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Cultural and Political Alienations in Sembene Ousmane's *Xala*

By Sikiru Adeyemi Ogundokun

Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria

Abstract - Linguistic alienation is a wall, which separates the African elite away from their fellow African brothers and sisters. This gap is what we intend to break because it is a kind of cultural alienation, which hinders development in all its ramifications. Our search light in this paper is on cultural and political segregations in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala*. We demonstrate that El Hadji Kader Beye, the chief character in the story represents the Senegalese elite in a post-colonial setting while the beggars stand-in for the oppressed masses, who are more than 80% of the country's population. The oppressed make themselves relevant in the scheme of societal affairs by being the ones that have solution to the *xala*, a disease of impotence which the protagonist in the story suffers. The spitting act becomes a form of freedom of speech to voice out their mind; especially by showing their displeasure over an exploitative system in the perceived new dispensation. As its purpose, the paper validates the fact that art and society are two interlocking entities. Hanged on sociological criticism, the paper ends with a warning that Africans in general should see the embracement of their culture particularly language as the root of durable and sustainable developments.

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I. INTRODUCTION

For the fact that literature is an open concept, it is variously defined or described. In 1968, Wellek and Warren define literature as "a social institution, using as its medium language, as a social creation...Literature represents life and life is in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation".

Warner Berthoff (1981) says; "... literature itself has its own purpose and determinants... never wholly autonomous it draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life experience of its producers in their time... but it never speaks for the totality of that culture," Therefore, literature or any work of art generally is not closed, independent or self-sufficient on its own. There is a connection between literature and the milieu/environment where it is produced and this fact has been demonstrated in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala*.. Since social problems are systemic things; literature as a product of a given human society can be employed to solve or at least to reduce social challenges by

consistently flogging such issues and recommending functional remedies to the identified perceived social "*brouhaha*"; hindrances, disturbances or impediments.

Literature is designed on the basis of prevailing daily or persistent events both socio-culturally and ideologically. Achebe (1988) "Literature, whether handed down by the word of mouth, or in print, gives us a second handle on reality, enabling us to encounter in the safe, manageable dimension of make-believe the very same threat to integrity that may assail the psyche in real life, and at the same providing through the self discovery which imparts a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are found within problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us".

Cyril Mokwenye (2000) "Literature was (and it is still) the most efficient medium of manifesting African culture and civilization, while poetry became the most effective genre for expressing it ... not just to illustrating and defending Africa's cultural values ...but also to the rehabilitation of Africa's damaged image, ...". We, however, extend the frontier of our discussion beyond poetry because poetry is not the only genre of literature. There are three major genres of literature namely: drama, poetry and prose. All these branches of literature have potential ingredients which make them functional platform to showcase Africa's beliefs, feelings, norms, values and aspirations which can translate into desired societal development.

Literature is not just a piece of writing, which only entertains. It is equally, at the same time too, a means of expressing ideas, views, opinions, experiences, feelings, body of knowledge, cultural values as well as teaching moral lessons and healing souls. Literature has turned out to be" a medium of appending contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society; since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. It is far from being ambiguous that literature buys into the expressive function of a given language. And, the understanding of culture and the society, which are potential ingredients on which literature is premised, paves the way for an effective development", (Ogundokun, Sikiru A., 2013).

Through protest writing, radical but reasonable African creative artists condemn the follies and the vices in their societies. They frown at corruption, bad

Author : Department of Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, College of Humanities and Culture, Ikire, Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria. E-mail : akorede4sure@gmail.com

governance, repressive policies, woman oppression, moral decadence and societal disturbances such as religious intolerant, with a view to making positive changes, which might accelerate human and material developments in Africa and the world at large. The primary aim of these committed African writers is the genuine struggle for cultural and socio-political revolution using literary activities as a platform. The different peoples of the world are made to understand the African world view through writing both now and before independence.

The major challenge of the 20th century is racial segregation but in this 21st century cultural issues have presented themselves as the most disturbing determinants, which militate against global developments. UNESCO sees culture as "What has shaped societies' and individuals' ways of life; while certainly rooted in ancestral values, it is also a source of dialogue, exchange, innovation and creativity, and the foundation stone of endogenous systems of solidarity, forms of expression and ways of transmitting knowledge that are as valid for meeting the challenges of tomorrow as for preserving traditions", (UNESCO, 2005). In a simple term, culture is an aspect of people's identity which promotes social integration and organization among a community of people.

