differences to bring about peace” in Tanure Ojaide's (2012, p. 55) words, this early wave of African literature relegated women and children issues to the back burner. The main focus of both Francophone and Anglophone creative writers was, back then, on men and their encounter with colonialism. “While Francophone African intellectuals and writers used Negritude to react to European denigration of African culture,” Ojaide (2012, p.

17) claims, "the Anglophone African writers affirmed their Africanity in their own way by showing the African personality as a human who has strengths and weaknesses".

If Sembène's *Le Mandat* (1965) is illustrative of the calamities brought by the West to Africa via colonisation, his *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) casts a new image of African women, a piece that bursts females at the centre of the struggle opposing the West African society and colonial economy, considering the steady charge that women are negatively represented in male-authored fiction. He thus makes women the fulcrum of social change by entrusting them with power and authority.

Considered by most critics as his masterpiece and rivaled only by *Xala*, Sembène's third and most famous novel, *God's Bits of Wood*, fictionalises the real-life story of a railroad strike on the Dakar-Niger line that lasted from 1947 to 1948. Although the charismatic and brilliant union spokesman, Ibrahima Bakayoko, is its central figure, the novel has no true hero except the community itself, with its women as key players in the successful resolution to the crisis. Even though several heroic figures distinguish themselves at the head of the strike, the true heroes of the novel are the common people of Africa who rise against the colonial oppressors to demand their rights.

This essay is anchored on a combination of feminist and Marxist theories as its reading grids. Both a development in critical theory and the evaluation of literature which was well under way in the 1960s and which has burgeoned steadily since, feminism entails the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of sexual equality (Friedan, 1963; Davis, 1989; Kapuka, 2019). Committed to total emancipation of women by seeking that justice be done to the latter via its exploration of themes such as female discrimination, sexual objectification, oppression, patriarchy and stereotyping, among others, feminism holds that men and women are the same, despite their biological differences; that sexual stereotyping and social conditions only favour men by granting them leadership positions.

Because all societies are highly hierarchised with the rich dominating the poor, the male sex oppressing the female, Marxism seeks "to bring about a classless society based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange." In Peter Barry's words (1995, p. 156), while other philosophies merely strive to understand the world, Marxism "seeks to change it."

While feminism faults patriarchy with gender domination in political, social, and economic relations maintained through institutions structured around the gender inequality of socially defined men and women and sees the power relationship between men and women as unfair, Marxism views progress as coming about through the struggle for power between different social classes. Representing class struggle as the major force behind historical change where the dominant class has

exploited the masses, Marxism projects bartering capitalism with socialism with a classless society as its ultimate goal. Marxist theorists are committed to fighting for social equality. Seen from this angle, Marxist criticism becomes a radical sociological analysis that looks through the eyes of the oppressed groups. For Marxist critics, Georg Gugelberger (1985, p. 12) holds, literature must “advocate social change and amelioration.” Sembène’s novel under scrutiny seems to be committed to such a daunting task.

God’s Bits of Wood’s depiction of the 1947-1948 Dakar-Niger railroad strike gives high visibility to African women. Despite the presence of adepts of the old school of thought regarding female job assignments in its framework, the author’s skilful portrayals of female characters shifts from women’s traditional roles to the emancipated and ennobling ones in the enfolding of the story.

Structured around two main sections, this essay uncovers how the novelist empowers her female characters in this masterpiece, after revisiting the traditional condition of women under patriarchy.

1. Patriarchy and Women’s Traditional Role

Dubbed the prime obstacle to women’s advancement for shaping both patriarchal institutions and social relations, patriarchy is held responsible for women’s secondary status. Despite their merit, the charge goes, patriarchy still hampers women’s progress by giving absolute priority to men and, to some extent, limiting women’s rights. So, what is patriarchy, this negatively charged concept by feminists?

Defined by Juliet Mitchell (1973, p. 65) as “the omnipresent system of male domination and female subjugation which is achieved through socialization, perpetuated through ideological means, and maintained by institutional methods” and refined by Sylvia Walby (1990, p. 214) as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” both in public and private spheres, patriarchy literally means “the rule of the father” and was originally used to describe a specific type of male-dominated family (Sultana, 2012). Thus, Godiya Allanana Makama (2013, p. 117) theorises it as “any system that operationalizes an order that accords men undue advantage over women.” As the term itself suggests, a patriarchal society is a male-dominated social system wherein males are the supreme authority figures and hold maximum power (Beechey, 1979, pp. 66-82). The father controls every economic, social, and moral decision regarding everyone else in a patriarchal family. Further crediting the above view, the *Oxford Dictionary* defines a patriarchal family as “a system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line”. Thus, the father or the eldest male holds complete authority over the

lives of every other family member, including the younger males, women and children.

Traditionally perceived to be the rule of a man in a family, the term is refashioned in the past five decades to analyse the origins and conditions of men's oppression of women (Kamarae, 1992). Considered as "a system of political, social, and economic relations and institutions structured around the gender inequality of socially defined men and women" (Nash, 2009, p. 102), most shades of feminism mainly use patriarchy to describe the power relationship between men and women, featuring the concept as a present-day unjust social system that subordinates and discriminates against women (Guy-Evans, n.d.).

Originally used in reference to the dominance of males and to describe the power of the father as head of household, the concept has been deployed within post-1960s feminism to mean the systematic organisation of male supremacy and female subordination (Lerner 1986; Robinson & Richardson, 1993). Painting it as a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions, feminist theorists have argued that in any of the historical shapes that patriarchal society takes, be it feudal, capitalist or socialist, a sex/gender system and a system of economic discrimination operate simultaneously. They thus characterise patriarchy as an unjust male system that cuts across political, economic, social, religious, cultural, industrial and financial spheres and that is oppressive to women. As feminist and political theorist Carole Pateman (1988, p. 207) sees it, "the patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection." So, the concept often includes all the social mechanisms that reproduce and exert male dominance over women in feminist theory, a theory which typically characterises it as a social construct. By unclothing its myriad manifestations (Edström et al., 2014, pp. 1-10; Mphiko, 2016, pp. 25-26), critics of patriarchal ideology hope to overcome such a system of hierarchical organisation that grants men the overwhelming number of upper positions (Makama, 2013, p. 117). As the saying goes, man can unmake whatever is man-made (Bressler, 1994, p. 108).

