

African Literary Artists and Political Imaging: An Instance of Sembene Ousmane's Xala as a Paradigm

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Abstract

The concepts of literature enhance well round development of the individual and the society at large. Its representation of life through the provision of texts by literary artists assists to liberate the society from the socio-political ills and moral decadence that hinder its development. The responsibility of literary artist is to see his work as having particular relevance to his society and its changing value; and his works should help the society in achieving meaningful goals. After the independence, Africa assumes the role of a free continent with an assumption that it could develop itself to its fullest capacity in all field of human endeavour. Regrettably, the post-independent African leaders that were saddled with the responsibility of governance scuttle that lofty dream through misrule, corruption and embezzlement of public funds. The post-independent period in Africa has left most of its masses in a weakened position, as they have been continually rendered politically crippled and exploited. The depth of socio-political and economic crises that have engulfed the African states has forced literary artists to capture those realities as truthfully as possible. How vividly these realities are captured by Sembene Ousmane's Xala is the subject of the paper. The authors conclude that the future of Africa is in the hand

of African masses coming together to fight for their own liberation and genuine independence.

Keywords: Literary Artist, Politics, Political development, Sociological approach.

Introduction

The concepts of literature enhance well round development of the individual and the society at large. Its presentation of life through the medium of writing to sensitise the polity, serves as a reforming tool in the society. Literature deals basically with people, their society, and institutions. In fact, literature has been defined as life itself. Amuta (1989) cited in Sadiq (2010, p. 137) defines literature “as the exploration of human experience”. He also contends that literature is crucial in shaping the mentality of a people and in shaping their identity.

Literature in Africa expounds on serious issues in the society through symbols, analogies, and indirect interpretations, in addition to presenting a critical perspective with a touch of sensitivity. In Soyinka’s (1988) view, cited in Amodu (2013, p. 123), “...art should expose, reflect, and indeed magnify the decadence, rotted underbelly of a society that has lost its direction.

Arts, Artist and Society

An artist is a social being and art is a social phenomenon that affects the society. The relationship between these three (Arts, the Artist, and the Society) cannot be ignored for they are intertwined. The artist lives in the society and his relationship with the society gives birth to his art. So, he creates his art in consonant with the particular type of relationship he has with the society. As corollary, Adolfo

(1973:113-114) is of the opinion that: “Art and society are necessarily connected. No art has been unaffected by social influences and no art failed in turn to influence the society”.

Buttressing this view, Sadiq (2010) states that, any literary artist has to see his/her writings as having particular relevance to his/her society and its changing values. His/her literary works should help the society in achieving meaningful goals and this can be achieved by subjecting his/her creative imagination and writings to the services of socio-economic reconstruction.

Since art is the product of the relationship between the artist and the society, it therefore has influences on the society. The validity of this line of argument arises from the submission of Oyediji (1999) which states that the experiences of artists with the society are reflected in their works. This implies that literature is a depiction of social dynamics in art form. The artist pictures his experience in writing. Through this, he educates his society.

Judging by the role literary artist has played in many great nations' life, there is no doubt that literature has become a veritable communication network through which collective human opinions, ideologies and aspirations are transmitted and interpreted for the survival of the society. In many countries, information or communication through literature has been used as a weapon of minimising the problems if political leadership in Nigeria in particular and African countries in general.

Nnolim (2006) asserting the submission of Soyinka when he declared in an entry in world authors after his release from detention; “I have one abiding religion, human liberty”. And he vowed to use art to challenge unacceptable situations in society. He declared elsewhere:

I believe implicitly that any work of art opens out the horizons of the human mind and intellect, is by its very nature a force for change, a medium, or change (pp. 6-7).

This is a charge to the literary artist to use literature as a tool for expressing real, imaginative, visionary, philosophical, historical, sociological and political thoughts, to inform, educate, reform and change the African people’s attitude.

Corroborating this view, Osunkentan (2004, p. 319) submit that:

The first generation of African writers concentrated on depicting horrible portraits of the effects of colonisation on both French and English-speaking countries. Their writings between 1956 and 1965 focused on sensitising the people, rejection and revolt against colonialism.

In a similar vein, literary movements in Africa have, as their primary aim sensitising their fellow Africans to write and struggle for liberation. Under the aegis of “Negritude”, W.E.D Dubois and L.S. Senghor embarked on conscience awakening programmes to recognise the value of their African origin and culture. These are explications on how literary arts, the artists and the society are interrelated; and how the literary artist is a

“watchdog” of the society correcting its social ills or acting as a “physician” x-raying the society or diagnosing its illness and prescribing medication.

Literature and Politics

Literature has for long been having a significant impact on the political development of nations. During the colonial era, major literary movements in Africa, have, as their primary goal, sensitising their fellow Africans to write and struggle for liberation. These movements were in the forefront of the struggles that led to restoring democratic governance in most African counties. African writers have had the task of writing about the experiences of African before independence as well as post-independence disappointment.

The above assertion is in tandem with the views of Saro-Wiwa (1999:81) which states that:

Literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics; by intervention and writers must not merely write to amuse or to take a bemused critical look at society. He must play an interventionist role.