Once the culture of a people is captured by another people, the people whose culture is invaded will remain in a perpetual darkness, perhaps till the kingdom comes. Culture is a soft-ware, the moment it is inflicted by the virus of another culture; the affected culture is crippled and becomes impotent.

However, culture is never static; it is dynamic, hence, it should adopt itself to constructive and meaningful changes which come or evolve with time. In this modern world which is ruled by science and technology, an unhealthy attachment to cruel crude culture is unacceptable as it hinders societal development.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our favored theory for this paper is the sociological criticism because we examine a social phenomenon. Sociological approach to the study of literature holds that literature and other forms of creative arts should be examined in the cultural, economic and political context in which they are written, produced or received. This literary theory explores the connections/relationships between the artist/writer and his or her society. To understand a writer's literary work(s), it may probe into the writer's society as well as studying how societal elements are represented in the literature itself since it is believed that literature has certain functions to perform in contributing to the development of human societies through moral or behavior re-orientation. And, of course, our adoption of

the sociological approach of literary criticism can be justified since this critical approach or theory is believed to be "the most apt to render a full account of modern African literature" because it (the approach) takes into consideration "everything within our society which has informed the work", Abiola Irele (1971).

III. ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

Let us begin by taking a peep into the story. Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* is about a successful Muslim business man named El Hadji Kader Beye, who lives in Dakar, capital of Senegal, a West African country. This El Hadji suffers a misfortune after his third marriage. There is a swift fall from being a wealthy man to an absolute humiliated man as a result of impotence he suffers.

Bending on solving his health challenge, El Hadji moves from one healer to another without a permanent solution. This sickness takes greater part of his time; he cannot attend to his business any more. Hence, he is insolvent and bankrupt. He is cut off from his business associates and he feels dejected.

One fateful morning, a beggar who claims El Hadji is the cause of his ruined life many years back, reveals that he is responsible for El Hadji's impotence. The only cure to the spell is for El Hadji to stand naked before the beggar and other beggars who accompany him to El Hadji's house to spit on him (El Hadji) twice. The police, the security agent of the state is at hand; fully armed thinking there will be a breakdown of law and order but surprisingly, El Hadji accepts and endures the condition given to him in desperation!

One of the major elements of cultural identity is language. In short, language, which makes man different from other animals, is the pivot of any culture. It drives culture because cultural traits are transmitted from one generation to another through language. In this regards therefore, by seeing the speaking of his local language as ridiculous, barbaric, degrading and an uncivilized act or practice, El Hadji, the main character in *Xala* is an agent of cultural alienation. He is indeed a bastard, an out-cast, who ceases to be an "omolùàbí"; an acceptable member of his community.

El Hadji overtly nails Rama, her daughter for speaking their indigenous language each time he speaks French with her. Let us hear the irresponsible father: «...pourquoi quand je te parle en Français, tu me réponds en Wolof? »

Besides the linguistic slavery which El Hadji is suffering from, he extends his ignorance to another aspect of cultural practice. He refuses to sit on a mortar and straddle the pestle on the night of his third wedding as a traditional cleansing ritual to neutralize the efficacy of spells of impotence.

The consequence of his cultural rejection or denial is that he is unable to consummate his marriage

as he suddenly becomes impotent. El Hadji stupidly describes a culture he has practiced for years as “*histoires*”, a mere made-up, which makes no sense what so ever!

Sad enough, El Hadji's betrayal of his culture takes him no where than being in isolation. He is neither here nor there. He is neither “fish” nor “meat”. An African by birth but has denounced being African. He has rejected African practices, norms and values. He does not have anything to build on to make himself a French man for the color of his skin, at least, will not permit him.

El Hadji has separated himself through linguistic line so much that he crucifies Rama, his own daughter for speaking Wolof, their mother tongue. El Hadji, an archetype of most African elite does speak the white man's language as a show-off to demonstrate their superiority over the uneducated larger population. El Hadji and his likes are bound to meet their waterloo. Those who are ashamed of their culture and demonstrate traitorous attitude towards it (culture) are suffering from colonial madness and, or mental slavery. It is not only El Hadji, it includes other elite who fall in this category. The plural pronoun of you, “vous” which El Hadji's aunt uses when addressing him validates our claim.

Sembène Ousmane does not call for a total rejection of the colonial master's tongue/language; rather he wants the use of such language restricted only to official quarters. In *Xala*, Rama demonstrates the mind of Sembène Ousmane, the revolutionary artist by speaking French when addressing a police man. This is the only time Rama speaks French, the colonial master's language in the story. A survey of his literary creations shows that Sembène Ousmane makes his films in indigenous languages to make-up for his inability to communicate with over 80% of his people, the Senegalese audience who are illiterate and cannot read his novels and, or collections of short stories which are written in French.

