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

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

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CHAPTER THREE: FEMALE MASCULINITY AND BOYHOOD MASCULINITY

Berger et al, in their introduction to *Constructing Masculinity*, insist that masculinity is multiple and that "far from just being about men, the idea of masculinity engages, inflects, and shapes every one" (7). In the same book, Eve Sedgwick, in her essay "Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity" proposes that masculinity may have little to do with men. She says, "Like men, I as a woman am also a producer of masculinities and a performer of them" (13). She, however, does not give examples to illustrate her statement, and neither do the other essays in the same volume give case studies on female masculinity, even though they hint at it in the introduction.

Devor (1989) studies female masculinity in fifteen women who lived with gender blending. The women had been mistaken for males from childhood through to their teen years and adulthood. Their physical characteristics, which were socially defined as masculine, contributed to this misrecognition. Some of the women appeared masculine to the public because they assumed the dress code, the hair cuts (most of them maintained short hair), facial hair, low-pitched speaking voices, height and muscular bodies of men. Others defined themselves by playing male roles in games even when they were children.

Halberstam (1998), in studying masculinity outside the male sphere, gives examples of female and lesbian masculinity in fiction, film, and lived experience. She argues that in female masculinity appearance is very important, though she

adds that it is not only about how one looks. Masculine women experience their masculinity as an "internal identity effect." She refutes the notion of reserving masculinity for people with male bodies and denying it to those with female bodies (Halberstam 269).

Halberstam gives an example of "butch theater" – a queer performance art piece called "You're Just Like My Father," by Peggy Shaw. Shaw represents female masculinity as a staging of the reorganization of family dynamics via the butch daughter. Shaw's character moves easily back and forth between various personae: She is involved in masculine activities such as boxing; "she is a crooner, the soldier, the breadwinner, the romeo, the patriarch" (32).

The film *Set It Off* (1996) represents black butchness. It is about four black women who become robbers in response to overwhelming social injustice, and discrimination. Queen Latifah, who acts as Cleopatra Simms – a butch lesbian with a girlfriend, "is a loudmouthed, bullying, tough, criminal butch. Her depiction of black female masculinity plays into stereotypical conceptions of black women as less feminine than white femininity, but it also rearranges the terms of the stereotype. Latifah successfully exploits the association between blackness and violent masculinity" (Halberstam 29).

In *God's Bit of Wood*, Ad'jibid'ji (Bakayoko's nine or ten-year old daughter) comes close to Devor's and Halberstam's kind of female masculinity. She is raised as if she were a boy. The narrator testifies to her being physically active: "She helped with the work of the house, and she ran the errands, but there were

moments, such as this when Assitan would have preferred to have a son" (6). We are told Bakayoko takes her to meetings of the men to learn. Niakoro, the grandmother, however, is not happy with the way Ad'jibid'ji hangs out with men instead of engaging in something more feminine. Niakoro accuses her of not even knowing "how to prepare *couscous*. That's what comes of always hanging about with the men, instead of staying beside your mother, where you belong" (5). Halberstam observes that tomboyism, which is an "extended childhood period of female masculinity" and which is evident in Ad'jibid'ji, is "tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent; however, as soon as puberty begins, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl" (Halberstam 5, 6). Niakoro does not want Ad'jibid'ji to interfere with the onset of adolescent femininity. Ad'jibid'ji, the boyish girl, tells her grandfather, Fa Keita, however, that she has "to start learning what it means to be a man" (97) and this is why she attends men's meetings. Moreover, she wants to grow up and have a masculine job; she aspires to be a driver of a train, just like her father (97).

Most other female masculinities presented by Ousmane in the novel are not defined by mere outward appearance but by unconventional female behavior. Moreover, all his female characters are heterosexual and not lesbian. Ousmane's adult female characters become masculine in a variety of ways; they become breadwinners, courageous and assertive leaders, and aggressive fighters. Their masculinity is more than a social construct or an innate biological characteristic; these women take on masculine identities out of necessity.

