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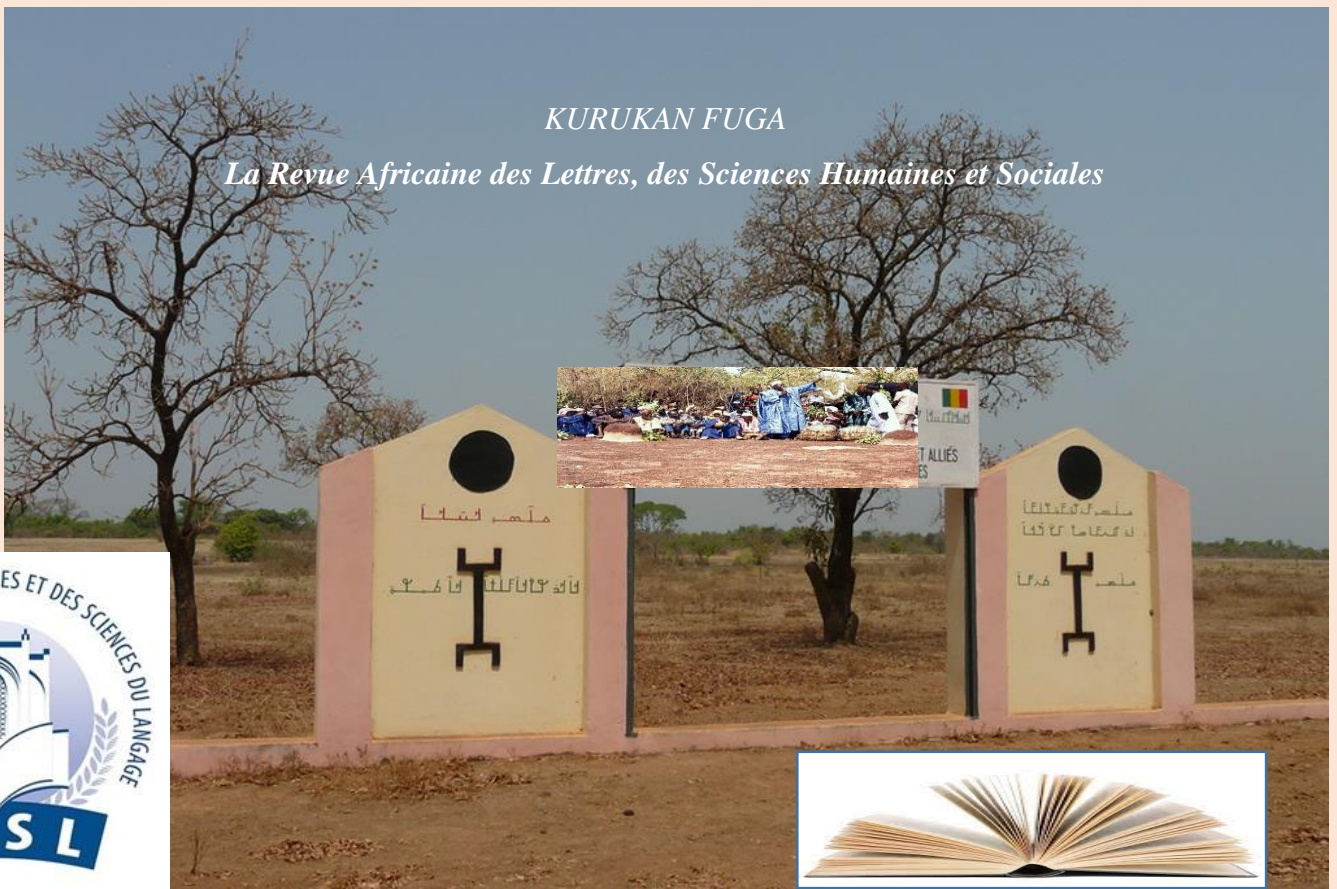
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## PORTRAITURE OF WOMEN AND THEIR ROLES IN SEMBENE OUSMANE'S *LES BOUTS DE BOIS DE DIEU*

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### Résumé

Cet article décrit l'image des femmes et leurs rôles à travers les personnages féminins dans *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* de Sembene Ousmane. La problématique de l'étude est que les gens ont généralement tendance à considérer les textes littéraires masculins comme sexistes ou aveugles au genre. L'objectif de l'étude est donc de rendre compte de l'image positive des femmes et de leurs rôles marquants dans le roman étudié. L'analyse des données de l'étude se fait dans le cadre de deux théories littéraires à savoir le féminisme et la déconstruction. La méthode qualitative est choisie pour collecter les données de recherche car l'instrument de collecte des données est un document écrit, notamment un roman. L'analyse montre qu'écrire ce roman est aussi une manière pour l'écrivain, Sembene, de rendre hommage à la femme africaine. Les résultats ont également montré que dans la plupart des œuvres de la littérature africaine, le personnage féminin est représenté de manière positive, même dans les œuvres de Chinua Achebe, connu pour défendre les valeurs patriarcales.

