

**REVOLUTIONARY AESTHETICS IN SEMBENE OUSMANE'S
GOD'S BITS OF WOOD**

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ABSTRACT: *Literature is not just a piece of writing, which only entertains. It also performs some other functions such as teaching moral lessons and healing souls. Literature has turned out to be a medium of appending contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society; since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. A creative art is designed to x-ray life, with a view to display human experiences, feelings, imaginations, observations, predictions and suggestions for realistic purposes. Literature is one of the major weapons for class and/or societal struggles. This paper focuses on societal issues raised in Sembène Ousmane's God's bits of wood Marxist theory of violence is our theoretical framework in evaluating the writer's preoccupations. As its purpose, the paper makes it bold to validate the fact that art and society are two interlocking entities. It is obvious that the oppressed in Sembène Ousmane's God's bits of wood are well mobilized and they behave as true agents of positive social transformation. They are very effective in the reconstruction agenda demonstrated in the novel. The paper ends by identifying the fundamental systemic challenges, which confront African societies during the colonial period and even now in the perceived global village and the writer is seen as one who embraces his environment and time very religiously in his artistic creation with a view to solving some common societal problems. Literature, therefore, is capable of activating and promoting the expected development in human societies.*

KEYWORDS: Art, Colonialism, Capitalism, Protest, Development

INTRODUCTION

The openness of literature as a concept permits the numerous definitions given to the word by different scholars. Wellek and Warren (1968) define literature as "a social institution, using as its medium language, as a social creation...Literature represents life and life is in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation".

But, In 1981, Warner Berthoff observes: "... literature itself has its own purpose and determinants... never wholly autonomous it draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life experience of its producers in their time... but it never speaks for the totality of that culture," Therefore, literature or any work of art generally is not closed, independent or self-sufficient on its own. There is a connection between literature and the milieu/environment where it is produced and this fact has been demonstrated in Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*.

Since social problems are systemic things; literature as a product of a given human society can be employed to solve or at least to reduce social challenges by consistently flogging such issues and recommending functional remedies to the identified perceived social contending impediments.

Literature is designed on the basis of prevailing daily or persistent events both socio-culturally and ideologically. As an open concept, it is seen and described variously by different people. Achebe (1988) "Literature, whether handed down by the word of mouth, or in print, gives us a second handle on reality, enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimension of make-believe the very same threat to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life, and at the same providing through the self discovery which imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us".

Cyril Mokwenye (2000). "Literature was (and it is still) the most efficient medium of manifesting African culture and civilization, while poetry became the most effective genre for expressing it ... not just to illustrating and defending Africa's cultural values ...but also to the rehabilitation of Africa's damaged image, ...". We, however, extend the frontier of our discussion beyond poetry because poetry is not the only genre of literature. There are three major genres of literature namely: drama, poetry and prose. All these branches of literature have potential ingredients which make them functional platform to showcase Africa's beliefs, feelings, norms, values and aspirations which can translate into desired societal development. Literature is not just a piece of writing, which only entertains. It is equally, at the same time too, a means of expressing ideas, views, opinions, experiences, feelings, body of knowledge, cultural values as well as teaching moral lessons and healing souls. Literature has turned out to be" a medium of appending contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society; since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. It is far from being ambiguous that literature buys into the expressive function of a given language. And, the understanding of culture and the society, which are potential ingredients on which literature is premised, paves the way for an effective development", (Ogundokun, Sikiru A., 2013: 1 - 9).

Through protest writing, radical but reasonable African creative artists condemn the follies and the vices in their societies. They frown at corruption, bad governance, repressive policies, woman oppression, moral decadence and societal disturbances such as religious intolerant, with a view to making positive changes, which might accelerate human and material developments in Africa and the world at large. The primary aim of these committed African writers is the genuine struggle for cultural and socio-political revolution using literary activities as a platform. The different peoples of the world are made to understand the African world view through writing both now and before independence.

The major challenge of the 20th century is racial segregation but in this 21st century cultural issues have presented themselves as the most disturbing determinants, which militate against global developments. UNESCO sees culture as "What has shaped societies' and individuals' ways of life; while certainly rooted in ancestral values, it is also a source of dialogue, exchange, innovation and creativity, and the foundation stone of endogenous systems of solidarity, forms of expression and ways of transmitting knowledge that are as valid for meeting the challenges of tomorrow as for

preserving traditions”, (UNESCO, 2005). In a simple term, culture is an aspect of people’s identity which promotes social integration and organization among a community of people.

