

ISSN:2141-1263

VOLUME 7 NUMBER 1 2015



ANNALS OF MODERN EDUCATION

UNIVERSAL  
ACADEMIC SERVICES



Annals of Modern Education, 7(1), 98-107, 2015  
ISSN: 2141-1263

**Gender as a Sign-Post to Identity: Feminist Impulse in Lucy Dlamini's *The Amaryllis* and Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood***

**Francis Ibe Mogu**

*Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria*  
*Email = mogufrancis@yahoo.com*

**INTRODUCTION**

From the advent of time and civilization, females have confronted what they perceive to be the male domination of affairs in the human society. According to the African-American feminist critic, may Helen Washington, all facets of the society must conform to the male order before they are adjusted to be correct. However, she reasons that this scenario cannot continue since it is lopsided and primitive of women. She argues for a fairer, egalitarian, non-sex biased society which accords similar rights and privileges to its male and female members alike. In her essay, "the Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Towards a literary History of Black Women, she opines that:

What we have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that power has always been in the hands of men – mostly white but some black. When are the disinherited.... Those differences and the assumption that those differences make women inherently inferior, plus the appropriation by men of the power to define tradition, account for women's absence from our written records (Gates, Jr ed., 1990:32).

In *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers – Adventures in Sex, Literature and Real Life*, Calvin C. Hernton supports Washington's views and proceeds to show clearly that the male domination of all aspects of life in the society still exists. He reasons that, "the complexity and vitality of black female experience have fundamentally been ignored" and that, "black male



### *Gender as a Sign-Post to Identity*

writing has been systematically discriminating against women" (Hernton 1987:39).

The situation referred to by Washington and Hernton reveals itself in the societies projected by Lucy Dlamini and Sembene Ousmane in Swaziland and the French speaking regions of West Africa respectively. Like in the African-American settings, women begin to emerge from behind the veil of male-based culture to voice their needs and concerns. Initially, they are taken for granted. Conversely, as events unfold, men begin to take them serious and to contend with their yearnings and aspirations.

Dlamini's *The Amaryllis* is set in Swaziland in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It also forays into neighbouring countries like South Africa, Botswana and Lesotho. The title of her novel recalls a beautiful, pink-colored and sweet scented, but rare flower that grows from a bulbous plant found usually in semi-arid areas. Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* on the other hand, is set in the late 1940s largely in Mali and Senegal, two prominent regions in the former French West Africa. It is essentially about the strike action embarked upon by African workers on the **Dakar – Niger Railway Line** which spanned thousands of kilometers across different time zones, territories, peoples and cultures. Put simply, "God's bits of wood" children of God the creator' (Ousmane 1970:62).

Dlamini's novel is about **Tana – Tanethu** – and other members of the **Mdluli family** in their quest to build a strong, economically sound and united family amidst the social chaos and decay of moral values in the **Logoba/Mhobodleni/Ka Khoza** area resulting from the rural to urban migration and the mushrooming of squatter settlements. These settlements were occasioned by the quest for wage employment at this period in the history of Swaziland, which threatens their efforts. The *Amaryllis* equally celebrates the establishment of the **University of Swaziland** – fondly referred to as "**Mvasi**" – and the warm reception accorded it by the **Swazi nation**. Historical figures such as the late **King Sobhuza II** and **Professor S.M. Guma**, accord the story some verisimilitude. Thus, the novel is a mixture of fact and fiction, credible and incredible events. The book therefore recalls works such as Felix Mntshali's *Yoraniviyoto* and manifests affinity with *God's Bits of Wood* in the sense that, as Ousmane's novel recalls and celebrates the **1947 – 48 Workers' strike – the Dakar – Niger Railway Strike** – which outcome uplifted African workers and restored some of their dignity which had been denied them by the French Colonizers. In the *Amaryllis*, we witness a young woman making choices and determining her future. Viewed against the backdrop of her culture, the heroine of the story appears to be rebelling against the status quo.

Whereas the heroine in Dlamini's novel is **Tana**, in Ousmane's book it is **Penda** and a host of other women who ensured the success of the worker's strike embarked upon by their male folk. **Penda** led the African women on a long, arduous protest march to **Dakar – the French colonial Capital**. In the

### *Francis Ibe Mogu*

course of the march and in the entire process of the strike, she was assisted and envisioned by other women like **Dieynaba, Ramatoulaye** and even the little **Ad'jib'd'ji** and the blind **Maimouna**.

