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Colonial Wounds, Patriarchal Domination: A bell hooks (1984) Reading of *God's Bits of Wood* by O. Sembène (1962)

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Abstract:

God's Bits of Wood (1960/1962) has been widely celebrated for its portrayal of women's collective resistance, yet the psychic wound colonial capitalism inflicts on African masculinity, and its displacement into domestic domination, remains underexplored. This gap raises the problem of how Sembène (1962) represents African masculinity as simultaneously wounded by colonial subjugation and complicit in patriarchal domination over women, and how women's resistance answers both. The article's general objective is to trace this double dynamic across three movements: colonial emasculation, displaced patriarchal compensation, and women's counter-resistance. The study draws primarily on bell hooks's (1984) theory of interlocking domination, supplemented by Frantz Fanon's account of colonial alienation. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative, text-based close reading of key episodes alongside these theoretical categories. The findings reveal that patriarchal domination in the novel functions not as inherited privilege but as compensation for colonial wounding, while women's solidarity constitutes a deliberate counter-wound targeting both colonial and patriarchal structures at once.

Keywords: African masculinity, colonial capitalism, psychic wound, patriarchal domination, women's resistance

Introduction

God's Bits of Wood (1962), Sembène Ousmane's fictionalized chronicle of the 1947-1948 Dakar–Niger railway strike, has long been read as a triumphant narrative of collective solidarity, its women namely Penda, Ramatoulaye, Maïmouna, Dieynaba, celebrated as agents of resistance against colonial capital. This celebration is warranted, but it has tended to leave underexamined the men against whom, and alongside whom, that resistance unfolds: railwaymen whose own masculinity is first wounded by colonial subjugation and then, in the domestic sphere, redeployed as a compensatory form of patriarchal authority over the very women whose solidarity the novel ultimately honors. This double movement - men victimized by one system while reproducing another - is what justifies the present study. To read the novel's women without accounting for the psychic economy of the men they live alongside is to leave half the novel's ethical architecture unexamined.

The existing literature on *God's Bits of Wood* (1962) has developed along two main axes. The first examines women's mobilization and labour as forms of resistance. Raja (2011) identifies solidarity as the novel's organizing "ideologeme," while Lubbungu (2020) argues that characters such as Penda challenge gender stereotypes by assuming leadership roles in a male-dominated society. McDonald (2015) develops a more nuanced argument, showing that women's revolutionary agency remains constrained by colonial structures and patriarchal family arrangements. Similarly, Bichang'a (2025) examines how Ramatoulaye, Penda, and Maïmouna emerge as leaders despite prevailing male attitudes. The second axis concerns colonial violence and psychological dehumanization. Drawing on Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), Dick (2016) interprets the strikers' revolutionary consciousness as a response to accumulated colonial aggression. However, these studies do not fully explain how colonial humiliation reshapes masculine authority within the household or how women resist the resulting displacement of male frustration. This unresolved question constitutes the present

study's point of departure.

The problematic that organizes the article can accordingly be stated as follows: how does Sembène's novel represent African masculinity as a site simultaneously wounded by colonial domination and complicit in patriarchal domination over women, and how does women's collective resistance function as a counter-force to both? This double bind - men as objects of colonial subjugation and subjects of domestic power - resists any reading that treats gender and colonial oppression as separate axes of analysis. Three objectives follow from this problematic. First, this study demonstrates how the male characters in the novel are psychologically wounded (emasculated) through labor exploitation, racial humiliation, and systematic denial of paternal and civic authority. Second, it explores how this wound is alleviated through the displacement of frustrated power onto the domestic haven, where patriarchy reigns supreme. Third, it analyzes women's collective action as a counter-wound: a rupture that exposes and contests displaced domination while reconfiguring the possibilities of solidarity across gender lines.

