

Ousmane Sembene: A Progressive Writer

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Introduction

Ousmane Sembene, described as “the father of African cinema” (Gadjigo 98) holds a pivotal place in both African literature and film and has had a significant cultural contribution in the world of arts and letters. Born in colonial Senegal, both Sembene’s life journey and his large body of work correspond with the tumultuous socio-political climate of his time. It was through his works - in literature and cinema - that he was able to voice his progressive thoughts against the establishment and aspirations towards social equality.

The deep impact of his early life — of the struggles, of the atrocities, of the straddling of tradition and modernity and the crimes — would inform his perspective and his dedication to challenging the urgent issues of his time. Ugor also notes the same as:

“African literature often navigates the tensions between tradition and modernity, offering rich, multifaceted narratives.” (2020)

Having grown up in a colonial context in Senegal, where colonial rule was applied to him, he came in direct contact with the injustices and inequalities of the colonial rule. This was the background of the growing impetus that drove him towards the creation of narratives that belonged, on the one hand, to the world of real African experiences and which, on the other hand, tried to take a critical look at the systems of colonial oppression and its aftermath (Diawara 12; Barlet 45).

This research discusses the life, and the chronological development of the literature and the ideological influence while Ousmane Sembene was a progressive. Drawing upon close reading and analysis of his novels and films will help us to unveil the dramatic impact of his works

on African literature and cinema. Sembene, whose novels, *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), and *Xala* (1973) are about the struggles of West African societies against colonialism and after, shows characters who are trying to make sense of their condition and the condition of West Africa with all efforts to deconstruct colonial discursive practice (Diawara 12). His subsequent films, most notably *Black Girl* (1966) and *Moolaadé* (2004) are no exception to this rule, as they explore varying themes about gender inequality, cultural tradition, and social modernization in the worlds of contemporary Africa (Gadjigo, 98; Bekolo 25).

In addition, we also investigate the reception of Sembene (even more) revealing how his work has influenced the conversation on global social justice and the representation of culture within Africa and around the world. Bisschoff and Murphy in 2014 also point out here:

“African cinema has been marginalized and often overlooked in global film discourse, yet it holds a wealth of cultural, historical, and artistic value that demands recognition and appreciation.” (55)

Sembene's unique storytelling showed a system that not only entertained, but also educated and empowered people, by raising awareness of the themes of identity, liberation, and collective memory (Diawara 12; Apter 45).

At its core, an exploration into Ousmane Sembene illustrates the transformative abilities of progressive writers and artists to change history and advocate for societal change. While selecting our way through his literary and filmography, we are traveling into the heart of a great artist who challenged current rules and aspired for a better world through stories and cinema. (Andrade 20-22)

Early Life and Influences

It thus is very clear how Ousmane Sembene's rather moderate beginnings of his life paired with his passion and need for information and knowledge formed an important basis for being a progressive author (Diawara 95). Sembene hailed from Ziguinchor, Senegal, where he was

born on January 1, 1923, to humble beginnings that would be forever shaped by the cultural bounty of his homeland (Diawara 100). Exposed to the stark injustices of subjugation and marginalization as a child while living in a post-colonial society, his early years in Hong Kong shaped his values, which became the foundation of the art he would create in the future. In Harrow (2008) it states, “Sembene’s early encounters with the stark realities of colonialism left an enduring impression on his consciousness” (42). Despite his opportunities to attend school being limited and his ensuing lack of formal education, Sembene was predominately autodidactic, with an unrivaled passion for literature and storytelling (Diawara 101).

The myriad other factors that informed Sembene’s point of view came from equally dissimilar sources—both his direct experiences and the historical environment of colonized Africa. The lasting legacy of colonialism haunted Senegal, and the first-hand exposure that Sembene had to the starkness of this epoch scarred his soul for life. Sembene was profoundly influenced by griots, traditional West African storytellers, as noted by Diawara (1992): “Sembene’s encounters with local griots, traditional storytellers, profoundly influenced his understanding of the importance of narrative in preserving cultural identity” (102).

Looking back into the formative years of Sembene, it is clear that the events of his formative years and the lingering influences he received paved the way for a writer who would one-day author narratives more powerful than mere literary achievements, phenomenon that would serve as vital mediums to address the socio-political transitions of his time.

Literary Works

The literary legacy of Ousmane Sembene takes the form of a host of narratives buoyant with momentous themes as well as an enduring stridency to a progressive ethos. His canon of novels and short stories, including seminal texts like *God’s Bits of Wood*, *Xala*, and *The Black Docker* attest to his skill as a storyteller and commitment to speaking truthfully to social injustices in society. Pfaff (1997) writes, “*God’s Bits of Wood* vividly depicts the struggle of Senegalese railway workers

during a labor strike, serving as a poignant commentary on labour rights and the burdens of colonial oppression” (68). Likewise, *Xala* expertly satirizes post-colonial corruption concerning “the fate of the African bourgeoisie who suffer at the hands of impotency of a wealthy businessman that underscores the piece as an essential item in Sembene’s literary catalogue” (Vieira 89).

Sembene writes complex characters and deals with the minutiae of decolonization, gender equality, and class conflict. Here, in *The Black Docker*, he narrates the experiences of an African dockworker in France providing a perspective of the grim realities experienced by African migrants in Europe. Sembene, a passionate defender of women’s rights, was known to create female characters who were strong and subversive of gender norms. These thematic explorations reinforce his willingness to speak to issues not only of his era but of great significance to carries-over listeners. Therefore, Shama (2002) also correctly writes:

“Sembene’s portrayal of female characters often subverts traditional gender roles, presenting women as active agents of change within their societies.” (53)

Moreover, Sembene wrote beyond the page, continually incorporating his position as a leading African filmmaker. This particular blending of literary and filmic sensibilities can be seen in his works like *La Noire de...* (1966) and *Mandazi* (1968), where his gift for storytelling diverges beyond the realm of prose to reach the masses with a tale on the silver screen. In other words, Sembene’s literary and film work serve as riveting evidence of his legacy as a modern writer and engaged storyteller, devoted to the possibilities of advancing the social and political causes of his era.

Social and Political Context

The social and political circumstances in Senegal during Sembene’s formative years and the height of his career provide the political and social context to understand the profound influences of Sembene’s progressive writings. Sembene grew up under the shadow of Senegal’s colonial legacy, a French colony, and in his autobiography, “the traces of

this colonial history of had become indelible in his youth and his being (Harrow 44). In the same vein as many African nations, Senegal suffered the sort of cultural trauma imposed by European colonization and the resulting imposition of systemic disparities and exploitation. Ukadike (1994) also emphasizes the same, “The evolution of African cinema is deeply intertwined with the continent’s history of colonization and the subsequent struggle for independence” (24). So was the case in Senegal.

In doing so, he tapped specifically from his own experiences which were a reflection of the living conditions faced by his comrades. Raised in a community still under the heavy hand of colonial rule, he knew firsthand the harsh realities associated with oppression and exploitation. Senegalese generally led a very repressed life in which politics and the economy were directly controlled by the French authorities. Masses of poor Senegalese were denied basic rights and an education, leading to discontent among the masses, and demands for independence.

These experiences were crucible for an eventual emergence on the world stage as a social and political leader, Sembene came to prominence. Traveling across the complexities of colonial Senegal, inspired in him a fierce impatience for transformation. Harrow (2008) notes that Sembene lived much of his formative life under colonial reign in Senegal, largely informing his experiences of the oppression of his people, their suffering, and their struggle for independence and dignity. It was these experiences with the colonial injustices and disparities that made Sembene develop his identity as a writer if he saw every last chance he had to use his art to fight back against it. It was in this crucible of colonial oppression that the seeds were sown of his progressive ideas and his irrepressible will to question the existing order of things.

The following paragraphs of this paper have examined how Sembene made use of his literary and film works as powerful tools in addressing these vital social and political concerns. They amplified the voices of the marginalized and did so passionately for change in Africa pre- and post-colonial. Nwankwo (2018) also highlights the same when he writes, “Postcolonial African filmmakers navigate a landscape marked by the

legacies of colonialism and the challenges of contemporary globalism.” (12)

Progressive Themes in the Writing of Sembene

The literary and cinematic oeuvre of Ousmane Sembene symbolizes a living testament to his unwavering resolution in fighting for progressive values and social justice. Sembene weaves throughout his narrative pertinent themes that - challenging old social standards - also serve as indictments demanding justice and equality. That commitment to decolonization is paramount throughout his narrative, a thematic underpinning that becomes truly consistent throughout his works.

In *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembene powerfully depicts the unbroken will of the striking Senegalese railway workers up in arms against their abusive French colonial masters. In telling this story of the fight for workers' rights it also becomes a touching reflection on the wider march to African independence from colonialism. Bakayoko personifies the idea of resistance - he rouses his coworkers to fight against the exploitation and the injustice:

“We are going to hit here, We've had enough! We want to enjoy the rights of men, workers, and citizens of the country!” (Sembene 112).

Growing up in colonial Senegal provided the bedrock of inspiration that would inform Sembene's politics of social justice and resistance to oppression. Harrow in 2008 states, “Sembene's early life was spent under colonial rule in Senegal, an experience which left an indelible mark on his [perception] of the oppression of his people” (45). Based on his on-the-ground experiences he concluded that he would leverage his abilities as a storyteller to uplift the stories of the oppressed and to chisel away at the dominant narratives of power.

A further common theme throughout Sembene's storytelling is the ongoing quest for gender equality. His female characters were resilient and proactive, breaking stereotypes of docile women and questioning patriarchal norms. The film *Xala* depicts the failure of the wealthy

businessman El Hadji Abdoukader Beye because since his wedding night, he has impotence (and therefore, of course, also on a symbolic level: powerlessness) and is a metaphor for the impotence and the moral bankruptcy of the post-decolonial African elite. Using the character of El Hadji's second wife, Oumi N'Doye, Sembene illustrates how women confront the violence generated by masculinity and discuss female experiences. As a very important point of that, Vieira (2008) summarizes:

Sembene's larger theme of welled strength in a changing world is also evident in his female characters, most notably in the figure of Oumi N'Doye who displays a power that undercuts the complacency of the planned gender order in the patriarchal structure of society (89).

In addition, Sembene's subject matters also concern issues of class struggle. Thus, in *The Black Docker*, he reveals the lives of African migrants in France, and their struggles with the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and discrimination. Diouana, the main character of the film, endures exploitation and alienation as a housemaid, laying bare the gritty sense of post-colonial migration and the enduring shadow of colonial-capitalist exploitation (Pfaff 35).

Sembene's works also delve into the complexities of post-colonial identity and the clash between tradition and modernity in Africa. His film *Moolaade* portrays the struggle of women in a traditional African village against the practice of female genital mutilation, challenging entrenched cultural norms. (Gadjigo 75)

The recurring themes in Sembene's writing as we skim through his works draw a very apparent line between Being tales and Beings' tales. They transpire as some of the most powerful tools for social critique and change. Telling the stories of the characters he brings to life, Sembene does not merely pose a challenge to the reading and viewing public of his time; he also leaves questions hanging in the air, regarding how these principles translate into modern reality.

Impact and Reception

The literary and cinematic oeuvre of Ousmane Sembene is an indelible mark on African and global artistic landscapes that transcend the boundaries of their original audiences. His films have been both acclaimed and denounced for their progressive themes and unflinching indictments of his society; in the process, they have stirred discourse and action throughout the world.

In Africa, Sembene is hailed for being the voice of the voiceless and a mirror to forgotten societal injustice. His daring interrogation of colonialism, female subjugation, and class divisions ignited vital conversations throughout the continent. *God's Bits of Wood* is one of Sembene's works that spoke to the lasting oppression of colonialism and the resilience of the railway workers of Senegal who were questioning justice and dignity. For instance, his reflection on gender relations, most notably embodied in *Xala*, challenged patriarchal assumptions and brought attention to the active participation of women in African societies (Vieira 45)

Harrow (2008) argues that "Sembene's works have become the critical lens through which Independent Africa examines its roots and its prospects for the future" (112), emphasising the centrality of his works to the shaping of the African cultural and political discourse today.

Sembene has also made an enormous impression on the global stage. His work — like *La Noire de...* — broke boundaries by delivering sophisticated African perspectives to a global audience. "The Cannes Film Festival confirmed this achievement, establishing Sembene as the international face of African cinema, both due to his pioneering narrative style and his serious intellectual content" (Diawara 98).

There has also been criticism of Sembene's work; some have challenged his didactic style — where women's roles are concerned in each of these films, his female characters are not given as deep or complex treatment as his male ones. Despite these critiques, Sembene's influence remains enduringly strong and continues to enrich contemporary

discourses on representation and questions of storytelling ethics in African and global diversity.

In all, Ousmane Sembene's literary and cinematic successes have been massive and lasting and have been received by and made an impact on a worldwide audience. His storytelling has become universally appealing, feeding into the broader tapestry of global cultural conversation and experience, inspiring discussion and reflection on issues of justice, equality, and humanity. The lasting impact of Sembene speaks to the catalyst effect art can have in creating empathy, understanding, and ultimately changing society.

Conclusion

Through our examination of the progressive writer and filmmaker, Ousmane Sembene, we have scratched the surface of the complex narrative of his life, the significant cultural forces that moulded his perspective, his substantive literary legacy, and his transformative impression on the world of African literature and cinema. Sembene was born in Senegal, raised with a story-telling grandmother, and shot to international stardom fully embodying the idea that a story can transform society. In an oeuvre that includes landmark novels like *God's Bits of Wood* and groundbreaking films like *Black Girl*, he remained committed to laying bare the most pressing social and political concerns of his country.

Sembene tells a powerful story of a Senegalese female entrepreneur struggling against the social norms, economic independence, and emancipation of herself in *Faat Kiné*. The first among many more to come in African cinema, this feminist lens remains relevant in current gender narratives, speaking to the radical and socially engaged spirit of Sembene the filmmaker ahead of his time. Vieira (2008) suggests that in his portrayal of *Faat Kiné*, Sembene "is foregrounding the agency of women in Senegalese society to disrupt customary roles and norms" (120). Likewise, Ceddo dramatizes the dehumanizing power of European imperialism, project-born to dramatize struggles that Africans would

face in a world where societies were crumbling and being reordered at an unprecedented rate.

Meanwhile, *Moolaadé* dares reckon with the horrors of female genital mutilation, holding traditions that violate the rights of girls and women to elaborate scrutiny and doing so by applauding the strength and resourcefulness of those who fight back. When analysing *Moolaadé*, Diawara (1992) argues that Sembene is depicted with a larger framework concerning the African-diasporic relations, which exposes three narratives: *Woman This, Woman That, and You* (p.85). This sophisticated tactic reflects his intent to foster cultural interchange and transformation even as he spurns cultural binaries, another side of his progressive coin.

Petty (2001) points out that Sembene's films are not just a medium of entertainment, but a powerful tool for education, information, and consciousness-raising. The films dare their audiences to face difficult realities and raise their voice for social justice and change. A pioneer of African cinema and literature, the legacy of Ousmane Sembene reveals a man who is stubborn in his ways, and relentless in his commitment to speaking to universal human experiences that transcend both the geography and the time in which it is set.

His unapologetic narratives challenge colonialism, gender disparity, and class struggle materialising palpably across the globe but also influencing future generations of artists, filmmakers, and activists. In the stories of resilience or resistance, he tells, embodied by complex characters and evocative themes, Sembene challenges us to confront the shortcomings of our era.

Amid Sembene's lasting contributions, it is worth remembering that his character as a conversational topic is of relevance now. The cultural shift of his storytelling stands as a universal model to navigate the challenges of a world still grappling with the legacies of colonialism, the fight for gender parity, and the backlash against economic equity. His productions reflect art's enduring capacity to stimulate critical thinking, inspire empathy, and spur constructive societal change.

Ousmane Sembene's life and works highlighted the power of storytelling in contributing to social change. The legacy of his time on this Earth, calls upon us, storytellers, scholars, and citizens of the world to meet the challenges of our time with courage, creativity, and unwavering justness. In the spirit of Sembene the revolutionary, let us use our art to explore, question, and advocate as we work to create a world that is fairer, more just, or more humane.

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