

BEYOND MASCULINITY: WOMEN ACTIVISM IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION, A STUDY OF OUSMANE'S *GOD'S BITS OF WOOD*

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Abstract

Historically, women activism is not new in Africa. It has existed since the colonial era and in literature, it emerged remarkably in some of the most famous post colonial works. This research looked at women activism as more viable than the efforts of the men, in resolving the textual conflict in Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood. This was done by giving insight into the origin of the word 'activism'. Activism was further described as a concept with many theories of analysis, including feminism which serves as an umbrella theory and a working tool for this paper. The meaning of masculinity was established and further explained by the mention of some associate terms. A brief history of women activism in Africa was given and this serves as a background to the study. Women activism was studied by looking at the nature, goal and achievements of the women activists, with particular attention to the forms of their movements. The movements could be violent or non violent or a combination of the two. At the end, the researcher arrived at the conclusion that women activism is a courageous and selfless movement to liberate humankind. It is the nature and achievements of these selfless movements that supersede those of the men.

Introduction

Group women activism had not been a popular subject in contemporary African feminist studies. Feminist writers and critics had in the recent past concentrated more on identity issues, like self-realization, self-actualization, self-discovery, resistance against male domination and the likes, as seen in the works of such writers as Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali, etc.

Although, there are some critical attempts on the issues of women struggles, the interest is on individual struggles. Here the researcher intends to examine women struggle as a collective effort rather than individual and consequently the achievements of these women in conflict resolution. The researcher will look at the concept of activism and how women in African literature used it as a medium to express their dissatisfactions and fight against oppression in different ways. Particular attention will be given to the nature and the achievement of women activism.

Sembene Ousmane like Ngugi Wa'Tiong O' has done an unquantifiable job in the representation of his female characters. Unlike the old retrogressive female characters of Achebe, Ousmane according to Chioma Opara projects his female characters as lionesses on the path. These lionesses believably, are moving on a revolutionary path for liberation against patriarchy, racism and colonialism. Ousmane no doubt, has reappraised African feminism through his representation of female characters. He gives the blind in the character of Maimouna a chance to perform and even the rejected, in the character of Penda the prostitute is given a formidable role of leadership. Ousmane without loss of words is truly the *avant-garde* of feminist literature in Africa.

Gods Bits of Wood belongs to the earliest works of African Literature with the attendant postcolonial and Marxist manifestations and domination. Beneath these popular representations lie some overwhelming feminist inputs of group women activism, without which the entire force of the

men put together would be in vain. This women activism, we are made to understand is the real force that pull the colonists out of Senegal.

Evidence abounds in the text that the achievement of women activism is by all means beyond that of their male counterparts in the struggle against oppression and exploitation in the text. Our aim is to demonstrate how the textual conflict eludes masculinity until women activists conquer it- hence, “Beyond Masculinity”.

Definition of Terms

The word activism is of German origin- *activismus*, which was first used around the end of the First World War. According to J.A. Cuddon, the French Revolution and the British abolitionists could be termed the earliest activists movements in Europe. Activism later became a concept to be analyzed by many theories, including Nationalism, Revisionism, Marxism, Deprivation Theory, Feminism etc. Activism could come as a violent or peaceful demonstration or a combination of both. Masculinity

Masculinity over the time has metamorphosed from the mere physical features of manliness to become an associate of words like: dominance, power, strong, alpha, control, etc. Greg Beyer says: “Masculinity is what it means to be a man – which I think is not a simple thing”. Here, masculinity is used in terms of whatever that makes up a man; his strength (muscle), both physical and intellectual, his cultural and socio-political advantages.

Background to the Study

From the beginning, women activism in Africa had never been selfish radical movements, like what we have in the West. According to Helen Chukwuma in an essay called “The Face of Eve: Feminist Writing in African Literature,” Western women liberation movements fought for women’s suffrage which is expressed in marches, protests and women right political conventions. African women movements differ from those of the western ones in the sense that African feminism did not have any articulated and written chapters as the western feminism. Example; “The Declaration of Sentiments” of the Seneca Falls Convention of July 19, 1848 in New York, *A Vindication of the Right of Women* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf and the much acclaimed *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, which serves as a base for the Western modern theoretical framework for feminism. Mumford Patricia writes that, history of women activism in Africa, when compared to that of the West is relatively new and different. Women protests had not been noted until colonialism came into Africa. (<http://www.uk.activists.com>). In support of this history, Gloria Chukwukere notes:

Yaa Asantewa, an Ashanti Queen mother in Ghana, was a powerful political activist, whose unique status enabled her control both men and women. She wielded a lot of authority and power that she is believed to have led her people against the British in the 1890 – 1901 Anglo-Ashanti war (3).