**Mots clés** : : déconstruction, Femme africaine, œuvre littéraire, statut, stéréotype

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### Abstract:

This paper describes the portraiture of women and their roles through female characters in Sembene Ousmane's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*. The problematic of the study is that people generally tend to see male literary texts as sexist or gender blind. The objective of the study is therefore to account for the image of women and their salient roles in the selected novel. The analysis of the research study is done within the framework of two literary theories namely feminism and deconstruction. The qualitative method is chosen to collect the research data because the instrument for data collection is a written document, mainly a novel. Writing this novel is also a way for the writer, Sembene, to pay tribute to the African woman. The results have shown that in most of African literature works, the female character is positively portrayed even in the works by Chinua Achebe who is known to be defending patriarchal values..

**Keywords:** African women, deconstruction, literary work, status, stereotypes

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### Introduction

The portraiture of female character in African literature has known varying fortunes. First, about male writers, they can be grouped into two schools of thoughts when it comes to portraying women in their respective works. The first includes the types of the continent's

writers who have been influenced by patriarchal ideologies and hence their female characters are not given dynamic roles. Chinua Achebe is one of them. For examples, in Achebe's works, most of the time women are not given very honourable roles in real life. It is in the esoteric sphere that they are valorised. In *Things Fall Apart* they are goddesses and oracles. But in *A Man of the People*, women are allowed a good image. Elechi Amadi is another writer in whose works female characters are overshadowed by male ones. It is the case both in *The Great Ponds* and *The Concubine*.

The second school includes Ngugi wa Tchong'O, Tayeb Salih, Cheick Hamidou Kane, Djibril Tamsir Niane Sembene Ousmane, Seydou Badian. These authors tend to project their female characters seriously and positively despite some hindrances. For instance, in *Soundjata, An Epic of Old Mali*, women have a positive status in general. In *Sous l'Orage*, Kani, (a young lady) is the main character. In Cheick Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, he portrays the most outstanding female figure of the work in a positive way and devotes her the role of changing her people's mindset. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi devotes very valuable roles to women. In Tayeb Salih's *In the Season of Migration to the North*, Bint Majzoub is portrayed as a female character that does not regard her condition, as a woman, as an impediment. In Camara Laye's *The Dark Child*, the author portrays his grandmother as a proud woman.

When it comes to African women writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, and Mariam Bah, we discover that they have attempted to bridge the gap that was created by early patriarchal ideologies enshrined in early African writings of mainly male authors. In their respective works, these female writers uphold and value female characters. That approach is felt in *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Efuru*, *So Long a Letter*, and *In a question of Power*.

It is in regard to what precedes that the objective of this study is to demonstrate the extent to which women are positively perceived and the vital roles that play in African societies, especially in Sembene's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*. To be able to reach this objective, the analysis of the collected data are done within the theoretical framework feminism and deconstruction. The theory of feminism has been opted for because the prime focus of the study on the portraiture of the female figures in literature. The second theory which is deconstruction has been used because we deeply believe that meanings are never stable and the reading of the selected novel enabled us to provide a counter discourse to sexist analysis of Sembene Ousmane's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*. Prior to that, we opted for the qualitative method to collect the data of the study through the content analysis design. This foregoing method is relevant because the corpus of the study is a novel.

Structurally, the paper is divided into main sections. The first one accounts for the role of women in the preservation of African socio-cultural and ancestral values. The second section focuses on unveiling how African Females are actually models and dedicated figures in African societies, mainly in the senegalo-mandingo culture or society.

### **1-Role of Women in the Preservation of African Socio-cultural Values**

Sembene values women in a tremendous way in his work. It is in that regard that he highlights a very old woman called Niakoro. Niakoro latter is portrayed as a figure striving to



preserve her native language, culture and civilisation. She is also honoured as being a very industrious and even to some extent a workaholic person. So, through her, the author pays tribute both to women and elderly people. The author states what follows: Sembene (1971)<sup>1</sup>, “Niakoro could not spend an entire afternoon being inactive. Sometimes, she would mend, repair or decorate calabashes”(p.19).

She was also uncompromising when it comes to preserving her culture and mother tongue.

Niakoro expresses her pride for her mother tongue and wants to instil in her granddaughter the same feeling toward Bambara language. The elderly woman behaves like a vanguard to her African language and wants to safeguard the language inherited from her parents and forefathers, and then pass it on to the new generation. The context was very hostile in so far as that French colonialists were imposing their language on native People of French Soudan (current Mali). But, notwithstanding that, Old Niakoro was fearless and does not show of any inferiority complex. She proudly asserts:

’In my bloodline, which is also that of your father, no one can speak French and none died because they could not speak it. Since I was born-and God knows that it happened a long time ago- I have never heard that a Toubabou (a European) has learned Bambara or any other language in this country. But, you the uprooted ones, you are only thinking of that alien language. One would think that our language has sunk into decay<sup>2</sup>’ (p.21).