The theoretical framework draws primarily on bell hooks' (1984) analysis of interlocking systems of domination - her account of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy - adapted here from its original American context to the colonial economy of French West Africa. hooks' (1984) insight that patriarchal violence among Black men frequently originates in the wound of racial-economic subjugation supplies the vocabulary needed to read Sembène's (1962) male characters without either exonerating or flattening their exercise of domestic power. This framework is supplemented by Frantz Fanon's (1967) theory of colonial alienation, developed in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which situates the psychic mechanism of emasculation within the racial and historical conditions of colonial domination.

Methods

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, text-based approach combining close reading with thematic analysis. Primary evidence is drawn from key episodes - the strike's origins in wage and dignity claims, scenes of domestic conflict and paternal authority, and the culminating women's march to Dakar - read against the theoretical categories established above. These episodes were selected because they most clearly represent the study's three analytical stages: colonial emasculation, the domestic displacement of wounded masculine authority, and women's collective resistance to both colonial and patriarchal domination.

The analysis proceeds through the article's three-part structure, tracing a single argumentative thread from psychic injury, through domestic compensation, to collective rupture and transformative possibility.

Results and discussions

The results and discussion are organized into three interconnected sections. The first examines how colonial labour exploitation and racial humiliation produce a psychic wound in African male workers. The second explores how this wounded masculinity is displaced into the domestic sphere, while the third analyzes women's collective resistance as a challenge to both colonial oppression and patriarchal authority.

I. Colonial Emasculation: The Making of a Wound

Before *God's Bits of Wood* (1962) becomes a chronicle of solidarity, it is first a ledger of humiliation. Sembène (1962) situates his railwaymen within a colonial wage economy that measures African labor against the standard of the animal rather than the human, and it is this economy - not any innate deficiency - that constitutes the wound around which the novel's masculinities take shape. bell hooks' (1984) account of interlocking domination offers a precise vocabulary for what Sembène dramatizes narratively: men denied the very manhood that

patriarchal ideology promises them, so that the injury inflicted by colonial capital becomes psychically indistinguishable from an injury to masculinity itself.

The novel names this condition in its opening pages, through Mamadou Keita's reflection on what is at stake in the walkout:

Our wages are so low that there is no longer any difference between ourselves and animals. Years ago the men of Thiès went out on strike, and that was only settled by deaths, by deaths on our side. And now it begins again. At this very moment meetings like this one are taking place from Koulikoro to Dakar (Sembène, 1962, p. 8).

What is described here is not simply low pay but ontological demotion - a wage structure that revokes the category of the human before it touches the pocket. Frantz Fanon's (1967) account of the colonized subject's alienation under a racial hierarchy that continually withholds recognition, clarifies the stakes of this demotion. As for Fanon (1967), colonization does not only deprive the colonized people materially, it makes them feel like they will never be civilized enough because they are perpetually judged by white standards. Sembène's (1962) striker names in economic terms what Fanon (1967) theorizes psychically - a subjectivity structurally denied full humanity. bell hooks (1984) names this same ontological demotion as the foundation of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, arguing that Black men are conditioned to seek a manhood the system simultaneously withholds. Sembène's (1962) striker thus embodies hooks' (1984) diagnosis precisely: colonial wage exploitation strips him of humanity before it strips him of pay, manufacturing the very wound patriarchal compensation will later attempt to heal. This demotion sharpens into direct interrogation moments later, when Tiemoko demands:

We're the ones who do the work,' he roared, 'the same work the white men do. Why then should they be paid more? Because they are white? And when they are sick, why should they be taken care of while we and our families are left to starve? Because we are black? (Sembène, 1962, p. 8)

Tiemoko's demand exposes the racial arithmetic hooks (1984) identifies at the core of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy: equal labor met with unequal recognition, care rationed along racial lines. His rhetorical questions - "Because they are white? Because we are black?" - refuse the naturalization of that hierarchy, articulating precisely what hooks (1984) argues Black men are systematically denied: not privilege itself, but the provisioning and protection patriarchal ideology promises yet colonial capitalism withholds. As hooks (1984) writes, men "are taught that they will be able to rule in the home, to control and dominate, that this is the big payoff for their acceptance of an exploitative economic social order" (p. 134) - the very payoff Keita's outrage suggests is already failing to arrive.

