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Author

Abdurrahman, Umar

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**Daughters of Dissent: Women as Warriors in
Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood***

Umar Abdurrahman

Abstract

This paper critically examines Sembene Ousmane's novel, God's Bits of Wood, with particular reference to the role of women in their struggle for social and economic emancipation. The paper considers Ousmane's depiction of the image of women as positive and politically correct and applauds the author's effort to correct the misconceptions and prejudices against women in Africa. The paper also analyzes the stylistic features of the novel and finds the author's skillful use of wit and symbolism as being key to his success in delivering his message.

A Hausa proverb that says, "If there are no women there is no home, and if there are too many women, the home is destroyed." As long as there is no other woman, the home is safe. However, subjective as it sounds, it reveals the contradictory nature of African women's struggle. While in Western societies women's struggle for emancipation and equality is about affirmative action and equal opportunity for employment, in Africa, the struggle is about polygamy. In my view, feminist ideology suffers a crisis of confidence. African women's overemphasis of polygamy over equality and economic empowerment trivializes feminism.

Many African writers in their works portray women negatively. Wole Soyinka, the prominent Nigerian writer, has described women, "as a plague" and the "Daughters of Discord" (Soyinka 1982, 161.) Another writer portrays them as rowdy, quarrelsome, and jealous. For instance, Chinua Achebe in his novel, *Things Fall Apart* depicts Okonkwo's wives as weak, submissive and living under perpetual fear of their husband. They never make any effort to assert themselves and are content with their condition of domestic enslavement. They are human; irrational in their thinking, erratic in their behavior and completely dependent on men. They are, in the writers' opinion, destined to eternal domestic slavery as cooks, housecleaners and mistresses.

African female writers have taken the challenge of redeeming the image of women by portraying them as serious minded individuals capable of defending their dignity. This new image of the bold and liberated African woman is projected by Bessie Head, in her novel, *The Collector of Treasures* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. Other novelists that deal with the issue are Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* and Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood*. More recent works by a new generation of feminist writers such as Zaynab Alkali in her novel, *The Virtuous Woman* and Hawwa Ali in her novels, *Destiny* and *Victory* treat the theme of women's liberation.

The emphasis on polygamy as being the leading cause of women's oppression rather than economic depravation contributes to the novelists' failure to impress their audience. It is as if polygamy is what the struggle is all about. In their effort to emphasize the issue of polygamy over other more vital issues the substance is lost and their message miscarried.

Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* seem to underline the contradictory image of women in African society. On the one hand, women are presented as docile and submissive, on the other, as bold and brave and capable of defending themselves from male aggression. The heroine of the novel, *The Collector of Treasures*, Dekiledi, is imprisoned for the murder of her husband. She kills him by severing his manhood, when she realizes that he does not love her or care for her and her children, but only wants to exploit her sexually. While in prison, she meets seven other women who are also imprisoned for committing the same crime. For the first time, women are presented as very violent, vindictive and capable of murderous acts. In that sense, they have become equal with men. In Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, two women approach the issue of polygamy in different ways. Ramatoullaye is willing to stay with her husband, even though he has married a young girl who is a friend to her daughter, while her friend Aissatou cannot endure a situation where she shares her husband with another woman especially, the one that is young enough to be her daughter. She therefore leaves him and becomes independent by improving herself educationally and financially. It is clear from the experiences of these two women, African women in traditional set up consider polygamy as a major source of oppression of women by men as opposed to economic independence. But the irony is that even without polygamy women are still oppressed. However in their own reasoning, polygamy "adds insult to injury" and helps to weaken their fighting spirit.

The focus of this paper will be on the positive portrayal of women, not by a female but a male writer. Certainly, radical feminists will see this exercise as ridiculous or even counter-productive, but it is, in all seriousness, necessary in order to counter the claims of bias against women by male writers. It is ironic that a male writer will be the one who will make the most potent ideological statement on gender equality, a reality that has eluded African female writers. Sembene Ousmane of Senegal articulates with utmost realism, the visions and hopes of the African impoverished masses, the majority of whom are women. His novels courageously challenge the traditional authority that sponsors and promotes reactionary values that undermine women's rights and freedom. Two of his novels, *Xala* and *White Genesis* are regarded as controversial because they explore the themes of incest, polygamy, and economic exploitation of women. The domination of women is perpetuated by the use of a plethora of outmoded traditional beliefs. The traditional society often projects the negative image of women as cooks, laborers and obedient housewives.