Clearly, patriarchal ideology is the idea that men have more dominance and privilege than women, patriarchy being a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political authority. Patriarchal society distributes power unevenly between men and women in which men have the advantage of being superior to women (Guy-Evans, n.d.). To be sure, such a society sets the parameters for women's structurally unequal position in families and markets by condoning gender-differential terms in inheritance rights, by giving all property rights to the males of a family, while the females are excluded from all rights, regardless of their position in the family. Equally, it buttresses gender-differential

terms in legal adulthood, by tacitly condoning domestic and sexual violence and sanctioning differential wages for comparable work.

Tradition, culture and religion have dictated men and women relationships for centuries and entrenched male domination into the structure of social organisation and institution at all levels of leadership. Patriarchy justifies the marginalisation of women in education, economy, labour market, politics, business, family, domestic matters and inheritance (Makama, 2013, p. 116). Thus, the power to dominate is given to the males of the society, holding women in the boundaries set by the patriarchal system. From the very beginning, detractors of patriarchy argue, the social structure has been shaped according to the male philosophy which separated the values of men and women.

Worldwide, men have always shown their supremacy over women due to patriarchal system. Projecting male dominance everywhere, this system prevents females from taking their own decision. Coercing women to be under men, the patriarchal system harms them physically, socially, sexually and psychologically.

In India, for instance, "women are mostly maltreated by the males in the society especially by husbands. The husbands who are annoyed, grumpy, short tempered and aggressive abuse their wives physically and psychologically," to trust Ritumbara Trivedi and Rekha Tiwari. Even "though the males in patriarchal society are well behaved in public," Trivedi and Tiwari (2016, p. 2) maintain, "at home they become very dominating. The patriarchal society sets some strict rules for women who don't allow her to perform some particular actions and activities."

No doubt, by exalting men over women and by assigning ennobling roles to the male and relegating the female gender to the background, this sociological stratification thrives on "marginalization, suppression, self-defacement, self-erasure, and injustice" (Oluwayomi, 2013, p. 370).

Patriarchy creates a system in which women are oppressed both socially and economically. Patriarchal system reinforces sexist attitudes and beliefs, and provides men with the power to act on them. This frequently results in women's experiencing violence and abuse while they are being denied equal rights and opportunities. Whether taken in its subtle or more overt manifestations, denying women equal opportunities remains patriarchy's hallmark (Guy-Evans, n.d.). Clearly, women are often under-represented in key institutions, in decision-making positions and in employment. Female transgressors who try to regain some power – by violating "the social code" – are often ignored or criticised.

A complex system comprising many elements, patriarchy, is a set of symbols and ideas that make up a culture, evident from daily conversations to literature and film. Therefore, a patriarchal society is concerned with social life, with its set standards of

feminine beauty and masculine toughness that are expected, alongside its images of feminine vulnerability and masculine protectiveness. In comparison to “masculine” attributes, this system undervalues attributes that are deemed “feminine”. As Mary Becker (1999, pp. 24-25) once made the point, a social system that is male-controlled and male-centered inevitably values masculine traits. Male-centeredness, an overarching patriarchal feature, implies that everything is focused on men. As evidence, most of human history is replete with the successes of men, who are presented as heroes, inventors and leaders, whereas women are royally ignored. In sum, male domination remains patriarchy’s defining feature.

Expressed through showing women inferior to men and suppressing them in the name of tradition and culture, patriarchal institutionalised system of male dominance entails a hierarchical system which puts men at the top in dominating roles and women at the lower level. The prevailing reason for patriarchy is that men see themselves as superior to women. On this bogus ground, the biological differences between men and women are inflated to assure that men always have the dominant roles and women the subordinate ones. Men hold herein every position of authority as possible, claiming the higher positions in jobs. They are usually the wheelers and dealers in the public and private spheres. Women are expected to do what men say, restricting their contributions to serving in the home and bearing children, worldwide cross-cultural roles, with no change in sight (Berndt, 2005, p. 11)), particularly for African women, to trust Sembène’s picturing it in *God’s Bits of Wood*.¹

As it were, men believe they must always be in control of family system in a patriarchal society. Practically, men are in charge of all life-and death-decisions regarding the family. As a general rule, the woman must ask permission from her husband before making a decision, including securing authorisation from her father to get married, a father who must approve the prospective son-in-law as a good fit. Thus, women are always under men’s control in their lifetime and treated as if they cannot make their own informed decisions. Some men may even go a step further by oppressing the women in their family as a means to gain more control over them. “A woman who tries to reclaim some power for herself may be at a risk of being oppressed, exploited, or even abused by men in the family, as a way to bring her back down to a submissive level,” Olivia Guy-Evans (n.d) writes about patriarchal manifestations worldwide.

A male-centered social system that inevitably values masculinity over femininity, patriarchal culture encourages both men and women to regard women as creatures

¹ Ousmane Sembène, *God’s Bits of Wood* (Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers, 1962), pp. 11 & 106-7. Subsequent quotes are from this edition, with page numbers parenthetically included in the essay.

suited to fulfill male needs (Becker, 1999, p. 25). Strictly confined to the home where they raise their children, women are routinely excluded from fully participating in political and economic life in a patriarchal society. Put differently, patriarchal relations structure both the private and public spheres, with men dominating both public life and their home (Nash, 2009, p. 102). So, women's assigned roles in any patriarchal culture are mostly child-bearing and housekeeping, being tightly confined to the house and kitchen. Indeed, these traditional and non-conscious patterns are centred on marriage and child care for women. An adult woman is always expected to marry and take care of the family. She works to help her family cope with the harsh realities of life by cooking, sewing, teaching and administering tender care.

African women are no exception to this rule: they are given similar roles in most African novels to date, the female figure being denigrated in this literature with its excessive masculine focus. The protagonists in Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, for instance, are men, while stereotypical portrait of the African woman permeates the novels by Achebe, Amadi and Ekwensi. Particularly, women shine by their absence in men's gathering, where important issues are debated: men are the sole communal decision-makers. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958, p. 70) provides an eloquent illustration of women as outsiders: "It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders". The picture remains unchanged in Francophone African literature: Oyono's *Une Vie de boy* (1956), *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* (1956) and *Chemin d'Europe* (1960) depict women who are respectively mothers, wives, concubines, mistresses... or prostitutes. Women with ennobling roles are chronically absent from these pieces.

