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SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE WORKS OF OUSMANE SEMBÈNE

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Synopsis:

Ousmane Sembène, the father of African cinema, is noted for his thought provoking in-depth analysis of the human condition in both his novels and films. Political, social, economic and women's rights issues are foremost in these portrayals. Sembène's body of work was dedicated in demonstrating the plight of the underclass, the poor and the disfranchised. This paper focuses on three of his works that underscore social inequality in African society: *Xala* (1973), *Le Mandat* (The Money Order) written in 1966 and *La Noire de* (Black Girl), found in his collection of short stories, *Voltaïque* (Tribal Scars), published in 1962.

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Ousmane Sembène, the father of African cinema, is noted for his thought provoking in-depth analysis of the human condition in both his novels and films. Political, social, economic and women's rights issues are foremost in his portrayals. Sembène's body of work was dedicated in demonstrating the plight of the underclass, the poor and the disenfranchised. Even as a young man, Sembène was an active member in labor unions. He helped to organize a strike against the Dakar-Niger railroad which assisted workers in securing improved working conditions. This study focuses on social inequality viewed in three of Sembène's works. However, before analyzing the social inequality in these works, the state of inequality in sub-Saharan Africa as well as the meaning of the term "social inequality" must be gleaned.

"Social inequality refers to disparities in the distribution of economic assets and income as well as between the overall quality and luxury of each person's existence within a society."¹ The data from *Afritorial* magazine states that "Africa [is] home to seven of the world's fastest-growing economies, with 70% of Africa's population living in countries that have averaged economic growth rates in excess of 4 per cent over the past decade and result in the region increasing the pace of growth well beyond 5 per cent over the next two years" (1). The article continues by citing the 2012 *Africa Progress Report on Jobs, Justice and Equity* which "warns

that Africa's strong economic growth trajectory is at risk because of rising inequality and marginalization of whole sections of society" (*Afritorial 2*).

In the article, *Combating Inequality in Africa*, according to a 2005 study by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA):

[It] was reported that in recent decades, African and Latin American countries have had the highest levels of inequality in income. Such inequality meant that when economic downturn or disaster struck, those at the bottom of the income scale, the most vulnerable, were hurt disproportionately. And when national incomes rose, those at the top benefited the most, while the poor saw few gains, if any. (Harsh 3)

The article also mentions that "the number of people in sub-Saharan Africa living in absolute poverty (with incomes of less than one dollar per day) doubled during those two decades, according to the DESA report" (Harsh 4).

This view of social inequality as well as economic inequality serves as the back drop and underlying cause of turmoil in the three works studied here by Ousmane Sembène: *Xala* (1973), *Le Mandat* (1966) (*Mandabi*, the film title) and *La Noire de...* (1962). Though the texts were written in the 20th century, the plight of the poor, portrayed in these works, still exists today.

In *Xala*, the misfortunate and weak, the poor and the disadvantaged are mistreated by the protagonist El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye (El Hadji), a *nouveau riche*. One sees the failures and ultimate downfall of this neo-colonial Senegalese businessman. His unscrupulous business dealings and his inability to care for three wives and pay his debts have led to his financial and moral downfall. Sembène underscores how the rich believe they are above the law and how the disadvantaged make El Hadji pay for his abuse of the system. El Hadji loses his manhood, two of his wives, and at the end, is subjugated by the very people that he had abused.

For ten years, El Hadji and his partners worked diligently so that they could become members of the Chamber of Commerce. They also strove to have one of their members become the President of this organization. That day finally arrived. El Hadji became President of the Chamber. Now they believed that they had achieved prestige, power, and wealth. This is also the day that El Hadji, in the polygamous tradition, married his third wife. “Cette troisième union le hissait au rang de la notabilité traditionnelle. En même temps, c’était une promotion” ‘This third union rased him to the rank of traditional nobility. At the same time, it was a promotion’² (*Xala* 12).

El Hadji came from a modest background. He was a former elementary school teacher who turned his attention to trade-union activities before venturing into the grocery trade business. Before becoming a member of the Chamber, he undertook many business schemes, most of them unsuccessful. He went from being the oppressed to becoming the oppressor. In his *African Literatures: An Introduction*, Oyeken Owomoyela reminds us that “the Africans who replaced Europeans as rulers were seen to have taken over their predecessors’ exploitation of the African masses” (104).