In *God's Bits of Wood* as in *The Amaryllis*, the events unfold over a vast canvass or landscape. The canvass in Ousmane's work is wider and larger than in Dlamini's book. However, key activities occur within selected locations in the two texts such as **Dakar, Thie's, Bamako, Manzini** and the **University of Swaziland** premises at **Kwaluseni**. The central point however in the two works is the emergence of the heroes and heroines who actively champion the cause of the ordinary down-trodden people in the society. In this case, we are looking at ordinary women who through dogged determination, commitment and discipline emerge as leaders and spokespersons of their various groups.

The renowned African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues in his book of essays, *Home coming*, that "the artist must be part of the national struggle" (Ngugi 1972:xv). A relevant artist employs his art to educate the present generations of people while charting the future for them. The above ideas are also central in Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Dlamini's *The Amaryllis*. Ousmane portrays a colonial society undergoing transition. The colonized African people of "French West Africa" realise their innate power and potentials through group action. Through the 'Railway Strike', they realise that they could effect a change for the better in their lives. Prior to the strike, many of them did not believe that group coordination of efforts could result in a change for the better in their conditions of living. Dlamini on her part paints a vivid picture of an emerging nation – **the kingdom of Swaziland**; with a population that eagerly welcomes the establishment of its premier academic institution – **the University of Swaziland** – owing to the enthusiasm for knowledge acquisition.

The dominant narrator through whose eyes we witness in *The Amaryllis* is **Tanethu Mdluli – Tana** for short. She is the first child and daughter to the **Mdlulis**. She is an ambitious, discipline, intelligent, ideal and likeable personality that is also naïve in some instances. **Tana** is dutiful and completely devoted to her family and to her studies. In the University she falls in love with **Reuben** – a fellow student but refuses to sleep with him. She believes that sexual consummation should come after marriage. **Reuben** however proceeds to date **Sylvia** and, in the course of the relationship, impregnates her – even though he is not willing to marry her because he believes his real love to be **Tana**. Although the society depicted in the story seems to turn a blind eye on **Reuben's** lack of responsibility over **Sylvia's** pregnancy and plight, **Tana** faces a dilemma as she cannot understand why a young man who claims to love her, but has put another lady in the family way and abandoned her in the process, still wants her to marry him. **Tana** is determined to climb to the top of the academic and career ladders. She is resilient and does not experiment with casual sexual relationships as her younger sister, **Zakhe** and her bosom friends and school

### *Gender as a Sign-Post to Identity*

mates. She is resolute in her convictions about dating a single man and avoiding sexual intercourse until after marriage. This stance deprives her of her first and only boyfriend, **Reuben** who is impatient to the point that he experiments with a willing girl.

**Tana's** position is at odds with the prevailing trend in the **Swazi Society** so vividly depicted. She believes the trend to be morally reprehensible. She thus wages a relentless war to sensitize her siblings at home and her friends at school against such a practice. Her posture which stands against the predominant male – ordered ethos surrounding her, is credible and realistic, but appears strange and weird in the existing social parlance. However, she is the voice of reason, a visionary whose actions and beliefs serve to warn against the consequences of promiscuity as manifested in the contemporary society. **Tana Mdluli** is therefore a suitable role model for today's youth in our **HIV- AIDS** devastated world.

In **Gods Bits of Wood**, a strike situation involving local African workers demanding equal labour rights and fairer treatment from their French Colonial employers serves to mobilize and enlighten both men and women to united action and team work against their oppressors and exploiters. For instance, it is during the strike that, contrary to their traditional role as house wives, women are allowed to attend and address a political meeting in a society where the very idea is "unfamiliar and disturbing". We therefore realize "how many traditional beliefs are being swept aside by the turbulence of the strike" (Charley Wilfred 1971:178).