Chukwuma also documents that the Egba women’s march on the Alake of Egbaland led by Mrs. Odufunmilayo Ransome Kuti was political and national. The popular Aba Women Riot of 1929 which spread to Abak and environs was a protest against the unfair taxation of the colonist. This political movement which cost about twenty-nine women their lives was completely national in objective. Margret Ekpo was another woman activist who personally funded series of women

activism in the colonial era. Ekpo and Mrs. Kuti funded and mobilized Nigerian women for political agitation in their various communities, such as the Abeokuta Women Union (AWU), Enugu Women Council and the Aba Women Association which led the Aba Women Riot of 1929.

According to Susan Ellons, series of women activism were led by Winnie Mandela and Miriam Makeba, especially during Nelson Mandela's detention for the liberation of the black race in South Africa. Also in Kenya, Ellons writes that Micere Mugo was a profound woman activist who fought against colonialism through writing and political protests.

Theoretical Framework

Women activism is simply feminist activism. Feminism is a modern literary theory inaugurated around 1960s, according to M.H Abrams Feminist literary theory is that literary tool which seeks to extract and evaluate female consciousness as embedded in a literary text. This entails the interest of a woman or the women regarding the textual conflict. Their consciousness is also revealed in their positions and actions towards conflict resolution. This would therefore uphold the feminist representation of any literary text. There are many branches of feminism, from which a researcher in women studies can approach each feminist issue within the larger theoretical framework.

Feminism is broadly categorized into two: Radical and Liberal feminism. For the purpose of this study, Liberal feminism is the tool. This is an umbrella theory in which those theories of activism earlier mentioned are assembled. Again, African women activism does not agree with the radical western feminist suppositions. It is the Liberal feminist stands that give the African woman the withal to showcase her sensibility as a woman, who is also a sister, a wife and a mother. Liberal feminism as advocated by African feminists is what Carol Davies in her essay titled "Some Notes on African Feminism" asserts that:

A genuine African feminism can therefore be summarized as follows. First, it recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yoke of foreign domination and European/ American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspect of women subjugation which differs from the generalized oppression of all African people (563).

In other words, Davies argues that "it is a hybrid of sorts, which seeks to combine African concern with feminist's concern. This is the nature of the balancing which has to take place" (565). Alice Walker quoted by Kerz Okafor differentiates African feminism from the Western type and she makes an important observation that "the black feminist is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (131). This methodology therefore, will enable the researcher extract from how feminist activists in the selected work used their efforts to achieve freedom from tyrants - colonial masters, capitalist and oppressors for the entire people in their different societies, through some organized protests.

Masculinity in the Text

In *God's Bits of Wood* Bakayoko is endowed with everything masculine. He is physically and intellectually upright, with enough education and awareness. He is Ousmane's activist, just like the

Activist himself, in Ojaide's *The Activist*. Baka as he is fondly called has all plans to remove the colonists and free his people. The narrator follows him wherever he goes, but that only leaves us with the report of his journey to different places and the meetings at each point. Never at any time is he involved in any action of physical combat with his enemy. A critical look at the character of Bakayoko reveals that he fears confrontations. He moves rather underground than come face to face with his opponent. Agreeably; "he is rather heard than seen" in the text as Opara would put it. In fact, Bakayoko's *modus operandi*, from every indication, lacks the capacity to resolve the textual conflict, had the women not intervened. He is already at the crossroad. The government has withdrawn their supplies. Water has stopped running. Hunger steers at the faces of every indigenous worker and their relatives plus the frequent trouble on the streets between the whites and the blacks; mostly women and children. The men are already contemplating calling the strike off. Some of them already disappear from their duty post at the union building, while others like El Hadji Mabigue go about predicting death from hunger and starvation, if the strike is not called off immediately. With all the enumerations above, the men have already failed to achieve their anticipated goal using the strike strategy.

Women of Thies

These women engage in series of protests for the sake of their men and the entire people of Dakar and Thies. Through violent demonstrations, the women are able to prove themselves courageous, fearless, strong and above all, lionesses, as Opara would call them. The women struggle violently under the sun and the rain, with the police, the soldiers at gun point and many life affecting weapons until victory is assured. During each protest, the women appear to have a leader or some leaders. These leaders at different points include Penda the young prostitute, Maimouna the blind woman, and Dieynaba Penda's foster mother, at Thies. Then, Ramatoulaye, Mame Sofi and Houdia M'Baye lead the fight at Dakar.