Another passage pushes this analysis toward its philosophical center: "It isn't those who are taken by force, put in chains and sold as slaves who are the real slaves: it is those who will accept it, morally and physically" (Sembène, 1962, p. 20). Read alongside Cathy Caruth's (1996) theorization of trauma as a structural disruption that resists immediate assimilation and returns only belatedly, in symptomatic form, this line performs a striking act of self-diagnosis. Bagayoko recognizes that the deepest wound of subjugation is not the external chain but the internal accommodation to it, an accommodation that, in Caruth's (1996) framework, need not be conscious to be operative. The men of Thiès have not simply been forced into an exploitative wage system; many have absorbed its terms as given, and it is this latency - the wound not yet fully registered as a wound - that the strike itself begins to interrupt.

That interruption is met, in turn, with what hooks (1984) identifies as the second half of the compensatory structure: displaced aggression. hooks (1984) writes that men's "need to dominate women, coupled with suppressed aggression towards employers who rule over them, makes the domestic environment the center of explosive tensions that lead to violence" (p.

134). Sembène's (1962) narration of the strikers' astonishment at their wives' emerging political consciousness – “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” (Sembène, 1962, p. 34) - registers precisely this tension in its early, still-ambivalent form. The syntax records a delay: astonishment before understanding, resistance before accommodation, exactly the lag Caruth's (1996) model of belated trauma would predict when an old injury - the wound of colonial subjugation - is abruptly confronted with a new and unanticipated threat to the one domain of authority still presumed intact.

Yet Sembène's (1962) narrative, like hooks' (1984) theory, refuses to romanticize the violence this wound produces even as it explains it. hooks' (1984) account of a man who, in “beating or raping women, is not exercising privilege or reaping positive rewards” but “may feel satisfied in exercising the only form of domination allowed him,” while “the ruling-class male power structure that promotes his sexist abuse of women reaps the real material benefits” (pp. 90–91), insists on a distinction the novel itself will not let its male characters use as an alibi. To explain domination is not to excuse it. This distinction anticipates the ethical horizon toward which both hooks (1984) and Sembène (1962) ultimately gesture - hooks' (1984) insistence that “men must begin to challenge notions of masculinity that equate manhood with ability to exert power over others, especially through the use of coercive force” (p. 135), is not a coda external to the novel but a demand the novel's own women will begin to enact. It is to that demand - displaced domination met by collective refusal - that Section II now turns.

II. Displaced Domination: Patriarchy as Compensation

If Section I traces the wound inflicted on African men by colonial capitalism, this section traces what happens once that wound is carried home. The transition Sembène (1962) narrates is structural rather than incidental. The same men denied dignity on the rail line reassert it, almost by reflex, within their households, and it is precisely this displacement - power confiscated in one sphere, reclaimed in another - that bell hooks (1984) identifies when she observes that a man conditioned to expect male privilege “often finds that few, if any, of these benefits are automatically bestowed on him in life” (p. 90). What he loses to the colonial wage system, he seeks to recover at home.

The novel supplies an ideological justification for this recovery through El Hadji Mabigué, who tells Ramatoulaye when she comes to him for help:

I know that life is often hard, but that should not cause us to turn our backs on God. He has assigned a rank, a place, and a certain role to every man, and it is blasphemous to think of changing His design. The toubabs are here because that is the will of God. Strength is a gift of God, and Allah has given it to them. We cannot fight against it – why, look, they have even turned off the water ...' (Sembène, 1962, pp. 44-45).

