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Masculinity and Female-bodied Persons in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*

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Abstract

Traditionally, masculinity has been conceptualized as an exclusive property of men. It is therefore considered pathological when performed by biological female persons. Viewed through a lens that goes beyond gender binary and its related theory of biological essentialism, this study demonstrates that masculinity can be authentically performed by female-bodied persons. This is done through the analysis of female characters in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*. The paper concludes that the female characters delineated in the novels under study engage in performances, behaviours and occupations that have culturally and traditionally been considered masculine, displaying strength and courage, violence, leadership and assertiveness, and playing the breadwinning role. They are not in any wise imitating men nor are they living contrary to their genetic coding. They are female-bodied persons genuinely performing masculinity in trying to proffer solutions to the challenges of their various communities. They demonstrate that masculinity is not a

standardized box fixed by biology. This study therefore recommends that masculinity should no longer be tied to narrow stereotypes. It should rather be seen as fluid accommodating either temporarily or permanently both the biological male and the biological female. This, it is hoped, will do the society a lot of good.

Key words: gender, gender binary, biological essentialism, femininity and masculinity

Introduction

Until recently, there was a general assumption that gender is assigned by biology in that biological maleness is equated with masculinity and biological femaleness with femininity. This binary view of gender is an offshoot of the presumed sex characteristics of the two sexes, male and female. Julie Tilsen, Nylund David and Lorraine Grieves argue that gender binary is "a discourse which demands compulsory conformity to individual gender performances of either male or female" (48). They add that "gender binary dictates that this performance must be congruent with an individual's physical sex characteristics" (48). In the vein of Tilsen, David and Grieves, Mimi Schippers avers that "the discursive construction of gender assumes that there are certain bodies, behaviours, personality traits, and desires that neatly match up to one or other category" (89-90). At the root of this assumption is the theory of biological essentialism. Fausto-Sterling defines biological essentialism as "a specific form of essentialism that conveys the idea that the essence of a person is rooted in their biology; that is, that their personality and characteristics are caused by something internal to the body such as hormones and genes" (67). David S. Cohen submits that "under this theory, both sex and gender consists of binaries… based on which sex you are, your gender is the set of behavioural and psychological characteristics associated with that sex" (517). This calls to mind John Beynon's observation that masculinity is "a standardized container, fixed by biology, into which all 'normal' men are placed, something 'natural' that can even be measured in terms of physical attributes" (2). The hallmark of the biological theory is that "men are born with masculinity as part of their genetic make-up" (Mutunda 21).

However, the theory of biological essentialism has generated a lot of criticism. Cohen for instance asserts that "there is no pre-existing set of characteristics that are masculine or feminine, and that what we think of as masculinity or femininity are just the performances of those whom we label as such" (518). Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke add that "femininity and masculinity are rooted in the social (one's gender) rather than the biological (one's sex)" (997). Nancy E. Dowd concludes that "masculinities theory sees masculinity, in any form, as a social construction, not as a biological given. It is not a thing that one has; rather, it is a set of practices that one constantly engages in or performs" (209). This notion according to Penelope Eckert

and Sally McConnell-Ginet "brings the challenge to uncover the process of construction that creates what we have so long thought of as natural and inexorable – to study gender not as given, but as an accomplishment, not simply as a cause but as effect" (9). Thus, scholars begin to examine gender from a new perspective, the social constructionist perspective. A good number of feminist scholars have made their contributions towards the concept of gender as a social construct. Loreen Maseno and Susan M. Kilonzo for instance argue that "gender is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference" (48). Ogundipe- Leslie on her part asserts that "gender is a socially constructed identities and roles" (219). Bringing it nearer home, Jeylan W. Hussein opines that "the African gender ideology is a system of shaping different lives for men and women by placing them in different social positions and patterns of expectations" (60). John Maclnnes summing up the assumptions about gender, masculinity and femininity states that:

> Gender, together with the terms masculinity and femininity, is an ideology people use in modern societies to imagine the existence of differences between men and women on the basis of their sex where, in fact, there is none… (it is something) we imagine to exist and which is represented to us in material form through the existences of the two sexes, male and female (qtd in Beynon 8).

