

FEMINIST TENDENCIES IN SEMBENE OUSMANE’S SHORT STORY-“HER THREE DAYS”

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Sembene Ousmane was born on the first of January in 1923 at Ziguinchor, Casamance, Senegal. He was born into a Muslim, Wolof family. His father was a fisherman. He went to Islamic and French schools. In 1936 he left schooling and went to Dakar, to work as a fisherman, bricklayer, plumber, an apprentice mechanic, a dock worker, trade unionist, etc. From the age of 15, he learnt from the “University of life” as he experienced from the many jobs he was exposed to, rather from a school or College. In 1944 he worked for the French Army. In 1947 he took part in the Rail road strike, which formed the basis for his seminal novel, *God’s Bits of Wood*. (1960) Sembene’s meeting with Claude McKay and Jacques Roumain, two great writers cleaved the path of writing in him. Sembene went to Moscow to study film making.

Sembene is considered one of the leading figures in African post colonial literature. At the age of 40 in the year 1960, he returned to Senegal to become a film maker. He felt his writings in his mother tongue, Wolof, was not far reaching and therefore decided to transform his writings into films to convey his message to a wider African audience. Interestingly it was in this year that Senegal became independent. The socio-cultural aspects of Senegal had a strong impact upon Sembene. As an artist therefore he felt the necessity to carry certain messages to the socially underprivileged masses, where the rate of illiteracy was very high. He shouldered the responsibility to create an awareness of social injustice and the medium of films was an immediate success. The desperate efforts to awaken the mass, especially women—the suppressed of the suppressed, through his films quenched the parched thirst of Sembene to a greater extent. He was at once a Senegalese film director, producer, writer and actor. The Los Angeles Times considered him as “the Father of African film”.*

The Patriarchal society where women are treated as the “other” has been the right kind of soil for African pioneer writers to exhibit shamelessly in their treatment of women as subordinate to the male, proving to be chauvinists. Male writers and male critics dominate the field, who deal with male characters and plots highlighting their heroism. Ngugu Wa Thiongo (Kenya) is a writer who has treated the male and the female characters as equals.

Sembene occupies a pivotal position as an artist who presents women in a rather different way giving a totally new outlook. This bold venture has earned him as “the greatest authors of Africa.”** Polygamy is a practice very much in vogue in Africa. The Demographic

theory substantiates and justifies this practice. Man has been indulging himself in sexual caprices very rightfully. It has always been a man's world. In the light of existentialist philosophy, it is quite possible to understand how the hierarchy of sexes was established. A strained relationship persists as in the case of master and servant.

The burden of reproduction is a terrible handicap to a woman in her struggle against a hostile class. In the early days, woman was reduced to a category of an object to propagate the clan. "She submitted passively to her biologic fate." (Simone De Beauvoir-P.63) Although a woman is used to produce the progeny, the domestic chores that she is entangled with do not produce anything worthy of being recognized as contributing to the family or the society. The early man gained superiority as he was the sole provider of all that is essential for the sustenance of life, by taking lot of risks while away from home. By hunting and fishing which involved risking his life to provide for his family, he attained that comfortable place. "That which kills is regarded more superior to that which brings forth new life." (Simone De Beauvoir-p.64). This explains the whole mystery behind the factors of dominance and servitude.

Simon De Beauvoir categorically states that marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by the society. On the other hand, the institution of marriage is also a blessing to many a women, as it is validated that marriage is the only means of support and a respectable status is thus attained in the view of the society. As a result she is expected to multiply the group as a 'service'. In return to this, man presents her gifts and vows to go for a marriage settlement promising to support her and the children born thereafter to them. It is also true that man cannot break the conjugal bond at his pleasure, whether in primitive societies or in modern times. He can divorce his wife only when the authorities approve of it. Marriage can either turn out to be either a burden or a benefit.

However for ages it has become customary for man to act as the productive worker and demand woman as the docile helper. He gets himself a home. After work when he returns home, he expects his wife to receive him with a smile, even if there are any differences. The wife is expected to wait eagerly and earnestly in a pure manner. Ironically the very aim of marriage seems to make the union of man and woman serve the interest of the society, rather than assure the partners concerned their personal happiness. Cooking and keeping the house is revelation and creation to the woman. These are some of the functions that a woman is forced to perform. This repetition and routine dooms her and pushes her to a margin, where she confronts with the internal as well as external conflicts. The promised happiness gets mutilated. Her dependence is interiorized. She is a slave in her own home. On the other hand man is free and independent as his bondage comes from the exterior. A husband can get along without a wife, but a woman is considered a hollow 'thing' without her husband. She is deprived of her social status and is treated with disregard by her own people. A change has to take place to redeem her from this predicament.