What is notable is the direction of the argument. Colonial subjugation itself is naturalized as divine order, and this same logic of fixed, God-given rank will, moments later, be redeployed to fix women's place beneath men. Ifi Amadiume's (1987) study of precolonial Igbo gender arrangements is instructive here, since she demonstrates that rigid, binary gender hierarchy was not an indigenous African given but a structure substantially hardened under colonial administration, which imported its own patriarchal theology onto more flexible systems of status. Mabigué's invocation of divine rank, then, is not the recovery of an authentic precolonial order but a colonial-inflected theology of hierarchy, borrowed to legitimate a domestic authority that the same colonial system has elsewhere stripped from him. This colonial-inflected theology of submission finds its clearest expression in El Hadji Mabigué's attempt to break the strikers' resolve by appealing to a divinely ordained economic order saying:

Everything here belongs to them – the shops, and the merchandise in the

shops, even the water we drink. This strike is like a band of monkeys deserting a fertile plain – who gains from that? The owner of the plain! It is not our part in life to resist the will of heaven (Sembène, 1962, p. 228).

Mabigué's argument explicitly illustrates what bell hooks (1984) conceptualizes as the seamless operation of interlocking systems of domination. By naming colonial ownership and total resource control as "the will of heaven", Mabigué describes economic subjugation as natural and places it into the category of divine hierarchy that demands passive acceptance. In hooks' (1984) framework, imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy relies on this precise ideological mechanism: teaching the oppressed that domination is an inevitable, natural state rather than an artificial structure of exploitation. Mabigué compares African workers to animal, when he says "a band of monkeys", to legitimate colonial control. He urges men to be obedient to the capitalist economic system making them believe that this will allow them to be master in their household and rule over their wives.

This hierarchical organization is not an abstract idea, it has a direct influence on the daily, personal lives of women in their homes. When colonial exploitation strips the African worker of his economic capability, the failure of the imperialist system is brought home to an empty hearth. Unable to challenge the colonial power that starves his household, the disempowered male worker redirects his frustration into an unthinking assertion of domestic intimacy and authority. Sembène (1962) captures this unconscious displacement of economic emasculation into domestic possession at the moment when a striker returns home. Sembène (1962) depicts:

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 (p. 33).

The sequence is illustrative - empty pockets, empty stove, then the wife's body, sought "without thinking." This automatic progression underscores what hooks (1984) identifies as the compensatory function of male domination under capitalist exploitation. For hooks (1984), working-class men socialized into patriarchal ideology often use women's bodies and domestic spaces to reclaim a sensation of power denied to them in the economic sphere. The worker who appears to be seeking his wife's body "without thinking" is subject to a conditioned reflex. Colonial capital has stripped him of human agency, so he tries to assert his remaining patriarchal influence over the female body as a substitute for his loss of systemic control.

However, this redirection of patriarchal power does not remain confined to direct interactions between men and women. It filters viciously into the fabric of the domestic sphere. As patriarchal domination sets its roots within the colonized families, it dismantles the harmony among women themselves causing them to internalize hierarchies that reflect systemic oppression. As hooks (1984) observes:

Between women and men, sexism is most often expressed in the form of male domination, which leads to discrimination, exploitation, or oppression. Sexism teaches women woman-hating, and both consciously and unconsciously we act out this hatred in our daily contact with one another (p. 93).

While hooks (1984) highlights how patriarchal sexism socializes women into internalized self-hatred, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) cautions against reducing Third World women to passive, homogeneous victims. Sembène's (1962) female characters move beyond internalized oppression, converting shared domestic suffering into localized, transformative political agency.

Sembène (1962) demonstrates that domestic patriarchal assertion is neither an authentic cultural retention nor a realm isolated from colonial capital, but a direct, compensatory byproduct of structural disempowerment. By revealing the mechanism by which economic

emasculation entrapped women and make them prisoners within their own home spaces, the novel shakes the myth of a pure domestic hierarchy. However, as the women anchor their collective tribulation into grassroots revolution, they overwhelm both colonial power and internalized patriarchal violence. Ultimately, *God's Bits of Wood* (1962) illustrates that true decolonization cannot occur solely at the railway gates, but must simultaneously dismantle the compensatory tyranny within the home.

