

MARRIAGE AND FINANCIAL GREED IN POST INDEPENDENT AFRICA: A REVIEW OF SEMBÈNE OUSMANE'S *XALA*

Rabiu Iyanda ¹ 

Department of French
College of Humanities and Culture, Ikire campus.

¹ Osun State University (Nigeria)

rabiu.iyanda@uniosun.edu.ng

Abstract

Literature is the projection of the civilization where it emanates. It explores all human activities: social, educational, economic and political. Marriage and several other areas of human activities are not left out of the concerns of literature. Marriage, the union of two people drawn together by love, is a dynamic aspect of human beings. It continues to be a field of interest to scholars across several fields of studies with different points of view. Before the advent of foreign cultures and religions in Africa, marriage was much valued by Africans. The worth of any man was measured by the number of wives under his roof in the traditional African life. This paper investigates marriages in African societies and reviews the deviations and advances in marital choices. Adopting the practice literary theory. *Xala*, a novel written by Sembène Ousmane is used to depict this cultural syndrome. In the novel, Sembène uses a symbol of sexual impotence, *xala*, inflicted on a nouveau riche, El-Hadji Bèye who thought money is everything by the less privileged ones to expose the hidden traits in this cultural ailment. *Xala* is inflicted to ridicule El-Hadji Bèye and was unable to consummate his wedding as a result of his perceived traditional cultural ailment. He betrayed the confidence reposed in him by the society. The changes brought about by the modern life industry and western cultures to African marriages and the roles in matrimonial homes are also x-rayed. The paper reveals African marriages in the present days and some reasons for being polygamous such as personal motives, economy, prestige and competition for power. The consequences of polygamy on the society, both traditional and modern, and some plausible ways to curtail the negative effects in the contemporary days are proffered.

Keywords: African marriage, Cultural syndrome, Practice literary theory, traditional ailment.

Introduction

Literature is considered as mirror of the society. It reflects the social-political and cultural life of people. Literature is also seen as an artistic activity that is deeply entrenched and comparatively persistent patterns of emotion and comportment of the society from which it is melded. It is interpreted as imitating customs and beliefs, as well as illuminating the code of values and behaviours. Kolawole, Kehinde and Mbipon (2001) corroborate this point of view that literature is not only an imitation of life, but also a concept which derives from certain sustainable principles. They conclude by saying that, a multifaceted relationship therefore exists

¹ **Corresponding author:** Aderogba Adeyemi
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0357-1891>

between literature and society, and the diverse conceptualizations of the relationship remain overt. The cultural ideas and happenings in societies have been factors that constitute major themes in literary writings. There are times when a collection of events arises and provokes literary leitmotifs. Writers put pen to paper to react for or against such a situation.

Considering the written African literature since inception, topics have been varying with time and events. From the pre-independence era to the writing for independence, the post-independence writings till present era, the era of contemporary African literature is worried majorly about happenings in society. Waugh (2006, p. 10) opines that

Literature has traditionally been seen as that mode of writing which seems, most completely, to allow us to converse with the past and to enter imaginatively and sympathetically the minds of others. How to speak with the dead/ so that not only/ our but their/ words are valid.

These contemporary topics in literary oeuvres are concerned with conducts of the society. It could be said to be premised on the nagging varying instabilities, socio-political and socio-economic uncertainties of the contending transformation. In the post-independence African literary writings; poems, plays and novels, francophone, Anglophone or any other language(s), similar themes are treated. These themes are treated to conform with the realities in such a society. The effects of cultural contact, the traditional and modern, have greatly influenced the customs. These traditions cannot be the same any longer. This diversified culture remains a problem and constitutes some nuisance in these communities. African literature could be branded into 5 major themes; colonialism, liberation, nationalism, displacement and rootlessness. The present themes in African literature witness expression of social changes across societies. Mazrui et al (1993) on African literature,

.... mention seven conflicts as themes: the clash between Africa's past and present, between tradition and modernity, between indigenous and foreign, between individualism and community, between socialism and capitalism, between development and self-reliance and between Africanity and humanity.