Beynon adds that "the masculine and the feminine signify a range of culturally defined characteristics assignable to both men and women" (7). This is the thrust of this study. Viewed through a lens that goes beyond the gender binary and its related biological essentialism, this study argues first that women can share in the culturally and traditionally presumed masculine behaviours and performances with their male counterparts. Secondly, that masculinity as a concept should be broadened to include female-bodied persons. This will be done through the study of masculinity and female-bodied persons in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*. The choice of male-authored texts is deliberate informed by the need to have some insights on male-centred views on masculinity and to demonstrate the extent to which the male authors deconstruct stereotypical notions of masculinity. Not only that, the choice is predicated on the need to have a wider premise to draw our conclusions given that the study cuts across linguistic and national boundaries.

It is pertinent at this juncture to consider definitions of masculinity to facilitate the study. Many scholars have made an attempt to define masculinity. Jessie L. Krienert for example posits that "masculinity is a socially constructed set of meanings, values,

and practices that come together to form differing levels of behaviour that men work to project" (11). Flourish Itulua-Abumere sees masculinity as consisting of "those behaviours, languages and practices existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine" (42). To Egodi Uchendu, masculinity is associated with "physical strength, firmness, fearlessness and decisiveness, an ability to protect the weak, to be principled, to control, to conquer, to take risks, provide leadership, to be assertive, to enjoy a high social status, and to display versatility in martial arts …intelligence and bravery" (283). Chimdi Maduagwu argues that masculinity entails "socially approved male qualities, as opposed to female qualities that are concretely expressed in occupation or trade, family size, physical prowess, development of special skills and or talents, inculcation of boldness, bravery and courage." (314). Drawing upon the definitions of Itulua-Abumere, Uchendu and Maduagwu, the paper defines masculinity as those behaviours and performances associated with male-bodied persons which include strength, courage, leadership, assertiveness, violence, the right to choice of trade/occupation and breadwinning; breadwinning because "our society identifies the role of breadwinner as masculine" (McGinley 802). Maduagwu further explains that masculinity should be seen in the outward sense because "the ideology has little to do with the inner selfhood or the internal being of man" (314). This provides the compass for the analysis of masculinity as performed by female-bodied persons in the texts under study. Five thematic areas distilled from the definitions of masculinity constitute the main points of focus. They are: strength and courage, violence, leadership and assertiveness, choice of trade/occupation, and breadwinning.

Strength and Courage

Characters such as Yaniba and Akole in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Ramatoulaye in Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* are considered.

Drought hits Anoa, Yaniba's community "for six seasons" (11), and the men appear to be indifferent to it. They rather "grew eloquent describing to each other the terrors of a long dryness" (11). Yaniba disgusted with the men's attitude towards this problem and "unwilling to tolerate the dryness outside" (11), goes in search of water for the people of Anoa. She goes "past the farthest tributary to its source. She *courageously* lifted a rock, one after many, and revealed to thirsty eyes a pool, the feeder of springs …" (11). How can a female-bodied person display such strength lifting rocks one after the other without the assistance of a man? Yaniba's act calls to question the generally accepted notion that "men are physically strong and authoritative and women are physically vulnerable and complaint" (Schippers 90). Here, it is the men that are indolent and compliant.

In Akole's world, women are seen and not heard. However, Akole strives over this confine and articulates her views publicly when her land is under threat of being sold to the white predators. When the people of Anoa are told that "the white strangers had come wanting to be our friends, to give us goods they had brought in return for ours, and to tell us of a wonderful creature they called their god" (78), Akole fearlessly interrupts the spokesman, Isanusi, saying: "We the people were tired of lies, and that the lies we have just heard that day were more dangerous than all the previous lies together" (78). She goes on to reveal to the people that the white predators are thieves, killers and monsters who roam the seas "till they came upon a people they could exterminate, whose lands they could rob, whose spirits they could scatter into an endless barren emptiness" (78). She speaks so convincingly that all the people are satisfied. "… It was as if the people had been waiting all day for just such a voice" (79). She boldly suggests that they should execute the white predators outright "as punishment for their crimes against the people of the way" (79) or "have the wisdom not to welcome them among ourselves" (79). Accordingly, "the night following that day…fires flew silent through the night and found the white destroyers' ship, setting it aflame" (79) thereby sending away the white predators. This is a great show of courage and bravery which culturally is a property of male-bodied persons. Akole's action gives credence to Raewyn C. Connell and James Messerschmidt's assertion that "masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action…" (836).