Once the culture of a people is captured by another people, the people whose culture is invaded will remain in a perpetual darkness, perhaps till the kingdom comes. Culture is a soft-ware, the moment it is inflicted by the virus of another culture; the affected culture is crippled and becomes impotent. However, culture is never static; it is dynamic, hence, it should adopt itself to constructive and meaningful changes which come or evolve with time. In this modern world which is ruled by science and technology, an unhealthy attachment to cruel crude culture is unacceptable as it hinders societal development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Marxist criticism is concerned with economic and political elements of art and it emphasizes the ideological property/message content of literature, Marxist criticism is one of the popular types of sociological criticism. Sociological approach to the study of literature holds that literature and other forms of creative arts should be examined in the cultural, economic and political context in which they are written, produced or received. This literary theory explores the connections/relationships between the artist/writer and his or her society. To understand a writer’s literary work(s), it may probe into the writer’s society as well as studying how societal elements are represented in the literature itself since it is believed that literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behavior re-orientation. And, of course, our adoption of the sociological approach of literary criticism can be justified since this critical approach or theory is believed to be “the most apt to render a full account of modern African literature” because it (the approach) takes into consideration “everything within our society which has informed the work”, Abiola Irele (1971).

Violence is “any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment,” (Baron,1997). Another view is that violent actions are “actions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury. Actions may be corporal, written or verbal; .Injuries may be corporal, psychological, material or social,” (Jackman, 2002).

In the field of criminology, psychology and other related disciplines, the issue of violence has caused hot debates among experts. Many scholars see violence as a function of nurture while other scholars believe it is a question of nature.

The Marxist theory of violence holds that violence is a subject of class struggle. To Marxists, violence is an imperial tool to increase power of the ruling class in order to divide the masses of the world through divide and rule strategy, causing confusion, mistrust and misunderstanding among the innocent less privileged people. To continue in their act and undeserved luxury, the dominant powers often employ descriptive indices like ethnicity, sectionalism, nationalism and religion among other things to prevent any form of anticipated challenge from the common man. Violence is believed to be a function of natural fallouts of the free market and the class system. As a universal systemic problem, it requires a world revolution to make it disappear.

Since there is a serious competition among peoples of the world and nations in modern societies as a result of control over resources or natural endowments and wealth creation and distribution, conflicts or violent aggressions are slimly unavoidable. Population growth, new technology and skills are systemic variables which call for a more politically organized institution to regulate the affairs of the modern state. It is therefore on this platform that "...it appeared pertinent to bring a political authority or government into force because of the danger that conflicting interests could pose to mankind. Thus, a body of people, to regulate the behavior and activities of people, was set up, in whom the people would surrender their individual power, the government in turn would provide them with public order and security, and make binding decisions (laws) on the people," (Kasali, 2008).

It is believed that there is justification for violence. The aggressor employs it as an instrument to meet his goals. In literature, especially in committed works, the concept of violence is used to press home a point which requires serious attention. It is not at all times that violence needs the use of guns, gun powder, atomic bombs or nuclear weapons. The frustration and bitterness caused by economic and political alienations have induced more pains and agonies into the lives of ordinary people. To fight for their rights and realize their dreams therefore, the masses at times use violent actions as a platform or a way of escape.

Even though the story is set in an imaginary African society, it reflects imperialist realities in most African states during the colonial period. There are in fact, some elements of fact/truth in fiction. "A selection of events on the basis of chronological sequence, casually and the value of judgments has always been necessary; that is to say information about reality has been presented to and by the human species in the forms of narrative fiction known to us as History, and the statements of politicians and journalists", (Joan Rockwell, 1974).