The **Dakar – Niger Railway Strike** brings about a situation where men become increasingly dependent on women:

The days passed, and the nights. In this country, the men often had several wives, and it was perhaps because of this that, at the beginning, they were scarcely conscious of the help the women gave them. But soon they began to understand that, here, too, the age to come would have a different countenance. When a man came back from a meeting, with head bowed and empty pockets, the first things he saw were always the unfired stove, the useless cooking vessels, the bowls and gourds ranged in a corner, empty. Then he would seek the arms of his wife, without thinking, or caring, whether she was the first or the third. And seeing the burdened shoulders, the listless walk, and the women became conscious that a change was coming for them as well... 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 1970:53-54).

**Penda** – a fearless female, organises a march with other women in support of the Workers' Strike. She subsequently emerges as a foremost leader of the march by African women from **Thie's to Dakar**. In the course of the strike she makes a speech at one of their meetings. The speech confirms her leadership s

### *Francis Ibe Mogu*

I speak in the name of all of the women, but I just the voice they have chosen to tell you what they have decided to do. Yesterday we all laughed together, but for us women this strike still means the possibility of a better life tomorrow. We owe it to ourselves to hold up our heads and not give in now. So we have decided that tomorrow we will march together to **Dakar** (254 – 255).

The **Amaryllis** depicts a situation where the protagonist, **Tanethu Mdluli's** unique personality emerges. Her male friend, **Reuben** takes her out the lawn for a chat soon after they meet at the University. In the course of the chat we observe her resolute position on issues such as dating and courtship. **Reuben** ventures thus:

'Tana, ... 'I would like to know you better, and may be you and I could be friends in a special kind of w...' However, **Tana** responds:

'Not so fast Reuben,... 'We scarcely know each other yet' (Dlamini 2001:70).

At this point, **Tana** patiently listens to **Reuben** as he intimates her with his family background. Once in a while she interjects to elicit more information from him. It is only when he has finished telling her his background that she responds fully by letting him know about her. When, much later, **Reuben** raises the issue of pre-marital sex, **Tana** resolutely opposes the idea. **Tana's** other name is **Busisiwe** which literally means "we are blessed to have you" (57). Therefore, she must live up to her billing. At the start of her University programme, her parents emphasize this point to her:

'My child, **Tana**,' Father said, turning to me, 'your mother and I don't know how to thank you for being such a blessing to this family. You have truly lived up to your name, **Busisiwe** – "we are blessed to have you" – which your mother gave you. Your mother and I feel truly blessed for having such a child.'

'We also trust that you'll continue to heed our advice while you're at that place of higher learning, which we have been warned, can destroy a child morally. Also, do not forget to read your Bible.'

'So, my child ... we, in turn, will keep you in our prayers, beseeching the Almighty to keep you on His straight and narrow path (57-58).

This parental advice and exhortation further strengthens **Tana's** convictions about her future and her leadership role both in her family and in the larger society. Hence, in her rapport with friends and school mates, this resolute commitment, which seems to be solitary in her neighborhood, stands out conspicuously. It also sustains her when **Reuben**, her boyfriend, attempts to blackmail her into engaging in pre-marital sex with him while they are at the University through his carnal and superficial relationship with **Sylvia** – a girl

## *Gender as a Sign-Post to Identity*

adjusted to be wayward. **Tana's** bosom friends and school mates, **Julie** and **Patience** try to persuade her to revise her stern stance regarding casual sex, but she remains committed to her resolution against it. **Julia** admonishes **Tana**:

'You know, **Tana**, ... 'I wouldn't be your true friend if I didn't give you my honest opinion. **Reuben** loves you, and I've not the slightest doubt that if you revised your stand on certain expectations in a relationship between two people who love each other, he would dump that **ntji**...

'No, **Tana**. I'm telling the truth. **Reuben's** using **Sylvia** for what he can get while waiting for you to change your mind (94).

However, **Tana** does not change her attitude or waver in her tough stance. She instead sulks and devotes all her energies to her studies in a bid to surmount the emotional setback:

In the succeeding days and weeks, I felt as conspicuous as an aching tooth, knowing that most people were aware that my relationship with **Reuben** begun with such promise (though bemoana, the malicious would call it pride) had been nipped in the bud. To stifle the pain I buried myself in my books, deriving deep satisfaction when each assignment was returned with nothing less than a **B** grade and very warm comments from my lecturers. At weekends I escaped to my home to breathe fresh air. Meanwhile, **Reuben** himself had kept his distance since the Sunday following my discovery. After church he had approached me but I had frozen his steps in mid-stride by hissing telling him to get lost. And from then on, I never looked back. I was disillusioned and bleeding inside, but I refused to give either him or the onlookers the satisfaction of seeing me waver (98).