Fraser (1980) agrees with Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah that independence is a source of disillusionment to most Blacks because it has failed to deliver on the key objectives that spurred the quest for independence. The legacy of capitalism which was inherited from the colonial encounter could no longer be discarded. This leads to the exploitation; the black man then replicates the white men's forms of expression. The aspirations of Africans remain unsatisfied. These constitute topics for writers who expose the relationship between Europe and Africa and the consequences of this socio-political/cultural meeting on contemporary daily life after the so-called independence.

Christianity and Islam constitute another prominent factor that adversely affects the Africans, their cultures and socio-political life. The adoption of any of these religions has turned many Africans against their cultures and traditions. This then creates a major theme of concern to some other literary writers. These writings among other intentions are to intimate the greater community of happenings in his or her milieu. These oeuvres also serve as instrument that corrects, entertains or educates the citizenry among several other roles of literature. Sembène Ousmane, a Senegalese writer who is widely known for his contributions to literary writings on social issues from the pre-independence period to date wrote many novels in French language. Some of these novels are translated to his language of immediate community, (Wolof) and later to English language. The purpose of using this indigenous language is for his immediate audience/community to maximally benefit from the various themes and moral lessons being

passed across. Many of those people he wrote for could not understand the language of the colonizer, the French language. Presenting the message in the native language, Wolof, makes it to get to the desirable audience. Several themes are treated by authors, ranging from the family ways of life, the societal engagements and that of the entire nation where such a work of art emanates. Example of such themes are; the case of nouveaux rich Africans in *Xala*, by Sembène Ousmane. The situation of women in the traditional and Islamic dominated countries, *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ. The bureaucratic African that intends to get rid of the nationals who are handicap for foreigners to be interested in their nations, to attract tourism. *La grève des battù* by Aminata Sow-Fall and several other writers with varying themes of the day-to-day events in African nations. Ramonu Sanusi in his novel, *Un Nègre a violé une Blonde à Dallas*, exposes contemporary societal vices of the younger generations efforts to get rich at all cost. The protagonist, Ajanaku, travels across continents without any particular job aside pick-pocketing. He demonstrates this seamlessly before he returns to his home town with affluence acquired from this treacherous job. Some writers write to condemn the injustices perpetrated in the education of children. Most societies prefer the male child while the female child does not enjoy the same privilege. The case of Juliette in the *Trois prétendants...un mari* by Guillaume Oyono Mbia is a good example. Juliette was sent to school so as to fetch her parents more money in marriage. Several themes to correct, to expose, to satirize or to condemn social vices in societies constitute literary topics in Africa and most human civilizations.

2.1 Marriage

Marriage is a journey through life which enhances and enriches entire communities. Marriage promotes sharing, tolerance, consideration, empathy, selflessness and several other virtues. Marriage is an important step in the life of every human being on earth. It is a societal institution that is dynamic and subject to change over time. Different cultures have different formalities and beliefs about marriage. Love, economic status, religious principles, and social acceptance are just a few reasons individuals marry across different cultures. Marriage is a public institution governed by overt rules and laws about the rights and responsibilities of its members. African cultures are very diverse and full of traditions based on social norms that have been all over the places for generations. African marriage systems do not share several characteristics with others. They cherish parental background and good names than any other factors. Parental history is usually the intrinsic element that must be properly investigated. After which the transfer of bride price- cash, goods or services- from the groom or his family to the bride's family. This exchange is both real and symbolic, as it marks the woman's passage from one social group to the other.