These female leaders are lionesses that lead the pack. They organize women at various points to protest against the oppressors in the Dakar Niger Railway for the general workers strike. These uneducated and uncivilized women despite all odds are able to understand the exploitation and marginalization their men are going through and when the men go on strike, the women protest even violently till their demands are met.

In the morning after the decision to embark on an indefinite strike is taken, the white employers out of anger attack some of the black employees at the market place. The strikers get frightened and a lot flee for their lives. This fight marks the beginning of women struggle in the text. According to the narrator: "Dieynaba had rallied the women of the marketplace, and like a band of Amazons they came to their rescue armed with clubs, with iron bars, and bottles"(39). The women throw anything they lay hands on at the soldiers who fire bullets at them. When the soldiers make more advances towards the people, Bachirou one of the black employees, is caught fleeing for his dear life across Dieynaba and she asks "Where are you going?"(40) The narrator continues; "handing him a rock to throw: but the young man just stammered something and ran off again" (4). It is in the heat of this riot that Maimouna the blind loses one of her twins in a stampede.

The paragraph above speaks in earnest the unpreparedness of the men to face such a nationalist movement. This is not unexpected as Africans had almost nothing compare to the sophisticated arms of the colonists. Women see the nature of the riot, the strikers with empty hands

cannot match the soldiers with guns. Then as activists, they prefer to lose their lives than let the innocent workers die alone. Would they continue to run from the white brutes? If that be, how will they conquer these “red necks?” This was the idea that made the women move in violently and in their large numbers, they are able to return some blows to the firing soldiers. When the fight is over, the people have eight people dead and very many others wounded. With this tension, the strike goes on quietly in Thies. The white employers never touch anybody again.

Another instance of women valour goes on in Dakar, after Ramatoulaye had killed El. Hadji Mabique’s robust and fierce looking ram called Vendredi. The killing of Vendredi is symbolic to the development of the plot. Metaphorically Rama offers herself saying; “No one in this house will go to bed hungry- if you don’t have ram’s meat to eat, there will at least be mine”.(96). Two things are revealed by the killing of Vendredi. First she wants to punish Mabique for sabotaging the strike and secondly to feed the family with the mutton, since the only available food is already eaten up by the ram. Mabique of course invites the police who come and demand the arrest of Rama and the mutton. Rama surrenders herself to the police but tells them that for obvious reasons, Vendredi must be eaten. The police insist she has to produce the mutton, and in the midst of the argument a serious fight breaks out in the street between the police and the women.

Nobody knows how the battle begins but “the woman with a toothpick” says: “Well, if they want him, they will have to pay! We’ll sell him dearly”(107). It is understood from the quotation above that the police cannot collect the mutton from the women unless the police pay, since everything in the area is now sold at cut-throat prices. These women do not fear gun and other police arms and insist on eating the ram. “Even cat put out its claws and spat”(107). Fighting continues in page 156 as the police reinforce on horseback and demand for Rama alone this time. Before the arrival of the soldiers on horseback, Mame Sofi one of the women activists gathers all the women and an arrangement on how to tackle the horsemen is seriously made. She says:

Don’t worry, I have an idea. Horses are afraid of fire, aren’t they? All of you run and get some live coals and embers from your houses. Carry them in anything you can, but we will have to have them – there isn’t a match left here. We ‘ll need some straws too. Now hurry! (156 – 157).

Immediately, the women spread out through the entire district. Making further arrangement, Mame Sofi orders them: “Now go out ... and line up on both sides of the street. Don’t light any of the straw yet – wait until I give the signal.” (157). When the police on horses back arrive in the street, they force their horses to move but at the sight of some endless pinkish glows along the two sides of the street the horses become uncontrollable. At this moment of confusion, the women simultaneously light their straw and in an instance, there was pandemonium.

Sheaves of flaming straw and pots of coals were flung at the horsemen from every corner of the darkness, while the women shouted at the top of their lungs and beat on tins trying to frighten the horses with the noise. The animals reared and plunged, whinnying frantically, and the men swore. The spahis were veterans of a thousand parades, but they could do nothing to control their horses now.(157).

