

DALHOUSIE FRENCH STUDIES

Katherine Kong on Christine de Pizan
Florence Orwat sur Madame Palatine
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Volume Seventy-Eight

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The Metamorphosis of Female Personae in Sembene Ousmane's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*

Ramonu Sanusi

Ousmane, perhaps more than any other African novelist, gives a privileged and dynamic role to women. The most striking example in this respect is provided by *God's Bits of Wood* in which women constitute a catalytic element and take an active part in the demonstrations of the rail workers during the strike.

Martin Bestman

Sembene Ousmane, whose feminism Bestman captures in our epigraph, deserves to be studied by scholars of African literature because aside from his feminist posture, Ousmane remains one of the most accomplished African writers of the pre and post-independence periods. As a witness of colonial atrocities in Senegal, Ousmane vehemently criticized the colonial enterprise in Africa. This novelist does not, however, limit his writings to the condemnation of colonial practices; he also attacks the political and religious practices as well as leaders of post-independence Africa. He denounces the subordination of Senegalese women in his texts mainly through his condemnation of polygamy. He fights for the liberation of African women in his writings and is committed to their cultural, political, economic and social emancipation.

Ousmane has published, among other works, *Le Docker noir* (1956), *Ô Pays mon beau peuple* (1957), *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960), *Voltaïque* (1961), *L'Harmattan* (1963), *Le Mandat suivi de Véhi-Ciosane* (1964), *Xala* (1973) and *Niiwam* (1999). He has also produced several films that have won prizes.

Ousmane, like many African writers of his generation, features in his first novels a principal protagonist on whom the plot of his novel centers. *Le Docker noir* and *Le Mandat* are concrete examples. *Le Docker noir* is characterized by an individual's revolt.

Ousmane closely observes Senegalese society and in his fiction attacks the injustices suffered by the people. He is very suspicious of bourgeois African intellectuals who distance themselves from the masses. *Le Mandat* and *Xala*, works in which he attacks post-independence Senegal, come to mind here. In *Le Mandat*, he criticizes in particular the administrative system of independent Senegalese society, class divisions, religion, and the oppression of women. The main theme in *Xala* is the attitude of the new African leaders who, after ascending to power, forget the promises they made to the masses and start living in an artificial paradise after emptying the coffers of their country. El-Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, the protagonist of *Xala*, is representative of this class. To display his wealth and to show that he is successful, he marries more than one wife.

In the stories in *Voltaïque* (1961), the author exposes the institution of polygamy and shows the weakness of this practice when women come out gradually from their docility to rebuke the male oppressor. In *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, one can clearly discern Ousmane's revolutionary posture against all forms of oppression. The novel is based on the Dakar-Bamako railway strike of October 1947 to March 1948 when workers agitated for better working conditions. Ousmane is devoted to people's causes; his works show a social commitment to transform the society. He first depicts the social condition of African women and then shows how women participate in the strike of the railway workers. Through the strike, it was possible for the women to change the conditions in which they were living by removing some of the previous restrictions imposed on them

by religious or traditional rules. Teresa Njoku opines that: "Though *God's Bits of Wood* criticizes colonial capitalist repression of the workers in Senegal, this oppression is transformed into revolutionary account of women's existence. Women's radical efforts and resistance thus became central to the novel" (124).

Many women in his *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* renounce some of their traditional roles and engage in the struggles first for national freedom and second for themselves. With their experiences and roles in the strike, they take on new responsibilities. Ousmane believes that no society can develop effectively if it undermines the roles of its women. He steadfastly engages in the fight for women's liberation from the traditions that enslave them. He admires the roles played by women during the struggle against foreign invasions and always campaigns for recognizing women's contributions and giving them a place in society. In moving female characters in his novels from a secondary role to a stage in which they reject their subaltern condition, Ousmane is without a doubt a pioneer African writer. His works show that women are relegated to the bottom of the ladder in some traditional societies and in those where Islamic culture has left its imprint.