One day, she fiercely rebukes her granddaughter Ad’jibid’ji when the teenage girl uses the French word “’Alors” in a conversation that she has with the old woman. In an angry tone, she retorts, Niakoro : “’Aloss, Aloss (Alors)! the old woman shouted as if she wanted to pull that word out of the girl’s lips. You talk to me; your father’s mother and you say Aloss to me<sup>3</sup>....” (p.22). Unlike Old Niakoro, her granddaughter Ad’jibid’ji is keen on modern life style and is not at all against French language. She is the prototype of a young girl that wants to be emancipated. In fact, she is in charge of her father’s home library and manages the borrowing and deposit of books. The young girl regularly attends the meetings of the rail way workers’ union beside her grandfather Fâ Keita amid crowds of men. Her uncle Ibrahim Bakayoko (she nicknamed her petit père) is the secretary general of the union. In fact, Bakayoko has been playing the role of her guardian since her father passed away. He has always shown her that she is not different because she is a girl. On the contrary he strives to provide her with the basic knowledge of life. Thanks to that love, she becomes a very lively, emancipated and educated young girl. She is also committed to advocating the end of body punishment in bringing children’s up. Her tutor never whips, slaps or beats her up. Instead of violence, and harsh words, petit père always uses patience, understanding and care to make her a modern and broad-minded girl. But, her mother is still convinced that a young girl cannot not be well- brought up if she is

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<sup>1</sup> Sembene(1971) : “’Niakoro la vieille ne pouvait pas passer un après-midi inactive. Tantôt elle ravaudait, tantôt elle réparait ou ornait des calabasses (P.19).

<sup>2</sup> Niakoro : “’Dans ma lignée qui est aussi celle de ton père, personne ne parle le Toubabou et personne n’en est mort ! depuis ma naissance- et Dieu sait qu’il y’a longtemps-je n’ai jamais entendu dire qu’un Toubabou ait appris le Bambara ou une autre langue de ce pays. Mais vous autres, les déracinés, vous ne pensez qu’à ça. A croire que notre langue est tombée en décadence !” (P.21).

<sup>3</sup> Niakoro : “’ Aloss, Aloss! hurla la grand-mère comme si elle voulait arracher ce mot des lèvres de sa petite fille. Tu me parles moi, la mère de ton père et tu me dis Aloss....(P.22).



turns herself to be a temporary nurse because it is she who nurses all the women that are injured during the riots. She uses salty water to treat the wounds and uses cloths to apply the bandages. That is the reason why, Sembene (1971) states that: <sup>9</sup>“ Dieynaba had turned her home into an infirmary” (P. 60).

Ramatoulaye is another prominent woman that is positively portrayed in the work. She is described as a highly respected person (a prominent citizen) within the community. She is even nicknamed an encyclopaedia because she knows every single person in her surroundings by sight and name. She also loves children a lot and never pass a kid without talking to him or her and give them advice. Yet, that highly personality trait makes of fundamental kindness and a great sense of humanity does not prove to be an impediment to the lady’s commitment for general interest (cause). It is that motivation for the betterment of her people that leads her into becoming a community leader when the families of the railway workers’ trade union run the risk of starving to death owing to the fact that the colonial administration impose on them restrictions measures concerning food and other basic needs. Shopkeepers receive orders not to sell the latter rice, sugar, oil, etc. These unhuman measures are taken against them in retaliation to the strike in which the heads of those families undertake against the railway company. The strikers claim for good work and living conditions and equity in treatment between them and the white staff of the company. They also demand rights to a good retirement system and annual leave. In return, their employers respond with punishment, hatred, repression, jailing, and above all cutting food and water supply to their families. Even the running water is cut off. It is amid that turmoil that Ramatoulaye distinguishes herself as a woman of valour.

In fact, while hunger and thirst become the daily lot of the community, one day a very famous sheep belonging to a community leader named El Hadj Mabigué enters Ramatoulaye’s compound and eats their millet flour. In the wake of that, she happens to be torn between disappointment and anger because that day is among the fewest days when they have a chance to eat. But, when she figures out what happens with the animal pouring out the millet and the consequence of intensifying the hunger of the family, she decides that enough is enough. They have so far known hunger because of the meanness of man. So, it is out of question to be imposed it on that day by an animal even if it belongs to a very influential man who has the support of the tyrannic administration. If her family is going to be deprived of a rare dinner because of a ram, then the ram will serve as their food. After the full emotion, she struggles with the ram a knife in hand and they turned around the whole compound on several times. She runs, jumps, falls down and get up many times. The ram also gives her many head-butts. Sembene (1971) says that, the ram known as “ Vendredi” is a very beautiful and noticeable animal known by everyone in the area. And, most of the people are afraid to lay hands on it even if it eats or spoils their food because of the social status of its owner. Yet, the lady decides to take revenge on the ram by killing it; and by the same way set all the poor families free from its bad presence. She gathers her strength and stamina and asks people to help her seize and kill it:<sup>10</sup> “hold its legs, Ramatoulaye said while she sat astride the ram, and by three times she drove

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<sup>9</sup> Sembene (1971) : “Dieynaba avait transformé sa maison en infirmerie”, (P. 60.).

