

**THE EFFICACY OF WOMEN ACTIVISM IN  
SEMBENE OUSMANE'S *GOD'S BITS OF WOOD* AND  
TANURE OJAIDE'S *THE ACTIVIST***

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**Abstract**

*Workers have always resisted exploitation and oppression foisted on them by economic systems such as capitalism. This study evaluates the effort of women at liberating themselves from such exploitation. Women as workers and the feminine gender engage in some forms of activism with the primary aim of freeing themselves from capitalism repression of the bourgeois class and the clutches of the patriarchal and societal inhibition, subjugation, oppression and dominance. In pursuance of feminist ethos, some novelists have presented the resistance of the working class against the superstructure of economic dominance and subjugation showcasing women in the lead. This paper looks at how women bond together in collectivism to drive activism with resounding success. Using Marxist literary theory, it interrogates women collective activism in Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*. It relies on the interpretive method to evaluate the effectiveness of women activism. The work is significant because of the erroneous belief that only the men can drive a change. The outcome is that now women are united in activism, they record a measure of success that affects the society more than the men.*

**Key Words:** Exploitation, Activism, Strike, Class, Protest, Oppression.

**Introduction**

Women have been resisting oppression and subjugation under patriarchy in particular and society in general. Over the years, they have been agitating for equality between men and women. Their belief is that men always take advantage of them in all areas of life. Mary L. Wenth worth in *What is Patriarchy and Why is it the Most Powerful Force in the World Today?* gives a definition of patriarchy that is relevant to our discussion. According to her, "patriarchy is a worldwide system that predates recorded history. It is the most powerful force in the world today; trumping other ideologies of political system or religious beliefs...it is rooted in subjugating women." (2) It should be understood that patriarchal cultures uphold the privileges of men based on gender, social structures, religious practices and legal codes. The movement that challenges male domination and advances gender equality in the society is known as feminism. Some African feminist writers identify patriarchy as the cause of the problems of women. Writers such as Nawal El-Saadawi of Egypt, Maraima Ba of Senegal, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria all show patriarchal structures underlining the several problems women face in the society. What women need to free themselves from men's oppression is solidarity and unification. However, since woman lives in the society, she is exposed to other forms of oppression besides gender oppression. In the world, there are cases

of exploitation, marginalisation, oppression, subjugation, discrimination, prejudice and stereotype that people try to resist. Capitalism couches significantly some of these forms of oppression. Marxist ideology stems from the rejection of capitalism and imperialism. If women are involved in this oppression, it is double; first as women and second as citizens. Women however, are able to join hands in fighting against oppression of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism.

#### **Activism Couched on Marxism**

People and groups use various methods to register their disapproval of or resistance to anything or situation they found not to be in their interest. Such methods can be called protest, demonstration or activism. Activism is a common word that people often use in describing such an action. Activism refers to a policy or action of using vigorous campaign to effect political or social change. There are several words that are sometimes used as synonyms of activism and these include: fanaticism, zealotry, fundamentalism, radicalism, dogmatism, chauvinism just to mention but a few.

Activism most often is carried out in form of movements or organisation especially when it concerns masses or class or group of people. Scholars have divergent opinions of activism. Charles Tilly defines activism in *Complexity and Social Movements: Multitudes at the Edge of Chaos* as “displays and campaigns by which ordinary people make collective claims on others” (23) while Sidney Tarrow observes that it is a collective challenge to the authorities, other group or cultural codes by people with common purpose and solidarity (21). Defining activism from its origin, J. A. Cuddon states that: “aktivismus means active political commitment or engagement among and by intellectuals” (17). In terms of its philosophy, he argues that activism is closely associated with expressionism and as far as literature is concerned. To sum it up, the word activism is used synonymously with protest or dissent, but activism can take a wide range of processes like writing letters, media announcements, campaign, street matches and even strikes.

An activists' organisation may operate as a pressure group, a socio-political organisation, and any mobilised group of individuals who operate within a political or geographical domain. The goal of the group is also local and that is to bring change to a society or members of a society who are by any means marginalised, oppressed or denied of their rights. Therefore, activists do protest against racism, gender discrimination, ethnic marginalisation, capitalism and colonialism. Accordingly, women activism in African literature is by the ongoing, a socio-political and economic protest. These protests historically had at one time or the other, been involved in fighting colonialism, capitalism, gender discrimination and racism. In Literature, women activists are presented as agents of positive change in different African texts. They reveal the positivity of the women's nature, their capability and strength, as well as the intellectual ability and solidarity of the women in several efforts to save humanity.