Sembene discovers the African woman as the neglected force which has the capacity to shift the whole society into the future. The characterization of the social forces

paved the way for his fiction to be easily transformed into film medium. Sembene can rightly be claimed as a revolutionary artist, as he was the first person to provoke his people to go beyond the word 'protest' which is explicit in his work. The great difference between Sembene and other African writers is that, he writes without a trace of male chauvinism. He has discovered that woman has the greatest revolutionary potential in Africa, for he strongly believed that if a woman is committed to change, she is wholly committed. His immediate success owes to the choice of subject for his stories and novels. "Sembene's work seeks to be an expression of common experience, common struggle and common exclusion from privilege". (Gerald Moore, "The Primacy of Change", p.69).

Sembene portrays women as responsible partners, especially at times of crisis. He highlights women's resilience in overwhelming circumstances. He breaks the myth that women are weak and dependent. Their capacity to endure and be undeterred are reflected in his powerful characterisation. He shows the viewers that women can be effective pillars of family like or even better than men. She proves her guts and committedness as the provider in a befitting manner. Opportunity knocks but only occasionally. Sembene paints a picture of women as Amazons, fearless, strong and bold. By ascribing such definite ways to women, he is reversing the roles in his zeal for their emancipation. He lends a loud voice to his women folk, to arise and arouse. He is championing the cause of women, who are caught in the mesh of social injustice.

Sembene is a true revolutionary when he breaks the invisible concrete walls between the jobs for men and women. He dismisses such barriers as a myth and argues that activities in public life are not exclusive for men and domestic chores are not meant for women. In his novel God's Bits of Wood, he presents strong women characters who shoulder the burden of the family, when the husbands are on a strike. A woman character Penda, who had no regard for the institution of marriage, opts to become a prostitute. This morally ill-reputed woman is depicted as a person with outstanding leadership qualities. She is transformed into a very impressive character. Sembene could mould the female characters as women who were being appreciated and given equal importance in life.

Sembene very deftly and diplomatically handles one of the serious concerns of the African women—polygamy. Through the character of Bakayoka, (God's Bits of Wood), Sembene openly disapproves of polygamy. In the given patriarchal system and coming under the Mohamadan law, which allows four marriages to a Muslim man, Sembene born into such a community, has chosen to tell his folk directly the pangs of women as a result of polygamy, through his films and also through his writings. His main target is the woman who he addresses that she has the right to choose her life partner for marriage and even the form of marriage she desires. His treatment of gender roles and his revolutionary approach to emancipate women, clearly show Sembene as a committed artist.

It is said that Sembene has done more for the cause of Feminist than subsequent feminist writers. He projects his heroine as a psychologically stable and better fulfilled. She is

a symbol of reality. His women are bold and act as better managers during crisis. Sembene has certainly carved a niche for them.

Coming to look at the short story form adopted by Sembene to convey the above mentioned strong aspects of women, it is essential to have a scathing view of his text, a collection of short stories called, Tribal Scars. It was originally published in French as Voltaire. The story taken for study is called, "Her Three Days".

The setting of the story is Mali, an unknown village in North Africa. The climate is understood to be very hot. The social conditions reveal that the women folk are closely knit. The theme of gender bias is very well exploited. The worshipping of the husband, by his wife above herself and even her children clearly marks the purity of love a woman has towards her husband, who may not reciprocate in any measure. The chief characters in this story are:

Noumbe-the third wife (protaganist)

Mustapha-the husband

Aida-next door neighbour, a minor character

Mactar-Noumbe's son

Second wife-flat role

Voulimata-fourth wife not in picture.

The story begins by giving a brief description of how Noumbe keeps her house, scarcely furnished, given her economic state. The house is shown to be bare. This is a symbol of her emptiness and longing for her husband's presence and affection. Sembene employs Noumbe to narrate her predicament to have a deeper impact among the women audience. The variations in the tone keep the reader's interest sustained.

Noumbe is portrayed as a strong and stable woman. In the beginning of the story, she is very nostalgic, remembering the sweet moments of the days when she was newly married. She was the third wife. So she knew she was not the first nor the last wife to her husband. She is stuck with great sorrow at this thought but little could she do to the system of marriage into which she entered happily. Polygamy has its nasty snarls, women groan within, unable to comprehend and cope with this choiceless situation. Noumbe suffers without any supportive or consoling word of hope. She is left alone to confront with her internal and external conflicts. Sembene picturises the inner torments that question her conscience at this point of life, when she recollects that she had committed the same mistake of agreeing to marry as a third wife. She tends to think of the other two wives, who would have gone through the same turbulent times. She is not able to digest that in their social set up, this is not anything new. It is this narrative technique of Sembene which marks him as a crusader of the women folk. Towards the end we are shown how her angry tone mars or ruins her hope of having her husband in her own three days. The external conflicts that Noumbe faces are the

intriguing nature and also the concerned women neighbours, especially Aida. When Mustapha's second wife comes to meet her, she turns to conflict with herself.