The feminist perspective of Ousmane's work and especially of *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* is quite striking. Ousmane shows the political force and capabilities of women, most of them traditional women who do not know how to read and write. There is no single individual working alone in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*; people function as a collective, including female characters who come together to participate alongside the men in the strike action. The strike becomes an eye-opening experience for women as it raises their level of consciousness and for men as well because they realize the capabilities of the women. The consciousness is therefore from both sides leading to changes in the society and in the way things are now perceived.

African society is founded on family. In the traditional African case, however, it is mostly polygamous. *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* clearly testifies to a hierarchical order where men are on the top and women are at the bottom and serve the men. The different categories of women present in the novel include the traditional women (Niakoro, Assitan, Fatoumata, Ramatoulaye, Mame Sofi, to mention a few). These traditional women, molded by traditions, were very submissive to their husbands prior to the strike. The most senior of them is the old mother, Niakoro, who symbolizes old traditions. It is by virtue of her life experiences ranging from domestic affairs to the various strike actions she has witnessed that she warns her granddaughter: "Tu n'as jamais vu une grève, toi! Ton petit père en a vu une lui, et il était encore jeune. Des soldats vont venir. Ils tireront. Et toi, au milieu des hommes, tu seras comme une chèvre au milieu de chameaux en débandade. Tu n'as donc pas peur?" (LBB 19) ["You have never seen a strike! Your "little father" saw one, when he was still a child. Soldiers will come, and there will be shooting. And you-in the middle of the men you will be like a sheep in a stampede of camels. Are you not afraid?"] (GBW 5)

Assitan was a traditional woman prior to the strike, "une parfaite épouse selon les anciennes traditions africaines: docile, soumise, travailleuse, elle ne disait jamais un mot plus haut que l'autre" (LBB 170-171). [By the ancient standards of Africa, Assitan was a perfect wife: docile, submissive, and hard-working, she never spoke one word louder than another] (GBW 106). According to custom, she was married off without any consideration as to her feelings for her first husband, and at his death, she was remarried to Bakayoko, her deceased husband's brother. She obeyed the traditions blindly after she was led into this second marriage without being consulted.

Neuf ans auparavant on l'avait mariée à l'aîné des Bakayoko. Sans même la consulter, ses parents s'étaient occupés de tout. Un soir, son père lui apprit que son mari se nommait Sadikou Bakayoko et deux mois après on la livrait à un homme qu'elle n'avait jamais vu [...] De nouveau, l'antique coutume disposa

de sa vie. [...] elle fut aussi soumise à Ibrahima qu'elle l'avait été à son frère. (LBBB 170-171)

[Nine years before, she had been married to the eldest of the Bakayoko sons. Her parents, of course, had arranged everything, without even consulting her. One night her father had told her that her husband was named Sadikou, and two months later she had been turned over to a man whom she had never before seen. [...] and once again the old customs had taken control of her life. [...] She was as submissive to Ibrahim as she had been to his brother.] (GBW 106)

Assitan is not the only female character in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* subjected to masculine or cultural domination. Fatoumata respected her husband like a "demi-god." "Fatoumata s'installa derrière son mari et resta ainsi durant tout le repas en signe de politesse" (LBBB 29). [Fatoumata seated herself behind her husband, where she would remain throughout the meal, as a sign of courtesy.] (GBW 11) Ramatoulaye, Awa and Dieynaba were also faithful and obedient wives. Before the strike these women were apparently happy in their roles as mothers and housewives and accepted their situation as normal. Unconscious of their subaltern condition, they were content to live under their husbands' dominance in the name of tradition or religion.

The second category is the westernized woman (represented by N'Deye Touti). N'Deye Touti was molded in a Western way and therefore accepted the status quo for different reasons. She saw everything in the colonial system as good. N'Deye Touti, enjoying the privileges of a Western education and elite status, rejected the idea of women taking part in the strike because the Western education she had received had taught her not to rebel against any constituted authority.