An aspect of Marxism that captures women issues in this regard succinctly is Marxist Feminism. It is crucial in interrogating the activities of women as they strive to free themselves from all manners of oppression. Although Karl Marx fails to specifically mention women in his theories, Marxist feminists are able to establish a hiatus where the exploitation of women has been identified, and is given attention. According to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o “among the

proletariats are the women, who are mostly referred to as the 'women workers'" (108). Marxism which is the theoretical framework for this study is a method of socio-economic analysis of class relations and societal conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development and a dialectical view of social transformation. Also, Marxism refers to a series of struggles between classes; that is, between the oppressed and the oppressing which is Historical Materialism. At the same time, it goes further to underscore the fact that the oppression on the basis of class also affects gender in which case; women are subjected to a lower level than men which is examined under Marxist Feminist Theory. Marxist literary criticism can include an assessment of the political tendency of a literary work, the oppression of gender and analyse the class construct demonstrated in the literature. Marxist Feminist according to Wilfred Guerin et al says there is a connection between class and gender. Marxist feminists argue that working men are rewarded because they produce tradable goods and women's works are not valued because women do not produce tradable goods. This gives the men power and control over women (185). Chinyere Nwagbara corroborates the argument with her declaration that: a key aspect of all forms of Marxist and Socialist Feminism is the belief that women's situation can only be understood within a socio-economic praxis, and the social context and structure have to change to make women's lives more meaningful." (15) She anchors her opinion on Valerie Bryson's argument that: "women's double burden should not be resolved by collective housework and child care, but by increasing their opportunity for part-time and flexible working arrangements." (185) Nwagbara implies that the condition of women is better appreciated based on the combination of social and economic factors in which the women are always at the disadvantage. If any meaningful change is to be achieved to better the lot of the women especially in bearing the brunt of domestic chores and work; there must be a structural change. Assisting the woman in housework and child minding will not be sufficient; rather, the advocacy is for giving the women flexibility in their working condition. This step if taken would be a relief of the double burden placed on women. Armed with the foregoing, it is pertinent at this point to discuss the novels in turn.

#### **The Efficacy of Women Activism in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist***

The devastation meted out to the ecosystem in the Niger Delta where oil prospecting companies in collaboration with the indigenous government have engaged in reckless oil exploration that desecrates the land and brings hardship on the people is captured poignantly in the novel, *The Activist*. Many organizations and groups such as the university students, the Area Boys, and the village elders in the novel take various actions which involve protest, consultation, delegation but all the efforts yield minimal result. These efforts are largely championed by men represented by The Activist and Omagbemi. Their move is instructive because the predators are themselves men so, ordinarily, it is believed that the males have learnt the rope to make and mar a given situation. Some of the actions of the men involve bunkering in an attempt to subvert the destructive and oppressive activities of the foreign and local imperialists but these actions are in themselves lethal in repository outcomes.

In *The Activist*, the people demonstrate against capitalism that breeds environmental exploitation. Vices such as pipeline vandalism, blowouts owing to gas flares and pollution rule. The petroleum company activities lead to diminished yield of palm trees. A case like a blowout in Roko village is certainly as a result of carelessness or callousness on the company's

part, yet no effort is made to cater for the refugee population of Roko village. The oil company sends Professor Tobore Ede to pacify the restless students, but he turns around and accuses the villagers of burning down their village in a bid to extort money from Bell Oil Company. The students discover that Professor Ede was speaking for the capitalist oppressors, in order to justify his affiliation with the company for selfish reasons. Therefore, the students' riot against this evil but The Activist, few other male lecturers and some students are detained. It takes Ebi, The Activist's wife and the wives of the other detained lecturers to demand for the release of their husbands and children, and the inspector released them. Women act on behalf of the men. This incidence ends the cycle of picking a university staff as a community development officer, which is a major reformation of the society. The change is brought about by the revolutionary women activism which the community needed.