As a result of the above functions of literature, Plato’s classical notion of literature as a mirror has persisted till contemporary times. African literature, like all literatures across nations, races, culture and time, fulfils its roles as a mirror, which reflects the realities of the people by depicting the sordid fact of African society. African writers are preoccupied with the political scenario in the continent because according to Amase and Kaan (2015, p. 27), “Post-independent African nations have persistently had to grapple with the nagging problems of bad leadership occasioned by monumental corruption

and greed. There is therefore a general feeling of disillusionment and betrayal of the masses by the ruling class". This accounts for why the dominant thematic concern of their writings is politics and the social ills prevalent in the society; as people's awareness on politics and how to bring about a political change can be influenced by literature.

In different societies information and communication by the medium of literature has been used a weapon of minimising the problems of political leadership in African countries. This is in consonance with Nwoga's (1978, p. 26) assertion that:

Our literature must be seen as part of the struggle for the liberation of Africa, politically and morally. It must reflect a full aspect for the value of human life, our aspiration for human life and that of humanity in general.

In treating African politics various issues are crystallised through the creative lenses of the literary artist. Such issues include among other things; colonialism, neo-colonialism, monumental corruption, looting of public treasury, misrule, bribery, mismanagement of public funds, erosion of popular will and dictatorship.

Renowned African novelists who express optimism in the struggle for the liberation of the penurious masses in the post-independent African nation states include Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Femi Osofisan, Sembene Ousmane, Ayi Kwei Armah and Alex La Guma. In their writings, these artists unveil the archetypal theme of inhumanity of man to man as

exemplified in the relationship between the ruler and the ruled in the post-independent Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is premised on the sociological approach to literature pioneered by Aristotle and others, which is preoccupied with moral assessment and instruction. According to this school, any art that is not committed to practical social realities is purposeless art. Literary sociology is a post-war development. It upholds that literature is subject to social change since it is a product of social researches. All literary works are reflections of societies they are set. This implies that literature is a depiction of social dynamics in art form. This view is corroborated by Osofisan (2001) stating that literature reflects the agonies and hope of the time, shows a way out of all the problems and condemns negative forces.

Balogun (2002, p. 508) argues that the sociological approach to literature “asserts that art should reflect life; it should be relentless and reliable chronicle of human experiences within the society.” It should portray vividly and objectively too, the prevalent need or spirit of the time. This approach also contends that art should reform society. It should be a corrector, instructor and guide towards the improvement of same. Therefore, the artist must have a good knowledge of his setting. This import of the sociological approach to literature is revolutionary in nature. The society must undergo a transformation process and this is only visible as the artist exposes the oddities and intricacies therein. This is genuinely what is obtainable in the texts being studied.

Xala

This paper critically examines the different social relationships in the post-independent African as epitomised by Sembene Ousmane in *Xala*. The choice of *Xala* for our analysis is hinged on the fact that the concept of 'Xala' in the Senegalese mythology connotes impotency. Thus, in this context, it is being used as a metaphor to describe African independence as an abortive one. This illusiveness is more unequivocally demonstrated in *Xala* than any other African novel, which treats the issue of neo-colonialism (Olajide 2007). In Ogunjimi's (1985) view, the adoption of *Xala* by Ousmane to provoke dialectics in the novel is deliberate. The impotency (*Xala*), which clothes the conflicts in the novel, is metaphorical. It paralyses the effort of the individual in a dependently independent society like Senegal. It depicts an aborted independence which neo-colonialism encompasses.

Sembene Ousmane's preoccupation in the novel is with his country Senegal in particular and Africa in general. He reconstitutes socio-political and economic history through a fictional world informed by his African experience and ideology.

In *Xala*, Ousmane chastises the new bourgeoisie in African ruling class, denounces corruption, hypocrisy and exploitation of the poor masses which has become the new order. Neo-colonialism is another facet of imperialism that Ousmane condemns in *Xala*. In the novel, he creates a typical neo-colonial setting where injustice, corruption and the scramble for wealth are prevalent. The vices were not only revealed by the literary artist, but he also proffers solution to them through a revolutionary option.

He chooses El-Hadji Beye, a business elite and at the helm of affairs as the main focus through which he centres his attack on the African political/business elite. In an ironic portrait of greatness amidst inevitable fall, Ousmane creates the towering personality of the El-Hadji who has just attained one of the most powerful position hitherto occupied only by the white, but on the urge to marrying his third wife discovers that he is impotent. El-Hadji cannot “perform” on his wedding night; his bride goes to bed a virgin and wakes up a virgin. El-Hadji’s manhood, we are informed, “crumpled like a wet piece of paper” (a comic allusion to the new nation’s constitution). There is an explanation, though: someone has put a hex, specifically, a Xala on him.

Ousmane’s treatment of the post-independence period in Senegal and the threat of new-colonialism is in his presentation of the powerful lineage the El-Hadji and the consequent failure with Xala sickness. Hadji Beye’s impulsive desires and egoism produce the conflict, which centres on him. In the novel, the Xala is single-handedly suffered by him because of his greed for wealth at the expense of the masses.