There is shortage of food in Dakar as a result of the railway workers' strike. Ramatoulaye meets her brother, Mbagué, a wealthy man, to guarantee the cost of food she wants to buy for her family but he refuses being in league with the French oppressors. Meanwhile, his goat nicknamed Vendredi, breaks into her kitchen scattering and eating the little rice and earthnut cakes reserved for the children. Ramatoulaye furious, kills the goat single-handedly and distributes the meat to the hungry families. The women surprised, wonder "D'ou lui etait donc venu cette force neuve…Ramatoulaye n'etait pas un homme, n'etait pas ete soldat…" (124). (How did she acquire this new strength…Ramatoulaye was not a man neither was she a soldier). This comment shows that in that milieu, Ramatoulaye's action can only be performed by biological male. Her action further negates "the belief in masculinity as a gendered identity specific to men" (Beynon 9). Not only that, when the police come to arrest her for killing the goat, she stands up to them commanding them to leave her premises: "Missé, toi pâti, ici maison pour nous pas maison pour blanc…" (124) (Leave now. This is our house, not a Whiteman's house). Everybody is surprised at her boldness and radical change. "Chacun se demandait où Ramatoulaye avait bien pu cette volonté nouvelle" (115). (They asked one another where Ramatoulaye had found this new strength). What a courage! Yaniba, Akole and Ramatoulaye's actions challenge "the

paradigm that holds that masculinity and femininity are straitjackets into which all biological males and females are automatically fitted…" (Beynon 11)

Violence

Characters such as Azania, Sekala, Nyewele, and Abena, all in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Mame Sofi and Dieynaba in Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* fall under this category. Faisal, an Arab predator, for the first time in his life wants to make love to a black woman and chooses Azania, "the black woman of his dreams" (22). Azania accepts the invitation with the intent of avenging the predators for turning the women "into playthings, for their decayed pleasure" (19). So she goes in prepared with a dagger hidden in the cushions unknown to Faisal and his askari. She prepares Faisal "for love … moved under him with a smooth grace that gave him his first ecstasy with a female" (22). Faisal, being a homosexual, still wants "his young askari in him from behind while Azania welcomed him inside herself, so that he would himself be firmly clasped between his lower and his higher joys" (22).

Faisal overwhelmed, lays "insensate, hardly breathing" (23). Azania seizes this opportunity to execute her game plan. Not gaining easy access to her dagger, she takes the sharp war spear the askari brings to defend his master and pushes "it hard through the askari's right side, so hard it went through him into the Arab panting beneath, threading him in his right. The two, the predator and his askari, were thus fused together when the agony of death usurped their sweeter pain" (23). Sekala and Nyewele in the vein of Azania also seek to take revenge for the way the Arab predators assault women such as using their fingers, toes and tongues to grope in the genitals of the women. Mohammed in particular has a nasty habit of licking women's genitals. On that fateful day, Sekala strikes "the expectant tongue with a thin, sharp knife" (23). Too amazed to believe his eyes, another woman Nyewele, with a sharper knife, "slid deep into his neck and jerked sideways to the left, sideways to the right, Mohammed died with his forehead stuck to the floor" (23). Here, Azania, Sekala and Nyewele successfully demystify the stereotype of the helpless female victim of sexual exploitation.