It is worthy of note that there is a demonstration against the general exploitation of the environment because it is tantamount to the exploitation of women for nature itself is seen as female as it produces. The effect of the destructive activities by the local masters of which the populace complain in the novel bother on conception, birthing malformed babies, mothers being forced to kill their children than allow them suffer malformation, and the men becoming sexually weak. In a lamentable tone, women in a meeting co-hosted by Mrs Taylor and Mrs Ebi speak in turn starting with a sixty-one year old woman, Umuto who explains:

I don't know what is happening elsewhere, but in Oginigbo area the women are finding it difficult to conceive... I am Titi; I come from Gbaregolor...Our pregnant women are delivering so many malformed babies...I come from Ekpan and my name is Matije...many of our men are now sick. Newly married young women complain openly about the weakness of their men... I am Maomi. I am from Ajagbodudu. Our young girls often are now menstruating...many women now reach their menopause before forty in the same area where women used to conceive even when over fifty.... Our mothers didn't complain of any burning inside their bodies... Where did those flushes hide before oil came into our lives?(238 - 240)

Apparently all their problems centre on the destruction of the environment by the discovery of oil in the area. The environment cannot be devoid of the life it sustains, its pollution leads to the death of the children of the land. The so called compensation paid for destroying farms, is a pittance which becomes almost nothing before it gets to them.

Apart from the destructive activities of the multinationals in collaboration with the local imperialists, the tenets of capitalism are put to maximum use in the exploitation of women as a labour force. The text demonstrates how in Bell Oil Company, many Delta women are recruited to do the menial jobs like janitors, vacuum cleaning and hover cleaning. Graduates are employed as tea girls in offices, the oil companies underpay men and women employed to produce chicken and eggs poultry farms established. Again, the foreign expatriate sleeps with their women by luring them with money. These vices are what the women want to put a stop to. All they were asking for is "the profiteers to spend a fraction of their wealth to restore the environment" (243). The women formed an association called, Women of the Delta Forum (WODEFOR). They devise different strategies. According to Mrs Timi Taylor, its

president; "what will compel the oil companies and the military government to act remained a secret they would keep till they wielded the weapon. Let the oil bosses continue to take women for granted! They would be surprised at the power that women could wield when driven to the wall". (244) All the women come to the realisation that they have to do something for their plans to succeed. They took responsibility leaving the men out of the plan.

As part of women activism, Ojaide portrays Mrs Taylor as a very charismatic leader, who travels all over the Niger Delta talking to the women's groups about the planned nude protest "there was no scarcity of women to volunteer for such a noble cause. Ebi made arrangements for buses to bring in the potential women protesters to a point." (268) The women collectively plan a nude protest. Before this, they threw their weight behind supporting the idea of sending a delegation to the United Nations and mobilising opinion in foreign countries to curtail the excesses of the oil companies. The women also showed belief in their gods' backing; they invoked the Egba god of revenge and restitution. Speaking on behalf of the other women, Mrs Taylor explicates: "the god of restitution is on our side. It is only a matter of time and we'll get back what's being taken away from us". (254) Mr Pritchard, the senior manager contemptuously blames the nude protest on the backwardness of the African people, "when will these people leave behind their voodoo beliefs?... old habits die hard...all the schooling and Christianising of many decades have done little to change the people and their ways" (268).

The women leader held a meeting and agreed to show their naked strength against the tyrants. They would do this in a most dramatic way by seizing a flow station and an oil-loading facility and then stripping there in protest. Only women who have reached their menopause would take part, according to the plan. This was in keeping with [the] traditional practice of cursing the oppressor. (269).

There is unity of purpose as demonstrated in the actions of the women which signifies a possible positive outcome of any action taken against their oppressors. There is no hesitation but a swift and easy mobilization of women volunteers for the nude protest. All this shows the strength of collective activism and cooperation from women. *It is clear that women are emerging having been groomed by the new and the older women.*

Within a few minutes of the CNN news report on the nude protest, Bell Oil sends fire-fighters to go and stop the burning river that had blazed for twelve days. This shows the women's effort yielded positive results although belated. Although the nude protest is aborted by the security personnel who arrest the protesters, its effect on the Bell Oil Company and the Federal Military Government is unmistakable. Thereafter, the women hold a meeting to ensure everybody safely returns from the protest. WODEFOR executive members are all present to underscore their unity and the importance of the occasion. Mrs Ebi Emasheyi being the secretary of WODEFOR gives the opening statement:

Only those who ordered and carried out our violation know what they deserve. God and our ancestors are not asleep, they were witnesses! Let those who assaulted us

know the crime they have committed...we cannot sit and watch our land made unliveable by outsiders. We will continue to fight to hand over the land, waters, and air of our birth to our children in a liveable state (273).

