

## RESHAPING IDENTITIES: GENDER ROLES IN TRANSITION IN AFRICAN COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL LITERATURE

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### Article Info

**Keywords:** Gender roles, African literature, female empowerment, colonialism, neocolonialism

### Abstract

This paper delves into the transformative portrayal of female characters in African literature, particularly focusing on Sembene Ousmane's "God's Bits of Wood" and Ngugi WA Thiong'o's "Petals of Blood". Traditionally, African novels have perpetuated biased and stereotypical depictions of women, positioning them as submissive, nurturing, and confined to domestic roles. In such patriarchal societies, women's identity has been restricted to their appearance and perceived suitability for tasks like cooking and childcare.

In contrast, this study critically examines how Ousmane and Thiong'o disrupt these gender norms by assigning their female characters roles that defy traditional expectations. These women take on masculine responsibilities to actively challenge colonialism and neocolonialism, thus freeing their male counterparts from oppression. By investigating the selected texts, the authors illuminate a shift in the representation of women from passive figures to empowered agents of change.

Additionally, the study highlights the significance of female solidarity and its healing capacity. The female characters in "God's Bits of Wood" and "Petals of Blood" transcend societal prejudices, forming deep bonds that empower them to engage in liberation efforts. This empowerment extends beyond mere survival, as these women contribute significantly to their families and nation-building. By dismantling the notion of simplicity associated with women's roles, Ousmane and Thiong'o demonstrate how women can play pivotal roles in reshaping society and challenging oppressive forces.

This research ultimately emphasizes the resilience and potential of marginalized individuals to effect positive change, countering the efforts of dominant powers aiming to suppress them. Through the lens of these two literary works, the paper underscores the capacity of the 'others' to overcome adversity, promote gender equality, and foster a more equitable society.

## Introduction

African novelists have for long been biased in their portrayal of female characters. Women have always been portrayed as weak, emotional, nurturing and submissive. In a patriarchal society women are supposed to be good looking and sexy and that their place is in the kitchen. They are suited to jobs like cooking, cleaning children and collecting firewood. This paper critically analyzes reversal of gender roles in *God's Bits of Wood* by Sembene Ousmane and *Petals of Blood* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The study indicates that the authors of the two selected texts present their female characters with masculine roles that enable them to fight against colonialism and neocolonialism thus liberating their men from oppression. The two authors in the selected texts give a different account of women characters by assigning them positive roles. Initially all the complex roles belonged to men whereas women were assigned simple roles. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sembene Ousmane in the two selected texts however break the ideology about simplicity of women's roles by empowering them.

The study foregrounds the healing powers of female bonding. The women overcome the prejudices and survive to enjoy female empowerment whereby they extend their friendship to liberate their men from the bondage of colonial powers and political elites in *God's Bits of wood* and *Petals of Blood* respectively. They really participate in providing for their families and building the nation.

It is therefore clear that the underprivileged/ the 'others' have the capability to work hard to improve their condition and promote a balanced society in spite of the greedy masters whose aim is to reduce them into nothingness.

## Theoretical framework

This study was guided by two theories, namely Feminist theory and Marxist Feminism theory

### Feminist theory

According to feminists, the gender roles in relation to patriarchal ideologies have been used to justify exclusion of women from equal access to leadership and decision making positions. It has been used to convince women that they are not fit for careers in such well-paying careers as mathematics and engineering. Any culture that privileges men by promoting these traditional gender roles is called '**Patriarchy**'.

Patriarchy promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. By this definition, patriarchy is thus "sexist".

Feminist philosophy discusses how power and inequality structures interact, i.e. they concentrate not only on gender dominance and exploitation, but also on how this could overlap with structural racism, a hierarchical class structure, orientation, ethnicity, and (dis)ability, among other things (Tyson, 2006).

Feminism movement seeks to promote gender equality for the benefit of both genders. It is thus a form of "activism" against patriarchal thinking. According to Crossman (2020), feminist way of thinking has consistently been about looking at the social world in a manner that enlightens the powers that create and sustain disparity, exploitation, and injustice and, in doing as such, encourages the quest for fairness and equity.

### Marxist Feminism Theory

The main proponents of this theory are Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxist feminism according to Elisabeth (2020), historicizes generation according to creation to all the more likely comprehend women's exploitation and oppression in capitalism; it guesses revolutionary subjectivity and opportunities for an anticapitalist future.

The study contends that Marxist theorists put the mode of production at the focal point of a wide range of power relationships in a society; they accept that it is the method of creation that brought about the private and public dichotomy of women's and men's domains.

Marxist writers are committed to fighting social injustices, purgation of societal ideologies which will result to social justice. This theory not only does it advocate for equality of people of different social classes but it also advocate for gender equality.

Marxism and feminism activists seek to revolt dictatorship with an aim of empowering the oppressed. The oppressed group in this case the females must fight for their dignity and reclaim their rightful place in the society. Sembene Ousmane and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are both feminist and Marxist critics because in their texts they fight all forms of oppression and male domination

### **Methodology**

The researcher used qualitative research design whereby textual analysis was used as the method of analyzing the two selected texts; *Petals of Blood* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and *God's Bits of Wood* by Sembene Ousmane.