For Africans, marriage is a matter between families as much as between the bride and the groom. Many families even arrange the marriages of their members. Social life is arranged around a strong clan and extended family ties. This plays a vital role in the marriage process. The heterogeneity of societies coupled with significant regional differences suggests that individuals of different ages and backgrounds may have quite varied perceptions of marriage. Those partners we may consider appropriate or inappropriate, and those characters or comportments considered suitable or unscrupulous are the products of multiple factors including our families, culture, religion, media, social contacts, and various other pervasive factors such as technology and globalization. Societies in Africa attempt to maximize rewards and minimize costs. This is done by comparing what one gives up compared to what they receive in marriage. A husband may receive social status, sexual enhancement, increased labor, and the knowledge that his bloodline will continue, while giving up some sort of economic compensation to the family of the wife. The wife may receive resources, adult status as wife,

and protection in return for her labor and obedience to her husband. Traditional African marriages with a homemaker wife and a breadwinner husband serve to reinforce the patriarchal order; prevent women from being acknowledged for their contributions to the family, the community, and the larger society; and often have negative consequences for women with respect to financial, emotional, and physical factors (Blaisure & Allen, 1995). In the Islamic perspectives, when a man marries, he has fulfilled half of his religious obligations. It is left for such an adherent to fear Allah to achieve the remaining (Hadith). This shows that marriage is an obligatory thing in the Islamic and traditional African settings.

2.2 Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* at a glance.

The novel, *Xala* written in the year 1970 is a post-independence novel. It concentrates on the effect of culture contact and the aftermath of the European exit. This constitutes major themes for most literary writers of the period. Writers of the period concentrate on the legacies left behind by the colonizers and how Africans administer themselves socially, politically, economically and culturally. Like all other writers, Sembène, uses this novel to expose the nouveau-rich African that exploits others. These new African leaders accumulate wealth by manipulating others. They make use of ill-gotten wealth to oppress the masses in the society. Sembène uses the Marxist approach to present his views and to condemn this vice in Senegal as in other African nations after independence in this novel. The oppressed masses are seen revolting against the injustice perpetrated by the oppressor. The reason for the Marxist idea by the writer, is for an egalitarian society; things must be shared equally, irrespective of sex, economic status or any factors. It represents the emancipation of the oppressed. During the rule of the Whites in Senegal, EL-Hadji Beye is an activist who condemns the actions of the Whites. He was victimized and dismissed from the teaching appointment he engaged in to make ends meet. Later, he became the first indigenous president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Senegal. This post is to oversee the affairs of buying and selling food stuffs and other consumables. To the amazement of every person in the community, El Hadji Beye turned out to be a rich person who cared only for his immediate family. He dispossesses several families of their landed properties. He oppressed at will and turned to a different person who had no mercy for the less privileged in the society. Babatunde Ayeleru agrees with Bestman, M.T. (1981. p. 107) on this set of nouveaux riches Africans:

Ils sont les escrocs et voire (les oiseaux noirs qui ont occupé le nid abandonné par les oiseaux blancs). Ils volent et détournent les fonds publics en laissant la masse en état de pauvreté. Les nouveaux riches de l'Afrique postcoloniale n'ont pas l'intérêt de la masse africaine au cœur. Ils montent au pouvoir pour satisfaire aux besoins de leurs familles immédiates.

They were cheats, black birds that occupy beds abandoned by the white birds. They steal and divert public funds and leave the masses at the poverty level. The post-colonial nouveau riches Africans do not have interest of the masses at heart. They get to position of authority only to benefit themselves and their immediate families. (Translation).

This accounts for corruption that continues to thrive in the African community after independence and is affecting the development of the continent excessively. El Hadji Kadir Beye finds it difficult to give even a little to the beggars in his vicinity and uses this post, the President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, to dispossess these people of their belongings. An illustration is the case of his relative he dispossessed of landed property. He knows quite well that the land belongs to the entire family, but because of his position, he fraudulently asserts himself ownership of the land to the disadvantage of others. This member of the family who is handicapped, causes the ruin of El Hadji Beye. El Hadji Beye plans to have