Cultural, social and existential issues known in the heyday of colonialism might have lured African male novelists to value masculine traits in their novels, connoting the needed tenacity to extricate themselves from colonial grips (Irele, 1981, p. 146). These writers, to be sure, barely entrust visible positions to women in their narratives, if they have not denigrated them altogether. Independence struggle prompted these novelists to extol men at the expense of women. Prizing masculinity was a royal way to political liberation, they reasoned. Obviously, their female characters are relegated to the background, sentenced to a subsidiary existence as they are solely restricted to their everlasting roles of wife and mother. Never heard and never seen, these women are denied agency with their portrayals of "mere shadow beings that hover on the fringe of the plot of the novels" (Lubbungu, 2020, p. 156).

Overwhelmingly, then, most African male writers depict females in their natural roles as daughter, wife and mother, a portrayal which downgrades them. Jagua Nana, for instance, never rises above her degradation in Ekwensi's fiction, a novelist who champions in the art of carving women as prostitutes. Arguably, these writers

cast their female characters in the role of wives, mothers and prostitutes "... because motherhood is so closely linked to understanding African women's lives and identities within their sociocultural contexts" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p. 35).

The above picture delineates women's roles in a patriarchal society, a society where the words control and strength are associated with the males. The latter control, overpower and exert superiority by having the females carry out their duties. Men are not only the main source of income of the family herein, they equally hold the dominating positions, while women are under their yoke (Trivedi & Tiwari, 2016, pp. 2-3).

In this context, to be a good woman entails being a good wife and mother, appearing only in the fringes, effaced and unassuming (Chan, 2017, p. 23). For most of history, women who deviate from this pattern are viewed with contempt and pity (Klein, 1984, p. 5). Like in real life, patriarchy has conferred a static role on women in fiction, by universally imposing upon them motherhood "as their sole identity, their proper identity, above all others" (Christian, 1997, p. 212), resolutely making motherhood the defining criterion of womanhood. Patriarchy has trumpeted it time and again: to be a woman is tantamount to playing a subordinate role; it implies submission to one's male kin (Christian, 1997, p. 214). Salmata Olga Ouedraogo (2007, p. 244) backs this assertion with the following:

Ce qui fait la femme en milieu traditionnel africain, c'est sa docilité, son aptitude à se soumettre à l'homme, son esprit de sacrifice et son silence face à tout, même à ce qui l'opprime. Parler, en public surtout, c'est porter atteinte à l'honneur de l'homme, c'est le vexer. La femme apprend donc très tôt à se taire, à rester bien à sa place de...femme dans un monde d'hommes. Si elle parle, c'est du fond de la cuisine enfumée. Et pour ne pas remettre en cause les fondements de la société, elle encaisse tout afin que les choses aillent bien, quitte à ce que ce soit à ses dépens.ⁱ

Most first generation of African writers, in line with the ideology of the above text, have royally ignored the woman, minimizing her role in their zeal to restore his scorned dignity to the black man. Housekeeping, marriage, child-bearing and child-raising remain the traditional roles of African women. As Niakoro, the epitome of the old school, put it forcefully, the African girl is taught her natural roles from her early childhood: to decorate utensils, cook meals, marry and have children (p. 3). Living on her husband's fringe with work-silence-patience as her motto, Ad'jibid'ji's mother, Assitan, moulds herself well as a genuine African woman: "By the ancient standards of Africa, 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 (...). Her own lot as a woman was to accept things as they were and to remain silent, as she had been taught to do" (pp. 106-7). Unveiling the stone-carved status of an African woman with no substantial change in sight, this text represents both Niakoro and Assitan as "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" (Lubbungu, 2020, p. 157).

The above "exaltation of patriarchy" extends well to other female characters. Fatoumata, another female figure in the novel, understands well her role as a woman in the traditional setting. "Fatoumata seated herself behind her husband, where she would remain throughout the meal, as a sign of courtesy" (p. 11). Right from her childhood, the girl is faced with her insignificance and uselessness as well as her subservient role in society. As a logical consequence, "She internalises these images that condemn her to a life of perpetual dependence and difference" (Ezeigbo, 1996, p. 74).

The foregoing credits the Western feminist critique of the "mother Africa trope" that crisscrosses African male fiction. In *Contemporary African Literature and Politics of Gender* (1994, p. 39), Florence Stratton posits that "the trope is deeply entrenched in the male tradition," arguing that the portrayal of the African woman in the fiction of all major male writers "takes the form either of a young girl, nubile and erotic, or a fecund nurturing mother" (1994, p. 41).

For a patriarchal society to function, then, women have to play subservient roles and be submissive to men; they must cater to all their hopes and desires without complaint. Thus, women are expected to stay in the house as mothers and homemakers, usually completing hours of unpaid labour. Little wonder that Marxist feminists claim a woman's unpaid labour as beneficial to both capital and her husband (Hartmann, 1981). Taken together, however, these fragmented portrayals merge into a representation of the African woman who is "doubly buried in the shadows by both the colonial system and the author who mentions them in reference to the male characters" (Augustin-Billy, 2018-2019, p. 59), an obvious sign of female subordination.

Grounded in patriarchal tradition and culture, then, female subordination takes myriad intricate forms. Even though education is accessible in her fictional Nigeria, patriarchal culture still subordinates women in Emecheta's fiction, denying them access to this prized commodity. After her father's passing, for instance, Adah has to trick the system to get formal education, a fight Emecheta has finely traced in her *Second-Class Citizen*. Similarly, the future of the girl-child is highly compromised on patriarchal altar, for her existence relies heavily on the good will of the males who cross her path. The happiness of the female protagonist of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, for instance, entirely depends on the mood of the male figure, whether father, brother, uncle or husband. While the women herein are confined to the home, their men are gainfully employed.

However, as the next section shows, the empowered women in Sembène's fiction outrank the traditional ones. He makes bigger room for strong-willed women around which the fight against injustice is won in his oeuvre.