Female masculinity is presented in women who turn into breadwinners on

account of the strike. Originally, it is the employed men, as wage-earners, who provided for their families. Their demands to improve the welfare of their families prompted the strike. They demanded an increase in salaries, an introduction of family allowances and a pension for the black workers. Mamadou Keita, the old one, admits that they have a trade but it does not bring them what it should. They therefore vote to go on strike so that they can "live decently" (8). The workers also push for family allowances which have been denied them on the pretext that if they earn more they would only marry more wives. During her unprecedented address to members of her community, Penda, the prostitute, announces that for them as women "this strike still means the possibility of a better life tomorrow" (187). She thus drums up support for the original breadwinners.

During the strike, when the men could no longer be the providers, the women took over this responsibility. We are told when "foodstuffs were gone, the meager savings eaten up, and there was no money in the house" (33), the men "would seek the arms of his wife, without thinking, or caring whether she was the first or the third. And seeing the burdened shoulders, the listless walk, the women became conscious that a change was coming for them as well" (33-34). The strike brought "forth a new breed of women" (34). Ramatoulaye observes that "the men know it, too, but they go away in the morning and don't come back until the night has come and they do not see … Being the head of a family is a heavy burden – too heavy for a woman" (69). We are told,

> Since the beginning of the strike Ramatoulaye had become more withdrawn, and perhaps more stern. There was no longer time for gossiping. Her responsibilities had become very great, because the house of which she was the eldest was large: there were no less than twenty of 'God's bits of wood' (40).

She had been to Hadrame the shopkeeper to get rice on credit, but had been denied it and advised to tell their men to go back to work.

Referring to men, Mame Sofi says: "Before this, they thought they owned the earth just because they fed us, and now it is the women who are feeding them" (48). The wives of the strikers roam the villages in the countryside to search for food (103). Assitan explains to her mother-in-law that she and other women have to walk to a market at Goume to buy food and they hope to be back in three or four days time because of the long distance (98). Despite the hard and difficult life, the women persevere and continue supporting their husbands and children.

Penda, the prostitute, assumes a masculine role in mobilizing the women to march from Thies to Dakar. She conceives the idea of creating a "committee of women" (160) and it is she who leads them on the march. Penda, who "from her earliest childhood […] had demonstrated a resolute independence which only increased as she grew up" (138), addressed a crowd of strikers and their women; this audacity was unprecedented. The narrator says that "it was the first time in living memory that a woman had spoken in public in Thies, and even the onslaught of night could not still the arguments" (187). She had firmly said:

> I speak in the name of all the women, 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. So we have decided that tomorrow we will march together to Dakar (187).

After the committee members had agreed on the women's march to Dakar, Penda was charged with ensuring that no accompanying males bothered the women. The women gathered the following morning, at dawn, and left under Penda's watchful

command. During the march, Penda encourages and coerces the weary stragglers to walk on as they brave the harsh climate and the long journey. At some point, during the march, she gets violent and beats up the stubborn women whose resolve was slackening; she becomes so irritated by Awa's unkind remarks that she hurls herself at Awa: "Her fists were as hard as a man's, and she hammered at the other woman's face and stomach until she stumbled and fell against the foot of a tree, screaming with pain and fear" (201). This violent, aggressive behavior reflects the only way she knew how to be in a position of authority.

In addition, as they approach the suburbs of Dakar, they are told of soldiers stationed at the entrance of the city who would not allow the women to enter. However, while other women are gripped with fear, Penda climbs up a little slope and announces: "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!" (203). The women-marchers then move on. When they approach the soldiers, they are told by the captain, "Go back to Thies women! We cannot let you pass!" Penda defiantly retorts, "We will pass if we have to walk on the body of your mother" (204). She comes out as assertive and defiant like any man. The soldiers are pushed back by the wall of people and, unfortunately, when shots are fired, Penda is shot together with a man called Samba N'Doulougou. Her temerity cost her her life, but she became a hero and a martyr whose untimely death galvanized other women.

In the novel, other women's masculinity is also defined by courage, aggression and violence. During the battle in Thies between workers and the soldiers,

Dieynaba, a market woman, bravely "rallied the women of the market place, and like a band of Amazons they came to the rescue, armed with clubs, with iron bars, and bottles" (22) to fight off the soldiers. It is Dieynaba who called Bachirou 'coward' as she handed him a rock to throw at the soldiers.