<sup>10</sup> Sembene (1971) raconte : “Tiens -lui les pattes, dit Ramatoulaye à cheval sur le bélier, et par trois fois elle enfonça dans le cou de l’animal; le sang gicla à nouveau et la grosse figure de Bineta, qui tremblait de tous ses

into the neck of the animal; its blood splashed against Binta's large face. All her body and limbs were trembling and she was completely soaked with blood. Ramatoulaye wipes the knife against the sheep's thick fleece and finally draws herself up (P. 123).

She needs a lot of courage to succeed such a deed for the owner of the sheep was considered to be a person who works closely with the French colonialists. So, such people are helped and protected by those settlers. In those, days someone needs to be fearless to have to be in clash with them. Ramatoulaye does not care about all those considerations which are nothing but attitudes pointing out the inferiority complex. And she is not at all a self-conscious person. Moreover, cutting the throat of an animal is an act typical to men. In that too, she breaks the rules and demonstrates that even though some practices or activities are reserved for men, women can also do them. So, her courage and greatest achievements can be counted among the actions regarded as breakthroughs in the emancipation and empowerment of female characters in African literature and real life in the continent since ages.

## **2-African Females as Models and Dedicated Figures**

Women emerge as leaders in Sembene's novel. Penda and Maimouna, a prostitute and blind woman, are the two that lead the women in the final march. Penda concocts the idea of the march from Thies to Dakar to symbolise that they are not going to give up, no matter their losses and French's threats. However, the two female figures seem to have serious drawbacks. One trade is sex and the second one is disabled. In spite of these apparent impediments, they refuse to live a cloistered life and hide in corners. On the contrary, it is they who encourage the other women to push on. Penda led by force, shouts at the women when they stop. She utters these galvanizing words to hearten them:<sup>11</sup> "No there can't be any stragglers, we must all arrive together" (p.145). Another woman showed commitment and refused to give up. That lady was Maimouna. Sembene (1971) relates the lady's attitude and deeds during the march: "her, baby strapped across her back, she marched steadily forward, humming one of her endless retrans" (P.202). It is these two unique women who keep the unity and drive within the women till they reach the arrival point. Unfortunately, the police kill Penda.

Mame Sofi is also a character who epitomizes a courageous and committed African woman. She plays an outstanding role during the strike and like all the other women, she wants to demonstrate that African women can do many more things different from housework. As early as the strike breaks out, she is among the ladies that understand that what is at stake is not merely the jeopardy of their husbands losing their jobs, but that what is at stake at the utmost is the survival of the entire community. In fact, the economy of the country is strictly linked to the railway. With that awareness, the ladies decide to fight with and beside their husbands because the struggle has twofold: the first one is to maintain the existing rights of their families and claim new ones for better living conditions and a bright future. The long strike has dreadful impacts on the strikers' families so much that family heads are unable to provide their loved

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membres, en fut aspergée. Ramatoulaye essuya son arme en la passant sur l'épaisse toison, puis, elle se redressa", (P. 123).

<sup>11</sup> Penda : "On ne peut pas se permettre d'avoir des retardataires dans nos rangs. On doit arriver toutes en même temps et ensemble" (P.145).

ones with the daily food. In these days, it is their wives who strive to bring food, water and the other essential needs to their families. That situation makes Mame say that their men have understood that they also play key roles when it comes to looking for the welfare of their people. Mame and the other women do not yield to the pressure put on the community by the colonialists. And, they do not resign themselves before arbitrary and unfairness. For all these reasons she says that from then, nothing else will be decided within the community without women. This is to assert as many other researchers, thinkers and leaders that rights are never granted but always snatched. In the same vein she says:<sup>12</sup> ‘‘Wait and see, our men will consult us on the next strike. Formerly, they were very proud of feeding us, but now, we, the women are the ones who feed them,’’ (p.93).