For Sembene Ousmane, the subjugation of women can take many forms, the least serious of which is polygamy. Unfortunately, for many women in African traditional societies, the least serious issue becomes the most serious and the only one worth fighting for and even dying for. Ousmane seeks to correct this misconception by alerting African women about the need to see their struggle as broad based. As long as women continue to concentrate their efforts in fighting polygamy, they will trivialize the real cause of women's struggle, which is economic independence. Women's freedom from oppression should be seen in terms of economic gains, equal opportunity employment, and educational advancement rather than social emancipation through the abrogation of polygamous practices. It is meaningless if women are free from polygamous marriages and yet uneducated and unemployed. It is only when women are

economically and educationally empowered that they can take full control of their destiny. This theme of freedom through economic empowerment is explored in Ousmane's novel, *God's Bits of Wood*.

It is important to note from the onset that this novel is not about polygamy, but about a fight for the social and economic welfare of people. It is about an industrial strike action by railway workers against the management and their demands for better wages and working conditions not only for men, but also for women. Men are the ones who first organize the strike, but later women hijack it, when it is clear that it is on the verge of collapse without achieving its goal. For the first time, women are not only fighting to defend their rights, but also staging a revolution that will not only alter their lives, but also open a new chapter in the history of women's struggle in Africa. The strike progresses into a violent struggle and is presented symbolically: the train as a machine and an economic tool on which people's survival depend. The train is described by some of the characters as "the smoke of the savannah." This symbolism is also relevant in that in rural African societies, smoke is always connected with fire for cooking food. In other words, the train that emits the smoke represents food for the people, because it is the source of their sustenance. The train is also the symbol of economic welfare and prosperity and an indispensable economic machine.

Ibrahim Bakayoko, the architect and leader of the strike describes the significance of the train to the lives of the workers, their families and indeed the whole nation. The train is also symbolic of a new dispensation and a new economic order that influences and alters lifestyles. A new society is being engendered, one which is dependent on industrial machines. The old order represented by men who are vocal ideologues of the conservative order is now crumbling under the weight of heavy industrial machinery. They either have to adapt

to the new situation or be swept by the winds of change symbolized by the machine, as captured by the words of a famous author: "The kind of men we were is dead, and our hope for a new life lies in the machine which knows neither language nor a race." (Abrams, 904)

Social change is inevitable in the wake of rapid industrial revolution that is fast transforming the traditional agrarian society into one that relies on a mechanized agricultural system and forces people to adapt to more modern ways of life. Now farmers have to discard their primitive agricultural implements and use the railway system for the transportation of their farm products. If trains stop working, they will not be able to carry their goods to the market, since trains are the cheapest form of transportation. As a consequence, they will suffer heavy losses. This is what the farmers and labor unionists fully understand, and which the management also understands but ignores. Ibrahim Bakayoko's determination to rally the support and solidarity of the union members to defy the management fails, because things have changed. The workers cannot sustain the strike for a long time because of hunger, and they cannot support their families without wages that are now stopped. The management has also succeeded in breaking the ranks of the union members through bribes and intimidation. Owing to the revolutionary nature of the struggle, Bakayoko being a product of the retrogressive establishment cannot successfully lead a socialist uprising. The social order that Bakayoko represents is corrupt, disorganized and inefficient. It can neither stand the test of time or the rigors of a protracted strike that deprives them of their monthly wages. As the situation worsens and men begin to falter, women take over.

The stoppage of wages is a plan to force the striking workers into a negotiated settlement. It fails to materialize as men and women begin to starve. When the situation deteriorates and women cannot bear it any

longer, they decide to join the strike. The entrance of women into the arena of strikes and political intrigues marks the beginning of a new revolutionary stature of women: "A terrible beauty is born." (Ousmane, 74). This sudden and inevitable transformation of women from stewardesses to strikers is spectacular. It celebrates the birth of a new African womanhood as revealed in the following symbolic statement: "The answer was simple as the woman herself. It had been born beside a fireplace in an empty kitchen." (Ousmane, 34). Ramatoulaye, a woman who will later play a crucial leadership role in the strike, makes this statement angrily when faced with the prospect of having her family starve to death. Ramatoulaye believes that she and other women suffering from the same fate have to take a quick and decisive action to save the situation, since men fail to break the impasse.