Analysis of the text

A fictionalized report of the Dakar-Niger train strikes, which took place in 1948, *God's Bits of Wood*, examines the political, personal and collective sacrifices the striking workers, their families and the society at large make during the struggle. The strikers struggle to win back pensions, annual paid leaves and family allowances from their harsh colonial masters. The story demonstrates an unusual power shift between the striking workers and their foreign self-imposed controllers. Mindlessly and persistently too, the Whites employ the political process and violence as a mode of power. The colonialists disallow the Blacks from getting water and, food is equally hard to come by. Surprisingly, the strikers press on as they have the masses faithfully to their side; which of course, is a powerful weapon of any political process to achieve a purposeful course.

As the struggle continues, the strikers gain powerful support from the womenfolk, who are indifferent to the need for the strike at its inception because they are not adequately informed. The women resist the arrest of Ramatoulaye by the police and they march to Dakar to protest their maltreatment as a way of supporting the strikers. It is indeed, a strike which neutralizes the social injustice and inequality, which are tied to sex and, or race.

Literature is expected to be an effective weapon in the reformation agenda of human society. Darah (1987) observes, "...literature is crucial in shaping the mentality of a people, it is crucial in shaping

their identity. Literature therefore, has a role to play in shaping people's consciousness. Based on Marxist ideology, Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* takes a serious look at the economic sphere in the society captured by the novelist in line with the view of Darah as stated above. It is obvious that the base-super segmental structure, which explains an economic policy which is tied to capitalism. This ugly trend cannot be absolutely divorced from racial discrimination occasioned by colonialism. The two "Cs"; colonialism and capitalism are no doubt acute weapons of human oppression in the history of mankind. Color separation brings about different social stratification and class distinction in the literary creation of Sembène Ousmane titled *God's Bits of Wood*. Reflecting on the imbalance and inequality among the workers in the novel, Tiemoko, a character and one of the railway workers laments thus: "We are the ones who do the work, the same work the white men do. Why should they be paid more? And when they are sick why should they be taken care of and why should we and our families be left to starve to death? Because we are black"(p. 149).

As a matter of fact, one can see that racism is a dominant issue in this novel, Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*. The most annoying thing is that some blacks who are already set against their fellow African brothers through divide and rule method do not see anything bad in the difference in wages. For example, Isnard, the foreman confronts Doudou to make himself a white man so that he can have the same form of treatment and the luxuries a white man enjoys. It is therefore not too surprising when the foreman books any black who comes late to work to lose that day's pay eventually. The pictures of the Imam and El Hadji Mabigue in the novel under review show them as agents of the colonial imperialists to entrench their divide and rule policy in an attempt to subject the system into a perpetual darkness. Consequently, the Africans remain blind-folded and the polity is heated-up and unstable.

The social, political and economic structures in the railway industry demonstrate the hostile human living condition in a capitalist state; where the means of production and distribution of wealth of the land are solely in the hands of the few rich investors.

This fact can be proved by some of the captions in the protest banners of the striking railway workers:

I. "WE DEMAND FAMILY ALLOWANCES"

II. "FOR EQUAL WORK EQUAL PAY"

III. "OLD AGE PENSIONS"

IV. PROPER HOUSING" (p.214).

The workers' "take-home" cannot take them home. It is far below expectation. Mamadou Keita informs us about this when he laments thus; "It is true that we have our trade, but it does not bring us what it should. We are being robbed. Our wages are so low that there is no longer any difference between ourselves and animals" (p. 212). The underlined part of the above extract x-rays the tempo of suffering which kicks the blacks on their faces right there on their own land. It is sympathetic and unfortunate that the right owners of a property have been systematically reduced to beggars. Oh! No, turned to slaves. In fact, the exploitative posture of capitalism and its eventual use dump syndrome are unacceptable. Hence, the workers' strike is justified as it appears that industrial action is the only option they have as a weapon to activate their dreams and aspirations.

The poor wages affects not only the workers but also their wives, children and other dependents. Do not forget, African society/culture encourages polygamy and extended family life style. One should therefore understand the unflinching support women later give their striking husbands towards the end of the story. As we have pointed out, art, which literature is a facet of, mirrors a human society which produces it. And, little wonder, Murray Krieger (1976) comments; “The general resemblance to reality is what makes art recognizable to the rest of us. But what makes art artful is the fact is the fact that the artist imposes his own matter upon these forms in a way that gives them responsiveness to inevitability, a new necessity and probability.” It is against this background that we can appreciate the revolutionary stance of Sembène Ousmane as his reaction to practical realities in his African society. Capitalism, the father of economic discrimination, brings about social disparity and a class society.