Abena and other children are sold as slaves to the Arab predators by King Koranche under the guise of having a feast in their honour. While in the ship, the King cajoles the children to enjoy themselves but Abena suspicious, stares at him menacingly and "spat straight at him" (110). Abena and her group eventually escape from the boat. After their escape, they lay ambush intent on attacking the predators. When the predators finally appear, Abena "fired the first shot" (178). That a female-bodied person could use a gun, a classic phallic symbol that connotes aggression calls to question the gender binary theory itself. In the course of time, Abena and her group

assemble the people of Anoa to address them. Abena takes the centre stage and makes King Koranche confess to the people how he sells them into slavery. After his confession, "Abena herself shot the King Koranche dead at the end of his tale" (196). In this way, Abena uses a phallic symbol, gun, to bring to an end the phallic source of slavery and oppression.

Azania, Sekela and Nyewele, and Abena move far away from what Linda Brannon describes as the Victorian ideal of womanhood: being "passive, dependent, pure, refined and delicate" (Brannon 162) to that of manhood - "active, independent, coarse, and strong" (162) using weapons which are symbols of traditional masculinity not only to defend themselves but also to fight for the good of their community.

Mame Sofi like Ramatoulaye is a staunch supporter of the railway workers strike. This is underscored by her naming Houdia M'Baye's child, "Grève" (Strike). She organizes the women to fill empty bottles with sand as weapon against the police when they come to arrest Ramatoulaye for killing Vendredi, Mbagué's goat. She braves the police and asks N'Deye Touti to interprete to them: "… nous ne laisserons pas partir Ramatoulaye. Nous mourrons ici, s'il le faut, mais elle n'ira pas à la police... (188). (…tell them that we are not going to let them take Ramatoulaye. We'll die here if need be, but she is not going with the police). She matches her threat with action as the women go into a combat with the police using their sand-filled bottles. When the police come back the next day, she boldly confronts them again saying "…tu n'en pas eu assez hier? Tu veux ecore goûter de la bouteille?' (187). (You did not have enough yesterday? Do you want to have a taste of the bottles again?).

Again, in the fight that ensues between the railway workers and their French employers in Thiès, Dieynaba in the vein of Mame Sofi, organizes a group of market women to fight in support of their men armed with "bâtons, de barres de fer, de bouteilles. (sticks, iron bars and bottles). They perform so well in this fight that the narrator describes them as "des amazones" (49) (the amazons). Meanwhile, while the women are engaged in the fight against the common enemy, some men like Bachirou take to their heels. Dieynaba disappointed, confronts him saying "Où vas-tu, poltron? Dit-elle en lui tendant un caillou" (50). (Where are you going to coward? and gives him a stone). Bachirou instead of using the stone to fight the enemy continues with his flight. What an irony! A man wedded to masculinity running away from a supposedly masculine activity while the women are actively engaged in it. Dieynaba's effrontery with Bachirou gives credence to Beynon's submission that men "who do not perform their masculinity in a culturally approved manner are liable to be ostracized, even punished" (11). In another instance, Dieynaba in the vein of Armah's Akole, suggests that the whites be killed. She wonders: "est-ce qu'on ne pourrait pas tuer tous les

blancs?" (295) (can't we just kill all the white men?). This question coming from a woman further transgresses the gender binary theory.

The performances of Azania, Sekala and Nyewele, Abena, Mame Sofi and Dieynaba put to test Frederika Cronje's assertion that "violence provides a relatively easily accessible means of asserting and maintaining a masculine identity" (6). Their action further demonstrates the fluidity of gender roles.

Leadership and Assertiveness

Here, Noliwe and Ningome, and Abena in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons,* and Penda and Mame Sofi in Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* shall be considered. Noliwe and Ningome display leadership qualities during the journey of the people of Anoa in search of a new land after the White predators dispossess them of their land. Meanwhile, pathfinders, men, have been sent out to spy out a good land for 'the people of the way'. Unfortunately, thirty of them are murdered during their mission and this brings fear and discouragement to the people. But two girls, Noliwe and Ningome, take over the mantle of leadership at a "time when the crowd of men, themselves fevered beyond patience, each the loser of beloved relatives and friends around whom the meaning of life had had a tendency to weave itself…" (53). They like the Biblical Joshua and Caleb reassure the people that "the land the pathfinders had seen; our destination was real" …on that journey we would move again" (55). It is these two girls who decisively lead the way amidst all odds when the hearts of men fail them. They "did not stop, neither did eat…going forward under the sheer impulsion of their obsession with reaching our destination" (55-57) until "rushing up a final crest, halted and called out to the despairing others" (56) announce that they have arrived at their destination to the joy of every one. The role played by Noliwe and Ningome validates Beynon's assertion that "masculinity and femininity, as characteristic of men and women, exist only as sociocultural constructions and not as the property of persons" (8).