In addition, Mame illustrates herself as a fearless woman ready to fight against the police, when the latter ‘s impending arrival at their place is announced. In fact, El Hadj Mabigué has gone to fetch them so that they come and arrest Ramatoulaye and her possible accomplices in the matter of killing ‘‘Vendredi’’, the famous ram of the area. Mame knows that in that matter, Ramatoulaye has acted and killed the beloved pet in a self-defence. So, she makes it clear that it is out of question and totally unacceptable to let Ramatoulaye down and let her be arrested, jailed, and even tortured by the police because she has killed an animal that has eaten the dinner of a starving family and worst tried to kill her. Now, it is no longer a matter opposing Ramatoulaye and Mabigué only, but it has become a matter of death and life in which the women of the community decide to fight against unfairness in all its forms. And, they are ready to physically resist the police and defend Ramatoulaye. On that day, Mame Sofi is the most illustrious figure of the ‘‘female revolution’’. When a woman comes to announce that Mabigué has gone to call the police, she responds harshly to indicate that they have crossed the threshold of here. Sembene (1971) reports her words and describes the surrounding scene with these words: ‘‘well, let us get ready to face them, Mame Sofi said. And she begins filling an empty bottle with sand. Other women do the same whereas in the small yard some were busy doing this or that or ending the cutting up of Vendredi<sup>13</sup>’’ (p.126).

Soon after, the police swoop in the main yard. In the wake of that, the women present in the compound rush to the street. Some police men also stand in the streets. At their sight, Mame Sofi does not flee away or panic, but she decides to confront and even attack them. Sembene (1971) comes up with the story in saying: <sup>14</sup>‘‘Mame Sofi pulled up her loincloth and held the two bottles full of compressed sand which she had made before; Bineta her ‘‘ co-wife’’, Houdia M’Baye and many others imitated her, (p.131). Mame, Bineta and Houdia are not only fearless but also tireless and are determined to fight the armed men no matter what the outcome can be. It is that limitless commitment and fearlessness that push them to collide with the police forces.

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<sup>12</sup> Sofi : ‘‘ Tu verras qu’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, ’’ (P.93).

<sup>13</sup> Sofi : ‘‘Eh bien! Préparons-nous à la recevoir, dit Mame Sofi, et elle se mit à remplir de sable une bouteille vide. D’autres l’imitèrent tandis que dans la courte où chacun s’affairait, on achevait de découper Vendredi, (P. 126).

<sup>14</sup> Sembene (1971) : ‘‘Mame Sofi remonta son pagne et saisit les deux bouteilles pleines de sable bien tassé qu’elle avait préparées; Bineta sa « rivale », Houdia M’Baye et plusieurs autres l’imitèrent’’, (P.131).

Sembene (1971), gives a brief account of the women's success in affirming the coming lines:

with her bottles, she knocked a short policeman downed. The man was standing by the cabin. And then, like a vixen (fury) she rushed at the subsidiary and threw the second bottle in his face. Bineta was using the pestle with which she would make intense whirls around her head. Houdia M'Baye, like a wild beast hung on a policeman that was beating her head with an apparent delight Sembene<sup>15</sup>, (p.134).

When it becomes hard for the family heads of the strikers to feed their loved ones, the women of their families do not let them down, and nor refuse to let their families starve to death. One day, because there is not the slightest grain to cook, N'Deye Tuti illustrates herself as the glimmer of hope that is so expected. In a very delight mood, Mame Sofi reassures the family members that they are going to have food thanks to N'Deye. She joyfully expresses the following: <sup>16</sup>“thankfully, we have four kilos of rice and a box of milk and rakal, and all that has been possible thanks to miss N'Deye Tuti”, (pp.94- 101).

Sembene is so willing to magnify the female character in his work that in addition to human beings, he highlights the role of a she-cat. In fact, in the fight that opposes the community strikers to the police, and in which the women prove to be very brave, the animal as to show that females are brave in all species and creatures, decides to play her role too. In the middle of what looks like a war scene, instead of seeking a comfort zone to hide and escape the danger, she decides to show temerity and foolhardiness. She holds a fight position and waits to attack any policeman that dares move a step forward. It is that determination that Sembene (1971) describes in these words: <sup>17</sup>“The she-cat had also released her claws and was hurling insults at the attackers,” (p.135).

Women's presence is also significantly felt at a trial court in Bamako. When the strike reaches its climax, some of the workers betray their colleagues and ally with the administration. Their intention is to undermine the success of the movement. The main instigator against the strike is named Diarra. When his trick is discovered, his colleagues set a tribunal in order to judge him. During his trial, women are present, and among whom some victims of his abuse of power because he has once ordered them to get off the train in the middle of the forest between Bamako and Koulikoro. These women are the spouses of the strikers. The ladies choose to be present so as to testify what they have undergone. They come and behave like any one.

Sembene (1971) describes the atmosphere inside the court and emphasizes the daring presence of women in these terms: <sup>18</sup>“When Diarra was tried at the headquarters of the trade union, the

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<sup>15</sup> Sembene (1971) :“ Mame Sofi qui avait repéré 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. Bineta se servait d'un pilon avec lequel elle faisait de grands moulinets au-dessus des têtes. Houdia M'Baye, elle, telle un petit fauve, s'était accrochée des bras et des jambes à un agent qui lui martelait le crâne avec une satisfaction visible”, (p.134).

