

https://dspace.org/

Masculinities in Ousmane Sembene's God's bits of wood

Mooka, Edward

2006-11-13T11:44:27Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/1638

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

INTRODUCTION: MASCULINITY AND MASCULINITIES

In recent years the study of masculinity has grown tremendously. Whitehead and Barrett (2001:1) rightly observe that "today there are no areas of men's activities that have not been subject to some research and debate by both women and men." This is especially true for Western countries. Masculinity has been defined variedly in many academic disciplines. The sex role theory, which is espoused in Brannon and David (1975), describes several elements that constitute the construction of Western masculinity. These elements include, first, "No Sissy Stuff" – the relentless rejection of anything feminine, such as public display of emotions; second, "The Big Wheel" – masculinity implies wealth, power, and status; third, "The Sturdy Oak" – reliability in a crisis, tough, and confident; and fourth, "Give 'Em Hell" – aggression, violence, and daring. The above qualities characterize the general perception of how men behaved or should behave.

Psychologists, for example Doyle (1989), further split the above-mentioned elements into a list of traits associated with masculinity, which include being aggressive, individualistic, self-reliant, self-sufficient, strong, competitive, athletic, ambitious, analytical, assertive, dominant, independent, and forceful. It is worth noting that the sex role and the essentialist theories have limitations since they suggest that men's lives are pre-determined and that therefore men cannot act otherwise. Essentialist (often biological) understanding of men assumes that masculinity is unchanging and common to all men.

Anthropological studies bring out different meanings of masculinity in non-Western cultures. Amadiume (1987), for example, describes the pre-colonial gender system of the Igbo of Nigeria, which was disrupted by colonialism.

Historical works focus on the changing conceptions of masculinity over time. Morrell (1998: 610) observes that notions of masculinities have changed along with capitalism. In pre- and colonial West Africa, the 'big man' epitomized the desirable image of dominant African masculinity. Akyeampong (2000) observes that in Ghana the 'big man' was materially wealthy; he had "imported drinks, rich clothes, gold ornaments, and a large number of wives, children and dependents" (223). Iliffe (1995: 94) adds that "the large complex household headed by a Big Man surrounded by his wives, married and unmarried sons, younger brothers, poor relations, dependents, and swarming children" was the "key colonizing group," a key figure in pre-colonial equatorial Africa and parts of West Africa. This model of masculinity applies best in rural settings. It hardly applies in a colonial context where the urban African "industrial man" (Cooper 2003) is employed and often works for a pittance. The alternate masculinities - such as those depicted in the novel under study - are not in a position of power except in a confined and restricted domestic sphere. Indeed Morrell (1998: 625) suggests a distinction between African masculinity in the country-side and black masculinity (working class) which incorporated work as a central feature of its identity. Black masculinity was largely oppositional as it contested the exploitative system at the workplace.

Sociologists have come to think of masculinities in a different way, based on the differences among men. We understand that masculinity varies across cultures, over time, and among different groups of men at a given point in time. Robert Connell (1995) develops the idea of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities and says that men's access to power, depending on one's race, class, or sexual orientation, explains the differences among men. The pluralized term 'masculinities' emphasizes the differences.

According to Klages[1], Butler's (1990) performative theory shows that gender is not just a social construct (as argued by sociologists), but rather a kind of performance, a show we put on, a set of signs we wear or assume, as a costume or disguise – hence far from essence. Gender is a fantasy enacted by "corporeal styles which […] appear as the natural configuration of bodies" (Butler 1990: 140). In other words, gender is an act, a performance, a set of manipulated codes, costumes, rather than a core aspect of essential identity. Butler's main metaphor for this is "drag," that is, dressing like a person of the "opposite sex." All gender is a form of "drag;" there is no "real" core gender to refer to.

Given all these different understandings of masculinity, we cannot safely apply a single one alone in the study of a colonial novel.

Masculinity versus Masculinities

Reid (2005) says that the term 'masculinity' was initially analytically seen "as somewhat homogeneous and evasive of scrutiny, rather than as an area of study in

[1] See http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/butler.html

and of itself. The past two decades have seen the emergence of 'masculinities' as an arena for more focused social enquiry" (208). In his attempt to define 'masculinity,' Connell (2001) observes:

> 'Masculinity,' to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture (33-34).