the third wife, Ngoné, during this wedding, Beye demonstrates fortune. Both necessary and unnecessary items were procured with public funds. The family of this new wife also marries N'goné to Beye because of his affluence, this will allow them to be sent on pilgrimage to Mecca and their financial burden will be taken care of by their rich in-law, El Hadji Beye. Despite the fact that the money belongs to the entire society, El Hadji Beye continues to spend it the way he likes. Several others are denied of reaping the fruits of their labour. Justice is not done amidst his wives. There's no equal treatment as stipulated by the Islamic religion he practices. These wives receive impartial treatment, financially, sexually and morally from the husband, El Hadji Beye. His motive for marrying the third wife is just to be reckoned with as an affluent person in the society. He already has eleven children from his two wives of which some of these children are already in the university. This is to show that it is not lack of children from the previous wives that made him to marry the third wife. The case of partiality could be seen in many areas. For example, he doesn't buy a car for the second wife, while the third wife is provided with a Mercedes Benz and 10,000 litres of petrol for its running. This looks ridiculous as such a privilege is not enjoyed by his other wives. Islam frowns at this type of treatment among wives. Economically, the hero lavishly spends the money that belongs to the entire community. This brings about financial difficulty to the community; the poor remains poor while the privileged continues to cheat them. This shows how the nouveaux riches dissipate collective resources on all categories of unnecessary things at the expense of the masses. This handicapped person later inflicts El Hadji Beye with xala, impotence and he is unable to consummate his marriage. This was revealed on the night of his third marriage. Unable to consummate a marriage is considered a disgrace. Attempt to solve this problem, exposes Beye, and also constitutes the beginning of his ruin, politically, economically, and socially. In the end, he discovers that the xala resulted from a curse sent by a Dakar beggar whose land El Hadji had expropriated. The protagonist finally recovers his manhood by submitting to the beggar's demands that he strips and be spat upon; the story ends with a freeze-frame of his spittle-covered body

2.3 Theoretical framework

Practice literary theory is adopted in this study. Practice theory is derived from many theories and many theorists made contributions to its limelight. It is derived from works of Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, Latour, Garfinkel and Butler. It is said to be linked to post structuralism, ethnomethodology, structuralism, actor-network theory (and science studies), and performativity. Practice theory according to Reckwitz, (2002, p. 251) is one of a variety of 'cultural theories.' Other cultural theories focus on mental qualities, while practice theory focuses on pre-theoretical assumptions on human conduct. Biernacki attaches four concepts to this theory. The body, the mind, things and knowledge. The body according to Biernacki, is controlled by rational choices, norms and values. The mind entails the use of the body in various ways and engagement in mental activities, we think and act accordingly. Things, according to Biernacki, involves using things in a particular moment and for certain purposes. Knowledge, entails ways of understanding knowing how ways of wanting and of feeling are linked to each other within a practice. Reckwitz (2002, p. 253).

This practice literary theory is used as the framework for this study as it is an established fact that human beings generally use what they possess to seek and obtain other new things. The body, mind, things and knowledge are mingled to accomplish people's desires. Money is a factor for many achievements in human society. Most crimes and actions are premised on money which is purposely to satisfy the mind, the body or the knowledge. The protagonist of

the novel *Xala*, El Hadji Beye, uses his position of authority and public money to acquire his desire, third wife.

3.1 Contextual explanation of marriage in the novel

There is no great civilization that has ever existed that abstain from marriage as one of its core fundamentals of nation building. Marriage is cherished in Africa and beyond, because it solidifies relationships that enrich our communities and nations by bringing forth new life and new hope. In the Islamic religion, polygamy is a lawful relationship between a man and more than one woman though this practice should not exceed four wives at a time. Quran 4: 3 states that:

And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of (other) women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then (marry only) one or those your right hands possess (i. e. slaves). That is more suitable that you may not incline (to injustice).

It is worthy of mention that there are some stringent conditions attached to this practice. The major protagonist in the novel, *Xala*, El-Hadji Beye, is a Muslim who follows the tenet of the religion. He has gone to Mecca, reason for being addressed as El-Hadji. He has already two wives before embarking on marrying the third one, N'goné. He exhibits his affluence in the preparation for this third wife. The Islamic religion's acceptance of this practice, polygamy, coupled with the African ways of living that accept polygamy could be said to be the motivating factor that led El-Hadji to his willingness to marry more than one wife. He is also interested because of the financial status of the who would be in laws. He is to lord them financially.