In *Gods Bits of Wood*, **Penda's** speech at the strikers' meeting in **Thie's** energizes other women into positive action as they decide to march to **Dakar** to vent their anger and frustration at the French Colonial exploitation of African workers. It is even acknowledged that, "it was the first time in living memory that a woman had spoken in public in **Thie's**, ..." (Ousmane 1970:255). **Ibrahim Bakayoko** who is viewed as the 'strength' and 'soul' of the strike, lends firm support to the women in their planned march. **Bakayoko** and **Lahhib** are regarded as the 'soul' and 'brain' of the **Dakar - Niger Railway Strike** respectively (256-257). **Bakayoko** tells the other strikers:

'We have no right to discourage anyone who wants to strike a blow for us,' he said brutally. 'it may be just that blow that is needed. If the women have decided, all that is left for us to do is help them. I move that the delegates from **Dakar** leave immediately to warn the local committee of their arrival...' (255-256).

## *Francis Ibe Mogu*

True to **Bakayoko's** reading, the march from **Thie's** to **Dakar** proceeds and succeeds. It thus becomes the lethal blow which serves to alert the French Colonizers to the firm resolve of the African Strikers to attain their objectives of having all the demands met. The solidarity exhibited by the women in their march to the colonial headquarters strengthens the strike and adds fervour to it. The workers refuse to return to work under the old working conditions and the strike drags on and degenerates into what **Hadrame** the shopkeeper describes as "a war of eggs against stones" (65). The authorities cut off supplies of food and water in a desperate and cruel attempt to force the strikers back to work.

In the resulting hardships and confrontation with agents of the colonial authorities, many people lose their lives. Those who survive suffer untold hardships that extenuate their endurance and this brings out the worst traits in some individuals, while it also reveals the best, but hidden attributes in others. Still, the workers remain adamant and the strike lingers on. In the end they win as the **French Colonial Railway Company** accedes to the Strikers' demands. A foremost leader of the Strike, **Lahhib**, sends a telegram from **Dakar** which confirms the end of the Strike;

"Conditions accepted. Strike terminated. Return to work tomorrow..." (320). It is plain that, whereas in *The Amaryllis*, **Tana Mdluli** is a moral voice for **Swazi women** on crucial social issues that affect all women, **Penda** and other females in *Gods Bits of Wood* actively join their men folk in an economically-driven battle against colonial, capitalist exploitation to regain dignity for Africans. In the process the women break new grounds as they begin to make themselves heard and felt poignantly in public meetings for the first time in their society. **Dlamini's** novel voices opposition to some long-established, male-based practices in the **Swazi society** as exemplified in the responses of the heroine, **Tana** to these manifestations, while **Ousmane's** book shows **African women** in a colonial and exploitative situation pooling their energies and ideas together to wrest the initiative from their foreign oppressors as a step towards redefining themselves and charting the future for oncoming generations regarding the usefulness of team work. To corroborate the story, **Ousmane** remarks in his Author's Note on the Dedication page of the novel:

The me and women who, from the tenth of October, 1947, to the nineteenth of March, 1948, took part in this struggle for a better way of life owe nothing to anyone: neither to any "civilizing mission" nor to any parliamentarian. Their example was not in vain. Since then, Africa has made progress (v).

History has revealed that **Ousmane** was among the strikers. Even though the story is told with some fictional undertones in a novelized form, the strike did occur within the dates stated above. And, the **African Strikers** had won a sweet victory which serves as a lesson till today. **Ousmane's** statement above serves as a backdrop to the revolutionary import of *Gods Bits of Wood*



### *Gender as a Sign-Post to Identity*

and goes a long way to give the **Railway Strike** much credence and place it within the framework of a historical milieu. The author employs this propitious favourite themes of **anti-exploitation, anti-colonialism and pro-Africanness (Pan Africanism)** – themes espoused and propagated by the **Négritude Movement**. Ousmane is therefore an **Africanist** who is fully committed to the ideals of **black consciousness** or the **beauty of the African cultural heritage**.