Another aspect of culture which suffers a setback in the hands of African elite as demonstrated in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* is the mode of dressing. At the beginning of the story, the elite wear traditional African outfits but later we see them in tuxedos, an indication that they have been assimilated and given themselves up to the western culture. They are nothing but traitors. They have indeed culturally isolated themselves from their people. This is a wall or a fence, which needs to be broken for the purpose of peaceful co-existence in African society.

Annoyingly, the kind of polygamy which fails to meet the socio-economic justification and religious injunctions is the only aspect of African culture which the African elite joyfully embraced for selfish reasons. For instance, El Hadji's practice of polygamy is informed by

sexual greed and mere personal-aggrandizement (show-off)!

In scholarly studies over the years, the inter-relationship between literature and society has been strongly attested. The writer or artist is an individual subject to emotions and feelings and he/she is a product of certain social make-ups, which literary work is potentially a response.

Sartre (1948) observes thus; “The writer has no means of escape, we want him to embrace his time closely, and it is his lot: it is made for him and he is made for it,” Sembène Ousmane demonstrates this fact in his novel, *Xala* by reflecting on political alienation in his country. Neo-colonialism, a new stage of colonialism after independence, is a mechanism used by the foreign powers to remotely control, dictate and dominate the economic and political spheres in African states. Barango (1980) observes: “By neo-colonialism, we mean the practice of granting a sort of independence with the concealed intention of making the liberated country a client state, and controlling it effectively by means other than political ones.” This new order brings about divide and rule, which set Africans against one another. Politically, the elite are incapable of providing the much awaited leadership. They are mere rubber-stamp, carbon-copy of the colonial order; mimetic machinery that reflects a psychological departure from what belongs to them. It is a direct path to destruction as we have made to see in El Hadji's symbolic *xala*. Dupont Durant, the French mentor of the president, a character behind the curtain in the story, who plays the role of a special adviser, represents an elongation of the colonial rule. It is also an indication that Africans are ill-prepared for the independence they get. They have no programs/agenda, no vision and no leadership training. All that they do is to scramble for or fight over leftovers for their own gain to enrich themselves. They do not care about their oath to improve living conditions of their people. They are crabs in the same basket tearing each other apart in order to lay their hands on the few resources, which are available. « Qui sommes-nous, si ce n'est que des minables commissionnaires moins que des sous-traitants. Nous ne faisons que de la redistribution des restes que l'on veuille bien nous céder... Nous sommes tous des crabes dans un même panier... apprentis sorciers et mal initiés dans les affaires... »

Sembène Ousmane derives joy in the practice of making fun of human actions with a view to correcting the excessiveness or weakness in a given society. This practice is called as satire. Adeoti (1994) says, “Satire is pleasurable mechanism evolved by the society through which it copes with deviation from accepted codes of behavior” Satire is an attack on follies and, or vices demonstrated by an individual, a group of people or a given society with the intention to correct such dirty or

unacceptable behavior It is used to achieve a reaction of contempt.

Neo-colonialism is another form of imperialism through which the industrially powerful nations manipulate and dominate the weak/poor nations culturally, economically, politically and socially. The African elite blindly follow the wicked and exploitative foot print of their colonialists not only through the divide and rule strategy but also by humiliating the ordinary defenseless people with the security agents who are paid with the people's hard earn money. For instance, people who advocate for genuine changes are painted as revolutionists and they are forced out of the system into exile. « ...Si tu n'es pas contente, tu iras faire ta révolution ailleurs. Ces sont les gens comme moi, ...qui avons bouté les colons et libéré le pays... » Beggars are seen as human refuse so; the police are to get them off the streets. The packing of the beggars into police vans and driving them off the streets to where only God knows is a political alienation. The picture here reminds one of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a political satire, where the novelist exposes political madness in English society at a time in history. Indeed, some animals are more equal than the others even in the post-colonial African society as reveals in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala*.

The social stratification in the land can be connected to the capitalist tendency inherited by the new leading elite. The beggars are not just there because they like their condition; instead, they are victims of fate and, or circumstance engineered by the insensitivity of their leaders in the affairs of state governance. The available resources are not prudently distributed.