<sup>16</sup> Mame : “ Dieu merci, nous avons quatre kilos de riz, une boîte de lait et du rakal, et le tout grâce à notre mademoiselle N'Deye Tuti”,( Pp.94- 101).

<sup>17</sup> Sembene(1971) :“la chatte elle-même avait sorti ses griffes et crachait des injures,” (P.135).

<sup>18</sup> Sembene(1971) : “ lorsqu'on jugea Diarra au siège du syndicat, la salle de réunion était archicomble et avait perdu son apparence coutumière. On remarquait des présences féminines, ce qui était une nouveauté”, (P.141).

room was crowded and had lost its usual appearance. One could notice the presence of women, and that was something new,” (p.141).

Really, female characters are portrayed as heroines that are determined to side with their men by all means. The ladies are present during the whole (entire) struggle. For instance, one of the prominent figures of the strike, a young man called Tiemoko goes to run errands to the railway station. Unfortunately, he comes across a former service man that seems to be supporting the colonial administration at the expense of the strikers who are his fellow black citizens. He backs a white colonial administration against his fellow “brothers”. The old retiree holds the young striker and threatens to hand him to the police. When a woman sees the horrible and humiliating scene, she intervenes in favour of Tiemoko and begs the “circumstantial officer” (the old retiree) to release the young man.

In a firm and motherly tone, she stands while carrying her baby and says: <sup>19</sup>“release that young man, there are many others who went on strike, and he alone cannot run the ‘big smoke of the savannah” (p.150). Tiemoko is really fond of their women’s commitment and courage during the strike. It is thanks to that admiration for the ladies’ fight that when the situation becomes hard and that the strikers are compelled to judge the traitors among them, he insists that the women should be present. One can say that the young man truly values the essential role of the latter (the ladies) in the society. He stands among the assembly and firmly defends the fact that letting women be present at the trial is a mark of consideration and recognition toward them. Tiemoko loudly and brilliantly states:<sup>20</sup>“He dared compelled our wives to get down, these brave women that support us. That is the reason why, against the advice of some of us, I requested that many women be present” (p.161).After that encouragement that the ladies receive from Tiemoko, a woman named Houdia Dia takes the floor and brings her testimonies against Diarra the defendant. Hadi is a woman with many scars on her face. Her lips are also tattooed. On that day, she wears her nicest garments. Tiemoko gives her the floor and asks her to speak without fear. She speaks freely and reports in piecemeal what sufferings Diarra has inflicted on the wives of his colleagues. Her story is full of emotion and goes that way:

The event occurred the other day .... two weeks ago, I was in the company of Coumba, her sister Dienka and the third wife of hee... we got on the “the smoke of the savannah” to Kati, Diarra who had previously checked our tickets, came back with a white service man. He exchanged a few words with the white man and he compelled us to get down and worst

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<sup>19</sup> La brave dame: “ Laissez partir ce garçon, il y’ en a d’autres qui ont arrêté le travail et à lui tout seul, il ne peut pas faire marcher la “ fumée de la savane”, (P.150).

<sup>20</sup> Tiemoko : ” il s’est permis de faire descendre nos épouses, ces vaillantes femmes qui nous aident. C’est pourquoi, contre l’avis de quelques-uns, j’ai demandé que plusieurs femmes soient présentes aujourd’hui, (P.161).

of all our money was not given back to us. I told my husband the entire story<sup>21</sup>. (pp.163-164).

During, the trial a character known as the first striker gets up and sides with the women of the community in praising the prominent role that they have played beside their husbands during the long-time strike. He rebukes Diarra not only for his attitude as a traitor but also his behaviour towards their wives whom he says are the ones who have been feeding them during their moment of harsh poverty, specially characterised by food shortage. The unnamed man rises abruptly and addresses the traitor in these words:

Diarra did not behave well, I am convinced about that and God knows that I am telling the blunt truth when I say that. I am convinced about that the same way I am convinced that someday I will be lying alone inside my grave. When I asked my work mates to stop working, they abide by my instruction in unison and, we all agree to continue with the strike. But you Diarra, as our elder that you should have guided us, but instead, you decided to side with our enemies and, in addition to betraying us, you squealed on our wives, the very ones who have been feeding us so far: let me state that shamelessly. I as for me, I think that we must cast Diarra in jail, yes he should be in prison<sup>22</sup>. (p. 164).

The praise about female characters is once again made by Tiemoko and it concerns Ad'jibid'ji.

In fact, during the trial, he catches sight of the young girl and without stating it, he becomes impressed by the smartness (intelligence) of the girl and the following passage illustrates his state of mind and Sembene (1971) brings it in saying: <sup>23</sup>“Tiemoko was heading towards the exit of the court and he passed by Ad'jibidji who beheld him in a bittersweet way. He looked down and the coming idea crossed his mind: “ that kid is smarter than this whole assembly put together” (p.168).