C'était N'Deye Touti qui répondait. [...] Elle n'avait pas pris part à l'échauffourée et désapprouvait la conduite des femmes, y compris celle de sa tante Ramatoulaye. On lui avait appris à l'école qu'il y avait des lois et que nul n'avait le droit de se faire justice lui-même. Pour elle, tout ce qui venait de l'école ne pouvait être mis en question. (LBBB 177-178)

[It was N'Deye Touti who answered. [...] She had taken no part in the fighting and disapproved strongly of what her aunt Ramatoulaye and the other women had done. She had learned at school about the workings of the law, and she had been taught that no one had the right to take the law in his own hands. And for N'Deye there was no questioning the truth of anything she learned at the school.] (GBW 111)

N'Deye Touti lives in a fantasy world dreaming of Europe with all its beautiful things. She does not care to know about her home country because her life is totally focused on the West. The Europe that she knows through her books and education represents the better world. She, therefore, defies the striking women and condemns their activities: "Parce que vous n'avez pas le droit de faire ce que vous avez fait. Lorsque les alcatis sont venus, ils ont demandé Ramatoulaye et vous leur êtes toutes tombées dessus. D'après la loi, c'est un délit!" (LBBB 178) ["Because you have no right to do what you did. When the policemen came, they wanted Ramatoulaye, and you attacked them while they were doing their duty. That's an offense against the law."] (GBW 111) Humiliated by the same authority that she had refused to defy at the beginning of the strike, however, N'Deye Touti later changed her opinion and ended up challenging the oppressors.

Ad'jibid'ji the little girl, represents the third category and a new generation of woman. Very courageous and talented, this young girl insists on playing a role in the strike. Similarly, Ousmane's portrayal of Ad'jibid'ji, who speaks up to the astonishment of her grandmother, embodies the redefined status of the Senegalese woman. Both the young girl and her grandmother, irrespective of their age differences, play significant

roles in the strike. It is as if the young girl pushes her grandmother Niakoro to metamorphose into a strong woman before her death. Ad'jibid'ji incarnates the changes taking place when, at her tender age, she already talks confidently with Niakoro about the strike, which is a colossal issue that even scares adults.

- Mais tu ne sais donc pas qu'aujourd'hui ils tiennent un grand palabre, sur la grève? [...] Et toi, au milieu des hommes, tu seras comme une chèvre au milieu de chameaux en débandade. Tu n'as donc pas peur?

- De quoi, mama?

- De quoi? Tu me demandes de quoi? Mais qu'est-ce que tu as dans la tête?

- Du cerveau, mama, rien que du cerveau, repliqua Ad'jibid'ji (LBBD 19).

[' But don't you know that today is the day of the big meeting, on the strike? [...] 'And you-in the middle of the men you will be like a sheep in a stampede of camels. Are you not afraid?'

'Of what, Grandmother?'

'Of what? You ask of what? But what do you have in your head?'

'Thoughts, Grandmother, nothing but thoughts'] (GBW 5).

Ousmane represents women positively and vigorously attacks patriarchal structures. As David Murphy asserts, Ousmane's representations of African women, "manage at least to open the terrain and give voice to a wider range of concerns than was touched on by the preceding generation of African writers" (141). Many of Ousmane's female characters who live in the shadows and are defined solely by their relationships to their husbands, emerge from their confined spaces to affirm their existence as individuals by rebelling against men's domination. The metamorphoses of Ousmane's women testify to the author's dream for the progress he wants for Senegalese women in particular, and for African women as a whole. The militant tone of Ousmane's novels is an indication of his determination to change society drastically by bringing a Marxist perspective to issues such as politics, economics, culture and gender. Ousmane's revolutionary writing does not exclude women because the author adapts his Marxist posture to the idea that men and women are equally engaged in the class struggle. Ousmane's Marxism is focused not only on establishing an egalitarian society by fighting for the oppressed men of the proletariat; he also directs his attack on institutions such as polygamy that are used as a weapon by men to oppress women.