Abena also occupies a leadership position in her struggle against exploitation by the colonialists and neo-colonialists. As discussed earlier, she skilfully leads the escapees from the slave boat to wage a war against the slave traders. She "went about the work of preparation, completed, repeated, and perfected each necessary detail" (174). They lay ambush to attack the predators and her "patience was endless" (175). She reassures the others who are wearied by the long period of waiting saying "they will be coming this way. They have no other route" (175). Eventually, they launch out and defeat the enemies.

Penda right from childhood has masculine identity and expects to be treated the same way as men. Hence, during the railway workers' strike, she appears in military

uniform in her capacity as a member of the strike committee. She like Armah's Akole, contravenes the norm that women should not speak in public. Thus, during the railway workers' strike, she conveys publicly to the surprise of the men, the decision of the women to march from Thiès to Dakar in support of the workers' strike. She urges the men to release their wives: "Seules resteront à la maison qui son encientes ou qui lllaitent et les veilles femmes" (289). (Only those who are pregnant or are breast feeding or old should remain at home). She leads the epic march: "en tête marchait Penda, la taille serrée dans un ceinturon militaire" (296). (still wearing her soldier's catridge belt, Penda leads the march). She displays a high level of organizational ability during the march. Her confrontation with the soldiers at the border underlines her intrepidity. She encourages the women to move on saying "… les soldats ne nous mangerons pas … n'ayez pas peur … avancez" (313). (…the soldiers will not eat us…don't be afraid…move on). A nervous soldier opens fire as she challenges him and Penda dies as a result. Thus, Penda "becomes a female saviour of men" (Opara 87).

Mame Sofi is a women leader in her own right. She leads the women not only to break into Mbague's house to carry foodstuff but also to build weaponry to fight with the police who want to arrest Ramatoulaye. When eventually Ramatoulaye is taken to the police station, she again urges the women to follow saying "allons au commissariat! On ne peut pas avoir confiance en leur parole!" (189). (lets go, one cannot trust what they said!).

One interesting thing about Noliwe and Ningome, Abena, Penda and Mame Sofi is that in carrying out their leadership roles they do not submit to male authority or question their own wisdom even though there are males in their midst. They assert their right to power and take initiatives that work out for the common good of the people. It is also interesting to note that their creators, Armah and Ngugi envisaging possible reappraisal from their opponents, arm these female leaders with weapons of different sorts. Abena uses a gun to defeat the predators and also to kill the black imperialist, King Koranche. Mame Sofi and her women use sand-filled bottles, machetes, broken wood and so on to fight against the police while Penda uses verbal weaponry to fight against the soldier who restrains them from entering into Dakar. She says to him "on passera sur le corps de ta mere s'il le faut" (313). (We will enter even if it means treading on the body of your mother). The**y** demonstrate culturally acclaimed masculine behaviours such as aggression, bravery and assertion. These attributes negate the Cult of True Womanhood part of which states that women are expected to be "weak, dependent and timid" (Brannon 162).

Choice of Trade/Occupation*:* Female characters to consider under this category are Anoa in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and Adjibidji in Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*.

Anoa's universe places great emphasis on wifehood and motherhood. But Anoa, right from her childhood, knows that she is cut out for better things than "choosing mother chores" (13) and positions herself to work out an alternative. She refuses to be coerced into accepting gender role models her parents offer her. She rises above this essentialism by demanding to be "trained with her brothers in the hunt" (14). When she is denied this opportunity, she vehemently protests against it. "She lost all interest in sustaining life, refused food, would touch no water, till she was admitted" (14). She excels in this trade and becomes "the possessor of hunting" (14) and brings innovation to the hunting skills to the surprise of everybody.