2. From the Margin to the Centre: Sembène's New Breed of Women

Hellen Roselyne L. Shigali's (2017, pp. 649-50) following caveat serves as an appropriate entry point to this section. Though relatively new in African developmental discourse and scholarship, gender sensitivity and feminist perspective in fiction is stereotypically associated with female writers based on stereotypical dichotomies that define patriarchy, categorising humanity into passive female oppressed versus aggressive male oppressor, gender is gradually gaining acceptance but feminism remains a dirty word at large. Reminiscent of the female rebel who is anti-African culture, feminism is replete with misconceptions and controversies in conventional African contexts, where it is viewed with anathema, given its association with some woman-centered, anti-men ideologies in the West. However, African gender sensitivity views male and female as two complementary parts of a whole defined as human, attesting to the recognition of multiple forms of oppressions to which both African men and women are subjected. As it is the case in *God's Bits of Wood*, showing gender sensitivity and feminist perspective is acknowledging the reality of multiple oppressions to which all African peoples, males and females comprised, are subjected.

A gender-sensitive perspective permeates the story of *God's Bits of Wood* through multiple devices: the novelist's creating of ordinary but empowered women and authorial statements.

This panoramic novel of social realism begins with the girl-child Ad'jibid'ji, adoptive daughter to Bakayoko, sneaking into a railway workers' union meeting consecutive to their vote to strike for the same higher wages and family stipends enjoyed by their white counterparts, advantages denied them on the bogus ground that indigenous marriages are a collection of concubines (p. 187). So this narrative takes off with the encounter between Ad'jibid'ji who "must have been eight or nine years old" (p. 4) and her great grandmother Niakoro, the epitome of patriarchal tradition, who complains about her granddaughter's naughty habit of poking her nose in men's affair: "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?" (p. 4). Through Niakoro's rebuke, Sembène unveils women's assigned role and place in a patriarchal setting, with a concrete wall separating women's and men's worlds: "It is not a place for a woman, and even less for a child your age," the old woman scolds her granddaughter, wondering why she must spend all of her time "with the men" (p. 4).

“Women’s real place” in any patriarchy-ruled society, as alluded to in this extract, is home. But this novelist shifts gear, changing the paradigm by presenting empowered women altogether, female characters holding toe to toe with men, starting with his innovative portrayal of the little Ad’jibid’ji, complemented by her traditionalist grandfather Fa Keita’s revolutionary take on the aspiration of the little girl, condoning the change. Contrasting Niakoro’s resistance to gender equity, Sembène secures this patriarch’s approval of the wind of change. Encouraged by the grandfather’s openness to gender balance, Ad’jibid’ji’ further fleshes out her dream of gender equality in her following exchange with the patriarch:

Ad’jibid’ji: I have to start learning what it means to be a man.

Fa Keita: But you are not a man!

Ad’jibid’ji: *Petit père* says that men and women will be equal someday.

Fa Keita: And what will you do then, if you are to be the equal of a man?

Ad’jibid’ji: Drive one of the fast trains, just as *petit père* does. He says it’s the most wonderful trade there is, and I believe him (p. 97).

Bestowed with extraordinary innate attributes for her age in that patriarchal setting back then, Sembène carves this girl-child as a critical thinker and curious observer, crediting her with more formal education than many of the adults she interacts with. Capable of distinguishing between evil/injustice and good/justice, Ad’jibid’ji’s maturity, quickness and intelligence “astounded everyone,” just as the education she has received from Bakayoko, her foster father she fondly calls “*Petit père*,” has not only made of her “a precocious child,” but a “free and independent” (pp. 5-6) young girl as well.

Respected by Fa Keita – who openly condones her outgoing behavior by making her a mail-girl between her home and the dragnet of the police during the strike – and trusted by Bakayoko, Ad’jibid’ji is a smart and daring girl for her age. Moreover, the author allots her time to complete her school chores, thereby emancipating her from oppressive domesticity at a young age, contrary to a time-tested tradition of dumping house chores on girl-children to the point of hampering their formal education. Indeed, as Shigali (2017, p. 653) aptly notes, this development of the girl-child character in *God’s Bits of Wood* credits Sembène’s “recognition of women as human beings in their own right who are entitled to human rights”. Further, the author’s depicting her ease while traversing both public and domestic spaces – “Ad’jibidji made her way to the foot of the stage and sat down on the hard-parked ground, between two men” (p. 8) – in conjunction with her witnessing of Diara’s trial and her subsequent evaluation of such an event centre-stage females in this novel.

That the first chapter of a narrative on labour movement – which would have been basically a men’s only business – be devoted to a nine-year old girl speaks volumes to this novelist’s ideological location, gender-wise. As Shigali (2017, p. 653) sees it all, Sembène’s artistic decision to foreground Ad’jibid’ji’s story as an entry point into his

narrative of the Senegalese labour movement exemplifies his “conscious effort to challenge sexism”. That the history of social-political event in Africa boldly features a girl-child from the outset is unheard of on the continent, prior to Sembène’s Marxist-feminist novel that treats women as men’s equal partners in the struggle for social justice.

While the very first chapter of the piece is cogently named after one of the novel’s many female characters, “Ad’jibid’ji,” as a celebration of this little girl, “Epilogue,” the last one set in Thiès, equally extols women’s invaluable contributions to the strikers’ victorious struggle. If the entry point of any story carries a heavy weight, its closing point has an equal importance regarding the overall message. The in-between chapters of Sembène’s narrative are not less remarkable by the presence of revolutionary women deployed by this convinced believer in women as men’s legitimate partners in the fight against social injustice. Thus, the novelist allocates chapters to female characters of all walks of life and ages in his piece, including Penda, Ramatoulaye and Maïmouna, among others. By devoting space to their individual feats and by foregrounding their collective stories via their active participation in the strike as a group, Sembène’s women gradually “emerged from their cocoon basking free to a mixed reception of surprise and wonder” (Chukuma, 1989, p. 2).