Morrell (1998) says that "masculinity is a collective gender identity and not a natural attribute. It is socially constructed and fluid. There is not one universal masculinity, but many masculinities" (607). This suggests that masculinities are produced when individuals choose to respond to a given situation in different ways. Connell (1995: 81) emphasizes that masculinities are "not fixed character types but configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships." Moreover, there are many ways to be a 'real man.' Dolan (2002: 76) writes: "The very notion that there are masculinities rather than a single masculinity acknowledges that there are potentially many ways 'to be a man'." Therefore masculinity takes many forms. Being multiple, masculinities are defined in relation to each other. We talk of masculinities because gender is a relational construct. Men construct versions of masculinity in relation to femininity or other men (Connell 1995: 68). Kimmel (2001) caps it well when he says that "the use of the plural – masculinities – acknowledges that masculinity means different things to different groups of men at different times […] Men's experiences depend on class, race, ethnicity, age, region of the country and location in the global economy" (338). A young, heterosexual white man in the city would have a totally different notion of masculinity to an old black rural gay man. The approach of multiple masculinities helps in interpreting the interaction of

men with men and men with women.

Power and hegemony

Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) address the issues of power and gender relations in their conception of 'Hegemonic Masculinity'. Their approach focuses on the production of social categories, particularly upon how the dominance of white, heterosexual masculinity is maintained and reproduced. They discuss patriarchal power and how it is exercised by men to subordinate women. They note one fact about masculinity: "Men in general are advantaged through the subordination of women" (590). This suggests that each man enjoys the "patriarchal dividend," "the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women" (Connell 1995: 79). Carrigan, et al refer to Cynthia Cockburn's work on British printing workers, which shows how men not only collectively drove women away from places of work to stay at home, but how they also at times used force in their families to dominate their womenfolk and offsprings. Therefore, being a man, Connell argues, conferred power. But not all men share this power equally and not all men are exploitative. This means that in addition to the women, young men, unskilled workers, and blacks are also marginalized or subordinated in industry. Morrell (1998: 608) writes:

> The concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a way of explaining that though a number of masculinities coexist, a particular version of masculinity holds sway, bestowing power and privilege on men who espouse it and claim it as their own […] It is argued that hegemonic masculinity in the USA is overwhelmingly the masculinity of white, ruling class men.

The working class, black men and gay men are excluded from hegemonic masculinity. They are defined as inferior. They do not wield as much power as that wielded by the hegemonic form. Connell (1987) argues that the hegemonic image

of masculinity "is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women" (183). Hegemonic masculinity can be seen as a masculine strategy for maintaining the economic, political and sexual subordination of women and 'lesser' men. Connell (1995), in discussing the notion of hegemonic masculinity, explores how relations of male dominance are reproduced. Hegemony "refers to a particular form of masculinity which is dominant in society, which exercises its power over other rival masculinities, and which regulates male power over women and distributes this power, differentially among men" (Morrell 2001: 9). A hierarchy is suggested among the masculinities. And when the hegemonic form of masculinity is distinguished from other forms, we have multiple ways of being a man.

Studies that inform our reading of *God's Bits of Wood*[2]

The important studies that shape our thinking assume that gender is socially constructed. We also draw on the performance theory. We agree with Berger, et al (1995) who say that "who we are is shaped by historical circumstances and social discourses, and not primarily by random biology" (2-3).

As a relational construct, masculinity can be understood in relation to femininity. Connell (1995: 68) argues that 'masculinity' does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity.' In our study we intend to show how some of Sembene Ousmane's characters defined themselves through the rejection of what their society/culture considered feminine behavior. Masculinities can also be described in relation to each other. Connell (2001) discusses the practices and relations that

[2] Translated by Francis Price from French in 1962, published originally as *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* in 1960. (Page references are to the translated 1995 edition)

construct the major patterns of masculinity. He develops the concept of multiple masculinities and examines a hierarchy and relations of power among these masculinities. He shows that there is hegemonic masculinity – a form that dominates other masculinities and holds a position of authority. Hegemonic masculinity comprises a group which claims and sustains a leading position in social life. It is seen especially when men dominate over not only women, but also fellow men of a different class or race or sexual orientation. Additionally, this form of masculinity is seen in top levels of institutions, such as governments, and it is often reinforced by violence.

Connell (2001) then points out three non-hegemonic categories of masculinity – subordinate, complicit and marginalized – which are developed outside the spheres of power. They are lived in relation to the hegemonic form. The subordinate group, in his definition, comprises of homosexuals and would not be applicable to the text under study, but there are other forms of subordinate masculinity. The complicit group moves with numbers. It shares in the advantages gained in the subordination of another. The marginalized masculinities are realized when gender comes into contact with other structures such as class and race. Marginalized masculinities are seen to be subordinate to the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group. Connell's model is useful in the analysis of the interactions between the white and the black men, as well as the boys' interactions with one another. We will show how the French assume a dominant hegemonic masculinity while a few black leaders become complicit. The majority of the black workers fall in the marginalized group. Moreover, the apprentices are depicted as operating in groups, one of which is hegemonic.