A close reading of *The Amaryllis* reveals that, like Ousmane, Dlamini equally cherishes and advocates this Africanist consciousness. Accordingly, she projects key characters in her novel who set the tone for other people to follow. For instance, she vehemently condemns and renounces some emerging tendencies – the renegade western habits of loose living, casual attitudes and the appropriation by females of male clothes. These are practices that run counter to the **traditional African heritage** of closely-knit family subsistence. As **Tana Mdluli** is ready to depart for further studies at the University, her father remarks:

... While I cannot say all daughters should follow their mother's examples, at least I can ask you to do exactly that. My child, don't like your prodigal sister, deprive us of the joy of one day giving you away in marriage to a deserving young man, and of presenting us soon after with grandchild, all begotten within a marriage sanctioned by the church. I therefore, ask you to keep away from all those alcohol-drinking and cigarette-smoking young men.

'This country is changing before our eyes. Certain behaviour that we thought belonged to big cities like Jozi or Thekwini have now been brought here. For example, I have even seen some of your age mates walking around in trousers. Again, we don't expect you, once you are out of our sight, to begin dressing like a harlot. Trousers belong to men. Why indeed should women want to wear trousers when we men never long to be seen in a skirt?'

'So, my child, I don't expect you to defile your father's house by coming here wearing trousers. You are not a man nor have I seen any indication of the harlot in you...' (Dlamini 2001:58).

From the foregoing, it is apparent therefore that Ousmane and Dlamini are proud of their **African cultural heritage** and would strive to any length to uphold it. The two writers employ literature to propagate their cultural ideals. Dlamini's heroine, **Tana** remains steadfast throughout the story. She heeds her parents' advice. Ousmane's females led by **Penda** energize their men folk with a supportive protest march from **Thie's** to **Dakar** in their bid to ensure a successful strike. Both writers harness history by recreating action and recalling events which occurred in the past to spur other generations to follow the appropriate paths by making the right choices in life. Essentially then, the two texts act as vehicles for far-reaching and progressive social

### *Francis Ibe Mogu*

change. The characters in the two novels embark on a journey of change for the better in their various societies.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY (SELECTED)**

#### **PRIMARY:**

- Dlamini, Lucy Z. (2001). *The Amaryllis*. Manzini Swaziland: Macmillan Boleswa Publishers (Pty) Ltd.  
Ousmane, Sembene (1970). *Gods Bits of Wood*. London: Heinemann Education Books Ltd.

#### **SECONDARY**

- Bestman, Martin (1975). Sembene Ousmane: Social Commitment and the Search for an African Identity; In *A Celebration of Black and African Writing*, eds. King and Ogunbesan. Zaria – Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello University Press.  
Gates, Henry Louis, Jr (1990). *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Meridian Books.  
Hernton, Calvin C. (1987). *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers – Adventures in Sex, Literature and Real Life*. New York: anchor Press, 1987.  
Ikiriko, Ibiwari (1983). "Ousmane's Achievement in *Gods Bits of Wood*" (am M.A. Thesis presented to the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar-Nigeria.  
Killam, G.D. (1973). Interview with Ousmane in *African Writers on African Writing*. London: Heineman Educational Books.  
Mnthali, Felix. Yoranivyoto (1998). Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba.  
Mogu, Francis Ibe (2002). *Black Male Writing and Black Female Responses in the United States*. Calabar – Nigeria: Centaur Press.  
A Review of Dlamini's *The Amaryllis* (Unpublished, Mss) Department of English Language and Literature, University of Swaziland, Kwaluseni – Swaziland, November, 2003.  
Literature and Revolution: a study of Sembene Ousmane's *Gods Bits of Wood*. (Unpublished Mss), April, 1990.  
Nnaemeka, Obioma (1998). *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press.  
Ogundipe-Leslie, Omolara (1987). *The Female Writer and Her Commitment; In Women in African Literature Today*, vol.15, eds. Eldred Durosini Jones, Eustace Palmer, and Majorie Jones. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.  
Ruthven, K.K (1984). *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Gender as a Sign-Post to Identity*

Washington, Mary Helen (1990). The Darkened Eye Restored: Notes Towards a Literary History of Black Women; In Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian.