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

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CHAPTER ONE: WHITE MASCULINITIES

Colonialism is an important arena in the construction of masculinities. Lynne Segal (1990) observes that during colonialism European men came to Africa to prove their manhood. She further notes that masculinity in the West can be studied by exploring "the social construction of another subordinated masculinity – Black masculinity […] The first fact about the 'black man' which the white man knew was that he was not really a man at all – a child rather than an adult, a body not a mind. White men created the image of Black men as yet another contrast necessary for their own self-image"(169). Segal describes mid-nineteenth-century white man as one who thinks of himself as a superior being, bringing civilization to the world's inferior races. Black men were imagined to be primitive, beastly and savage. This race factor shaped men's lives. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his introduction to Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized,* says "racism is ingrained in actions, institutions, and in the nature of the colonialist methods of production and exchange" (Memmi 1990:22). In colonial times race, therefore, constitutes the form that masculinity takes. Morrell (2005:282) emphasizes that for a good understanding of gender, the relationship between race, subordination and marginalization must be explored. Men of different ethnic groups have different experiences of masculinity. This explains the multiplicity of masculinities where some are dominant and others are subordinate or marginalized. It builds on the notion that not all men have the same amount of power. White masculinity is presented as the dominant one in Ousmane's novel. It is white employees and bosses who marginalized the black workers. And since they used their power over

what they called inferior beings, it can be said that race was a factor in the creation of hegemonic and marginalized masculinities.

Connell (1995) discusses the idea of hegemonic masculinity as the form of masculinity which is dominant in society. He explores how relations of male dominance are reproduced. He also distinguishes hegemonic masculinity from other forms, saying that the hegemonic form is established through a "correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power" (77). It is important to note that hegemonic masculinity not only oppresses women, but it also subordinates other rival masculinities, which in turn challenge it. Bhana (2005:207) adds to this by pointing out the patterns of conduct which are associated with hegemonic masculinity: authoritative, aggressive, heterosexual, physically brave, and competitive. Morrell (1998:608) adds to the above list by quoting from Mike Donaldson who says hegemonic masculinity is "exclusive, anxiety-provoking, internally and hierarchically differentiated, brutal, and violent." It is Morrell who also says racism, misogyny and heterosexuality define hegemonic masculinity.

The Frenchmen in Ousmane's novel *God's Bits of Wood* are directors, supervisors, police officers and prison officers in French West Africa during the 1940s. Ousmane constructs a number of masculinities with regards to these colonial bosses who want to maintain their power over others at all costs. Positioning his novel within colonial French West Africa, the writer presents a range of masculinities which we can classify as violent hegemonic masculinity, as discussed by Deevia Bhana (2005), superior masculinity and treacherous

masculinity. The notion of a superior masculinity is derived from the belief among whites that they were superior, supreme over black workers. They cherished ideas of their superiority and it is these ideas which justified to themselves their colonial rule. What we term treacherous masculinity was exhibited by a few whites. These betray the cause of the rest; they go against the common racial code of behavior by supporting the black workers during the strike. This form of masculinity appears more humane and peaceable, as will be shown later.

Violent masculinities

In the novel violent masculinities develop as a result of the workers' strike. The bosses assert their hegemony through violence. They resort to violence to bring workers to obedience and to maintain their dominance. On the morning when workers refused to go to work, but assembled instead outside the workshops, the managers ordered soldiers to beat them up as a way of squashing the strike at once. Monsieur Dejean, the regional director of the railway company, says they "must make sure that this business doesn't drag on" (31). A troop of soldiers marched towards the striking workers with bayonets and rifles. Inevitably, a battle broke out between the soldiers and the workers. In the course of the battle, "more armed men had also arrived, from the airfield and the watchmen's barracks" (23). Many were wounded in the skirmishes; the management lost three officers and the workers lost eight lives. The image of violence is clearly accentuated by the phallic weapons of attack used by the soldiers. Theweleit (1989) has emphasized the sexual nature of gun and bayonet violence. Bayonets and guns represent phalluses and bullets represent "genital fluid" (283).

We further see an example of violent masculinity in the chief of police and his men when Ramatoulaye[6] resisted arrest. The chief of police sent for more policemen and soldiers. "In the street […] the reinforcements the officer had sent for had arrived – more policemen, and soldiers with them. And it was in the street that the battle between women and the police began" (75). The policemen, however, retreated because they were outnumbered by the women. They then staged a come-back on horses and engaged anew in battle against the women, who retaliated with fire to scare the horses (112-113). A number of workers' houses were burnt down during this riot.

When Ramatoulaye finally accepted to go to the police station, she was accompanied by the women of Dakar. The chief of police sought to disperse them and therefore sent for two water trucks to spray water on the women with powerful hoses (use of yet another phallic symbol). This results in the death of one woman, Houdia M'baye. The narrator says,

> and the powerful jet struck her squarely in the face, knocking her head back like a blow from a giant's fist. She opened her mouth to cry out, but no sound came forth, and the pitiful little snapping of the cartilage in her neck was lost in the roar of the hoses. For an instant she beat at the air with her arms, as drowning people do, then her hands seized convulsively at her blouse, tearing it open, and she fell on her side (123).

Additionally, it was soldiers in Dakar who tried to prevent the women marchers from Thies from entering the city. They shot and killed the women leader, Penda, and a man, named Samba N'Doulougou (204).

[6] Ramatoulaye is a character in the novel. She is a hardened woman in charge of a large household of about twenty of 'god's bits of wood'. She is also the sister of Hadji Mabigue, the indifferent district leader.

A violent form of masculinity is further brought out in Isnard, a French supervisor, when he drew his gun and shot at defenseless apprentices who were only "practicing their marksmanship" with slings, on a lizard (162). He killed two on the spot and the third one died later. This also suggests that in this climate of fear, making indiscriminate use of guns was part of a dominant masculine code, since it is only whites who owned guns. Before this incident, Isnard had used threats of violence in his dialogue with Doudou, a strike committee member. In reference to Bakayoko, the influential workers' leader, Isnard growled, "Ah, that one! […] He'll see when the strike is over" (151).

Monsieur Dejean harbors violent thoughts of murder. When Edouard reported to him that it was Bakayoko who rejected his propositions at the delegates meeting, he says, "I should have had him hanged in 1942! If only the directors had listened to me!" (180). It is not surprising that he acts out his violent thoughts in a meeting with the union leaders. The narrator describes how, "When he [Dejean] passed Bakayoko's chair he stopped abruptly and, before anyone could have stopped him, he slapped him hard across the face" (185). Dejean had repressed his violent thoughts for some time before he acted.

In the camp where a few strikers had been incarcerated was a 'commandant,' "an ex-sergeant major in the colonial forces named Bernadini […] A Corsican, and the product of a series of foundling schools, he hated all *macacos*, as he called the Negroes" (233). He is portrayed as very ruthless. He "lashed at his [the stammerer's] face with a riding crop" (233). It is his fist that "crashed against Konate's nose" and his riding crop again that slashed brutally across Konate's face.

Bernadini also twice kicked old Fa Keita as he was praying. "The 'commandant's' boot caught him in the kidney and hurled him head first into the strands of barbed wire. Little drops of blood flecked the skin of the old man's shoulders and back and sides"(236). Violence is used to maintain control over others and threats of violence are also used to ensure compliance. Resorting to force and a belief in the glory of combat are some of the features of what is sometimes called "imperial masculinity" (Morrell 1998: 616). Just as the British imperialists in South Africa sought to subjugate their Afrikaner and African opponents, so the French sought to bring under control the black workers in French West Africa.

Superior masculinities

Superior masculinities are also exhibited by the French bosses and staff. Boehmer (1995) observes: "Always with reference to the superiority of an expanding Europe, colonized peoples were represented as lesser: less human, less civilized, as child or savage, wildman, animal, or headless mass" (79). This explains the condescending attitude in, for example, Dejean who boasted of his long experience in dealing with black workers. He says on the phone: "But I know them, I assure you, they are children" (30). Isnard "had never thought of Negroes as anything but children – often contrary children, but easily managed if you knew how" (151). Edouard too, the personnel director of the company, tells his colleagues: "They are children who want to learn to walk by themselves, and it is up to us to give them a hand" (170). These references to African workers as children suggests how the relationship between the whites and blacks involved emasculation. It means the black man could not grow to manhood. The Frenchmen deprecated black workers and saw their supervisory tasks as essential. Kanitkar

(1994: 190) expounds on this by saying that the subordination of 'native' adults was represented as childlike immaturity. The black adult was perceived as unable to safely manage his own affairs. It was claimed that whites were meant to rule over the blacks since blacks were incapable of self-government. It is no surprise that in the novel Victor tells Pierrot, the newcomer, "We built this city. Now they have hospitals, schools, and trains, but if we ever leave they're finished – the brush will take it all back. There wouldn't be anything left" (166).

The Frenchmen espoused a superior masculinity not only because they were the colonizers and the company bosses, but also because they were white. They regarded themselves as naturally superior to the black workers. Memmi notes that "even the poorest colonizer thought himself to be – and actually was – superior to the colonized" (1990:10). The narrator reflects Dejean's thoughts: "He was simply exercising a function which rested on the most natural of all bases – the right to an absolute authority over beings whose color made them not subordinates with whom one could discuss anything, but men of another, inferior condition, fit only for unqualified obedience" (179-180). Dejean could not understand how these black workers could disregard his orders. Elsewhere, after Dejean had emphatically told the union leaders that they would not have the family allowances, "simply because you are all polygamous" (183), the narrator reflects his thoughts:

> But to give in on the question of family allowances was much more than a matter of agreeing to a compromise with striking workers; it would amount to recognition of a racial aberrance, a ratification of the customs of inferior beings. It would be giving in, not to workers but to Negroes, and that Dejean could not do (183-184).