The striking women led by Ramatoulaye in their newly acquired image, have decided to go where their men have not gone before, beyond the expectations of the traditional order that has carved boundaries for them. Their revolutionary action is symbolized by the phrases "a fireplace," "empty kitchen," and "cold ash." Their anger and discontent force them to rebel against the traditional system that has stomped upon their rights to self-determination. The time of their confinement in the kitchen as cooks, secluded wives and mothers is now over. As destiny relegates the status of their men because of their passive resistance, the same destiny elevates the women to the position of labor activism. The women begin to assert their freedom. Their agitation does not have to get any approval from their own husbands, or more appropriately, their former masters and enslavers. When confronted with the reality of the no other option but a strike, they have to do something drastic. In a way, because of their daring action, they resemble the legendary Lysistrata's women warriors who succeeded where their men had failed. They too had to do something because their men had failed:

One morning a woman rose and wrapped her clothes firmly around her waist and said: "Today, I will bring back something to eat." And the men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women (Ibid, 34).

How to "bring something to eat" is an issue that will test the wits and organizational capabilities of the women in their newly found role. The legitimacy of their revolution will be determined by how long and how well they can sustain the struggle. Both time and patience are running out for the multitudes of hungry mouths: "God's Bits of Wood." Their success in the strike is crucial to their image as leaders and to the survival of their families and by extension, the whole society. They have a moral obligation to do it better than their men who are discredited and dispirited; otherwise they will be reduced to social nonentities and their struggle reduced to irrelevance. Although Ramatoulaye has emerged as the most vocal and charismatic leader of the revolutionary group, there are other women who are progressive and share the same ideological commitment.

Sembene Ousmane's presentation of these female characters can be understood in terms of group sociology, a sociological theory propounded by both Karl Marx and Lucien Goldmann in their works. An individual, though a member of a group, is not detached from his immediate social environment. The society is not an abstraction to him, as his behavior consequently determines his society's direction. The individual and the society are complementary, one enhancing the legitimacy of the other. As Karl Marx in his book, *Early Writings*, says:

The individual is a social essence. His exteriorization even if it does not appear in the immediate form of exteriorization

accomplished in common with others is then an exteriorization and a confirmation of life. The life of the individual and that of the species are not different (Marx, 350).

Grouping the characters according to their social and ideological positions helps us analyze them in terms of their individual relationships, as women, mothers, wives, workers, militants and members of the human species. There is no doubt that, the characters' grouping makes the study of the issues and their relevance to societal expectations easier. As Lucien Goldmann in his book, *Method in the Sociology of Literature*, notes, a novelist like a sociologist, "must study every social group in an effort to find an integral and coherent response to the problems common to all members of the group in relation to their social environment." (Golmann, 56). What is interesting is that there is no conscious effort by the women to group themselves according to age or ideology, but they come together as a result of their mutual caring for and sharing with one another.

Generally, the female characters can be divided into three groups on the basis of their ideological orientation and active involvement in the strike. In the first group are women who belong to the conservative order, whose resistance is motivated by self-preservation; they include old grandmother, Niakoro, Houdiya Mbaye, the mother of nine children and Assitan, Bakayoko's wife. The second group is made up of younger, educated and militant women like Ndeye Touti, Mame Sofi, Maimouna, Dienaba and Penda. The third group includes, among others, Adjibidji, Bakayoko's adopted daughter fondly called, "the daughter of the union." She and other children like her represent the birth of a new era of freedom for women.

The women in the first group represent the past and the traditional values that perpetuate the domination

of women. They accept their social inferiority with a resigned fate and never complain against the oppressive reactionary forces. They cook, obey and take care of children. Niakoro, the old grandmother, spends all her time smoking her pipe, idealizing the glorious past and occasionally criticizing the young people for their waywardness. She serves as a link between a past that is now gradually disappearing and the present that is asserting itself. She does not get involved in the matters of the moment because she does not understand them. She is, as the author correctly observes, "a left over from the vanished time, slowly being forgotten." Thus she is a symbol of culture that is dying. The other two women, Houdiya Mbaye and Assitan though younger are less radical and committed in the women's strike.

Houdiya Mbaye is more concerned about finding food for her hungry children than getting actively involved in the struggle. She seems to be more satisfied playing the role of a docile submissive housewife and a dutiful mother, than taking center stage in the strike. Although she reasons rationally, understands the women's problems and their need to defend their legitimate rights and names her baby Strike, she obeys her husband and the social norms that limit her freedom. Assitan, Bakayoko's wife and victim of society's archaic practice of arranged or forced marriage, is ironically passive. In spite of the cruelty and injustice committed against her by the social order, she remains loyal and faithful both to her husband and the traditional authority. In reality, Houdiya Mbaye and Assitan are torn between tradition and modernity. They find it difficult to totally reject the traditional system without having to make sacrifices that will alter their lives.

This fear of the future that is unknown and uncertain is very frightening for them, hence their hesitancy. In fact, Assitan personifies the traditional African woman who is not only abused and neglected, but also a mere "chattel," that can be disposed of at will.

She has no right and power to challenge the judgment of conservative order:

By the ancient standards of Africa, Assitan was a perfect wife, docile, submissive and hardworking, she never spoke one word louder than another. She knew nothing whatever of her husband's activities, or if she did she gives no appearance of knowing. Nine years before, she had been married to the eldest of Bakayoko's sons. Her parents of course had arranged everything without even consulting her (Ousmane, 68).

The three women, Niakoro, Houdiya Mbaye and Assitan are deeply rooted in the traditional system, and so realistically, cannot be in a strong position to champion any social or political cause that negates the old order. Although Houdiya Mbaye joins the strike later and is killed, her death is necessary in order for the new social order led by

Ramatoulaye to thrive. It is not surprising that the Imam blames the striking women for complicity in her death. As in every revolution, some people have to be sacrificed before the ultimate goal is achieved, and Houdiya Mbaye's death will not be in vain, as success will eventually come.

The second group of women consists of radical activists like Maimouna, Dienaba, Ndeye Touti and Penda. This group is the brainchild of Ramatoulaye who still remains its undisputed leader. She mobilizes and inspires all the women to demonstrate and demand for the rights of their husbands and other workers that the management is withholding. Her determination, courage and confrontational posture lead to her arrest, before the strike achieves its objectives. Her arrest makes the women ever more determined in their struggle, as they owe their initial gains to her heroic and visionary leadership.

With Ramatoulaye's absence, two women who by societal expectations can be regarded as outcasts, take over the leadership of the organization. Maimouna, who is blind and a mother of illegitimate twins and Penda a prostitute, are elected to lead the women in their struggle. The fact that a blind woman and a prostitute can become leaders shows that competence and commitment are the primary determining factors in choosing leaders. The women are willing to accept Maimouna's physical disability and Penda's moral delinquency, as what matters most is the success of the strike. But can their traditional society endorse such a choice, especially as it considers itself the guardian of public morality? Whether it accepts it or not, it is powerless to stop the wind of change from blowing. The transformation of these two women marks the beginning of a new era of a progressive society that is free from prejudice that also has the capacity to bestow freedom and equal opportunities to its deserving citizens irrespective of gender distinction. This new society determines the individual's worth by his or her positive contributions to the people's welfare rather than gender or social status. It is a society envisioned by Ramatoulaye and others that is now becoming a reality and all the women are participants in its creation.

The women, like their mythological sisters, Lysistrata's women warriors, perform credibly beyond the expectations of their men. Their excessive political zeal and desperation leave them with no option, but to press on with their agitation. Their first radical move is to kill Verendri, Haji Mabigue's fat ram. This action is significant as well as symbolic. It shows their indomitable spirit and firm resolve to openly challenge those whom they regard as agents of exploitation. Haji Mabigue in his greed for money and power promotes capitalist values that keep women in permanent economic bondage. Symbolically, Verendri is fat because it feeds at the expense of hungry people. While women and children are either malnourished or dying of hunger, unscrupulous

businessmen like Haji Mabigue are wasting food by over-feeding their livestock. When Mabugue's ram eats the women's grain, they decide to kill it and share its meat. It is Mabigue's sister who orders the slaughter of the ram: "Let us cut him properly and everyone will have a share." (Ibid, 122). Their action also symbolizes the demise of the old order and advent of a new one represented by a new African woman who is brave, decisive and even violent and bloody if necessary: "The sacrifice of Verendri who is an insult to hungry women, symbolizes the advent of a new order. The shedding of blood symbolizes the destruction of the old order with its emphasis on docile obedience." (Ibid, 201). With this act, the women have achieved a heroic stature. Their success in killing and eating the ram that signifies the fall of 'men' and male domination helps them to overcome their inferiority and imbues them with an enormous courage with which to fight repression. The arch-traditionalist Mabigue is crushed and the conservative values he represents show signs of imminent collapse.

The women's war against agents of exploitation gathers momentum with every act of disobedience making them bolder. When policemen are sent to arrest Ramatoulaye, the women put up a very stiff resistance. They see the policemen as agents of a corrupt establishment that perpetuate the exploitation and domination of women and other helpless people. Both the policemen and their sponsors are guilty of committing heinous crimes against humanity and deserve to be punished. During the violent confrontation with policemen, the women led by Mame Sofi display their fighting skills. Mame Sofi and her combatant platoon like the mythological Lysistrata's women's warriors have successfully defeated the anti-riot policemen who are sent to crush the rebellion. The women devise a strategy by attacking the policemen with "missiles of fire," made from "life coals" and "embers." This tactic helps them to achieve a costly victory by suffering minor casualties.

They also burn down Mabigue's house and reduce all the houses in the neighborhood to rubble. The use of fire is symbolic of the new African woman's fiery image. Ironically, this fiery image is also self-destructive as fire has the capacity to consume the one who starts it and the one who stands on its way and so it is with revolution. As Mame Sofi remarks, "There is no water for fire, but there is plenty of us." (Ibid, 137). In the course of Ramatoulaye's arrest by the police, Houdiya Mbaye is killed. Although the women's rank is shaken, their spirit is not broken. The sacrifice of their two leaders makes them even more resolute in their struggle.

Penda, the prostitute, assumes the leadership of the embattled radical movement and to the astonishment of many, proceeds to provide it with a clear sense of direction. Although with the emergence of Penda the movement becomes more militant and confrontational, its achievements in political terms are spectacular. The emergence of Penda as a leader also poses a serious political issue, which will have a moral repercussion in terms of traditional societal expectations. The fact that a prostitute assumes the leadership over those perceived to be more honorable in societal judgment is not an issue to the feminist movement. It is just a sign of new things to come that incompetent traditionalists will find hard to accept. At first even women outside the militant group find Penda's assumption of leadership as unsuitable because of her shady past: "Ah! I know that one. She is a prostitute. They should not have let a woman like that be a leader of honest women." (Ibid, 202). In many ways Penda's social orientation is as a result of rigid traditional mores that deny women freedom and economic independence. Her wish to be independent makes her a rebel in a society with institutionalized prejudices against women. Therefore, Penda's life since childhood has become dominated by her psychopathic hatred of men whom she sees as perpetrators of aggression against women: "From her earliest childhood she had

demonstrated a resolute independence which only increased as she grew up. As a young girl she had seemed to develop a hatred for men and turned away every man who had wanted to marry her." (Ibid, 202).

With this new role, Penda becomes a metaphorical extension of the new African woman: bold, independent, dynamic, organized, enterprising and politically conscious. She is the voice of a new generation of women that are courageous enough to challenge the traditional hierarchy and win. With Penda, a star is born and this star also twinkles. The new breed represented by Penda is destined to lead the women into an age of equality and egalitarianism. The rising tide symbolized by Penda's women revolutionaries will sweep away the forces of reaction and cleanse the society of its collective guilt: "How can the men prevent this great river from rolling to the sea?" (Ibid, 185). This great river cannot be stopped as symbolized by the women's march to Dakar. The march is a turning point in the long and arduous struggle for emancipation. This new dawn is seen in the "feminist power," which men are forced to acknowledge: "Our gallant women have something to say to you. They have the right to be heard." (Ibid). Penda, the social outcast, has fought relentlessly, even violently, on behalf of all the women and restored for them their rights of self-determination; Penda's address during the solidarity rally, on the eve of their march to Dakar, can be regarded as their crowning glory. It is a victory speech:

I speak in the name of women, but am just the voice they have chosen 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 tomorrow. We owe it to ourselves to hold our heads and not to give up now. So we decided that tomorrow we would march together to Dakar. (Ibid, 219).

Penda leads the militant women marchers with Maimouna the blind woman in the forefront. The march to Dakar is symbolic of the mass movement of African women from ignorance and enslavement to liberation and enlightenment; a feat that is accomplished as a result of the women's persistent sacrifices and tenacity of purpose. For Penda and her warrior sisters, the feminist movement, though not homegrown, is the most significant blessing to women since the abolition of slavery. Penda in the end sacrifices her life so that the humanistic ideals she fought for can be actualized, so that all women can have a better future. The future looks bright judging from the sense of optimism expressed by the mother of a baby called Strike. As she beautifully remarks, "I am nourishing one of the great trees of tomorrow."¹ Thus the strike becomes both physical and symbolic; a future that is nourished and sustained by its great and dynamic people. One of the great trees of tomorrow being nurtured by the society is Adjibidji, nicknamed, "the daughter of the union." Adjibidji asks a philosophical question in the beginning of the novel, "What is purer than water?" The question is finally answered in the end. "It is the spirit." The spirit is purer than water. But what kind of spirit and whose spirit is it? It is in the author's view, the revolutionary spirit of the women who are daring enough to stand up and fight for self-determination and win. This spirit is personified by the leaders of tomorrow, Adjibidji and Strike.

The final message is infinitely hopeful. The future is here and it is good because, "the beautiful ones are already born." The march to Dakar brings the strike to its end and so with it, the domination of women by men. The fire in the kitchen for cooking is forever extinguished and the ashes are cold. Women have to seek their employment elsewhere and regard men from now onwards as equal partners in every human endeavor. They have to compete with men in everything.

The war on gender equality that is fought and won will pay off only if women face the challenges of life with pragmatism. Their hard-won victory should not be trivialized. Nor will the sweet taste of victory be an excuse for vindictiveness. The deed is done. The women cannot take back the night. To do that is to undermine their feminist struggle, which is much more comprehensive in its ideological appeal. But women can take control of their night as they have already taken control of their lives through the radical feminist movement led by charismatic women like Penda. It is precisely because Penda understands the importance of dutifully sticking to substantive issues like social and economic equality and independence rather than polygamy that makes their revolution a resounding success. It is pertinent to note that throughout the novel, the issue of polygamy that has been the main focus of many African feminist writers has been sidelined. Rather, economic independence in which the real salvation of women lies is emphasized.

The power of this novel lies in the author's exploration of the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by the traditional African societies that use outdated draconian laws to oppress women. The failure of these traditional societies to face the challenges of modernity by liberalizing its repressive mores inevitably leads to their destruction. For the first time in African Literature, we have a male writer championing the cause of women, by presenting them in a positive light, capable of redeeming their scarred image. Sembene Ousmane is successful in his artistic effort by constructing powerful characters that can articulate his socialist ideology that accommodates progressive values. He has deliberately chosen women who are stigmatized by the traditional society to lead in order to enforce his ideological message. The fundamental issues raised are political and economical, not moral or religious. Bakayoko angrily objects to Ndeye Touti's accusation of Penda's prostitution in which she says rather graphically, "the only thing that

was not on top of her was the railroad." (Ibid, 58). In his defense of Penda, Bakayoko makes the following poignant remarks:

You will probably never be as worth as Penda, he said at last. And I know what she is worth. She was a real friend and she lost her life because of it. There are a great many ways of prostituting yourself, you know. There are those who do it because they are forced to-Alionne, Dionne, Idrissa and myself all prostitute our work and our abilities to men who have no respect for us. And then there are others who sell themselves morally-the one like Mabigue and Gaye and Beougosse. And what about you? (Ibid).

For Bakayoko, moral prostitution is the worst. Ironically, men like Mabigue, Gaye and Beougosse who in their arrogance believe that they are the legitimate custodians of social morality are themselves blameworthy. They have no moral right to judge or censure women like Penda and Maimouna because of their social orientation. At least they are not hypocritical. They are brave enough to take risks and to make sacrifices for the betterment of all. They fought and won the battle on behalf of women and their men counterparts because of their moral stamina and with "the spirit that is purer than water." For Penda, prostitution is a matter of choice, just as staying single is. She believes that she has the right to be whatever she wants to be. To deny her that right is therefore unjust. Defending her rights as a woman is a sacred obligation that she and the rest of her comrades have proudly fulfilled. By their strong will and moral courage they have attained a heroic status. This is what makes their story so spectacular that in the words of Wole Soyinka, it assumes an epic dimension: "As with all good epics, humanity is recreated. The social community

acquires archetypal dimensions and heroes become deities. Even Penda, the prostitute is apotheosized." (Soyinka 1976, 117).

On the whole if read from Marxist dialectics, *Gods Bits of Wood*, is a powerful and enriching novel. It is structurally taut and stylistically flawless. The central theme is well carried in a series of exceedingly witty symbols. These artistic merits therefore establish Sembene Ousmane as one of the most articulate and visionary writers in Africa.

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POETRY