Courage and violence in women is further displayed in the character of Ramatoulaye. When she is told that Vendredi, Mabigue's ram, has spilled their food in such times of starvation, she sends for a knife. She then struggles with the ram and finally slaughters it to the astonishment of the other women and children. She tells the women present:

> When you know that the life and the spirit of others depend on your life and your spirit, you have no right to be afraid – even when you are terribly afraid. In the cruel times we are living through we must find our own strength, somehow, and force ourselves to be hard (69).

As a result of Ramatoulaye's act, Mabigue notifies the police. Meanwhile, Mame Sofi advises the other women: "Let us get ready to receive them" (69). She begins to fill an empty bottle with sand and the others soon get busy, copying her (69-71). When the policemen go to arrest Ramatoulaye and to take away the meat, she (Ramatoulaye) courageously and defiantly tells the police officer: "I know Vendredi does not leave 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" (74). She then rebukes some women for weeping about as if someone had passed away. Many women who knew Ramatoulaye as an "unassuming and gentle woman, one who never argued or spoke badly of her neighbors," wondered "where she had found this new strength" and where this violent behavior had been born (74). The narrator answers this question thus: "it

had been born beside a cold fireplace, in an empty kitchen" (74).

As the police officer discusses with Ramatoulaye, the other women begin to brandish their sand-filled bottles, flatirons and clubs of all shapes and sizes, as they also encircle the policemen. They all adopt masculine identities when they acquire the crude weapons for protection and aggression. In the streets, more policemen and soldiers have arrived a battle ansues. "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" (75). The policemen are overcome in this battle by the big numbers of women. Some women, happy with their victory, form themselves into little groups and begin to patrol the streets of the neighborhood, armed with their sand-filled bottles. In defense of their homes and meager possessions, the women adopt the aggressive behavior which is tradionally associated with men, and forsaking all signs of weakness become the protectors of their villages while the men are away.

Mame Sofi and a group of women courageously invade Hadji Mabigue's home. They disregard the servants' pleas not to enter the premises. Mame Sofi hits one servant in the forehead with a bottle and beckons the others: "Come with me – we'll see what's in the kitchen" (110). While the other women ransack the house for food, Mame Sofi cries out: "Mabigue! […] come out! Come out if you are a man! You only have courage when you're hiding behind the *toubabs*! You made them close down the fountains; now come out here and see if you are man enough to make me close my mouth!" (110). She challenges him to prove his masculinity against hers and that of her followers who are told to carry away everything that

can be eaten. Mame Sofi's actions also show that she can put prudish behavior aside if need be; during the battle with the policemen, she is reported to have grabbed a soldier's private parts and asked Ramatoulaye to piss in the soldier's mouth. She shows that she is not intimidated by authority and that in fact she has no respect for power that does not serve the people.

When the "spahis" (soldiers on horses) attack at night for a renewed battle, the women ingenuously seek to fight back with fire to scare away the horses. Many women collect straw and live coals and embers. They then line up in the street to wait for a signal from Mame Sofi before attacking. Pandemonium breaks out when the shouting women throw sheaves of flaming straw at the horsemen. The narrator states:

> Mame Sofi and her group of women 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 relieved themselves at night and thrust his head in the accumulated filth (113-114).

The women's ingenuity and quick thinking, however, backfires as the fire accidentally gets to the workers' hovels and burns down a number of homes.

Earlier on in the novel, Mame Sofi had already been presented as an intimidating woman, exuding a violent masculinity in her confrontation with a water carrier. The tall man, a Toecouleur, empties his jug into Mame Sofi's vessel and she tells him to come back another day for his money. The man protests that he does not sell his water on credit and stands there to demand his money. Mame Sofi repeatedly tells him that he will not be paid that day, but he insists on payment, so "Mame Sofi slapped him hard across the face" (56) as she screamed for help. The

water carrier flees, leaving behind his torn shirt and a jug. Mame Sofi and other women feel victorious. They had been able to get some much needed water and they were not intimidated by the man's menacing persistence.

Violent/Aggressive Masculinity Among Boys

This sub-chapter explores how one group of unemployed, idle boys in the city of Thies established their masculinity through the performance of adventurous and dangerous practices. The boys' performances of masculinity, and sometimes the relationship between dominant and subordinate masculinities were shaped by the boys' choices of games.