### **Findings**

#### **Gender Roles Reversal**

The research findings indicate that there is reversal of gender roles in the two selected texts. Traditionally it was man's role to provide for the family, to care for and protect his wife and children. When women take up the men's roles, they reverse the gender roles. In *God's Bits of Wood*, the author presents female characters who take up the role of family provision when their men go on strike demanding for salary increment and introduction on family allowances. "One morning a woman rose and wrapped her cloth firmly around her waist and said, 'Today I will bring back something to eat'. (Ousmane, pg.34). Similarly in *Petals of Blood* women till the land to put food on the table. Wanjia advises Abdulla to take Joseph to school and she selflessly facilitates his education when Abdulla is financially unstable. Karega's mother portrayed as responsible. She raises her two sons alone after separating with her cruel husband. She educates her son Karega, she works in the shamba to make ends meet. She represents the African women who go against normalcy of traditional gender roles by working hard in the public domain so as to raise enough money to support their children's education.

For a long time men have been depicted as intelligent and wise. For that reason they have always been given the advisory role. In the two selected texts however, there are some female characters who are act as advisors and educators while those who are educated play an integral role in the social wellbeing of the masses. Nyakinyua in *Petals of Blood* educates the others on how to prepare a local brew called Theng'eta. The sale of Theng'eta becomes very popular and earns Wanjia and Abdulla much profit. Nyakinyua uses her intelligence to link the past, present and future through narration of past stories. She also encourages, advises and instills traditional values to the youths. Everybody remain silent when she is talking a show that she is able to demand respect. When trekking to the city, she motivates them with her stories 'Thus Nyakinyua talked to them, keeping up their spirits with stories of the past.....Nyakinyua was the spirit that guided and held them together' (Ngugi, pg. 125). She is also knowledgeable in many areas such as singing, storytelling, tilling the land as well as decision making. Likewise Wanjia's knowledge in business enterprise renews Abdulla's shop and she also succeed in setting up Theng'eta enterprise; when employed by Abdulla in his shop, she comes up with new business ideas and suggestions that boost the business to a higher notch. The business grows tremendously and the success is felt immediately.

In *God's Bits of Wood* on the other hand, presence of the female characters in the meeting act a source of courage to men, little girl Adjibiji for instance encourages the speaker (Mamaduo Keita) to continue with the speech, she is also depicted as intelligent, she reads the letters sent to her by her father (Ousmane, pg.100). There is a great

honor to female characters because their complex roles are being recognized. No wonder their moral support and strength to their striking men is highly appreciated, for instance when Bakayoko confirms “We have no right to discourage anyone who wants to strike a blow for us,” (Ousmane, pg. 188). The females who break away from patriarchal ideologies and acquire formal education stand a better chance in the society because they are less likely to engage in domestic chores rather they are used as means of formal communication: N'Deye Touti an educated girl, writes the letters on behalf of village women to their husbands requesting them to send food. In addition Penda portrays leadership qualities in a male dominated society. Previously women could not acquire formal education. The two authors however act as eye openers on the need to educate both genders. This is because the educated and wise females use their intelligence to liberate the men from oppression.

Things are changing with change of time and since culture is dynamic, men accept the fact that times were not just bringing a new breed of men but also bringing forth a new breed of women. “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.” (Ousmane, pg, 34). Likewise women were allowed to speak and participate in public. Similarly in *Petals of Blood* women are seen participating in the public, in the delegations and in decision making.

From the above illustrations it is therefore clear that there is gender roles reversal in the two selected texts.

### **Conclusion**

Critical analysis of the research findings, portray that there is evidence of reversal of gender roles in the two selected texts. In most cases, literary texts especially the ones written by the males tend to present their female characters negatively however the two authors in the selected texts deviate from the common norm and their positive portrayal of female characters is well noted. The two authors embrace the female characters in their spirit of fighting for social change. They empower their female characters with natural abilities and qualities that enable them liberate their male counterparts from oppression.

### **Recommendations**

By addressing reversal of gender roles in literary texts, the researcher recommend the ministry of education to only recommend the literature set books that portray gender equality in both secondary schools and colleges. Basing on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the upcoming literary writers to root up gender biasness by portraying both genders positively. This way people in the society will come to appreciate both genders (Esther, 2018).

The researcher recommends the African man to support the African woman in her efforts to establish her identity so that she will be in a position to promote justice for all. The authors and publishers ought not to be biased; they are urged to portray both genders equally in terms of natural abilities and qualities. This will help the reader of the text realize the full potential of the female gender in the complex world outside the cocoon of simplicity in which the patriarchal society has in the past and currently placed her.

The authors should consider three key things namely: sensitize the importance of education for the girl child, promote equal opportunities for both genders and free the women from claws of traditions so as to make choices they desire.

Secondly, the researcher recommends both teachers and parents to promote gender equality to both boys and girls. They should encourage the girls to perform duties that are termed as ‘masculine’ because this will help them realize their potential and will empower them in their endeavor of promoting social justice. By empowering them they will as well motivate them to stand up independently when faced by life challenges. They will also be in a position to device ways of liberating the society when confronted by emergencies. Therefore both genders ought to be portrayed with equal abilities in the society.

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