The chapter of the novel entitled "La marche des femmes" [The March of the Women] gives kudos to these women warriors. The long march from Thiès to Dakar demonstrates that the strike was also their concern, and they were ready to participate fully with whatever means were at their disposal to support their men. Thus they walked the fifty kilometers between the two cities. Ousmane makes the women *collectively* "heroic." As Minyono-Nkodo observes:

Ces cinquante kilomètres à pied de Thiès à Dakar sont *l'aventure héroïque* accomplie par les femmes de Thiès, malgré une multitude d'obstacles, de lourdes fatigues et des privations de toutes sortes. Liées entre elles par une franche solidarité, elles s'entraident durant ce long parcours. L'accueil que leur réservent les habitants de Sébikoutane ranime celles qui sont sur le point d'abandonner. (51)

Those fifty kilometers from Thiès to Dakar are a heroic adventure accomplished by Thiès women in spite of multiple obstacles, heavy fatigue and hardship. Very united, they helped each other during the journey. The great welcome accorded them by inhabitants of Sébikoutane reassures those among them who were planning to give up. (My own translation)

In *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, women who were at first docile and submissive to their husbands metamorphose and rise above their traditional status to fight along with men. Dieynaba becomes a doctor who treats victims of police brutality during the strike. Likewise Ramatoulaye, who was a quiet and traditional woman before the strike, becomes a butcher of sheep. In traditional African societies of the sub-Saharan, in accordance with cultural prescription, men are the butchers of sheep. During the strike, Ramatoulaye's potential for playing a larger role in society emerged as she struggled with the sheep named Vendredi, which she finally overpowered and slaughtered. The narrator describes the scene as follows:

Vendredi gratta le sol de ses sabots, puis, tête baissée, il fonça et l'on eût dit qu'il rentrerait dans Ramatoulaye [...] Par trois fois, elle enfonça la lame dans le cou de l'animal; le sang gicla à nouveau [...] Ramatoulaye essuya son arme en la passant sur l'épaisse toison, puis elle se redressa. (LBBB 114-115)

[Vendredi pawed briefly at the ground with his hoofs, and then he charged. His horns and head seemed to bury themselves in Ramatoulaye's body [...] She plunged the knife three times into the ram's neck. The blood spurted out again [...] Ramatoulaye wiped the blade clean on the animal's heavy fleece and stood up at last.] (GBW 67-68)

In this violent, bloody scene, Ramatoulaye is not playing the traditional "feminine" role. With the practical necessities brought on by the strike, men had to turn over some of their responsibilities to women. In addition to slaughtering the sheep, Ramatoulaye plays a significant and active role in the strike itself, helping to defeat the policemen.

Ramatoulaye avança encore d'un pas [...] Autour d'elle, on commençait à brandir des bouteilles, des taparquats, des pilons, des morceaux de bois ramassés ça et là. Les policiers se virent rapidement encerclés. L'auxiliaire voulut dire quelque chose. Ramatoulaye lui coupa la parole: "Toi, je n'ai plus rien à te dire. Si tu es encore debout, c'est grâce à ce toubab!" (LBBB 124-125)

[Ramatoulaye took a step forward [...] On all sides of her the other women began brandishing bottles filled with sand, flatirons, and clubs of all shapes and sizes. In a few minutes the group of policemen was completely encircled. The interpreter tried to say something, but Ramatoulaye would not let him speak. 'I have nothing more to say to you. It's only because of the toubab that you haven't yet been struck down.'] (GBW 74)

Mame Sofi on her part turns into a fighter and displays the courage that had lain dormant in her for several years living under her husband's roof. She threatens him: "Si tu reprends le travail avant les autres, je te coupe ce qui fait de toi un homme" (LBBB 87). ["If you go back to work before the others, I'll cut off your thing"] (GBW 39) When the police came, she chased them away. "Mame Sofi qui avait réperé près de la cabane un policier de petite taille l'assomma d'un seul coup de ses bouteilles de sable, puis, comme une furie, elle se rua sur l'auxiliaire et lui envoya la seconde bouteille en plein visage. (LBBB 125) [Here and there were men in uniform. Mame Sofi tightened the knot on her waistcloth and took up the two bottles, filled with hard sand, which she had prepared for an emergency] (GBW 72-73).