He then accuses the strikers of "insulting a great nation and a great people!" (184). According to Dejean, this strike was an attack on their race, their superior masculinity. The mentality of the French bosses clearly echoes the doctrines of assimilation and association which provided the framework of French colonial administration. Madubuike (1983) notes that these policies were seen as aiming to raise the Senegalese to the same level of culture and civilization as the French, after all, it was believed Africa had no indigenous culture. The French sought to implant their way of life in Africa. He adds that the policy of association was meant "to establish cooperation between the French and the native, not on the basis of equality, but on the basis of fraternity, with the French acting as a senior brother. It assumed, *a priori*, the inferiority of the native population"(4). This mentality explains the paternalism of the Frenchmen.

Moreover, the French often used animal imagery to refer to natives. For example, Dejean called them "savages" (32), Edouard referred to old Bakary as an "old gorilla" (180), and Bernadini used analogies with monkeys and pig when referring to the jailed strikers (235).

The belief of the white employees in their superior masculinity is further seen in the chic quarters where they reside. The posh villas, which were christened 'The Vatican' by Lahbib, had

> prefabricated roofs, well-kept lawns, graveled walks, and porches surrounded by a low cement railing. In spite of the nearness of the railroad yards and the constant pall of smoke that hung over them, they had been painted in clear, light colors. Ivy and flowering vines climbed up the posts supporting the porch roofs, and flowers in pots or boxes ornamented the railings. In the gardens at the rear, rose bushes and borders of daisies and snapdragons made vivid areas of color, shaded from the tropical sun by giant bougainvilleas (164).

This is emphatically contrasted with the hovels of the black workers which are described as "houses made of wood. Unsteady houses, shored up with beams or trunks of trees, ready to fall down at the first gust of wind, but houses just the same. The roofs were held together by stones and iron bars and old jugs filled with earth, and the holes in the tarpaulin of the outhouses were plugged with rags and cardboard, but they were houses" (13). Elsewhere, a French newcomer describes them as "nothing but rats' nests […] swarming with vermin" (166). This glaring inequality partly explains why workers went on strike. They too wanted a chance to have better living conditions.

The white bosses and staff were entitled to other privileges, a few of which included "four black servants for the price of one in Europe" (169), ten minutes off for their tea (149), and higher wages for white railway workers though they did the same work as black ones (8). This emphasized the power, hierarchical difference and privileges of the bosses and white workers over the black workers, which fed and sustained the notion of a superior white masculinity.

Treacherous Masculinities

The treacherous form of masculinity is an alternative masculinity which seems to contradict the hegemonic white masculinity. There are whites who are depicted as non-racist and sensitive towards the black workers, hence deemed to be disloyal to the ways of their colleagues. The treacherous masculinity is manifested in a character called Leblanc. He had visited Africa as a student of anthropology, and had wandered about the continent for some time before he was employed in a

minor position in the railway company. He is said to have tried to establish a friendly relationship with the African workers, but his efforts were fruitless because his knowledge intimidated the Africans and he was shy to boot (168). To the contempt and disgust of his colleagues, he had a high esteem for the strikers' leaders. For instance, he said that "Doudou and Lahbib and Bakayoko are honest men" (31). However, he was angrily shut up by Dejean who told him he was only a youngster who did not know that all Negroes can be bought. Lebanc also identified with the cause of the workers. In a drunken state, he met Isnard trying to persuade Doudou to call off the strike. He then told Doudou, "And you, black man, don't listen to a word he says – he's a bloody liar" (152). While at Isnard's residence, it is Leblanc who refers to Frechmen as "gangsters" whom Edouard was to represent in a meeting with the Negroes (169).

Leblanc later comes out as sensitive, peaceable and caring for the striking workers when he reveals to his colleagues that he supported the strikers financially. He shocked and disappointed them by saying, "I like the Negroes, or I used to like them – but they shut their doors in my face. I'll tell you something, though. I sent them twenty thousand Francs to help out with their strike. Yes […] I did it. Twice, I sent them a ten-thousand-franc note" (170-171). He is seen to have betrayed his fellow Frenchmen who had hoped that hunger and deprivation would make the workers call off the strike. Leblanc reasons that the Negroes did not like him because of his fellow whites. He typifies what Memmi terms the "benevolent colonizer" (1990:92) who has discovered that colonization is an economic, political, and moral scandal, and therefore condemns it. This, however, creates a conflict with his fellow whites who ultimately brand him as a "traitor" (1990: 87).

Leblanc was increasingly attacked and looked down upon by his fellow Frenchmen for favoring the cause of the striking workers. In fact, they plot to get rid of him. Isnard reports that he had telephoned Doctor Michel to take care of Leblanc's elimination and then to call it "a case of sunstroke" (180). Dominant violent males will turn against their own kind if they feel betrayed or shamed. There is humanism, moral strength, and a sense of justice in people such as Leblanc who assist in alleviating the starvation and suffering of the workers and their families. For Ousmane, Leblanc presents a high form of masculinity than one which asserts its hegemony through violence. Leblanc demonstrates that humanism and yielding to the workers' demands were the way forward, but he represents a minority which is ineffectual largely because his type of reasoning was considered treacherous at best.