Butler (1990) upholds the idea of gender/masculinities as performative. In the novel we clearly see how the boys' adventures made visible some of the ways that masculinities were performed during the strike. As Berger et al (1995) note, "gender, rather than merely constructed, is performative, that it inevitably unfolds as a series of performed operations that render complex meanings about the normative standards that we cannot escape, the choices we make" (3). Butler's idea of the performative nature of masculinity comes in handy in the examination of the ways that a group of boys 'did' masculinity in the city of Thies. Butler (1990) theorizes gender as a "corporeal style, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (139). This has influenced the rethinking of gender and sexuality in anti-essentialist terms. She further argues that gender is not "a stable identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a

stylized repetition of acts" (1990: 140). Gender is thus regarded not as a stable identity but an act that requires repeated performances.

Furthermore, masculinities, being multiple, are defined in relation to each other. Connell (1995) as we have said expounds the idea of hegemonic masculinity and other subordinate forms. The hegemonic form holds a position of authority at a given historical moment and within a particular context; however, other forms of masculinity are simultaneously in existence as well. The concept of hegemonic masculinity can be used also to define the boys' interactions with one another in Thies. It is clear in the novel that one group of boys performed the dominant hegemonic masculinity. They indulged in games and adventures that other boys whose masculinity was not dominant did not indulge in.

The families of the boys play a role in shaping masculine identities and the physical environment plays a part in the processes through which masculinities are forged. In the city of Thies, the black workers' families are depicted against a poverty-ridden background. During the strike, neither the boys nor their parents are working. There is lack of water and food. They live in dirty, crowded, dilapidated homes. Although poverty does not bring about aggression, it can give rise to conditions that make it more likely. Generally, boys have a tendency to be violent, especially when they are exposed to violent experiences themselves. Walker (2005: 172) observes that "the roots of men's violence were as much psychological as social." She adds that the violence of the environment in which one grows up, the violence of poverty, and the densely populated urban towns explain violence in men and boys. Thomson (2002: 168) quotes Askew and Ross and notes that

"aggression in boys is a reflection of attitudes and beliefs about violence generally in society and it is, therefore, related to the nature of wider society and to the power relations between groups in it." Different cultural contexts encourage aggressive behavior in boys and associate it with masculinity.

During the strike, violent masculinities emerge among the apprentices. They are affected by their violent surroundings. The apprentices in the novel, aged between fourteen and seventeen, negotiated their masculinity in the type of adventures they chose to create for themselves. As the boys began to exercise their violent masculinity, they were encouraged by some adults, in spite of disapproval by others.

The boys learnt to be violent in their hostile environment and came to see in violent masculinity an ideal to be emulated. Twelve boys in Thies forged a friendship which had distinct forms of shared play. Their conversations were centered on the Western war films they had watched before the strike. We are told that "war films were their favorites" (156) and this partly explains their desire to emulate the ideal of adventure coupled with violence. In their play acting they identified themselves as soldiers not only because of the films they had watched, but also because they had witnessed and participated in the violent protests alongside the adult strikers, who fought against law enforcement officers. The narrator tells us: "From the grade crossing, Magatte and the apprentices had opened up a regular barrage of pebbles […] From the height of the roadbed at the grade crossing, Magatte and the apprentices were still launching salvos of stones" (22, 23) upon the armed men sent to repress the demonstration. The boys saw this

as an act which asserted their masculinity. They had seen the discontentment and angry but peaceful protest of their fathers and this gave them ideas of manliness that were defined by resistance against the oppressive French managers. Their masculinity drew on images of oppositional masculinity which had become prevalent among the black workers. These examples cultivated in the boys an interest in war-like activities.

The apprentices engage in mock war play. For example, after the battle between the workers and the soldiers, the apprentices helped Maimouna, the blind woman, to get to Dieynaba's house. We are told "the apprentices were playing at being soldiers, along the sides of the ravine" (26) when Magatte, Doudou's apprentice and their leader, summoned them to help the blind woman. He called one of his comrades: "Corporal Gorgui!" One youngster came forward, stood at attention with head held high and responded, "Yes, *seneral*?" Magatte quickly corrected the word as 'general.'