Oftentimes, in front of his business, on the sidewalk, there were beggars seeking El Hadji’s aid. He would either insist that they leave or he would have the police remove them. It is later discovered that one of these beggars cursed El Hadji with impotency or *xala*, causing him not to be able to consummate his third marriage. His impotency is not only physical but it is also a metaphor for his impotency to help his people and his continuing the policies of social inequity and suffering. El Hadji seeks desperately a cure to his problem. He spends a fortune in search of a cure and borrows heavily to pay for a solution. He finally is cured but El Hadji reneges on a

debt and he is once again cursed with impotency. Concomitantly, he reneges on his responsibility to help his country defeat poverty and social injustice.

Through his journey to seek a cure, one learns about the social conditions of present-day Africa, for not only is El Hadji impotent, but also the governmental agencies are afflicted with *xala*. Throughout El Hadji's odyssey, he unveils various conditions synonymous to an ineffective government. El Hadji goes bankrupt unable to pay his debts, just as many countries have gone bankrupt, unable to pay their debts. Finally he is expelled from his business circle because his bad credit has jeopardized the group's financial standing. At the end of the story, it is revealed that the beggar who continually came to his store seeking aid was one of the men El Hadji's family stole from back in the village. Because El Hadji's father was the chief of the village and his name was on the property, he sold the land that belonged to the village, leaving his people helpless and profiting from the goods, keeping the money for himself. The beggar recounts the story:

Te rappelles-tu avoir vendu un grand terrain situé Diéko (Jéko), appartenant à notre clan? Après avoir falsifié les noms claniques avec la complicité des hauts-placés, tu nous as expropriés. Malgré nos doléances, nos preuves de propriétés de clan, devant les tribunaux nous fûmes déboutés. Non content de t'être approprié notre bien, tu me fis arrêter et jeter en prison. Pourquoi? . . . Simplement parce que tu nous as volés! Volé d'une façon légale en apparence. (184-185)

Do you remember selling a large piece of land at Jeko belonging to our clan? After falsifying the clan names with the complicity of people in high places, you took our land from us. In spite of our protests, our proof of ownership, we lost our case in the courts. Not satisfied with taking our land you had me thrown into prison. Why? . . . Simply

because you had robbed us. Robbed us with all the appearances of legality. (Wake 99-100)

The beggar who had often haunted El Hadji with his singing, offers El Hadji a second chance to have his *xala* excised. El Hadji must go through a humiliating ritual to have his *xala* removed. He willingly submits to the ritual. He has reached a *prise de conscience* and is cognizant of his past errors and is willing to undergo the ceremony. Thus, one hopes that a remedy for Africa's problems will soon be found. As El Hadji decided to change, so too, must the government and its citizens find solutions to Africa's social, economic and political dilemmas.

The novel also illustrates the social dysfunctional elements of neo-colonialism. El Hadji loses his identity as a member of the community. He had sought solace in the fact that he could wear European suits, gold watches, drive a black Mercedes, drink only imported mineral water and afford three wives. However, all was based on a shallow foundation as previously mentioned. First of all, he had obtained his wealth dishonestly, becoming rich through the misery and suffering of others. Second, the banks and his creditors owned most everything. He admitted this to his Chamber group on the day he was ousted:

Qui sommes-nous? De minable commissionnaires, moins que des soustraitants. Nous ne faisons que de la redistribution. Redistribuer les restes que les gros veulent bien nous céder. . . . Ici, nous ne sommes que des crabes dans un panier. Nous voulons la place de l'ex-occupant. Nous y sommes. Cette Chambre en est la preuve. Quoi de changé, en général comme en particulier? Rien. Le colon est devenu plus fort, plus puissant, caché en nous, en nous ici présents. (154-156)

Who are we? Mere agents, less than petty traders! We merely redistribute. Redistribute the remains the big men deign to leave us. . . . We are nothing better than crabs in a basket. We want the ex-occupier's place? We have it. This Chamber is proof. Yet what change is there really in general or in particular? The colonialist is stronger, more powerful than ever before, hidden inside us, here in this very place. (Wake 83-84)

With the existential exclamation, *Qui sommes-nous?*, El Hadji hopes to awaken the consciousness of his fellow countrymen and business partners. He wants them to come to terms with who they really are—middlemen in a pyramid of the business world. If they could drop their persona of pretense, they, too could recognize that they are, in part, responsible for the social, economic and political inequality of their country and begin to make positive changes.