The women are resolved and willing to do and sacrifice even their pride and dignity for their children and the future of their God-given heritage.

After the nude protest, Mr Van Hoort is said to have caught a heart attack and died a week later. The head of the federal military government, General Mustapha Dongo Ali was also reported dead under some strange circumstances. This shows that the women's planned protest is successful. It is fulfilled supernaturally; they have the backing of the gods of the land. They brought down tyrants that their men failed to bring down. The two tyrants that tormented the Niger Delta were gone. New leaders were elected for the FMG (Federal Military Government) and Bell Oil. A development agency is set up to tackle the perennial problems of the Niger Delta.

#### **The Effectiveness of Participation in Strike by Women in Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood***

The efficacy of women collective activism is evident in Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*. The activism in focus seeks to redress exploitation of the working class. It is a common knowledge that the primary function of a trade union is to create and wield power which can be used to bring the management to terms within the legal framework and processes of the country. Equally, it bargains collectively with necessary bodies about these terms. Strike is one tool that workers use to get their demands met when bargain and negotiation fail. Sembene Ousmane creates the men as the initiators and leaders of a strike who then mobilise the women to join in a collaborative effort. It is important to note here that the strikers Ousmane captures are not just blacks, they constitute the majority of the working class, they are also the sons and daughters of the original owners of the land, sons and daughters of the soil, the exploited. Marxist aesthetics holds that "in a realistic novel the content is socially conditioned and issues from historical circumstances...the social responsibility of literature is a force of social change and liberation" (7). All the major demands of the strikers are clearly expressed in the women's march from Thies to Dakar to express their dissatisfaction with the confrontation of the police who burn the houses of the protesting workers leading to the death of women and children.

*God's Bits of Wood* goes beyond the scope of women activism, as it also captures the role of the author, Sembene Ousmane as a Marxist. His expression of the Marxist spirit and the ideology of class struggle are evident in all the parts of his novel, which graphically examines the relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. It is a struggle between those who control the means of production and the exploited working class. The strike would not have degenerated into a full blown movement for national emancipation from white supremacy, but for the failure of the French government management whose colonial group on the colony is blind to the humanity of the workers and legitimacy of their agitations. The main reason for the strike is that the workers felt marginalized as they do most of the work, yet earn very little: "We are being robbed. Our wages are so low that there are no longer any differences between ourselves and animals. Years ago the men of Thies went on strike, and that was only settled by deaths, by deaths on our side. And now it begins again" (8). The effect of the marginalisation,

exploitation and oppression on the workers and by extension, the women transcends physical disturbance to emotional upheaval. The narration reveals that:

“the night no longer brought them rest. At the moment the eyes of the body closes, the eyes of the mind were opened. On the threshold of every dwelling place, people listened fearfully to the distant rhythm of the dance. In the darkness that enclosed the city the deep-toned drumming seemed now to come from everywhere at once, twisting and turning through the heads of those to whom sleep would not come” (12).

*From the forgoing, it is clear that the situation of the workers is debilitating; so, there is the need to urgently attend to it. Marxism rejects capitalism as an evil system. While it denounces the stratification between the strong and the weak, it advocates for the classless society where economic, social and political power is equally distributed. Marxist feminism advocates for the involvement of women in the creation of a sexless society where women also participate in the takeover of power economically, socially and politically. The biggest strength of the Marxist feminists is their consciousness and willingness to cooperate with the opposite sex. So, the women have a common interest with the whole working class.*

In a capitalist Senegalese society of the novel, there exist two class stratifications, the ruling class and the working class. Dejean and other members of management represent the ruling class; the bourgeoisie, the exploiters, people with a common interest to maximize profit at the expense of the proletariat; the working class. Dejean accuses Lahhib of insulting France, the nation they represent “a great nation”, and a great people”, it is apparent that Lahhib's retort which is instantaneous, did not just see Dejean and his people as a nation, but a representation of a class. “You do not represent a nation or a people here, you represent a class” (182).

The workers embark on a strike to press home their demands. Although the men start the strike in *God's Bits of Wood*, they are unable to sustain the impetus. Many men have already given up on the situation of the strike. Sounkare even loses his life as a consequence of hunger, loneliness and worry. He would not join the other men, even the rice he has had finished. The last statement he was recorded to have made is "I am abandoned... Like an old dog who is no longer worth his keep" (132). However, the women are determined to bring a change through their activism. They bond together and never felt lonely even when their last food is almost out. Dieynaba tells Maimouna "there is only enough left to eat for one night-two pounds of rice for twelve of God's Bits of Wood" (132), but they persevere. Sounkare runs to the women at some point when he is tired of being alone before he curses the strike, curses his friend, Bakayoko and finally gives up.