Ab'jibid'ji is the prototype of an emancipated girl in an African household. The maiden is very close to her grandfather Mamadou Keita and has a great influence on the old man in a positive way. She always heartens him in his moments of despondency to do what he must. But, she does everything respectfully and cheerfully. A glaring instance of what is said occurs when Old

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<sup>21</sup> Dia : “C’était l’autre jour... il y’a deux semaines, j’étais avec Coumba, sa sœur Dienka et la troisième femme de heu... Nous avons pris la « fumée de la savane » pour aller à Kati, Diarra, qui nous avait demandé de lui montrer nos billets, est revenu avec un toubabou militaire. Il lui a dit quelques mots en langue toubabou, le militaire nous a fait descendre et on ne nous a pas rendu notre argent. J’ai tout raconté à mon mari,” (Pp.163-64).

<sup>22</sup> L’homme anonyme : “Diarra a mal agi, oui, Dieu m’est témoin, il a mal agi. J’en suis sûr comme je suis sûr qu’un jour je serai seul dans ma tombe. Lorsque j’ai dit à mes coéquipiers d’abandonner le travail, ils l’ont fait comme un seul homme et, ici nous sommes tous d’accord pour poursuivre la grève. Mais toi Diarra, toi qui es notre aîné, toi qui aurait dû nous guider, tu t’es rangé du côté de nos ennemis et, non content de nous trahir, tu mouchardes nos femmes, celles qui, nous le disons sans honte, nous nourrissent. Pour ma part, je dis que nous devons mettre Diarra en prison, oui en prison”, (P.164).

<sup>23</sup> Sembene(1971) : “Tiemoko lui-même se dirigea vers la sortie; en passant à la hauteur d’Ab’jibid’ji qui le regardait d’un air mi-mangue, mi-goyave, il baissa les yeux et pensa:” il y’a plus de choses dans la tête de cette enfant que dans toute cette Assemblée “, (P.168).



Keita does not want to attend Diarra's trial, she insists and succeeds in convincing him to go. Sembene (1971) states: "he had firmly decided to not join his other colleagues that were in charge of trying Diarra at the headquarters of the trade union, but Ab'jibid'ji's skilful and gentle insistence had got the better of his intransigence<sup>24</sup>", (p. 170).

One day, in conversing with her grandfather, she bewilders him a lot with her sense of maturity and forwardness. At early age, she is already able to figure out the prominent role that women can and should play in the society. She utters this <sup>25</sup> : "I have to start learning what it is to be a man: petit père says that men and women will be equal someday", (p. 170). The girl is ahead of her time for she seems to foreshadow what is to be women's altering role in the future. The women of the Keita family (that of Ab'jibid'ji and Mamadou Keita (Fâ)) once stand as strong pillars to supporting their family because the consequences of the strike have severely impacted their household. The lack of their husbands' wages over several months puts their family in a situation of great vulnerability that can result in starvation. So, amidst such a calamity, they make up their minds to do something in order to provide their loved ones with some food. What they can do is to go to the nearest market and sell some vegetables and buy some cereals with the money that they get out of those sales. It is for that purpose that they make for the village of Goumé. Sembene(1971) puts it this way :<sup>26</sup> "Early in the morning, led by Assitan, the women had gone to Goumé, the nearest market (p. 172).

Ad'jibid'ji is the symbol of a modern African girl in those days for she goes to school and can read and write. In general, girls that are her age or around do not attend school, let alone go further in their studies. But she is lucky to have a better fate thanks to her adoptive father "petit père, " her grandfather Mamadou Keita and even her grandmother Niakoro, even if the latter openly says that she is against the French school. Actually, she is not resistant to girl's schooling, but is worried about the loss of their language and culture.

Ab'jibid'ji is proud of herself and also grateful to her family for letting her be an educated and emancipated girl in a hostile environment. From time to time, she pokes jokes at old Niakoro in stating the fact that she is the only person in the family that can read French. One day she teases the old woman in these terms:<sup>27</sup> "it is because you cannot read. Nobody can read in this house, except for Arabic. I am the only one that can!", (p. 174.)

Another day, she teases her grandmother and wants to show her that she has a good command of her native languages (her mother tongues) Bambara and Oulof and French too. It is also a way to reassure her that one can attend school without being uprooted. On the contrary, school is a means of safeguarding one's identity and language, provided that the learner is aware of

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<sup>24</sup> Sembene(1971): "il avait bien décidé de ne pas se joindre à ceux qui se rendaient au syndicat pour juger Diarra, mais, l'habile et douce insistance Ad'jibid'ji avait eu raison de son intransigence", (P. 170).

<sup>25</sup> Ad'jibid'ji : "je dois apprendre à me comporter comme un homme. Petit père a dit que demain femmes et hommes seront tous pareils", (P 170).

<sup>26</sup> Sembene (1971): " De bonne heure, les femmes étaient parties, conduites par Assitan, vers Goumé où se tenait un marché" (P. 172).