Using practice literary theory to examine the concept, it is an established fact that human beings generally use what they possess to seek and obtain other new things. The body, mind, things and knowledge are mingled to accomplish such. The bride's parents make use of their daughter to achieve their desired religious ambitions of performing the holy pilgrimage to Mecca and satisfy other economic exigencies. El-Hadji Beye commits himself financially to satisfy the needs of the bride's parents and achieve his aim of marrying N'goné even at the detriment of his other wives. Weddings can be very elaborate, involving feasting and dancing for days within a community. They can be very simple, or even be performed as huge ceremonies involving many different couples. The marriage between El-Hadji Beye and N'goné is performed amidst very elaborate ceremonies. El-Hadji Beye, uses his influence and affluence as the president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry to divert public money for his personal comfort and exhibition. This is to make him gain more popularity and to be considered a well-to-do person in the community. This marriage is not the first as he has two wives already. It is an established fact that polygamy is permitted for many social reasons. However, it is by permission and not an obligation or recommendation in the Qur'an that a Muslim male should indulge in polygamy. It is revealed in the novel, *Xala*, that Beye does not follow the laid down principles on polygamy.

This Qur'anic verse expresses above clearly Allah's purpose concerning polygamy. Marrying more than one, two, three or four is subject to equity in man's dealing with these wives. The husband has to be just in treating these wives especially in the areas of accommodation, expenditure, and food, clothing and kind treatment. If a man feels that he will fail to observe such equity, then he is not allowed to practice this choice. Considering the way El-Hadji Beye comports himself before, during and after his marriage, it is glaring that he lacks the knowledge of basic things required of him amidst his wives.

4. African beliefs and philosophy

Africans have their life patterns before the cultural contact with the Western World. They lived a communal life. They cherished good virtues and protect their names irrespective of their economic status. Good character is the most cherished aspect of life in Africa. In every community, virtuous life is taught. In this part of the world, you may be wealthy, have many children, and build several houses, all come to nothing if you lack good character. A life without moral rectitude is nothing but vanity. Covetousness is not part of their character. They tend to be satisfied with their economic status. They work harder to acquire more at the expense of greediness and stealing. They don't believe in short cut to riches.

Sembène in the novel *Xala* presents El Hadji Beye as a greedy individual who cheats others including his immediate family members. He dispossesses them of their parcel of land. These people in return ridicule him and drag his reputations in the mud. Traditional African method is used to deal with this man that constitutes himself to a charlatan. Despite that he has the means to finance an elaborate wedding and he demonstrates it during the marriage ceremony with N'Goné, these people with the aid of African traditions render the expenses a waste. Of what benefit is a wedding that the bride cannot consummate? Efforts to reap the fruits of this elaborate spendings on the marriage proved abortive. Despite his affluence and position of authority, he was unable to realize his goal. El Hadji Beye demonstrates some traits inherit from the white masters. He fought against this exploitation during the colonial era. He becomes an oppressor at the exit of these same people he condemned. Inflicting xala on El Hadji Beye by the immediate family member is to show that African cherish good names and always ready to reject any act of disgrace at any time.

5. Conclusion

The paper investigates the trend of things in post-independence Africa especially as it happened in Senegal and by extension in many other African nations. Many pro-self-government advocates turn to oppressors. In a way to reject these bad attitudes, African masses wage different hostilities against these sets of leaders. Such is the case of El Hadji Beye in this novel that is examined. This is part of the problems in contemporary African societies and all hands must be on deck to correct such anomalies in each society. The yearning for material things is now constituting a great menace and should be frowned upon by every person. Every person in any position of authority should do the needful, should be just and act unaffectedly. When justice is established peace and improvement will grow and a society will be able to forge ahead in all areas of endeavours.

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