The horses are terribly frightened and this makes it even more difficult for their men to control them. The women now carry their fire even closer and “A fiery bundle of straw gets one of

them full in the face and chest and he screamed in terror, trying to tear off his heavy jacket, which had already begun to burn” (157). This is quite a terror to the police and even the soldiers. The soldiers manage to draw their swords and flash them wickedly among the crowd but:

Mame Sofi and her group of women had pulled the leader of the platoon from his horse, and when they had him on the ground they dragged him by his boots to a little ditch where the people of the neighborhood relieve themselves at night and thrust his head in the accumulated filth (158).

Interestingly, these women eat the mutton that night. The almighty force of the police could not stop them. Rama feeds the family and even beyond. Therefore her objective is fulfilled. The next day the struggle continues at the police station until Houdia M’Baye pays the ultimate price from a merciless spray of water by the police. The women rally immediately to begin another riot but the Imam arrives on time and admonishes them to go home. Considering his religious position, the women obey and return to their homes and Rama also returns with them, objective achieved.

At Thies again, the killing of the ‘crew’ prompts another protest. At the hearing of a sound of gun, the women rush out and see the bodies of two children. They cry and mourn, symbolically, “fists were waved and a torrent of oaths and insults burst from their throats like water through a shattered dam” (222). When they arrive at the front of the residence of the District Administrator, they lay down the two corpses and stand there silently. The narrator even confirms the weight of the silence as it is heavier than any violence whatsoever.

Three days after, the directors of the company notify the strikers that their representatives would be received. This is one of the movements, among all the women movements in the text that does not involve violence of any kind but is quite significant and effective. Note that before this incidence, Bakayoko has travelled through the country, conjuring meetings and consulting all and sundry just to know the interest of the white employers on the strike but in vain. Three days after the women’s demonstration, the employers notify the employees to come for a negotiation – the first since the beginning of the strike.

In the epilogue, Beatrice Isnard’s wife commits suicide. This is as result of another peaceful demonstration by women. Isnard cannot understand why the white should leave the people for good. He and his wife refuse to go, when others have all left their stations. This prompts another demonstration and Beatrice in an oxymoron of shame and anger grabs one of the revolvers on the dining table and runs out to the garden. Two shots ring, followed by a cry, one of the soldiers at the gate runs to the garden. Isnard, Edouard and Pierre also run to the garden only to meet Beatrice’s motionless body on the ground. They pick it up into the house and bolt their door carefully. The intriguing aspect of this non- violent activism is that; “At the sound of the shots, an echoing silence had fallen on the crowd, as if they had written a brutal ending to a long, long story whose climax, until then, had been unknown. Even the drums were silent”(332). Therefore, this marks the end of suffering for the women and entire people.

The Popular Match

Penda and some other women approach the men at the union building and Bakayoko the protagonist announces the presence of the women in a most interesting manner saying: “our gallant women have something to say to us...They have the right to be heard”(254). The mood in the

quotation above sounds like one in earnest need of the women's help, one already disillusioned and perplexed by the struggle at hand, and then the arrival of a messiah. Then Penda speaks on behalf of the women, she makes known their plan to march to Dakar. The delegate from Dakar tells them that the journey from Thies to Dakar by foot is not what the women can try, considering the distance. Besides, the women of Dakar have been fighting both the police and military troops on the streets. So, there is patrol everywhere in Dakar. For this reason, these women may be going straight into the jaw of a lion. But Bakayoko interrupts the shout of disapproval and on top his voice asserts: "We have no right to discourage anybody who wants to strike a blow for us...it may be just that blow that is needed.(255-256).

By two o'clock in the morning, all the women gather and Penda cries: "Now we are leaving ... leaving ... leaving" (257). Accompanied by echoes of a hundred voices and the beating of drums, the multitude of women move out into the night. This movement is planned to be completed without a single violence. The women's intention is just to move and let the world who watch them see for themselves what oppression and exploitation their men pass through in the hands of their employers and then judge for themselves. This march will continue peacefully until they get to Dakar, the capital city where the chief of the oppressors resides. There and then, they will lay their complaints before him. The women press on, singing and raising moral. As soon as one group allows the refrain to die, another picks it up and new songs are thrown up at intervals. Finally, the day breaks and the sun goes behind them, beating ever hardly on their backs but they pay no attention to it. Penda, Mariama Sonko and Maimouna are at the head of this endless and scattered moving train of women. In the evening of their departure, they arrive at a small village. The inhabitants are bewildered at the sight of such multitude of women. The second day is just like the first one.