III. Rupture and Possibility: Women's Resistance as Counter-Wound

Sections I and II have traced how colonial subjugation produces a wound in African masculinity, and how that wound is displaced into patriarchal domination over women, now this final section turns to what interrupts the cycle. Sembène (1962) stages this interruption gradually, and bell hooks' (1984) insistence that "solidarity strengthens resistance struggle" and that "women must take the initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity" (p. 61) frames how it should be read: the novel's women confront not one form of domination but two at once - colonial and patriarchal - and their resistance must therefore answer both simultaneously.

Sembène (1962) captures this exact movement from internalized domestic suffering to organized collective action during the crucial assembly at Thiès. Standing before the male leadership, Penda articulates a radical redefinition of political agency that merges female solidarity with the survival of the entire community. She declares:

I speak in the name of all of the women, but I am just the voice they have chosen to tell you what they have decided to do. Yesterday we all laughed together, men and women, and today we weep 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 to give in now. So we have decided that tomorrow we will march together to Dakar (p. 187).

Penda's speech marks the realization of what bell hooks (1984) identifies as revolutionary political solidarity. Women taking autonomous initiative to redefine resistance beyond patriarchal boundaries. The women refuse to remain as passive support for male strikers, so they organize themselves independently to transform their shared domestic vulnerability into collective agency. This dual confrontation supports Collins' (2000) matrix of domination, as the march to Dakar openly resists the intersecting forces of racial, economic, and gendered oppression. When Penda asserts "we have decided", she does not only challenge both colonial exploitation and traditional male authority, but also shows that true liberation requires fighting patriarchal power and dismantling colonial control as well.

This collective march to Dakar is far from being a celebrated or easy victory. It is a brutal struggle that brings the women to collide with colonial violence. Dieyneba's painful breakdown illustrates the exact moment when imperial power stops being an abstract concept and becomes a heartbreaking, personal loss. Sembène (1962) writes: "Dieynaba did not appear to be crying, and yet, one by one, tears rolled down her cheeks and dropped to the cloth that covered her breasts. She murmured, 'Why can't we just kill all the white men?'" (p. 191). Her question returns the analysis to the colonial source of the wound named in Section I. It is white colonial rule, not only the men of her own community, that she names as the object of her rage. hooks' caution against romanticizing resistance is instructive here - solidarity does not erase this grief or redirect it away from its true colonial target. It gives the anger a shared, organized form without pretending the underlying wound has healed.

Rather than fracturing under this immense grief and violence, the women synthesize their shared pain into an unstoppable, highly visible vanguard. The visual arrangement at the front of the march captures a radical reordering of community, uniting the political organizer, the traditional wife, and the marginalized outcast in a single, resolute front. Sembène (1962)

observes:

Penda, still wearing her soldier's cartridge belt, marched at the head of the procession with Mariame Sonko, the wife of Balla, and Maimouna, the blind woman, who had joined them in the darkness without being noticed by anyone. Her baby was strapped across her back with an old shawl (p. 192).

This tableau exemplifies what Raewyn Connell (1995) conceptualizes as the destabilization of hegemonic masculinity. Penda the fiercest and most engaged character appears in a military cartridge belt, this soldiery picture is a clear message that the women seek to overwhelm colonial and patriarchal domination. Masculine hegemony favors marginalizing female agency and seeks to maintain patriarchal domination. However, the women of the novel are very combative and have a high sense of leadership. The collective mobilization aligns with bell hooks' (1984) idea of radical solidarity, where women subvert socially imposed divisions to create a consolidated front. Their collective movement triggers an alternative structure of authority that questions submissive gender roles. This proves that anti-colonial liberation begins with deconstructing the gender hierarchies that prevails within patriarchal structure.

This new form of reordering authority does not only reconfigure the march itself, it utterly changes how male leaders view women's position within the anti-colonial struggle. The patriarchal domination, confronted with this powerful feminine mobilization, is forced to admit the commitment and determination of the women which signals a new political awareness. Sembène (1962) captures this reluctant awakening in Lahbib's letter reflecting on the women's unexpected force:

At first, they even pounced on me like tigresses — they wanted to start running everything! But things are a little calmer now — the children have not come back yet, and the women go out to the lake every day. In future, though, we will have to reckon with them in whatever we do (Sembène, 1962, p. 228).

