“Her Three Days”
by Sembene Ousmane

Interpretations of Character and Themes

Names of the Group members
Table of Contents

- Introduction
Introduction

In order to pick a story we were all interested in we each listed a few works that we enjoyed or that had stuck with us and “Her Three Days” was pretty consistent in all our lists. From there we each found our individual inspiration for our own projects that could represent the different elements or characters from the story. We were attracted to this story because of the many interesting levels and cultural implications to the story and by Noumbe with her mixed emotions of loyalty contrasted with the strength to stand her ground. We were drawn to the themes of sacrifice and hope, the lengths one will go for love, and the unique perspective of a woman in her cultural surroundings that are a little different than our own.

These objectives also contributed to inspiring and capturing the themes we wanted to depict in our pieces:

Week 3 -
Objective 2: For students to learn how women cope with polygamy.
Objective 4: For the students to learn how to recognize symbolism within literature.
Objective 5: For the students to think critically about feminism and the historical and cultural elements within these stories, and how they apply to the given situations in the stories we are reading.

Week 5 -
Objective 2: For the students to learn about how gender expectations of and behaviors change due to various geographical and cultural locations.
For each of our individual art pieces we looked to explored themes that related to our course objectives, such as the varying gender roles and expectations in specific communities, the internal struggle of women in polygamous marriages, and varying feminist issues through historical and cultural elements. Through our own projects, we interpreted themes of Noumbe’s emotions and characteristics like her strength, vulnerability, and her internal struggles, the dynamics inside her home, and the elements of polygamous marriages. We used all different mediums from cooking to found objects on the beach. By representing her character on many levels and from different angles, we hope to portray her in a way that helps to understand the complexity and depth of this very interesting story.

“Her Three Days” relates to other stories from our class in that Noumbe experiences an internal conflict between love and obedience for her husband and the desire to be appreciated and respected in her community, which are common themes that came across in our readings amongst diverse cultures; such as with characters from “One Night” by Rosaura Sánchez and “Sweat, Sugar, and Blood” by Suzanne Dracius. Additionally, this story also relates to a woman's place in her society and makes an interesting commentary on the dynamics of a polygamous relationship. “Her Three Days” also has themes dealing with ageism connecting with the stories from week seven, in that we see Noumbe coming to realize she is no longer the favorite, in other words she has become an outdated wife to Mustapha. All in all, this is a well-rounded story that has elements and themes that relate well to other stories we have read in this class.
“She blinked; her eyes were like two worn buttonholes, with lashes that were like frayed thread, in little clusters of fives and threes; the whites were the color of old ivory.”
- Her Three Days by Sembène Ousmane

This portrait of Noumbe from the story Her Three Days is based off of the quote above which is found on page 144. The character's eyes are the focus of the drawing and are supposed to appear both hopeful and tired. The goal was to show both Noumbe’s strength and her vulnerability.
I really enjoyed the story of “Her Three Days” and was glad that my group was interested in using that as our central theme. My first idea was to make some sort of collage using broken pottery to represent the three plates that Noumbe breaks. I wasn’t sure that I could pull off what I was imagining though and as I was looking over the story again I found the quote describing her eyes. I was really drawn to how complete a picture of the character it gave me even though it only was about one of her features and I decided I wanted to try and draw a picture of Noumbe based on that quote. I’m not very good at drawing people so I searched online for pictures of women from Senegal and found the image on the right. Something about it stood out to me and so I used it as inspiration for my first sketch which I did in pencil. After that, I started going in with india ink pens to create what became the final outline. I uploaded it to my computer and used Photoshop to add the color. Initially, I was only planning to color the whites of her eyes, but as I looked at the image more I felt like the whole image needed color because my sense of Senegal is that it is a vibrant place.
Interpretation

As I was thinking of what I wanted to do for this process I began to think of the various wives Mustapha has and what each of those houses would look like. Although he has four wives in the story, when I think polygamy I automatically think three wives. Therefore, I decided to do a tri-fold. As I was reading the story I was getting influences as to what their houses would be made out of. At the beginning of the story Noumbe is looking out beyond the village for her husband beyond “muddle of roofs, some tiled, others thatch or galvanized iron,” that was why each “house” has these different roofs. It was my way of including the village into this collective house. I am no artist by any means, so the roofs (from left to right) are galvanized iron, tile, and thatch.