The women never give up. They make huge sacrifices by selling their belongings, which include virtually everything they had- things of value; they sold until they lacked buyers. They went as far as selling their head clothes and waistcloths which symbolised their virginity and pride of their entire family, just to survive. They sacrificed all they could. Even such degree of hurt to their pride and dignity no longer seemed of great importance than just any means to survive. Their houses were empty to the extent that they sought something of value from the litters; but they are determined. All they had left was each other. "On days when there was a meal, the women would gather in a circle around the elders, and then their talk would go on far into the night" (137). This is an epitome of togetherness, team spirit and a

positive bonding that sustains the embers of resistance, stamina and refusal to succumb to all defeating mechanisms employed by the oppressive regime and its agents against the women as workers and then as women.

The role of the women is of great significance in that the men are happy and fulfilled that the women are helping out. Lahhib even congratulates himself to have enlisted Penda's help. She keeps the women in line, she forces the men to respect her. She goes to the union office daily to help out with the work. Maimouna once told her: "you don't seem to like men very much, yet you are helping out with the strike, you don't even know why". (140) Women do not need to have a reason to help, it is natural to carry responsibilities, the modern day woman is equal to a man, she commands respect like Penda, and she knows what she has to do and does not hesitate to do it. It is a great lesson for men. They can achieve so much with women than being without them.

Evidence abound that the women are more resolute, determined and focused on carrying the strike through unlike the men that saunter. For instance, in Bamako, a man is picked up for going back to work and disguising himself as police. The strikers immediately hold his trail. Interestingly, up till the last male strike-breaker as recorded in the narrative, there is no female caught for strike breaking. Even old Niakoro knows the strength of a woman. Although her voice is not heard, she knows her role as a woman is important: "I took care of your grandfather, your father and your little father too" (100). She speaks to Adjibidji just before Fa Keita is arrested.

Women make enormous sacrifices undauntedly to achieve a result. This is evident as "Old Niakoro hurled herself at the man, but a violent blow of his elbow directly over her heart left her stunned and breathless. She fell back against the wall, gasping, gasping, her eyes opened wide in terror." (104) This violent treatment of old Niakoro results in her instant death, which comes as a shock to the women and they immediately seek vengeance for her death.

Part of the consequence of the strike is to ban the women from using the train, making them walk long distances to their destinations. Rather than being cowed, it marks the beginning of the women's voice to be heard in public. Many of them did. Tiemoko encouraged Hadi Dia to speak without fear or shame. Sira goes up to speak, and in the narrative, she speaks swiftly and confidently against the betrayers and traitors in their midst: "he stopped the train and made us get off... eight women alone, right in the middle of the bush! I tell you he is nothing but the slave of the Toubabs! Tiemoko is right; he should be hanged in the market place!" (92) She also passes a verdict on the culprits, which is eventually executed. The women's agitation became something much more than a movement of collective agitation, it leads to the emergence of a new kind of women, men, and children.

Vital to this research is the women's effort to sustain their families during the strike demands desperate measures such as theft, forcefully taking food on credit, buying items fraudulently. This is in total aberration of Dejean's claim that they represent France, they actually represent a class of people who are ruling class, controlling the means of production and distribution, lead the French colonies and wield as much power as exhibited in the novel. This accounts partially for why the women are bothered about the inequity and injustices. A very important feature of the theme of class struggle is the growing consciousness of the oppressed class. Therefore, their gradual awareness and understanding of their state of existence spur them for the collective activism seen in the women's approach to the strike. The

women are determined to bring a change through their activism. Many men had already given up on the situation of the strike unlike the women who were still together and never felt lonely even when their last food was almost out. The strike in which there is a large scale involvement of women shows that there is power in collective activism.

### Conclusion

Problems in the society are most often tackled by the men. The study reveals that the inclusion of women in resolving the issues is not only ingenious but leads to huge success. With the active and leading role of women, which is reflective of reality, *God's Bits of Wood* and *The Activist*, in spite of the different periods in which they were written, are more similar than it would seem at first glance. The two novels provide for female participation in history. The two writers portray more success in women activism and subtly advocate the inclusion of women in decision making in the society.

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