Adjibidji is an intelligent young girl whose consciousness is inspired by Bakayoko's statement that "… demain femmes et hommes seront tous pareils" (157). (...men and women will be equal in future). This calls to mind Maclnnes' forecast that "there will come a time when there will be no difference between men and women apart from the anatomical…" (qtd in Beynon 9). Henceforth, she begins to position herself for the changing role of the woman. She says, "il faut bien apprendre son métier d'homme" (157). (I have to start learning what it takes to be a man). Thus, she, like Armah's Anoa, prepares to venture into a trade that is culturally assigned to the male. She desires to train as a train driver like her "petit père" believing it to be "le plus beau des métiers" (151). (the best of all occupations). This gives credence to Fausto-Sterling's assertion that "gender is a situational accomplishment…not merely an individual attribute but something accomplished in interactions with others" (243). Adjibidji's interaction with Bakayoko elicits in her the desire to venture into a culturally male preserved trade. Anoa and Adjibidji's choice of occupation corroborates Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's observation that "the individual's chromosomes, hormones, genitalia and secondary sex characteristics do not determine occupation…" (13).

Breadwinning

Here, Ramatoulaye in Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* and Yaniba in Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* shall be considered.

In Ramatoulaye's patriarchal world, men are the breadwinners and the heads of their families. However, a reversal of role is noticed during the railway workers strike. Ramatoulaye takes over the mantle and becomes the breadwinner of a large family fending for twenty "bouts de bois de dieu" (people). Mame sofi commenting on this, tells N'Deye Touti: "tu verras qu'à la prochaine grève, les hommes nous consulteront. Avant ils etaient tout fiers de nous nourrir. Maintenant, c'est nous, les femmes qui les nourrissons" (87). (You'll see; the men will consult us before they

embark on another strike. Before now, they were full of themselves because they fed us, and now it is the women who are feeding them).

In Yaniba's milieu, women take over the breadwinning role from the men who have become indolent electing rather "to go with the women every farming day to sit in shady places" (10) claiming to guard the women against danger which "came seldom" (10). Yaniba and other women go against all odds to look for food for the family "…bringing tales and skins and meat home to triumphant husbands" (11) who "sit in the shade of large bodwe trees or beneath the cool grass huts built by women, drinking ahey" (10). The narrator comments: "the women were the maintainers; the women were their own protectresses, finders, growers both" (10). Breadwinning is of course one of the strong indices of masculinity. But here, the role is effectively performed by female-bodies persons.

Conclusion

The delineation of female characters in the novels under study shows that female-bodied persons subvert the gender binary and successfully lay to rest the theory of biological essentialism. They demonstrate that masculinity is not an exclusive property of male-bodied persons. They engage in performances, behaviours and trades that have culturally and traditionally been considered masculine, displaying strength and courage, violence, leadership and assertiveness, and playing the breadwinning role. Their performances accord with Dowd's submission that while masculinity "is dominantly used or performed by men, it does not require a biologically male body. Women can be masculine also…" (209)

Armah and Sembène are highly appreciated for deconstructing the stereotypical notions of masculinity broadening the scope to accommodate female-bodied persons. Undeniably, the female characters analysed are not in any wise imitating men or longing to be men nor are they living contrary to their genetic coding. They are female-bodied persons authentically performing masculinity in trying to proffer solutions to the challenges of their various communities. Their roles should therefore not be seen as pathological; rather they should be recognized and encouraged. This is because identifying either the male or female with negative stereotypes can 'threaten performance' to use Brannon's words. She explains further that "if the person does not believe the stereotype or accept that it applies, the threat of being identified with a negative stereotype can be an ever-present factor that puts a person in the spotlight and creates tension and anxiety about performance" (159). This study therefore recommends that masculinity should no longer be seen as exclusive to men tied to narrow stereotypes. It should rather be seen as fluid accommodating either

temporarily or permanently both the biological male and female. This, it is hoped, will do the society a lot of good.

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