<sup>27</sup>Ab'jibid'ji " Parce que tu ne sais pas lire. Personne ne sait lire dans cette maison, à part l'Arabe. Il n'y a que moi !, (P. 174).

what he or she learns and what to safeguard and get rid of. She puts the old woman a puzzle in asking<sup>28</sup> : “grandmother, why do people say in Bambara, M’bé sira Ming, “I drink tobacco “”? Ming means to “swallow” whereas in Oulof “to drink water “ is translated by *nane* and “to inhale smoke “ by *touhe*. So, there are two words like in French. Why don’t we, Bambara people also have two words for these two different actions?” (pp. 174-p175).

Ad’jibid’ji and her grandmother Niakoro illustrate themselves as true “amazons” when the police swoop in their compound to arrest the head of their family, Old Mamadou Keita, known as Fâ. The men in uniform have been sent to the Keita’s and arrest the chief of the family because he is suspected to be one of the instigators (master minders) of the strike. When the police arrive, the young girl and the old woman oppose them their refusal to let Fâ be arrested. Fearlessly, they resist and receive many hits but never give in. He is finally arrested, but the two female figures show stamina and prove that being a woman or a girl has nothing to do with weakness.

The following passage illustrates the horrible scene that occurs within the Keita’s household on that gloomy and sad day:

’Niakoro, the old woman pounced on the police men, but a violent blow to the chest left her breathless. She leaned against the wall, eyes widely open, she was panting. In her turn, Ad’jibidji rushed on the policeman, she pointed her nails. A heavy laced boot kicked the hollow of her kidneys. She turned round, the pain compelled her to fold her body and she finally collapsed at her grandmother’s feet. Niakoro felt that her end was getting nearer. She was seized with a last anguish<sup>29</sup>, ( Sembene, 1971, pp. 178- 179).

The women in this work also fight against a police faction called “the horsemen or saphis”. When a woman tells Mame Sofi that the police is arriving, she replies in saying<sup>30</sup> : “well, we are going to face them just like we faced the alcatis ”, (p. 196). The tricks that they employed to repel the police consisted in lightning fire. Mame Sofi explains that horses are afraid of fire. So, she asks that matches be brought. When they use all the match sticks, she asks the women to bring embers and straw. When each of them has got fire and straw, she orders them to take to the street. At the arrival of the police men, the group of women lights fire and the police men route because their horses are caught in panic at the sight of fire. Some of them fall down and others run away.

After the round with the police which is concluded by the women’s victory, the rescue workers are requisitioned by the colonial administration in order to disperse the rally. Mame Sofi and Houdia M’baye are the two heroines that face the fire men. In fact, when the police men on horsebacks route, the colonial administration through the police commissioner of the city of Dakar sends for rescue workers not to extinguish fire , but to use their water jets against the

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<sup>28</sup>Ad’jibid’ji : “ Grand-mère, pourquoi dit-on en Bambara M’bé sira *Ming*, “je bois du tabac”? Ming veut dire “ absorber”” tandis qu’en Oulof “” avaler de l’eau” se dit *nane* et “ aspirer la fumée”” *touhe*. Il y’a donc deux mots, comme en Français. Pourquoi nous, les Bambaras, nous n’avons pas aussi deux mots? “, (Pp. 174-175).

<sup>29</sup> Sembene(1971) : “ Niakoro-la-vieille se rua sur les policiers, mais un violent coup de coude en pleine poitrine la laissa sans souffle. Elle s’adossa au mur, les yeux grands ouverts, haletante. A son tour, Ad’jibid’ji se jeta sur le gendarme, les ongles en avant. Un lourd brodequin vint la frapper au creux des reins. Elle pivota sur elle-même, la douleur la plia en deux et elle vint s’affaler aux pieds de sa grand-mère. Niakoro sentait que la fin s’approchait. L’angoisse dernière la saisit”, (PP. 178 -179).

<sup>30</sup> Mame Sofi : “ eh bien, on va les recevoir comme on a reçu les alcatis”, (P. 196).

'rioters' so as to scatter them. All the women yield except for the two mentioned above. Houdia M'baye fights until her last breath and she finally passes away in the battlefield because they pulverize her chest with water and she collapses under the effect of the pressure. The two ladies, through their commitment honour the women of the whole community.

## Conclusion

This study has explored the portrayal of women and their roles, through male characters, in Sembene Ousmane 's 'God's Bits of Wood'. Its objective was to account for the image of women and their salient roles in the selected novel. The first part has dealt with the role of women in the preservation of African socio-cultural values. The second part has examined African females as dedicated persons. At last, the analysis of the work has shown that the author has reserved an honourable status for female characters. The heroines are from various backgrounds. Yet, what they have in common is courage, commitment, and a great sense of honour and dignity. Through this paper, another image of African women is brought to light. That puts into question the stereotypical description of those females as submissive, weak and worthless persons in the African society.

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