Noumbe was my favorite wife and I felt she deserved, what I believe to be the most sturdy roof, so I gave her the tile roof.

I chose to not give any of them a face, besides Noumbe frowning, because I don’t think the other wives are important enough to differentiate using a face. However, I did, to the best of my artistic abilities, differentiate them using different colored head coverings.
**Interpretation**

**CENTER:** In the center I drew what represents her house. The “lavish” table in the center represents all the work Noumbe puts in to ensure that her husband enjoys his time with all the food and other tasks to take care of Mustapha. At the head of the table is a large purple (color of royalty) bed with two pillows for Mustapha and Noumbe, surrounding the table there are 4 beds and a smaller cradle that represents the five children Noumbe had with Mustapha.  

**LEFT:** On the fold to the very left we see Noumbe with a cup of coffee, which she never made because of her heart, and on the table there is stale bread showing that Mustapha has yet to show and Noumbe sits at this “lavish” table worrying over him not coming.  

**RIGHT:** Lastly, on the right of this fine tri-fold I added the other three wives of Mustaphas’. There you’ll see a woman washing clothes, the other with two pans in her hands, the third enclosed in a heart with Mustapha. This is the newest wife and I put her in the heart because she is much younger than Noumbe and the heart represents that Mustapha is able to have more children with this younger wife. These were just different characteristics that each wife brings to the table, one, like Noumbe, makes tasty dishes while the other does tidy work exceptionally well.
Noumbe’s Compound and Mustapha’s Wives
Process of Creation. I wanted to do something to represent the way in which the women lived waiting on their men and for their three days. I had this image of a compound where all these women and their children live in poverty with a mental countdown to when their husbands would come and visit them. My artistic skills are limited, but not my creativity! I was not feeling very inspired with creating a piece at home with ideas I brainstormed, so I headed out to dunes and beach with my dogs to build my piece. Thankfully, I got a few pictures of it taken before a great tsunami called "High Tide" ripped through the village.

Interpretation. My representation models a compound in which a group of women live waiting for their husbands. Each pine cone represents a different one of Mustapha's wives' houses all connected with a wild strawberry stolon. From right to left goes the youngest/newest wife to the oldest as represented by the flower or feather by each pine cone. The youngest has a bright healthy bunch of yellow flowers, Noumbe has a single flower, the third wife has a bunch of tufted seeds of flowers past, and the oldest has a fungus and moss covered pine cone with a raggedy feather. In front of each house is a series of ice plant sprigs to represent the wives and all their children, the number of children increasing with age and longevity of marriage. Additionally, there are folded pine needles and grass in front of the pine cones representing a countdown till the number of days left till their husband visits. The order from youngest to oldest is; a heart to signify how her heart is currently fulfilled with her husband’s presence, 19 days, 41 days, and 61 days. The simplicity and similarity of all the women show the perspective in which the men like Mustapha view their wives as property, entertainment, and reproductive vessels who are all the same and only differ in age and beauty.
A Senegalese Feast

Mâfe Ginaar (Peanut and Chicken Stew), Accara (Black-Eyed Pea Fritters), & white rice

Sombi (coconut rice pudding)
Interpretation

In spirit of the important element of cooking in the story “Her Three Days” by Senegalese author Ousmane Sembène, I have prepared a meal using traditional Senegalese recipes, as Noumbe did for her husband as well as the other wives. For Noumbe, preparing a large meal was her way of attempting to exert power over her husband, by trying to out-cook the other wives she was able to make her ever-disappearing husband stay home a little longer than he had planned. The idea that wives try to cook bigger and better meals than their husband’s other wives is an interesting side of polygamy. Coinciding well with our objective of how women cope with polygamy, presenting the struggles of the women involved in these situations is important since they too often get brushed aside and unconsidered. The story also provides interesting perspectives on the role of women given their cultural elements, themes that coincide with our objective #5, because it presents a woman who is dutifully performing the tasks that are expected of her in her culture, such as being the ultimate caretaker of the children as well as the talented chef for the multiple members in her family. So in a futile attempt to prove her worth, she cooks an elaborate meal for her distant husband. This story is also a perfect example of how gender expectations can change across different geographical and cultural locations, and Noumbe is an example of what is expected of Senegalese women in polygamous marriages. I think the meal represents the way she plays out the role that is expected of her, her dedication as a wife, her display of strength and stubbornness, yet also her human emotions such as jealousy.