Indeed, if their initial “contribution to the strike is accepted as unconsciously as their housework [or as] an extension of their duties as wife and mother” (Jeffers, 2009, p. 104), they soon refuse to watch – as passive bystanders – the striking scene unfold before their very eyes. Therefore, strong-willed women who aspire beyond their natural roles of wife and mother gradually mushroom in the narrative. Entrusted with valuable tasks and discarding their traditional place, then, these women burst to the striking scene, without any further ado. The text zooms in:

The days were mournful, and the nights were mournful, and the simple mewing of a cat set people trembling. One morning a woman rose and wrapped her cloth firmly around her waist and said, ‘today, I will bring back something to eat.’ And the men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women (p. 34)

Tired from seeing their starving family, *God’s Bits of Wood’s* women decide to move from the fringe to the centre of the strike. As this extract highlights, the strike thrusts individual women to the forefront of the struggle, before it takes the shape of a collective venture. So, faced with their mates’ unanimous decision to call a strike, coupled with the railroad’s cutting off water supply to their homes as a retaliation measure, the women individually begin to strategise their inputs for its success and to realise their own place within the class struggle. Although disentangling the roles of women as a communal force – who “have their own collective score to settle with the capitalists” (Sacks, 1978, p. 369) – from individual women’s contributions to the

strike's successful completion remains a herculean task, actions of three female revolutionaries – Penda, Ramatoulaye and Maïmouna – are presented below as a testimony to the new breed of women originating from Sembène's imagination.

Based on her outstanding contributions to the strike's happy ending, Penda, tops the list of those Umar Abdurrahman (2004, pp. 169-188) aptly labels Sembène's "women warriors".

One of the prominent female revolutionary commanders in *God's Bits of Wood*, Penda, embodies resilience and courage of the women involved in the struggle, devolving from the staunch character she is born with: "From her earliest childhood she had demonstrated a resolute independence which only increased as she grew up. As a young girl she had seemed to develop a hatred for men and had turned away everyone who had wanted to marry her" (p. 138). Thus presented, such an independent woman needs no male authorisation before acting on her own will and shoulder social roles arbitrarily denied women on patriarchal grounds. Rejecting the so-called "women's place" in this life-and-death struggle for community survival amid starvation, this dogged-willed woman plays a pivotal role in the workers' strike against the railway company.

Who says strike means hunger, a terrain Penda has claimed as a turf during this strike-induced chronic famine time. To soothe starving families and subvert Dejean's diabolic agenda to use "hunger" as a dreaded strike-breaking instrument, she weighs in by willingly helping with the rice ration distribution:

Twice each week, after that, Penda supervised the ration distribution, assisted by two other women, one of whom was older than she and the other very young (...) The three women stood behind a table, set up in an open field not far from the union building. Each of them held a two-pound measuring scoop and transferred the rice in this from the big sacks behind them to the receptacles handed to them by the women (p. 142).

Before this realisation, this ordinary woman with exceptional creativity – whose insistence has brought forth the co-ordinating food distribution organisation – has been furiously working behind the scenes, providing needed support, unwavering encouragement, and necessary back-up to the strikers.

A single working woman who spends working time with men to whom she is not married, Penda's "easy-going" behaviour has prompted ungrounded accusations of promiscuous lifestyle, for the absence of textual evidence makes such allegations "the gossip of women who accept male definitions of sexuality" (Case, 1981, p. 287). These bogus charges, however, position her as an independent woman: "she does not have a submissive role to play as a wife" (Gyasi, 2004, p. 181).

Gifted with extraordinary organisational skills, qualities that thrust her to the limelight within the women's action group, Penda shows off her unparalleled ability to shake men through her revolutionary actions aiming at the success of their joint

struggle. A hardcore advocate of equal treatment both in public and private realms – her “resounding smack” to one of her colleagues who “had stupidly patted her on the behind” serving as a cogent reminder (p. 143) – she establishes a “committee of women” (p. 160) to co-ordinate the latter’s march from Thiès to Dakar. Just as “A woman slapping a man in public was something no one had ever seen before” (p. 143), an anathema which is an anti-patriarchal and un-African gesture, this free thinker and convention-breaker takes a step further by creating such an association of women that ultimately holds the key to the crisis denouement. In anticipation of such a crucial role of the said association, this fighter against the triple oppression of women – race, class and gender – urges males to allow their partners to join the strike: “Men, you must allow your wives to come with us” (p. 187). Under the aegis of class consciousness, she sends a clarion call for women to join the strike and march from Thiès to Dakar for its conclusive resolution.

Borne of the material conditions (i. e., the capitalist exploitation of railroad workers) Penda finds herself in, this quintessential embodiment of radical Marxist-feminist philosophy and epitome of feminist activism logically drives her political programme in mass conscientisation to mobilise womenfolk for the battle against the railroad company. Brushing aside the inner division of the all-male union and its bickering about women’s participation in the strike and fed up with men’s arguing about women’s right to be heard (p. 187) in these trying times when traditional gender roles are reversed with women becoming the breadwinners of their families (pp. 34 & 40), this champion of female equal rights surprises menfolk by taking the floor “in the name of all of the women” (p. 187). Flatly overturning the patriarchal expectation that a woman must ask permission before making a decision, she announces women’s plan to march from Thiès to Dakar:

I speak in 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. 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! (p. 187).

Expectedly, this announcement in a patriarchal setting, where most of the men would prefer the women to keep to their allotted place, is followed by men’s astonishment that ultimately resulted in “remonstrance and protest” (p. 187), because “it was the first time in living memory that a woman had spoken in public in Thiès” (p. 187). Clearly, this lucid strategist and articulate Marxist revolutionary has crossed many red lines, defeated taboos, travelled uncharted treks, reached new heights and expanded women’s horizon. She has resisted male discouraging tactics, vowing to reach the target. One such a male tactician is Beaugosse, Bakayoko’s romantic rival, who belittles female capacity with these condescending and androcentric words:

I've never gone to Dakar on foot, but I don't think it is anything for women to try. Besides, there is no water there; when I left, Alioune and all the other men were scouring the city for a cask or even a bottle of water – which is what the women should be doing. Instead of that, they have been battling troops in the streets and starting fires (p. 188).

Beaugosse's deterrent is a wasted energy; the women completely ignore his prescriptions, as they do other men's mischievous intents, circumventing male cunningness. Since they are resolved to make it at all costs, while the men are strategising "the measures to be taken at the union office, the women prepared for their departure" (p. 188), without guidance from their mates, ruling out a patriarchal prized infantilisation principle that women cannot even be trusted with making their own informed decisions. Against the treasured patriarchal prescription that women must always be under men's control, Sembène's new breed of females has no order to receive from their men: "Like so many echoes, hundreds of voices answered her. 'Now we are leaving... leaving... leaving... Preceded, accompanied, and followed by the beating of the drums, the cortège moved out into the night'" (p. 189). These women are unafraid of night, without male protection. Where have patriarchal rock-solid binary opposites of feminine vulnerability/masculine protectiveness gone in this picture of female feat?

