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

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CONCLUSION:

This study set out to explore masculinities in Senegalese writer Ousmane Sembene's text *God's Bits of Wood*. The study mainly concerned itself with Sembene's representations of masculinity in a crisis situation. The railway workers strike depicted in *God's Bits of Wood* is a landscape in which varied masculinities are enacted. We have argued that the colonial context provided the impetus for the depiction of white masculinities that were dominant. The violence which was manifested was an inevitable component of the strike – a moment of crisis. The white men aligned to dominant patterns of violence as a means of maintaining the status quo. The violence meted out by individual whites and the black soldiers under them became a component of their masculinity. However, not all whites displayed hegemonic violent masculinity. A form of treacherous masculinity contested the deprivation and hostility directed to the black workers and their families. These whites did what they thought was right; they helped alleviate the suffering of the strikers despite the hostility and cynicism of white colleagues.

The black workers went on strike to protest the exploitation and the inequalities in the workplace, and the squalid living conditions they had been subjected to. There were disparities between their wages, allowances and privileges and those of the French men who had the same skills but were protected by the color bar. The text reveals that in this situation the black masculinities were also ambivalent. There are those who were oppositional; some workers did not go back to work and endured the hardships during the protracted period of the strike and this was a marker of their newly developed oppositional masculinity. Some men, however,

were complicit with the system, while others manifested a cowardly kind of masculinity, choosing to see their role as breadwinners as more important than their need to assert their rights and dignity.

The female characters presented a portrait of (wo)men's power in the face of conflict and hardship during the strike. Women were previously subservient to their menfolk and were marginalized economically and politically, but necessity made them change and assume female forms of masculinity. The males, who originally provided for their families, being on strike had no other means of earning; their families were therefore plunged into suffering and were on the verge of starvation. During the day the males left the towns for fear of being arrested. This state of affairs which served to remove the male breadwinner and protector from the scene masculinized the women who assumed masculine responsibilities and traits. They became breadwinners, leaders, and aggressive fighters.

The idle apprentices also forged an aggressive and violent form of masculinity in order to cultivate and maintain a sense of identity. This implied engaging in anti-social activities which provided food for their families and in acts of vandalism which affirmed their status. They too did not shy away from the crisis situation. However, not all boys in the city of Thies displayed the same violent masculinity. One group was dominant and it sidelined the other less adventurous and less daring groups.

We have explored various theories of masculinity and adopted those which have been useful in our endeavor to identify the masculinities in the novel. It is

clear that Robert Connell's model, though a Western model, can be applied to an African colonial context. In French West Africa the depiction of white supremacy suggests that white, ruling class masculinity was hegemonic. The subordinate groups include black workers who are portrayed as marginalized or oppositional, while a number of others are inevitably complicit.

Ousmane shows that the black man, contrary to stereotypic black violent masculinity attributed to him, can behave in a controlled manner. The workers are depicted as behaving with restraint; violence is not necessarily an inherent part of their masculinity. Instead, it is the white hegemonic masculinity that feels it has to resort to violence during the strike to maintain their control over Africans. In this crisis situation black women, as well as the boys, are portrayed as behaving violently, unlike the black men who choose to go into hiding to avoid arrest and confrontation. Indeed, Mortimer (1990: 71) says the content and technique of Ousmane's novel, which is from the African perspective, contrasts Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – a colonial text written from the European point of view. Though both texts concern the impact of colonialism in Africa, Conrad's depicts a dark and enclosed image of Africa, whereas Ousmane's is light and open.