Georg Lukacs remarks that the working class movement "in plucking men from the unconscious dullness of their lives and turning them into conscious fighters for the emancipation of mankind transforms them into harmonious, contented happy beings in spite of the hard fate which they have to bear as individuals" (237). Ramatoulaye plays a significant role in revolutionizing their revolution. In addition to the collective heroism

noted in the novel, there is a depiction of how an individual develops ideologically. As Lukacs asserts, people grow more human via the social process of the struggle for freedom. It is not a surprise that, when the strike becomes unbearable, Ramatoulaye is radically transformed from a gossipy housewife into a fearless and dynamic woman. Her leadership qualities are manifested in her firmness and sense of responsibility for others. Ramatoulaye affirms her leadership role: "Quand on sait que la vie et le courage des autres dépendent de votre vie et de votre courage, on n'a plus le droit d'avoir peur. Même si on a très peur! Ah! Nous vivons des instants cruels, nous sommes obligés de nous forger une dureté, de nous raidir (LBBD 117)." ['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 strength, somehow, and force ourselves to be hard'] (GBW 69).

Ousmane's 'prise de position' is a positive march toward the evolution of the subaltern African female subject in male fiction. For the social, economic and political condition of African women to change for the better, African men have to recognize the essential roles played by women in transforming the society. The strike which is the central theme of *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* serves as a catalyst, prompting women to realize their potential to free themselves from domination.

N'Deye Touti's transformation is perhaps particularly significant in this regard. Although she is a learned person, unlike Ramatoulaye and most of the other women, she does not know much about her own society; the Western education she received focused mainly on Europe. Nevertheless, she learns from her hard experiences and eventually changes her worldview. The curriculum designed for colonized countries was a mirror of that used in the colonizers' society. It was not an education that took into account the cultural values of the colonized people and it did not teach subjects that were relevant to them. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ndeye Touti knows a great deal about Europe and nothing about her own society. As Simon Gikandi points out, she has a lot to learn from the strike. She had totally yielded to the hegemonic colonial culture, at first disapproving of the strike and the other women's actions against the colonial machine. But when she is humiliated by the colonial masters who consider her just as savage as the rest, she undergoes a transformation. After being abused by the system she believed in so much, she comes out of her shell and joins in the strike action. As the truth dawns on her and she faces the reality of her subaltern status, she, too, decides to confront the system which she had initially defended.

Thus, it is clear that *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* not only exposes the institutions of polygamy and patriarchy, but also projects sub-Saharan African women beyond the confines of subordination. Ousmane depicts the society as he perceives it, but he also points to the way he believes it should be. In telling the story of how subordinate women act to escape their inferior position, he imagines a different future for sub-Saharan African women. Among the many women who changed their traditionally accepted roles during the strike it is perhaps Penda the prostitute who most eloquently testifies to the positive transformation. Penda does not live according to accepted Senegalese ways of life. Penda is an independent woman, a prostitute rejected by her society, a libertine who does not care about what the society says about the life she has chosen to live. To the people she incarnates a "devil" because Islam considers prostitutes as agents of Satan. On the walls of her room, one finds photos of movie stars and singers such as Clark Gable, Tino Rossi, Fernandel, as well as of half-naked white women. This is an indication that she has distanced herself from her community to live in a world of film stars and pop singers. Yet Penda also embodies the new African woman, for she is both articulate and increasingly politically conscious with the advent of the strike. Penda reveals herself to be a fearless individual ready to participate courageously in public and social life. Even though no one wants to recognize her at first, her eventual role in the strike dignifies her

and elevates her to glory. Penda's coming into the strike revolutionizes many things. She intimidates everyone she encounters, especially the men. She motivates men, women and children to fight. Finding an all-engaging role in the strike, she becomes a formidable force. She sees the strike as a catalyst for change so that men, women and children may have good living conditions. Among women in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, Penda's courage is exceptional. Lahbib, one of the strike leaders who had hired her, recognizes Penda's leadership qualities:

Par la suite, Lahbib se félicita souvent d'avoir embauché Penda. Elle tenait tête aux femmes et se faisait respecter des hommes. Un jour qu'au syndicat où elle venait assez souvent et se rendait utile, un ouvrier lui avait maladroitement touché les fesses, elle le gifla publiquement ce qui ne s'était jamais vu dans le pays. (LBBDD 224)

[In the days that followed, Lahbib often congratulated himself on having enlisted Penda's help. She kept the women in line, and she forced men to respect her. She came to the union office frequently to help with the work, and one day, when one of the workmen had stupidly patted her on the behind, she gave him a resounding smack. A woman slapping a man in public was something no one had ever seen before.] (GBW 142)

The respect she later commanded came from the courage she displayed in the strike. Indeed, Penda is an adept organizer and an effective strategist throughout the strike. In the midst of men, Penda gives a speech signaling the beginning of a rupture from traditions and the celebration of a radical new role for women. Even after her death, she is considered a martyr and her name is constantly evoked. Her memory serves as a motivating force to those still fighting. Penda dies serving the cause of her people. According to Adebayo, her courage, like that of Ramatoulaye,

serves as a leaven to the spirit of other rail-workers' wives who abandon the hearth-place and march on the railway masters who are exploiting and oppressing their husbands. Their march to Thiès leads to the subsequent surrender of the employers who accede to the workers' demand, thus putting an end to a long, crippling rail strike. (183-184)

If the strike succeeded, it was mainly because women decided actively to support the actions taken by their men. Men agitated for change but women's actions were keys to realizing the social, economic and political reforms that occurred at the end of the strike.

It is perhaps telling that the critic Mínyono-Nkodo, whose brilliant analysis of Ousmane's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* points out women's important roles in the book, nevertheless attacks the author's feminism: "Mais que penser du féminisme de Sembène Ousmane? Le romancier n'est-il pas un peu abusif, complaisant, en peignant l'homme comme le "suiveur" de la femme dans la marche évolutive de l'histoire?" (53) [What can one say about Sembène Ousmane's feminism? Did the writer not go too far and being complacent by portraying man as the "follower" of woman in the evolutionary march of history?] (My own translation) Writing in 1979, almost two decades after the novel's publication, Mínyono-Nkodo nevertheless failed to embrace Ousmane's progressive vision, clinging instead to the patriarchal status quo.

The strike brought about noticeable changes in the way women perceived life after the strike. Patriarchal and foreign hegemony over women both faded away with the advent of the strike. Patriarchal power was overthrown because the economic power that sustained it was destabilized with the strike. The colonial institutions that helped enforce patriarchal power were equally attacked. Foreign hegemonic ideology and patriarchal arrangements that once combined to subdue women were contested. Western values and education that were tailored to perpetuate European hegemony and which condemned

any form of revolt crumbled. Similarly, a reversal of gender roles occurred as men began to engage in certain activities which before the strike had been exclusively reserved for women. Old traditions and customs were gradually changing as, for example, one saw fathers and husbands in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* going to fetch water. The narrator notes:

Alioune avait réussi à persuader un bon nombre d'hommes que les vieilles coutumes féodales n'étaient plus de mise. On voyait maintenant des maris, des fils, des pères même, partir à la corvée d'eau et revenir le soir dans les concessions poussant des barriques ou portant des bouteilles. (LBBB 317-318)

[Alioune had succeeded in persuading a considerable number of the men that their old feudal customs had no place in a situation like this. Now, husbands, sons, and even fathers could be seen every morning, leaving their homes in search of water and returning at night, triumphantly pushing a barrel or carrying a sackful of bottles.] (GBW 203)