The strike lands these women at the forefront of the struggle, a situation unheard of in Africa, where such roles are men's traditional turf (Dick, 2016, p. 172). Taking the bet under Penda's guidance, then, the Thiès women undertake the fifty mile protest march to Dakar, chanting along the way:

They marched in well-ordered ranks, ten abreast, and without any masculine escort now. They carried banners and pennants printed with slogans, some of them reading, *EVEN BULLETS COULD NOT STOP US* and others; *WE DEMAND FAMILY ALLOWANCES ... FOR EQUAL WORK, EQUAL PAY - OLD AGE PENSIONS, PROPER HOUSING* (p. 214; capitals in original).

Not only are they unafraid of night, but they also defy guns, for even "bullets could not stop" them. Whenever they go off-track along the way, Penda will tap into her personal resources (i. e., her leadership ability and organisational skills) to return order to the group and keep them together for the risky trail. They eventually reach the capital city, undeterred even after Penda is gunned down by the police: "But how could a handful of men in red tarbooshes prevent this great river from rolling onto the sea?" (p. 204).

Penda's instrumentality in the successful completion of this defiant march needs no further demonstration. One critic nicely summarises her invaluable contributions to the happy ending of the strike in these terms:

It is under Penda's unparalleled leadership that the women of Thiers participate in a long anti-colonial protest march 'that's more than men could do'. It is under Penda's unequalled leadership that women are conscientised and given organisational skills.... it is under her unmatched leadership that the French colonial oppressions are eventually forced to accede to the strike (Mphiko, 2016, pp. 65-66)

Unlike men's counter-productive and self-defeatist collusion with its internecine war, the spirit of sisterhood has prevailed, bringing chauvinistic colonial exploitation to its heels in *God's Bits of Wood*, under Penda's watchful eyes and strategic guidance. A pivotal character who has bartered her miniskirt with military outfit, she orders the tired masses to march on to Dakar, using Maïmouna's visual impairment to goad her fellow marchers into perseverance: "What a blind woman can do ... the rest of you should be able to do" (p. 202). For taking the initiative to organise the women's long protest march and for holding the forefront position in pivotal episodes (Sougou, 2010, p. 89), Penda is rightly credited with the strikers' resounding victory, a woman who has snatched admiration even from the men.

Ramatoulaye comes next on the list of Sembène's women fighters. Portrayed as the head of her household and entrusted with the management of all affairs within the compound in the course of the strike, Ramatoulaye, this "walking encyclopaedia" who "knew everyone, by their first names and their family names ... [who] knew all their relatives and the bloodlines of all the men, for generations back" (p. 40), takes seriously her new role of breadwinner: "Since the beginning of the strike," the text reads, "Ramatoulaye did not pause at all," putting upon herself the responsibility of feeding by all means the large family she is in charge of. Indeed, considering the huge size of the said family, kidding is over: "There was no longer time for gossiping. Her responsibilities had become very great, because the house of which she was the eldest was large" (p. 40). So, she disrupts the patriarchal pattern by becoming "the breadwinner" of her family, a role traditionally reserved for men alone. After promising her household to bring sustenance back upon her return, she combs the whole town in search for food and water to no avail. She finally visits Hadramé's shop to buy "just rice" - No oil, no sugar - on credit and feed at least the starving children only to be met with the shopkeeper's flat refusal. Hadramé makes it no secret; as it transpires through his thunderous no, he is on the side of the railroad company, using hunger as a dreaded strike-breaker: "I told you yesterday, Rama, that I couldn't do anything more for you, or for any strikers' families" (p. 42).

Like Hadramé, Ramatoulaye's own brother, El Hadj Mabigué, insists he can only give her credit on condition that she stops supporting the strikers. So being on the side of the oppressors, the French railroad company, Mabigué refuses to help the starving families, including his sister's. Having a personal score to settle with this brother of her who has disinherited her by calling her an "illegitimate" child, this epitome of the feminist slogan, "the personal is political,"ⁱⁱ Ramatoulaye, brings her family conflict to public gaze, unveiling his wealthy brother's refusal to share food with close relatives during these critical times. Mabigué's refusal, resulting from collaboration between African patriarchy and capitalist exploitation, raises Ramatoulaye's awareness about their collusion to exterminate the have-nots through hunger. It is in light of this new-found consciousness, a prerequisite for her

confrontation with her brother Mabigué, that Ramatoulaye returns to her home to witness a scene that almost makes “her choke with fury,” a scene her brother’s ram, Vendredi, has orchestrated. Outside the home, “a few grains of dirty rice and the remains of the earthnut cakes were strewn across the ground, and fragments of gourds were scattered everywhere. In the kitchen, all of the cooking pots on the unused stove had been overturned” (p. 66). Threatening her family’s sustenance and hampering her means of providing for the strikers and her female comrades, this spectacle of disarray prompts Ramatoulaye’s impulsive decision to kill the ram on the spot (McDonald, 2015).

So, without any further ado, this Marxist-oriented woman – who is unafraid of authorities when it comes to ensuring comfort of the common people – kills Mabigué’s fat goat and feeds her starving children and the other striking families, because she understands that “being the head of a family is a heavy burden – too heavy for a woman” (p. 69). Not only does this woman kill the ram through retaliatory action, but she taunts her brother as well: “I know Vendredi does not live 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). Her slaughtering the goat leads to unrest with the police, an expected retaliation from her brother. Sensing troubles brewing ahead, then, the women around Ramatoulaye get prepared for a confrontation of any kind: “It was then that the police arrived in the big central courtyard” (p. 72). But Ramatoulaye’s resisting jail, a resistance emboldened by the power of sisterly solidarity, leads to a riot, so to speak: “From the street, 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).

Ramatoulaye owes her salvation to female solidarity. Grounded on several principles that have been advocated by feminist theory and political practice for decades, female solidarity advocates supporting those who are under the yoke of oppression: workers by capital, women by patriarchy, ethnic minorities by racialised orders and racist institutions (Altınay, 2022, p. 3).