Social inequality and injustice also permeate Sembène's novel and film, *Le Mandat*. The protagonist's naïveté is highlighted in this comic and satirical portrayal of the disadvantaged being mistreated by unscrupulous and sometimes powerful people. Dieng, the protagonist, seeks help out of his seemingly hopeless situation but his innocence and lack of education lead to his despair. Sembène commented on how the movie, *Mandabi*, remains popular. "J'ai fait des films après *Le Mandat* mais tout le monde parle du *Mandat*" 'I made films after *The Money Order* but everyone talks about *The Money Order*.'³ He also mentioned that young people are astonished when they realize that the movie was produced more than twenty years ago. He further commented that, "C'est aussi valable maintenant. Plus valable maintenant que quand je le faisais" 'It is also valuable now. More valuable now than when I made it.'⁴

The problems exposed both in the novel and the film are still relevant today. The plot involves the trials and tribulations of a poor unemployed family man, Ibrahima Dieng (Dieng) of Dakar, who receives a *mandat* 'a money order' from his nephew who lives in Paris. His nephew,

Abdou, left Senegal because he could not find employment. Dieng encounters red-tape and many dishonest people while trying to cash his money order. The first problem he incurs is even before he personally receives the money order. When the postman comes to deliver the money order, he tells Dieng's two wives that they have received money from Paris, a sum of about 25,000 francs C.F.A., at that time the monetary unit in Senegal. This was the equivalent of 500 French francs or approximately 100 dollars. Since Dieng is not at home, they immediately go to the local store and purchase items on credit in anticipation of receiving the money. So not only does the merchant know of his soon to be "fortune" but surely the neighbors will soon find out and they, too, will want to benefit from his new found wealth.

Dieng has the letter that came with the money order translated for him and learns that he is to keep 2,000 C.F.A. for himself, he is to give the nephew's mother, his sister, 3,000 C.F.A. and the remaining 20,000 C.F.A. are to be set aside for the nephew and given to him upon his return to Dakar. So the sum he has received has dwindled considerably. And Dieng cannot even cash the money order because he does not have an identity card. The post office will hold the money order for two weeks before sending it back to Paris. Therefore, he must go and seek help to obtain an identity card. In doing so, as mentioned earlier, he encounters more than his share of scam artists including the person who translated the letter who wanted 50 C.F.A.

So he has no identity card. He finds out that in order to get an identity card he will need to produce a birth certificate, which he does not have. To get a birth certificate he needs to go to City Hall. When he goes there, he is unable to get the birth certificate because he does not know his exact date of birth. When he returns home, he is informed that many people have come by to borrow money or to borrow food.

Continuing his journey to get his money order cashed, he goes to see a distant relative who promises Dieng that he will assist him in getting a birth certificate. To assist Dieng to get his documents, the relative gives him a one hundred C.F.A. bill as well as a check for 1,000 C.F.A. A man, a passer-by, tells Dieng what to do in order to cash his check. For the information he asks for 300 C.F.A. out of the 1,000 check plus he has given a woman in the streets 25 C.F.A. who claimed to need the money to go home. He purchases photos that he never receives for 200 C.F.A. and still needs to purchase a 50 C.F.A. stamp. His sister comes to town to get her 3,000 C.F.A. and insists on getting the money even though the money order has not been cashed. One of his wives goes to the store to pawn her gold earrings worth 15,000 C.F.A. and is only given 2,000 C.F.A. for them. To add insult to injury Dieng must repay the loan in less than a week and a 50 C.F.A. fee is attached to the 2,000 C.F.A. loan. If he fails to do so, he will lose the earrings that are worth about 10 times the value of the loan.

His trials and tribulations continue. Dieng ends up giving another relative, his brother-in-law, power of attorney who goes to the post office and cashes the money order on Dieng's behalf. However, he is once again duped. This relative claims that after having cashed the money order he was robbed. As compensation, he gives Dieng a huge bag of rice and 5,000 C.F.A. Dieng is truly victimized and comes out much worse than when he started. He comments, "Il n'y a que la fourberie qui paye" 'Only dishonesty is rewarded' (190). The postman attempts to put a positive spin on the events by telling Dieng that it is people like Dieng who will help bring a positive change in the country's future: "Demain, nous changerons tout cela" 'Tomorrow we will change all of that' (190).

Mbye Cham in his article, "Art and Ideology in the Work of Sembène Ousmane and Hailé Gerima" underscores the poor being taken advantage of by those in power. He states,

“African reality is one of oppression and exploitation of the majority by a powerful and resource-laden foreign and indigenous minority” (82).

Social inequality and injustice are seen throughout the novel. One of the main factors in social inequality is the rate of high unemployment. Despite the positive growth rate in this region of Africa, the poverty rate continues to climb. The novel reiterates that high unemployment is a social problem that necessitates attention by the government. Dieng and many of his compatriots have been unemployed for several months even though they search continually for work. Even Dieng’s nephew had to leave Dakar for France to find work. Abdou states in the letter to his uncle, “A Dakar, il n’y a pas de travail. Je ne pouvais pas rester toute la journée, toutes les années assis” ‘In Dakar, there is no work. I could not stay all day, every year, doing nothing’ (126). According to Joseph Stiglitz, “A strengthened focus on education and the creation of appropriate funding mechanisms is paramount in creating social equity” (qtd. in *Afritorial* 3).

Finally, the short story, *La Noire de...* highlights the travails of the underclass, the uneducated and the poor, exploited by those in power. The story revolves around Diouana, a young Senegalese woman whose gradual disillusionment with an ideal France leads to her destruction. The setting unfolds as follows, “C’était le matin du 23 juin de l’an de grâce 1958” (157). This date reminds the reader that Francophone West Africa is still under French control though independence is just around the corner. In March 1958 Charles de Gaulle established the “Communauté française” which included most of these territories. However the union lasted only eighteen months. As a result, countries such as Senegal, Mali and Côte d’Ivoire became independent in the 1960s.

This morning of June 23, 1958 is the date that Diouana was discovered dead in the bathtub having cut her throat in a final act to escape her desolation in Antibes, France. Diouana had arrived in France in April 1958 to work for a couple that she had worked for in Dakar. She had taken a boat to travel to France while the couple and their four children had taken an airplane back to France. On the boat to France, Diouana passes Gorée Island, a symbol of slavery, where many Africans were shipped into slavery to various parts of the world. It is as if Diouana were being shipped off from her native land to endure servitude and hopelessness. However she left for France, hoping for a better life, socially and economically. Upon her arrival to France, she is fascinated by the beautiful landscape and compares it to her native land, “Elle dévorait tout de ses yeux, s’émerveillait, s’étonnait. Elle se meublait l’esprit. C’est beau! Toute l’Afrique lui apparaissait comme un taudis sordide” (174). ‘Her eyes took everything in and she gazed in wonder and admiration. Her mind became filled with these first impressions. How beautiful it was! Africa now seemed no more than a sordid slum’ (Ortzen 94).

In Dakar Diouana worked for the couple as a laundrywoman. The family requested that she return to France with them. She perceived this as the perfect opportunity to improve her condition:

Diouana voulait voir la France et revenir de ce pays dont tout le monde chante la beauté, la richesse, la douceur de vivre. On y faisait fortune. Déjà, sans avoir quitté la terre d’Afrique, elle se voyait sur le quai, à son retour de France, riche à millions, avec des vêtements pour tout le monde. Elle rêvait à la liberté d’aller où elle le désirait sans avoir à travailler comme une bête de somme. (165)

Diouana wanted to visit France and return home from the country so renowned for its beauty, wealth and pleasant living. You made your fortune there. Already, even before

leaving African soil, she could see herself on the quayside, just back from France, rolling in money and with clothes for everyone. She dreamed of the freedom she would have to go where she wanted, of not having to work like a horse. (Ortzen 88)

What Diouana was not aware of at the time, was that Mme P ... (the lady of the house) requested that she work in France as a source of cheap labor, for if she were to hire someone for the same work in France, they would not only charge more money, but they would want a day off (165). Mme P... (Madame) knew that hiring a maid from Africa would be to her economic advantage. Diouana would get no days off, work for a low salary and do all the household chores.

Not only was she exploited economically, but she was isolated socially with no family or friends. She had a relative living in Toulon, France but she does not know how to write and does not ask anyone to help her write letters to family in either Senegal or France. She communicated only in a limited amount of French such as “Viye Madame” ‘Yes, Madame’ (167) which limited her making friends in this foreign land. She was also carted to other family homes in France to make “native” meals. Indeed, she lacked formal education, was depressed and was isolated. She became like the African masks on her employers’ wall: devoid of meaning, now only pieces of wood, hollow, having no symbolism or cultural significance. She no longer existed as Diouana, the confident young woman in Senegal with friends and family. She had become the other, an object, *la noire de*.

Diouana finally understood that she was brought to France under false pretenses and that she served only for the economic gain of her employers: “Tout se clarifiat. Pourquoi Madame désirait-elle tant que je vienne? Ses largesses était calculées” (181). ‘It was all quite plain to her

now. Why had Madame been so anxious for her to come? There had been calculation behind the gifts and the little extras' (Ortzen 97).

Furthermore, *La Noire de...* deals with the questionable ideologies of neo-colonialism. These ideologies are based on or refer to specific beliefs or value systems. For instance, neo-colonial policy has a two-category system: the alleged superior and inferior classes where the former "will have the most of whatever the society defines as the best, and the least of the worst. In stark contrast, the alleged inferior group will have the least of the best and the most of the worst" (Jones).

Neo-colonialism is in fact the economic, cultural, religious and political power that former colonializing nations, such as France, Britain, Portugal and the United States, still maintain over their previous colonial territories. In his *Neo-colonialism: The Last State of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkrumah states that "neo-colonialism is imperialism in its final and perhaps its most dangerous state" (ix). He continues by stressing that "[t]he essence of neo-colonialism is that the state which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from the outside (ix). This statement emphasizes two of the three main means of neo-colonial oppression: the economic and the political exploitation (the other being social exploitation) that is used to maintain the alleged superior classes' dominance.

The third critique of neo-colonialism which stems from its socially dysfunctional system, is the economic policies that in some cases still enslave the former colony. Nkrumah underlines this aspect: "the result of neo-colonialism is that the foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world" (x). In *La Noire de...*, Diouana is utilized as an economic tool. Her employers save money by bringing one maid from

Africa. She is a source of cheap labor. Diouana finally realized that she was being exploited, “Vendue... vendue... achetée... achetée, se répétait-elle. On m’a achetée. Je fais tout le travail pour 3 000 francs. On m’a attirée, ficelée et je suis rivée là, comme une esclave” (182). ‘Sold, sold. . . bought, bought, she said to herself over and over again. I’ve been bought, I do all the work here for three thousand francs. I was enticed here, bound, and now I’m chained here like a slave’ (Ortzen 98).

Believing she has no escape, no way to return to her “self,” her identity, she commits suicide.

In the works studied in this paper, Sembène insists that one must do one’s best to improve the economic, social and political systems in Africa. From Diouana’s example, one learns that to improve one’s personal condition, one must not leave the country. She mistakenly believed that both her economic situation and her personal happiness would improve by going elsewhere, by going to France. Tive Corrêa, the retired sailor who warned her not to go to France states, “Je m’étais opposé que Diouana aille en France. . . . Quel est le jeune Africain qui n’ambitionne pas d’aller en France? Hélas! Les jeunes confondent vivre en France, et être domestique en France” (172). ‘I was against Diouana going to France. . . . Of course. Is there any young African who doesn’t long to go to France? Alas, the youngsters don’t know the difference between living in France and being a servant there’ (Ortzen 92). Tive Corrêa is portrayed as a broken down drunkard who suffered tremendously from having lived twenty years in France. The author offers, by reverse example, what one must not do in order to advance effectively in the community. In *Le Mandat*, as the postman emphasized, it is up to people like Ibrahima Dieng, to improve their country and to work for a positive future for their country. In the case of *Xala*, El Hadji warns his countrymen, his fellow members of the Chamber, that it is

up to them to improve the plight and circumstances of their country. To rid the neo-colonial albatross it is necessary to improve the social, economic and political situation of their country.

Noted as a modern-day griot, Sembène offers us these poignant examples of how the poor are disenfranchised, abused and mistreated. He sheds light on the consequences of not being educated, of losing one's cultural heritage and the manner in which those who are being misused must take charge of their destiny in order to rise above social inequality and injustice. They must take charge in order to survive.

Notes

1. "Social Inequality." *Wikipedia*. N.p., n.d. 1-12. Web. 11 Feb. 2014.
2. Translations are mine unless otherwise specified.
3. Sembène, Ousmane. Personal interview, 11 April 1990.
4. Sembène, Ousmane. Personal interview, 11 April 1990.

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