With the Xala sickness, his personality begins to diminish in the eyes of his friends who represent the powerful echelon of power and influence. In the eyes of his wives, especially the new bride, the El-Hadji is no longer the man whose presence is reckoned with in bed. He becomes, together with his fervent search for the cure extra-restless. He is prepared to go to any length to find the cure to his sickness. His passionate search for cure marks the gradual descending of the El-Hadji towering personality until it becomes to the lowest of the low.

He becomes an enterprising market for the marabout that solicit him with their different prescriptions and preparations to get his money. In a powerful scene evoking contempt, Ousmane satirises the El-Hadji who has come to a seer, Kaft for cure:

Because of his European clothes El-Hadji hesitated for a moment, then seated himself as best as he could on the ground. Ousmane (1976, p. 63). (Subsequent references shall be by page number only).

In his frantic efforts looking for his cure, he visited several wise-men healers and witch doctors. One has him crawling on the floor, to the marriage bed, on his hands and knees – an activity that makes him suspiciously resemble some of the beggars he had earlier dismissed as “human trash”

There is conflict between the El-Hadji who is the representative of the bourgeoisie class and the beggar representing the exploited class. The El-Hadji who is suffering from impotence can only get cured if he can try the beggars’ formula. The beggars hold the cure to his Xala:

If you want to be cured, you are going to strip yourself naked, completely naked, El-Hadji. Naked, before us all. And each of us will split three times on you. You have the key to your cure. Make up your mind. I can tell you now, it was I who caused your Xala. (page 112).

Thus, the beggars who were once relegated become Ousmane’s positive alternative in revolutionary struggles. Also, the beggars’ formula is what El-Hadji must accept for the cure of Xala if he really wants to save himself from

the shame and humiliation that has overtaken him since he contracts the Xala. As such, he must be cured of his disease. At the end, El-Hadji submits:

Methodically El-Hadji unbuttoned his pyjamas jacket. The first spittle struck him in the face and the cure has begun. (p. 113).

Perhaps there is something symbolic in the beggars' insistence on the El-Hadji to remove his clothes. The cloth symbolises the false protection given him by wealth, power and influence at the expense of the seeming nothingness, depravity and near nakedness of the beggar. By removing his clothes therefore, the beggar is showing the El-Hadji what he is truly. The naked figure that stands astride the chair is the real, the undisputed, while the figure in European clothes is the Xala stricken, the false image of what he thinks he is. And by so doing, the El-Hadji is not only cured of the Xala but also of the false consciousness in which he has been living over the years. It is only the beggar and his likes that are able to distract the El-Hadji from the distorted vision of such an uneventful pleasure for a few like the villas and chauffeur-driven cars and youthful wives while many are living in penury.

Sembene Ousmane is a moralist, an idealist and a constructionist. He satirises the modern Africa in order to correct the excess and insensitivity. He even allows a lot of tragicomedy to egg us on to assimilate the horrendous misbehaviours of the political class.

Ousmane's use of the image of the wretched, the symbolic verbal and physical violence that the beggar and his troop carry to the El-Hadji's home and pivotal to and thematic in our understanding of the frustration of the

oppressed and the needy are not only to revenge but also to reverse the status quo. The smelly foul and rancid appearance of the wretched of the African continent is a consequence of moral pollution of the political leadership. Right from the opening scenes, it is impressed upon the reader that El-Hadji is a member of a selfish and exploiting class which has arrived by dubious means and which engages in conspicuous living to the detriment of the nation's economy.

The encounters in the novel are symbolic, descriptive and allegorical of the relationship between the rich, and the ruling class, the people of the influence and the proletariat who have been edged out of their possession, out of social justice, out of human recognition. The very people who are to protect them, to fight for their needs, now oppress them.

Olafioye (1989) is of the opinion that Ousmane wrote *Xala* a hilarious commentary to satirise the importance of the ruling class in an emergent African nation. *Xala* in Senegalese cultural parlance is sexual impotence, but in metaphorical term stands for the futility of oppression, inordinate ambition, the gleaning and grabbing of riches, the acquisition of ill-gotten wealth and certainly, the result of wasteful spending and egocentrism.

Xala goes far beyond the frontiers of Senegal. It is African as a whole which cannot produce anything fruitful as its elites and leaders are oblivious of the masses of their need and despair. The tragedy of El-Hadji owes its dimension to another tragedy, the one of a continent betrayed by its own sons. Ousmane's formula is in the belief that the future of Africa is in the hands of African masses coming together to fight for their own liberation

and genuine independence. It is only in this noble endeavour that a better future can be ensured to Africa and the Africans.

In conclusion, the authors have shown in the forgoing discussion that art is inexorably tied to the society and it could be utilised to fight bad governance, corruption, neo-colonialism etc. Ousmane specifically in this text and other revolutionary artists in general in their writings seek to establish the predicament and dilemma in the society. Intriguingly, these artists do not only affirm the existence of exigency but also proffer solution to it.

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