At the end of the day, Ramatoulaye exhibits an extraordinary strength, unknown to her before, to trust her sisters-in-fight’s testimony: “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...” (p. 74). Again, drawn from Sembène’s fertile imagination, this woman has more than a man’s strength. Are we not schooled into believing that men are always strong and women weak? Why is she endowed with such an exceptional physical strength? Sembène’s feminist leaning is the apt answer to this question.

In sum, she is a strong and courageous woman who leads by example. For her household's and strikers' sake, she honestly and fearlessly accepts her role as the provider, protector and leader of women and children for the strikers' victory. Underscoring her unparalleled role during the strike, besides protecting Penda, Mphiko (2016, p. 66) writes: "Ramatoulaye's capacity, in both her personal and public spheres, to inspire and maintain this spirit of women's gender, class consciousness and solidarity is in direct contrast to the Union leaders' collaborationist bickering, backstabbing and competition for power, positions, possessions and prostitutes."

She definitely performs, besides Penda, brave deeds during these trying times when strikers and their families are preys to the oppressors.

Showcasing yet another example of a courageous and strong-willed woman in the shape of Penda and Ramatoulaye, Sembène brings in Maïmouna, a blind woman. She is not only a riot-victim for having sustained numerous strike-related attacks, but also a male-abused victim, with African men who have sexually preyed on her vulnerability. Impregnated by Samba, one of the strike leaders, who deserted her thereafter with twins, Maïmouna has known male cruelty through and through. This disabled woman and victim of multiple oppressions refuses to back down, however: she is resolved to participate in the move in this Muslim-oriented setting, where women are excluded from public decision-making. Despite this prohibition, Maïmouna does not only partake in the strike discussion but she effectively participates in the women's heroic march to Dakar during which a stampede leads to the death of one of her twins:

As soon as calm had returned to the market place, Maïmouna, the blind woman, began groping her way in search of her child, not knowing that the little body had been carried away when the dead and the wounded were gathered up. She had been beaten, pushed, and trampled until her body was bruised and stiff in every joint. Her clothes were in shreds... (p. 26).

So, in addition to losing her child to the strike, this poor creature is badly assaulted by the police. Although bereaved, bruised, brutalised and pauperised after losing her small business in the process, this "intellectually bright, spiritually pure, morally upright and courageous" woman (Mphiko, 2016, p. 67) remains steadfast in the struggle, undeterred by her visual impairment and countless misfortunes.

Drawing her strength from local folklore and inspired by the life story of another blind and local feminist legend Goumba N'Diaye, she uses the latter's sloganeering and revolutionary songs to goad women into actions. Displaying an unshakable conviction in a successful conclusion of the strike, on top of her steadfast belief in overcoming the situation, Maïmouna's unswerving commitment to the strikers' cause is unparalleled, seen via her uplifting the fighters through her celebration of the power of her comrades and sister-warriors. An intuitive, perspicacious and

visionary woman with extraordinary extrasensory perceptive power (Mphiko, 2016, p. 67), Maïmouna is the personification of Penda's resilience and the embodiment of Ramatoulaye's manly strength. Moulded as a psychological healer and acting as a trusted advisor to her fellow sisters, this blind "woman who had measured her strength against that of men," to borrow Lubbungu's (2020, p. 158) formulation, ultimately emerges, in the unfolding of Sembène's narrative, as a commanding character, leading the women from Thiès to Dakar. In itself, this heroic act of her remains an uncommon example of female empowerment, given her disability: "All of the women seemed to want to walk behind Maïmouna, as if she trailed a protective wake in which they would be safe" (p. 201). As Lubbungu (2020, p. 158) aptly theorises in light of this feat, Sembène seems to be proclaiming through Maïmouna's resolute courage, unwavering resolve and unflinching determination that "Disability is not Inability." It is only in consideration of her overall inputs to the strike's successful resolution that Penda's slogan, "What a blind woman can do ... the rest of you should be able to do" (p. 202), fully makes sense. Paying Maïmouna a tribute for her invaluable roles herein, Mphiko (2016, p. 67) cogently writes the following:

Maïmouna might be an old, poor, blind and illiterate woman; but she succeeds where the bickering young, able-bodied, educated male collaborators have failed. Despite her blindness, advanced age, frailty and infirmity, she is more creative, resourceful and committed than the compradorial Diaras and Beaugosses of this world. She embodies and expresses the Senegalese people's cultural-political resilience, aspirations and accomplishments.

A victim of multiple oppressions borne of African men's collaboration with French colonial-capitalist-patriarchy and dumped by men who exploited her vulnerability, this noble woman with disability refuses to be beaten down, enduring her selfless suffering. Emerging as an exemplar role model to her fellows, Maïmouna ultimately leads them to victory, after sustaining numerous physical and psychological injuries for the good cause.

CONCLUSION

The world is ruled by patriarchal ideology, a concept which has infantilised women and mandated everything to be seen through the male eye, completely denying women's recounting of their own experience to the satisfaction of a patriarchy-ruled society. To reflect the desiderata of this system of relationships, values, and beliefs embedded in social, political, and economic systems that structure gender inequality, wild theories are constructed accordingly, including Harris Mirkin's (1984, p. 42) following idea that nails the perennial dependence of females: "Regardless of a woman's status or situation, her derived economic class, or her sexual preference, a woman remains under the power of the father, and can have access only to so much of privilege or influence as patriarchy is willing to consent."

Though a male author must represent a historical event from a masculine point of view by making the male characters the wheelers and dealers under patriarchal watchful eyes, Sembène chooses otherwise to imbue his narrative with a balanced gender perspective, defying patriarchal diktats with his creation of empowered women in the midst of a male-oriented society. His portraying Penda, Ramatoulaye and Maïmouna, among others, as leaders, strategists, organisers, curious observers, critical thinkers, and brave fighters goes against patriarchal expectations from a man. The emerging of these female characters in his fiction as entities unto themselves, not subservient to their men, shakes patriarchal ground. Sembène's carving these women as independent beings capable of speaking for themselves as well as his presenting them as autonomous subjects who make decision in a way that defies conventional conceptions of how women should behave are shocking spectacles to patriarchy. An anathema in itself for sure, his overall representation of women "peeing with the phallus" infuriates patriarchy, an ideology which singularly promotes male privileges.