At about noon the third day, their fatigue begins to show. According to the narrator, "The sun upended its caldrons of live coals on the earth, and the movement of their knees and ankles became steadily more difficult and painful" (263). They trek for three days now without sufficient rest and feeding. The going gets tougher but they do not give up. The movement and singing and all the humour among the marchers, the narrator likens to a river which having amassed all its strength to pass through a narrow gorge, spreads out and moves sluggishly when it has reached the plain, the troop of women straggled across the landscape. These notwithstanding, the gallants march on.

On approaching the suburbs of Dakar, the women meet not their waterloo but Napoleon. A little boy races on his bicycle and says to them: "There are soldiers on the road at the entrance to the city. They say that, the women from Thies will not be allowed to pass" (276). Fear comes upon the crowd but Penda says to them:

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! The long
Multi – colored mass began to move forward again (276).

Shortly after, the women arrive at the entrance gate of Dakar and here, there is a confrontation; one that alters the trend of the movement. It is at this point that the movement would have come to a standstill, but for the marchers, they are just too many as Penda earlier said, to be stopped by anybody. On getting to the guards on the entrance gate, the captain commanding the small troop of soldiers calls out to the marchers: "Go back to Thies, women: we cannot let you pass!" (277). But Penda sarcastically replies: "We will pass if we have to walk on the body of your mother!" (277).

And already the pressure of this human wall was forcing the soldiers to draw back. Reinforcements began to appear, from everywhere at once, but they were not for the men in uniform. A few rifle butts came up menacing and were beaten down by clubs and stones. The unnerved soldiers hesitated not knowing what to do, and then some shots rang out, and in the column two people fell – Penda and Samba N' Doulougou. But how could a handful of men in red tarbooshes prevent this great river from rolling onto the sea? (277).

So, Penda pays the ultimate price. She dies a martyr; a price for the people's freedom. At Dakar, people gather along the road to watch and others to welcome them. Among the spectators, one asks. "Is it true they walked all that distance without food or water? Poor things, – that's more than the men could do" (287). This is an arrival point as far as this essay is concerned. A three days walk by some organized women is quite beyond masculinity. Ousmane of course by this single statement has placed women in a position no other writer of African literature dare to. The statement is meaningful and objective. It sends the totality of the African feminist message well across. Though they are women, they can do what men cannot do. Feminism in African literature focuses on the female consciousness. Targeted at the female characters in a work and extracting from their characterization the role and the goal of a woman in the development of the plot not whether one is marginalized or not. The trend in feminism is the female consciousness and that is the way forward. Adichie is one most recent writer who persists on this way forward for African feminism in her literary works. Other watchers conclude the women are only playing politics and doing what is not their business. But some others speak for the women saying: "But they aren't doing anything except trying to help their husbands" (287). The women are finally welcomed in Dakar. An old woman who is generally referred to as 'Grandmother' spreads a piece of cloth which she says is inherited from her own grandmother on the ground for the marchers to walk on. This is a most fascinating way of appreciating a visitor or an event.

Shortly after their arrival, they rest for some time and proceed to the field where there is going to be a meeting concerning the strike.

Going to the meeting, the women now join with those of Dakar; they march gallantly but non – violently carrying placards which read: EVEN BULLETS COULD NOT STOP US,... WE DEMAND FAMILY ALLOWANCES" (290).

As the meeting is going on, Bakayoko realizes he may not be allowed to speak and knowing he is the only person who can speak the mind of the people, he instructs Alioune: "if they should try to stop me from speaking later on, round up some of the men – and especially the women – and tell them to shout like they have never shouted before!" (291). At last, he is allowed to speak to the people and his speech gives birth to a general strike.

Conclusion

This paper has created a balance between the old retrogressive sexist and sarcastic representation of women and the later radicalism of feminine representation. Women activism in this research is not antagonistic to men. It is indeed a selfless, nationalist movement of some none educated –cum- religious and traditional women of their times and societies. Sembene's women are of Islamic uneducated class but they are superb, courageous and great achievers.

Through the sub-headings, the forms and the nature of women activism in African literature are revealed. Women activism could be violent or non-violent. Through the textual analysis, the researcher discovered that, of each of these forms of women activism, none could be deemed more effective than the others since the women only sing and beat drums and Beatrice commits suicide.

In conclusion, this is a purely liberal feminist work in which the marginalization and the oppression of the entire people becomes the progenitor of women activism: the struggle without which the plot would have been different. Penda and Houdia M' Baye pay the ultimate price but the women achieve what the men fail to achieve which is freedom from colonialism.

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