It is obvious that the strike brought about a radical transformation, according women an important place in the society and suppressing some of the old customs that had formerly restrained them. As a result of their successful participation in the strike, women were invited to witness a man's trial. That is, when Diara was tried for betraying his colleagues by going back to work and violating women's rights, various women were invited to testify against him. That was the first time women were permitted to attend the trial of a man. "Lorsqu'on jugea Diara au siège du syndicat, la salle de réunion était archicomble et avait perdu son apparence coutumière. On remarquait des présences féminines, ce qui était du nouveauté" (LBBB 131). [When Diara's trial was held in the union building, the meeting hall was filled to overflowing and has lost its customary aspect-there were several women present, and this was something entirely new] (78). This is a new development in Senegalese society (and in African society in general where women tend to be excluded from men's gatherings). Women had never before been present at men's trials and had never been given audience. The narrator notes that:

C'était la première fois que [Hadia Dia] prenait la parole dans une assemblée d'hommes. Une autre femme, plus âgée celle-là, monta à son tour sur l'estrade, elle parlait vite et d'un ton rassuré. On l'appelait la Sira. [...] Il y eut encore deux femmes qui vinrent raconter des histoires assez semblables à celles des premières, après quoi il se fit un long silence, chacun était troublé en lui-même de cette nouveauté: des femmes qui venaient de prendre la parole au milieu des hommes. Les regards allaient du président à Diara puis à Sadio toujours prostrés. [...] [Diara], tu mouchardes nos femmes, celles qui, nous le disons sans honte, nous nourrissent. (LBBB 151-152)

[It was the first time [Hadia Dia] had ever spoken at a meeting of the men, and she was filled with pride. Another, older woman went up to speak, going this time directly to the stage. Her name was Sira. [...] Two more women came forward and told of happenings that were more or less similar to the first ones, and after that there was a heavy silence in the hall. The idea of women addressing a meeting as important as this was still unfamiliar and disturbing. The men gazed absently at the stage, waiting for something to happen, their glances wandering from Konaté to Diara, and then to the unhappy figure of Sadio. [...] [Diara] you spied on our women. We are not ashamed to admit that it is the women who are supporting us now.] (GBW 92-93)

In line with the changes taking place, women also began taking on other roles traditionally played by men, such as that of provider. It had always been man's duty to

feed their wives but after the strike everything was different: "Un matin, une femme se leva, elle serra fortement son pagne autour de sa taille et dit: Aujourd'hui, je vous apporterai à manger. Et les hommes comprirent que ce temps, s'il enfantait d'autres hommes, enfantait aussi d'autres femmes (LBBB 65)" [One morning a woman rose and wrapped her cloth 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] (GBW 34). This woman's statement is a warning to men that what men can do women can do even better. The author further suggests that women will now have greater economic independence, some of them henceforth managing their husbands' money. Politically, Senegalese women have greater access to public speech, since Penda, by defying men and speaking out in public, has opened this door that has been locked for so long. Mame Sofi, optimistic about all these changes, says that men will consult women next time there is another strike: "[À] la prochaine grève, les hommes nous consulteront. Avant ils étaient tout fiers de nous nourrir, maintenant c'est nous les femmes qui les nourrissons" (LBBB 87). [You will see-the men will consult us before they go out on another strike. Before this, they thought they owned the earth just because they fed us, and now it is the women who are feeding them] (GBW 47).

Ousmane's image of African women reveals the capacities of women in the society. Indeed, *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* reflects Ousmane's belief that Africa can only be liberated if women are included in the national struggle. To this author, a free Africa is the Africa that strives to reject Western capitalism, feudalism, and patriarchal domination and enslavement. In Ousmane's novels the quest for freedom, equality and emancipation on the part of oppressed women is remarkable. As we have noted, the author particularly denounces polygamy, criticizing the Senegalese interpretation of Islam, which gives more rights to men than to women. Female characters in his novels, triumph no matter how small the victory is. The author's realistic and positive portrayal of African women and his criticism of polygamy and other religious and traditional practices that enslave African women in his novels, made an immense contribution to the struggle that was later carried on by African women writers.

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