To reach a balanced gender perspective and land his females in leadership positions in the midst of such a phallogocentric society, Sembène fictionalises workers' unrest. So, the author deploys "the struggle of a people for equality and for the right to be treated as decent human beings," to borrow Peter A. Abety's (in Kandji, 2006, p. 183) working definition of strike, to change women's traditional representation in Africa and advocate for complementarity between men and women, breaking the cocoon of patriarchal society. With a strong feminist inclination, this writer has men and women harness their complementarities in their joint struggle against social injustice.

With cocksureness and patriarchal blessing, menfolk launch their move without consulting their women, but they learn it the hard way, thereafter. Once its first moment's enthusiasm wanes, things get ugly as the workers' families start to go hungry. This critical situation inaugurates a reversal in stereotypical gender roles: the men are no longer able to provide for sustenance, catapulting the women into breadwinners, a slap in the face of patriarchy, given its stringent role division – the distribution of men and women into social roles both in the home and at work. Because the new situation commands women to move from private to public sphere, with their new-found consciousness as equal partners and comrades of men, they become involved, head-on, in protests and confrontations, brushing aside patriarchal sacrosanct principles that structure both the private and public spheres, ensuring that men dominate both. Thus, without asking permission from their men, these women actively participate in the strike, projecting themselves as supportive of their striking mates. As the role switching attests to it, many stereotypical gender dichotomies are blurred during the strike, with the deconstruction of traditional portraits of both genders. The author thus provides an acerbic critique of patriarchal systems, demythologising any form of gender discrimination against women. Seen through

Onyemaechi Udumukwu's (in Dick, 2016, p. 172) lens, Sembène's Marxist-feminist art seems to suggest that the struggle "is neither that of men nor even of the women, both genders unite to make the struggle a people-oriented struggle".

Beforehand, the author counters patriarchal-sanctioned rules about girl's subservient education with his innovative moulding of Ad'jibid'ji. Contrary to time-tested conventions, this girl-child is taught from the cradle her importance not only as a woman but as a full person endowed with the capacities to learn and be a motor of social change. Additionally, Sembène's featuring of this little girl at the outset of "men's only business" narrative, his emancipating her from oppressive domesticity at a young age and his securing patriarch Fa Keita's approval of the girl-child's gender equality aspiration constitute revolutionary steps hallmarking the author's feminist leaning.

Sembène's challenge to sexism is equally exemplified through women's involvement in the movement. Climaxing in their march from Thiès to Dakar, women's full participation in the strike as co-fighters ultimately holds the key to its denouement, to their men's astonishment. Portrayed both as a motivating force and as defying the traditional feminine roles, the female characters in *God's Bits of Wood* are instrumental in the strike's happy ending, a portrait which delivers one resounding message: women should neither be viewed as weak subjects, nor should their thighs "be treated as tables on which contracts are signed" (Lubbungu, 2020, p. 158). As acknowledged by a male strike leader, although men are the strike's nominal leaders, Penda, Ramatoulaye and Maimouna, among other women, perform equally feats: "In the days that followed, Lahbib often congratulated himself on having enlisted Penda's help" (p. 143). In any case, these female characters do not make it a secret: they are pompous about it. Mame Sofi, the embodiment of women's defiance against male chauvinism who organises the women into a militia to repulse the police, brags about her invaluable inputs: "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 fed us, and now it is the women who are feeding them" (p. 48). Such a bragging is reminiscent of Flora Nwapa's (1984, p. 13) forewarning men that women "are a force to be reckoned with." Again, by making this tough woman threaten her husband with "cut[ting] off the only thing that makes you a man," if the latter "go[es] back to work before the others" (p. 48), preventing him from becoming a strike-breaker, this feminist-inclined author endows her with a resolute determination to see it through, Sembène's rebuttal to the supposedly female weakness.

If his conferring an extraordinary power on his female characters is any indication, Sembène's narrative might be an illustration of a mandatory presence of a female behind every successful man. Consequently, his fiction is rife with empowered and strong-willed women who act on their own impulse without guidance from their

men for the common cause. Resting on feminist bedrock and dubbed silent revolutionaries and emblems of African female strength and resilience (Iyam, 1986, pp. 79-87), Sembène's women do neither "represent shadows of the male figure, nor echoes of the male voice," female figures who are known for regularly breaking ties with traditional socio-cultural mores in their constant "struggle to redefine their perceptions of the world" (Wallace, 1984, p. 113).

Based on the author's superb maneuvering of interdependence and gender complementarity as distinctive principles of African feminism in *God's Bits of Wood*, one might share Saadia El Karfi Azzarone's comment on Sembène's artistic approach to gender balance, in general. In advancing the cause of gender equality, Azzarone (daily.jstor, n.d.) holds, Sembène skillfully "presents the fascinating, multifaceted, and complex female characters who ... end up as the protagonists and heroines of the narrative, leaving the readers and audiences with the final say and making the most impact".

Definitely, this Marxist-feminist-inclined author invites females to snatch their fate from men, because no man will willingly relinquish his manly privileges, undue patriarchal gifts granted him for being born "the right sex". Frederick Douglass (in Afagla, 2019, p. 224) once forcefully made similar point: "The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." Likewise, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, p. 36) impels women to liberate themselves: "... it is up to women to combat their social disabilities; to fight for their own fundamental and democratic rights, without waiting for the happy day when men will willingly share power and privilege with them - a day that will never come." So, just the way sovereignty, the capacity of any community to be free from external control, must come from within, not from any outside forces (Cook, 2002, pp. 106-7), women must start acting audaciously by using their sovereign rights, emulating Sembène's female characters as their role models, instead of waiting for men to hand it to them on a golden plate. That wait-and-see attitude radiates with mirages, a beautiful vision which will never fructify but will recede further and further, instead of drawing nearer.

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ⁱ What makes the woman in a traditional African environment is her docility, her ability to submit to the man, her spirit of sacrifice and her silence in the face of everything, even what oppresses her. To speak, especially in public, is to attack the man's honour, it is to vex him. Therefore, the woman learns very early to be silent, to remain well in her place of... woman in a world of men. If she speaks, it is from the back of the smoky kitchen. And so as not to call into question the foundations of society, she collects everything so that things go well, even if it is at her expense. Our translation

ⁱⁱ Underscoring the connections between personal experience and larger social and political structures, this phrase was popularised by second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and was the main slogan used during the civil rights movement.