In such a social set up, it is the duty of the husband to fulfill the marital duties. Negligence results in giving the pain at heart to the women folk. Diplomatically Sembene dismisses through the words of Noumbe that women were also a major cause for polygamy. "He was a weakling who always ended by falling into the enticing traps set for him by women." (Her Three Days) However Sembene portrays Noumbe as a self-sufficient woman, capable of surfacing harrowing times. In her solitude she desperately wishes that she possesses a husband only for herself. "Why shouldn't it always be like that for every woman to have a husband of one's own?" (Her Three Days) From the following lines we learn that she was not dependent on her husband for money: "She never asked him for money." (Her Three Days) Sembene shows her as a self-reliant woman.

Noumbe laments for the loneliness and broods over her predicament. She begins the first day with lot of hope and enthusiasm, cooking and cleaning the house to please her husband and impress him about her duties of a sincere wife and mother even in his absence. Noumbe is shown as an excellent cook, one of the arts to appease her husband. She does not pay attention to her children nor to her failing health. She is obsessed with the thought of receiving her husband legitimately in her own three days. The first day is spent in vain. The second day with the meagre money she manages to make good food, but does not feed her children the delicacies. She also starves, with an aching heart, for she was suffering from some heart problem. Sembene implies that polygamy had made her sick at heart. Her neighbour, Aida tries to comfort Noumbe.

On the second day Mustapha's second wife comes to Noumbe's hut for some urgent reason in the hope of meeting Mustapha, for she knew that it was Noumbe's turn of the month. For Noumbe it was a moment of mental agony which prompts her to scorn at women like her as she questions thus: "Why do we allow ourselves to be men's playthings?" (Her Three Days) The curse of polygamy is best expressed in the guilt laden Noumbe's mind. She feels the visit by the second wife was intentional. Her mind imagines thus:

You stole those days from me because I am older than you.
now a younger woman than you is avenging me. Try as you
might to make everything nice and pleasant for him, you have
to toe the line with the rest of us now, you old carcass. He's slept
with some one else-and he will again. (Her Three Days)

The second day passed like the previous. Noumbe became very restless and impatient. On the third day, she sends her children to the fourth wife's house to call their father. At last, they come with the news that Mustapha would come. This ignites her low spirit and she prepares fine food. The long wait does not end yet! Finally he arrives, with two of his lieutenants. Noumbe shows her unstable emotions at her husband. She retorts to his enquiries in a cold manner. She behaves in a hysterical way. The arguments get heated up. When

Mustapha mocks at her behaviour and questions her about the three plates spread. Noubé could no longer control her emotions and she knocks the plates down in fit. Her eyes turned red with rage before she fell down due to a pain at her heart. Her loud cry, roused the women of the neighbouring compound who come to her rescue, because Mustapha dismisses her agony and behaviour as jealousy and conveniently escapes the wrath of Noubé. The male chauvinism is very well reflected in the remarks made by one of the men thus: “Now these hussies have got their associations, they think they’re going to run the country.” (Her Three Days) Sembene gives a befitting climax and that too through the perspective of a man thus: “Have you heard that at Bamako they passed a resolution condemning polygamy?” He makes it more emphatic by saying, “heaven preserve us from having only one wife.” (Her Three Days) Sembene strongly felt that economic independence can relieve women from such bondages to a great extent. He makes the men leave the floor for the women to prove to the world their capabilities, suppressed by men for too long a period. He portrays women as excelling in the areas where men claim supremacy. They live in a close knit circles, ready to help each other. This factor is seen even among the wives who share the same husband. There is no jealousy. This strength makes them formidable. Sembene’s women can be concluded to be fulfilled. Noubé does not seem to be regretting this change in her as she disowns her three days completely. Sembene employs Mustapha to convey the statement of the emancipated state of his woman character as the apt finishing: “They can go out to work then.” Mustapha’s tone may sound highly cynical. The hard core society and the die-hard habits cannot be erased very easily has been pin pointed here. Sembene’s objective is definitely achieved.

End Notes

* WWW.google.com.LosAngelesTimes,OusmaneSembene.June14,2007.

** WWW.Wikipedia Article

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