In Sembène Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood*, there is a sharp contrast between the houses where the Africans live and those houses where the colonial masters live. The poor Africans, even though they are on their land, live as paupers in shanty: dirty, stinking and overpopulated environment while their uninvited guests live in Eldorado; clean, well furnished and conducive environment, where they have access to everything which makes life interesting.

The words of the omniscient narrator in the novel paint the black man’s house in Thiès more vividly thus: “Hovels. A few rickety shacks, some upturned tombs, walls of bamboos or millet stalks, iron barbs and rotting fences. Thiès, a vast, uncertain plain where all the rot of the city has gathered stakes and cross ties, locomotive wheels, rusty shafts, knocked in jerricans, old mattresses springs, bruised and lacerated sheets of steel. And then, a little farther on, on the goat path that leads to the Bambara quarter, piles of old tin cans, heaps of excrement, little mountains of broken pottery and cooking tools, ...” (p.13). Through the underlined phrases in the extract above, we see imagery of poverty and an unsafe environment, which can cause an epidemic of air or water borne diseases. The unpleasant picture from the extract also reminds one of the moods of Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali in his poem titled; “Nightfall in Soweto,” where he exposes the oppression of the Africans by the white people in apartheid South Africa. This scenario is indeed a disgusting social injustice, which needs to be corrected. We are therefore not embarrassed when the railway workers down tools to reject all these messy situations which render Africans hopeless and man less. The situation is such bad that at a time in the novel, children struggle with vultures to feed from refuse bin.

The colonial lords are fat and good looking; an evidence of a happy living but their hosts are mere walking skeletons; emaciated and haggard. Poverty is written all over the faces of hungry-looking Africans on the land which heavenly belongs to them.

Capitalism is an economic cum a political ideology which interlocks. The political super-structure hegemony; especially the legal system in operation in the society presented in the story testifies to this argument. The novelist condemns the seemly imposed social order; that is, the French law system which is set purposely set in motion to debase or dislocate the indigenous political structure for the eventual destruction of what belongs to Africans as regards a system of governance. Fa Keïta remarks: “That book was written by toubabs (the Whites). And the machines were built by the toubabs!” (p. 87).

Politically, the Africans are seen as mere children and their countries are satellite or outreach centers. Dejean captures this European perception thus: "... the blacks, are children who want to walk..." (p. 29). Indisputably, the establishment of the military, the police, the court and the prison by the colonialists is to accomplish their hidden agenda.

The Africans are often intimidated by the soldiers and the police. Fa Keïta, Konaté and several other striking workers are arrested and imprisoned. The by-product of all these unhealthy treatments whether economically, socially or politically is psychological trauma, in which Africans are subjected on their own God given land. Out of frustration, occasioned by the prevailing acts of discrimination, the Africans result to strike as the last resort.

Being a revolutionary artist, through his desire, emotion and experience, Sembène Ousmane is able to testify to the human conditions and social crisis of his people, particularly the Senegalese nationals and generally the ugly situations in African states during the colonial period. He identifies with the defenseless poor minors, the masses having acknowledged their predicament. His purpose is to provide both the prescription and cure to the seemly social madness, which ravages human society. Art is indeed an effective weapon "for fighting oppressive ideologies such as capitalism, fascism and other totalitarian hegemonic structures", (Vazquez, 1973).

CONCLUSION

That African literature evaluates the African society is obvious. However, it must be stressed that such evaluation should take into account the contemporary social realities which are anchored by the existing moral ethics, societal norms and values in African context.

We have displayed in this paper that *God's Bits of Wood* is practically focused on deplorable human living conditions socially, politically, economically, culturally and psychologically during the colonial era. Ousmane has used this novel to raise the consciousness of his people with a view to mobilizing them for any repressive and irresponsible government not only at the time of decolonization process but also after the perceived political independence/ liberation. Reference to truly existing towns or cities such as Dakar, Bamako and Thiès validates the much talked correlation between society and literature. The railway workers' strike is as a matter of fact, a revolt against all forms of discrimination using the social, political and economic structures in the railway establishment as a symbolic representation.

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