Following Butler (1990), we argue that masculinities can be identified through certain patterns of behavior, practices and attitudes and they keep changing, in different contexts and different times; they are fluid. Gender is not a stable identity but an act that requires repeated performances. Butler says that gender is not "a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts flow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (1990: 140). Men and women as agents actively make and shape their identities. Characters put on a masculine performance at any given time. Butler's notion of the performative nature of gender is useful as we examine the ways in which a group of boys 'did' masculinity in their adventure and games. Commenting on the performative theory of masculinity, Morgan (1992) says:

> Men do not routinely remove and replace their sexual organs in everyday encounters. They do, however, sometimes remove their hat or their ties, clench their fists, bare their teeth, smile, weep, relax, straighten up, touch or obviously fail to touch. Gender and masculinities may be understood as […] presentation of self, something which is negotiated (implicitly or explicitly) over a whole range of situations […] We should think of doing masculinities rather than of being masculine (46-47).

To illustrate the validity of these statements, we examine the characters' utterances and actions during the crisis situation depicted in the novel.

Smith (1996) observes that some influential scholars have claimed "masculinities are in some real sense not the exclusive 'property' of biologically male subjects […] Many female subjects lay claim to masculinity as their property" (4). Halberstam (1998), who notes that "there is remarkably little written about masculinity in women" (xi), gives examples of female masculinities in fiction, film, and lived experience. She, just like Amadiume (1987), emphasizes

the fact that masculinities go beyond the biological divide. Women do assume roles or traits or positions which are usually attributed to men.

In her study of the Igbo community, Amadiume (1987) argues that the pre-colonial indigenous gender system was flexible and fluid. She notes:

> The fact that biological sex did not always correspond to ideological gender meant that women could play roles, usually monopolized by men, or be classified as 'males' in terms of power and authority over others. As such roles were not rigidly masculinized or feminized, no stigma was attached to breaking gender rules. Furthermore, the presence of an all-embracing goddess-focused religion favored the acceptance of women in statuses and roles of authority and power (185).

Male roles were open to certain categories of women through such practices as "male daughters" and "female husbands." Our study adopts and expands upon Halberstam's and Amadiume's frameworks in examining the depictions of how women challenged 'traditional' notions of masculinity, during the long strike. Ousmane's female characters become masculine in multiple ways; they become tomboys, breadwinners, assertive leaders, and aggressive fighters.

Sembene Ousmane the man and the writer

In compiling a brief biography of Sembene Ousmane, we have relied on Tsabedze (1994) who gives complete information on Sembene's life and literary career. Sembene Ousmane was born in Senegal in 1923. He grew up and followed his father's career path as a fisherman. At fourteen he dropped out of school for being unruly. He became a mason and during weekends he listened to *griots* from whom he learnt not only about the past, but also the art of storytelling.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, he was drafted into the French army and fought in Italy and Germany. In 1947 he returned to Senegal and took part in the Dakar – Niger railway workers' strike. This event formed the historical background of his well-known novel, *God' Bits of Wood* (1962), which launched his literary career. In 1948 he went back to France and worked as a docker in Marseilles. He became a trade union leader for the Black dockers. His first novel, *Le Docker noir*, published in 1956, deals with his experiences in Marseilles; in it he condemns the practice of forced labor and racism. This novel was quickly followed by a number of other novels[3].

In the early 1960s he turned to film as a way of effectively reaching the largely illiterate masses. It is worth noting that Sembene Ousmane identifies with the exploited working class in both his fiction and films.

We believe that Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* allows for an analysis of masculinities. The text is clearly about representations of conflicting and emerging masculinities. It is a detailed account of the long railway workers strike in Colonial French West Africa. Gakwandi (1977) notes that the novel is

> an imaginative recreation of a historical movement of the railway workers of former French West-Africa. Between October 1947 and March 1948 these workers paralyzed the railway services from Dakar to Niger by going on strike in defense of their right to enjoy the same social benefits as those enjoyed by white workers (120).

Ousmane weaves a narrative that centers on the dominance of the French, the struggles of the African train workers to obtain decent wages and better working

[3] Sembene Ousmane's other works of fiction include *O pays mon beau people* (1957), *Voltaique* (1962), *L' Harmattan* (1963), *Le Mandat* (1966), *Xala* (1973), *Le Dernier de I' Empire* (1982).

conditions, with the support of the women and the boys/apprentices. On reading the novel, one becomes aware that different forms of masculinity are portrayed by the writer. The French men, who have authority and power, lord it over and marginalize black workers. White managers and white workers alike enjoy a number of privileges; therefore, one can say that power relations between whites and blacks are tilted against the blacks. The whites are keen on maintaining the status quo and therefore will not yield to the demands of the striking workers. They exercise their power over people they believe are inferior. The subordinated black workers, however, who decry the exploitative and harsh socio-economic realities, vote to go on strike in protest. Gakwandi (1977) says that "they revolt against being treated as mere numbers, or as units of labor." They want to be "treated as a valuable collection of 'God's bits of wood'[4]" (123). The workers and their families endure suffering and hardship during the period of the strike so as to gain freedom from exploitation and dominance. Therefore, while the whites struggle to maintain their position of power, the black workers are driven to rebellion and the desire to challenge it. The black workers are supported by their valorized women who in a moment of crisis assume masculine traits and roles. Unlike most early African male writers, Sembene recognizes the significant contribution of women to the struggle for freedom. His female characters are not overshadowed by their male colleagues, unlike, for example, many of Chinua Achebe's heroines[5]. The fact that he does not underplay the significance of the women warrants a study of his text,

[4] The expression 'God's bits of wood' is used in reference to black human beings. It refers to a superstitious African way of counting people so that evil spirits are kept at bay (Ousmane 40). During the women's march from Thies to Dakar, a few exhausted stragglers refuse to move on to join the group ahead. Penda, starts counting by pointing her finger at individual women. The women protest: "No, no! Don't count us, please! […] We are God's bits of wood, and if you count us out you will bring misfortune; you will make us die!" (Ousmane 196). By drawing on superstition Penda easily gets the women to stand up and walk on.

[5] Except for Beatrice Akoh in *Anthills of the Savannah,* all other female characters in Achebe's most acclaimed novels are overshadowed by male counterparts (Odhiambo 2001:3).

especially in relation to the emergence of a strong female masculinity in a society in which culturally women were relegated to more private roles. The teenage boys as well affirm their masculinity during the strike. The novel ends on an optimistic note of assurance that the working conditions will improve and that the womenfolk have risen in the esteem of their society.

Aim

The aim of this study therefore is to examine the way in which manliness, the embodiment of power in men and women, is shaped and exercised in a crisis situation as portrayed in *God's Bits of Wood*. It analyses Ousmane's reconstruction of the changing dynamics of masculinity in former French West-Africa. It explores the various forms of masculinity that emerged from the nationalist crisis prompted by the oppressive and exploitative colonial times.

The struggle of the workers, their womenfolk and the young apprentices offers a good backdrop for the study of the complex issue of 'African' masculinities, which were affected by racialised and gendered relations to power. The novel deals with the empowerment not only of men, but of women and youngsters who had for the most part been socialized to accept subordinate and submissive roles.

The study explores the contrasting depictions of masculinities in the French managers and white soldiers, and the African workers who were driven to opposing white dominance and enduring the hardships, and their more timid counterparts who do not join the strike. It looks at the new type of youth culture

that is forged among teenage boys, and how women are forced to assume masculine behavior, which ultimately gives them a new sense of identity.

Through a close textual reading and analysis of *God's Bits of Wood* the study examines the masculinities assigned by Sembene to his characters. We explore the changing and different, and sometimes contradictory masculinities that are forged in the text during the socio-economic crisis. The study focuses on groups as well as on individual male and female characters, their actions, their utterances and use of language in order to identify types of masculinities. Masculinity is approached as "expressions of social practice to be observed within specific […] contexts" and as "individual experience and subjectivity" as affirmed by Lindsay and Miescher (2003: 7, 8). We examine men's and women's actions and words which are typical of manliness, measured against the amount of power they wield or can claim for himself or herself.

In the first chapter we deal with white masculinities and examine the discriminative, oppressive and exclusive white masculinity which exercised its hegemony in the place of work, in the quelling of riots and protests, and in prison. We identify a range of masculinities at work in the text; they include violent masculinity, superior masculinity, and treacherous masculinity. Chapter two discusses black masculinities. The reaction of the black workers towards the exploitative employers reproduces diverse patterns of what it means to be a man. The chapter contrasts the preferred oppositional masculinity with the complicit and cowardly masculinities. Chapter three is an analysis of female masculinity and boyhood masculinity in the novel. We study the female characters who assume

masculine roles and characteristics and become breadwinners, assertive leaders, and aggressive fighters. In this chapter we also examine the boy culture that develops during the crisis. The apprentices who cultivate an adventurous culture get embroiled in the conflict. In this way, they affirm their 'masculinity.' Their 'masculinity' is confirmed by the parents who approve their anti-social behavior such as stealing and vandalism.

In the conclusion we summarize the arguments that have been pursued and expect to conclude that through the depiction of evolving and changing masculinity Sembene Ousmane reconstructs the processes through which an exemplary sample of West Africans become "conscious of their strength, but conscious also of their dependence" (32).