Moreover, the boys' adventure always began with the siege of the baobab tree then spread across the open fields to attack small game. We are told that sometimes as a change from their enforced inactivity, "they played war games at which the baobab became the enemy" (156). They threw stones at the tree, but after some time, they found that monotonous and simplistic. They thus turned their attention to "the swarms of little snakes and lizards in the fields around them" (156). The war play and the adventurous activities outside their village were for them a way through which they imagined they were securing their identity as boys/men. The pleasures of war games attracted the boys to venture away from their homes to a

world of adventure on the outskirts of the town. At one time Doudou's wife tells her husband that Magatte was never at home, not even for meals. Doudou's response seems to approve of the boy's absence. The now unemployed apprentices demonstrated their independence from their families, especially during the day, by roaming the fields freely. They embraced the open fields outside their town as the place to act out their masculinity.

After some time, the boys adopted the suggestion to make slingshots. They agreed to remove the rubber tubes from Aziz's truck. In a daring and adventurous feat, they stole the tube from the truck and made slingshots. The following morning, armed with the catapults, they hunted birds and lizards. They then hung the dead birds on the baobab and aimed at them to improve their marksmanship.

One day Dieynaba, Gorgui's mother, suggested that instead of loitering about doing nothing, like a bunch of dumb animals, the boys should rather wander in the white district to steal the chickens that were roaming loose. Gorgui sold the idea to his friends who were excited about it. After Magatte gave the ok, they each successfully brought back home one to two chickens. We are told: "They were overwhelmed with praise for their daring, and their chests swelled proudly above the sharp-boned cage of their ribs. From that moment on they had found a new reason for their existence"(159). During the subsequent days, on the boy's return, the women would "come out to meet them, crying, 'Our men are back!'" (159). This filled them with pride and the boys "redoubled their zeal in the hunt," after all, they had been exonerated from any sense of wrong doing. The practice affirmed their masculinity and the approval by parents helped to confirm the boys'

masculinity.

Meanwhile, Penda conceived another idea for them. They went to Aziz's shop and as Penda engaged the shopkeeper in a dialogue on cloth, the boys at her heels pierced a sack of rice and emptied it into their bags. They walked away very fast with rice that lasted two days. With the chicken and rice episodes, the boys felt "they had tasted the bitter fruits of danger and now nothing else had any flavor" (160). Even if they knew that the stealing of chicken and the shoplifting were in normal circumstances abhorrent acts, their zealously and daringly committed acts were, for them, a way of providing for their otherwise starving families. It proved their worth and their manhood.

This adventurous and violent spirit drove them however to other acts of vandalism such as shattering the headlights of cars, windshields, windows, the showcases and electric light bulbs of the station. Their once playful violence slipped into violent, destructive behavior. They began to enjoye this new game. They would wait for darkness to fall then hit at "everything that shone in the night" (161). This went on for some time as they aimed their slingshots at the replaced light bulbs. This violent masculinity can be associated with an anti-authority stance. Connell (1995: 100) observes that boys view "authority as an alien power and start to define their masculinity against it." The gang of boys asserts its masculinity through destructive acts. These activities are also a way of gaining status and maintaining a reputation within their community.

The boys consciously held courage in high esteem – a notion of courage that

was based on willingness to perform feats of daring. Their daring courage goaded them into attacking even the police station. This bold action caused mixed reactions from their parents. While some thought it was a way of making the whites share some of the negative effects of the strike, others disapproved of it and sought to stop the aggression; they forbade their sons to associate with the gang. Thus Magatte remained with six followers, still playing at being soldiers and doing daring, aggressive and violent deeds to display their masculinity.

Boys performed masculinities in relation to one another. The boys who were most into aggressive play and adventure were, for the most part, those who were fascinated by violence. These are the boys for whom the reality of life and of war films was totally blurred. They were the ones who played at being soldiers and killed birds, snakes and lizards. They were the boys who ventured into the white quarters to steal chicken. They were the ones who also committed acts of vandalism at the station. As the narrator says, "sometimes they would be seen with the groups of the other children, but they rarely took part in their games any more" (158). This suggests a hierarchy of masculinity among boys in Thies. The status of Magatte's group was largely due to their display of what was a dominant masculinity in the town – they were daring and aggressive. As stated earlier, Connell (1995) argues that at any given time and within particular contexts, various masculinities are present, whether hegemonic, marginalized or subordinate. In Thies, the other groups of boys embodied masculinities that were subordinated to the masculinities of Magatte's group.