This passage underscores what bell hooks (1984) calls authentic solidarity. Women coming together by transcending domestic suffering to protest against unfair systemic oppression. When Lahbib acknowledges that “we will have to reckon with them”, he admits that patriarchal control cannot stop the determined women and therefore is bound to collapse.

This turning point also aligns with Walker's (1970) examination of Black female resilience. She shows how Black women, for a long time, have been excluded from agrarian capital and domestic hierarchy. She also underlines how their gather strength and courage to move from endurance to full agency. All in all, Sembène (1962), hooks (1984), and Walker (1970) agree on the same truth: anti-colonial and racial liberation cannot be achieved without shattering the yoke of internal patriarchal domination.

Dembélé and Diakité (2026) refuse to regard colonial violence as a justification for domestic oppression. Drawing on Walker's (1970) assertion that “The white man's oppression of me will never excuse my oppression of you, whether you are man, woman, child, animal or tree, because the self that I prize refuses to be owned by him. Or by anyone” (pp. 345-346), they argue that genuine agency constitutes a powerful counterforce to systemic subjugation. Their analysis reveals that ending the cycle of violence requires resistance on two interconnected fronts. External opposition to colonial domination must be accompanied by a critical confrontation with the patriarchal structures that reproduce similar forms of violence within the domestic sphere.

Paul Gilroy's (1993) account of Black diasporic solidarity as a transnational space connecting struggles across distance offers a final frame for the march's direction, back toward its colonial target. The decision to walk not simply out of Thiès but “to Dakar” ties this local women's action to the same rail line that has organized the entire colonial economy examined in Section I, turning the very infrastructure of colonial extraction into a route of solidarity. The march

gains its force because it travels toward the colonial capital itself, not away from it. Ultimately, this section demonstrates that genuine anti-colonial liberation requires an uncompromising, dual confrontation. Sembène (1962), in his narrative, demonstrates that women's collective force challenges both colonial rule and internal patriarchal control. In so doing, they transform their shared vulnerability within the home spaces into collective agency. As black feminist thought and contemporary ethical scholarship observe, fighting against colonial oppression is never a justification for committing abuse or violence against family. True liberation is possible only when inferior subjects reclaim their agency, break internal gender role, and focus their well-structured, unflinching resistance directly against the colonial rule.

Conclusion

This study addresses a central gap in literary scholarship on Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1962) by examining the psychological and social dynamics of African masculinity under colonial rule alongside women's collective mobilization. The core scholarly problem centers on the double condition of the railwaymen, who are simultaneously emasculated by colonial capitalism and driven to displace this psychic wound into compensatory patriarchal domination over women within the domestic sphere. The analysis grounded on a text-based close reading around hooks' (1984) framework of intersecting systems of dominance and Fanon (1967) theory of colonial alienation, shows how colonial labor exploitation dehumanized African men and strips them of the role provider. This leads them to reproduce the same master-subject system in their very family. Textual evidence, ranging from wage-driven demotion and the naturalization of hierarchy to domestic authority claims, confirms that domestic patriarchy operates not as inherited privilege, but as a reaction to colonial powerlessness. In response, the women's collective resistance, culminating in the march to Dakar, functions as a counter-wound targeting both colonial power and domestic dominance at once. The major scientific contribution of this work lies in adapting hooks' (1984) "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" to French West Africa, offering a conceptualization of domestic oppression as a compensatory response to racialized trauma. Based on these results, future research can further develop this analytical reflection of hooks (1984) and Fanon (1967) and put them into dialog with other postcolonial African texts to examine whether displaced oppression recurs across various colonial labor regimes. They can also deepen the comparison to see whether Black diaspora writers theorize the domestic impact of systemic racism.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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