For my project, to represent the character of Noumbe and her struggles, emotions, and dedication I prepared three dishes: 1) màfe ginaar, a peanut and chicken stew made with peanut butter, vegetables, and served over white rice (there was one piece of chicken left at the end of the meal, just like what Noumbe saved for her husband after her children had eaten), 2) accara, black-eyed pea fritters made with onion and deep fried (absolutely delicious), and 3) sombi, coconut rice pudding for dessert, made with white rice, coconut flakes, and coconut milk.
The Process of Creation: My contribution to our story, *Her Three Days*, is a mixed media piece. I used acrylic paint and pen to illustrate with a digital overlay depicting the nature of Noumbe’s heart condition. Initially I made a collage but wasn’t satisfied and then I made a small drawing that inspired this piece. I wanted to include plenty of symbols and references to Noumbe’s heart condition in the piece so I picked apart the story to do that. The texture of my piece didn’t show up in the picture so I added a digital overlay to it to create texture. When making the piece I tried to put myself in the perspective of Noumbe and consider all the psychological triggers that stressed her. Noumbe endured a lot of stress and anxieties trying to maintain in a good place with her husband amongst his other wives. Her life revolves around the relationship she has with her husband. Noumbe also carries the stress of having to live in poverty and raising her son with limited resources. The art piece I created demonstrates the weight Noumbe carries in her heart.

**Interpretation:**

I filled her heart with all her anxieties and included different symbols across the piece that shared a relationship to her heart condition. In the heart are: the other three wives, a sun and moon surrounding a clock, the laughter and eye of her husband, the number three, and lines from the story that fill the heart demonstrating Noumbe being in her husband’s control. Below the heart is Noumbe serving herself a dose of consolidation. The background is a horizon made out of threes.
Interpretation

The other three wives intimidate Noumbe, especially the youngest because the husband favors her. In the story Noumbe is compelled to compete for her husband’s affection and it takes a great toll on her. In the heart the women are in order from the youngest, the favorite before Noumbe, and the oldest. The youngest wears a West African symbol called Duafe, wooden comb, which represents beauty and in her head wrap are the words “the young one”. In the center is the wife previous to Noumbe, in her head wrap I wrote the words “old fav”. The last wife in line is the first wife of Mustapha, in her head wrap she has the words “first one” and her dress appears skeleton like.

The sun and moon in the heart surrounding the clock represent the days that go by that she spends anticipating his visit. The clock also represents Noumbe’s anticipation because of the time spent waiting on him and refers to her time with him was being jeopardized by the time he spent with his other wife.

The mouth and eye of her husband symbolizes the lack of respect he gave upon his arrival. His eye represents the criticisms he sought and his mouth the verbal criticisms he directed to Noumbe. He not only disrespected her but she felt foolish having anticipated him so greatly.

The number 3 has many references in the story which include her three days, the other three wives, and the three plates she broke to demonstrate her outrage to her husband. In the story the line “She imagined what the next three days would be like; already her "three days" filled her whole horizon” inspired me to make a horizon behind the heart out of a series of threes. Also the color is used to illustrate apprehension and excitement which also contributes to Noumbe’s heart condition.

These lines fill Noumbe’s heart with hope and frustration contributing to her weak heart:
"Mustapha is such a kind man, and so noble in his attitude,"
"If he weren't, he wouldn't be my master,"
"Mustapha will come, all the same. This is my last night."
“Ever since Friday she had been harboring spiteful words to throw in his face. He would beat her, of course ... But never mind.

The bottle of syrup pours the words “I shall wait for him”, to represent the reassurance she feeds herself as she works her heart anticipating his arrival all day and night.
Discussion Prompts

1) Review the introduction slide of Senegalese women over the decades comparing 1974/75 (when the story was written) to present day and the link below. What points can you relate from “Her Three Days”? How does this relate to our themes, particularly the oppression of women and the value of education in progress? How does Senegalese polygamy perpetuate this?

Article of interest: "Polygamy Throttles Women in Senegal"

2) Which art piece struck you the most and why?

3) How do you think Noumbe would have artistically depicted herself? ie. How do you think Noumbe views herself?

4) What themes do you see in each art piece?
It was great getting to know you all through discussions!

This picture while not politically correct, provides some insight to how the men/husbands might view the women/wives and the dynamic of polygamy.