The few elite embezzle the little drops, rather than directing the resources towards developmental projects, which will benefit all and sundry. It is evident that the African elite are corrupt. Corruption is till date the bane of social vices in African society. The money those Senegalese elite collect from the colonialists after the independence becomes bile, which contaminates and cripples the economy of the country. It is liquor which intoxicates the elite and later renders them impotent. African countries are in bad state of indebtedness, flat broke up to their ears, even with cuts in government expenditures like the removal of subsidy on basic daily commodities. Africans cannot afford two meals daily still, their perceived leaders keep stocking money in foreign accounts without any impunity.

In 1998, Okey, D. Ebele captures the human condition in African society thus: "It is evident today; the rural communities have been cut off from the urban areas because their roads have become impassable. Most, if not all our communities, are smarting from their rustic eerie darkness. The people of our hinterland are hungry for development, and desirous of the opening up of their villages to beat back the forays of want,

deprivation, poverty, primitivism, superstition. Generally, they long for better living conditions and the benefits of science and technology."

The African elite are incapable of bringing socio-economic progress required by their country through their leadership because their idea of national freedom or independence is too narrow. They think independence is just sacking the colonial lords and replacing them with the natives to oversee state matters without any sense of direction. One would have expected the new elite to correct the anomalies, which the colonial imperialists left behind in the polity; that is, the faulty policies which are not in consonance with African context.

As a result of his wealth and political influence/power, El Hadji ignorantly alienates himself socio-economically, culturally, politically and even psychologically from his people and community. However, El Hadji's eventual acceptance of the prescribed cure to his *xala*, impotence is a rebirth of his consciousness. To restore his manhood, El Hadji is told to stand naked while beggars spit on him and this he does. In African society, this spitting act speaks volume. It reminds one of the fact that there is always a pay-back time. In other words, there is punishment for any sin or offence which one commits whether against humanity or God. The didactic ingredient of this spitting act cannot be treated with a pint of salt. It calls for caution and moral uprightness in all that one does at all times.

The beggars represent the masses, the oppressed people of Africa in general and in Senegal in particular while El Hadji symbolizes the African elite, the opportunists who do not have what it takes to give the good governance which the people yawn for. In African world view, spitting literarily and figuratively connotes dissatisfaction. It is hazardous to spit on someone. It is more harmful than the open insult or vulgar abuse. It is a demonstration of despise, hatred and/or disgust. The oppressed masses use this act of spitting as a weapon to press home their point that never again would an exploitative and insensitive government has a place in their country.

The search for a cure for "xala", impotence can be translated as the inability of the newly independent African state to achieve a political order which can provide human and infrastructural developments. Durable and sustainable developments need to be tied to socio-economic, cultural and political realities of any human society. This is the view of Sembène Ousmane in *Xala*, the novelist's account on 1970s Senegalese government. And, as a matter of fact, this is the view we own too. From the study, it can be deduced that the oppressed in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* are well mobilized and they behave as true agents of positive social transformation or reformation.

Radical or revolutionary artists “do not merely testify to the conditions of social crisis but offer a precise diagnosis [as well as remedies to cure the identified social ailments],” (Vazquez 1973). This has been validated by our author, Sembène Ousmane in *Xala*. As a realist and a social pathologist, he suggested solutions to the social problems which he has identified in the society he designed and presented in the novel under review. The writer's experiences are brought into his work to inform and educate his publics for the purpose of influencing the society at the end. “...literature is crucial in shaping the mentality of a people, it is crucial in shaping their identity. Literature therefore has a role to play in shaping people's consciousness”, (Darah 1987).

IV. CONCLUSION

Sembène Ousmane has underscored the fact that it is possible to use art as a weapon or an instrument to fight against repressive policies, cultural alienation and other societal vices so as to develop the society since there is a deep relationship between art and the society which paves the way for its creation and eventual production. Art is a weapon “for fighting oppressive ideologies such as capitalism, fascism and other totalitarian hegemonic”, (Vazquez 1973).

It has been practically demonstrated that when people disassociate or distance themselves from their culture, it is a rape on their system. Blind political affiliation to ex-colonialists will never bring about the sustainable development which African countries are longing for. Africans should disconnect themselves from colonial legacy to totally free themselves from mental slavery and perpetual poverty. Hence, African elite need a rebirth of their consciousness and a re-orientation to reestablish them into their cultural heritage. A river which forgets its source will soon dry-up. In this paper, we have shown Sembène Ousmane as a revolutionary artist, who is interested in the purification of his society. In this case, he attempts to detoxify the African elite from cultural and political alienations.

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