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Aesthetics, Ideology, and Social Commitment in the Prose Fiction of Ousmane Sembène

by Frederick Ivor Case
New College
University of Toronto

The prose fiction of Ousmane Sembène¹ is very easy to comprehend on the surface but it is, in fact, profoundly complex. There is a remarkable consistency in his work: a preoccupation with the struggles of the working poor and the unemployed; and also with the exploitation and oppression of a relentless capitalism that seriously threatens the social and cultural structures of society as well as the inner recesses of the mind. There is also a consistent aesthetic context in his work, in which African artistic principles underlie and undermine the limitations of French forms of expression, since these forms do not always provide the author with the semantic, linguistic, and symbolic tools he needs. In *L'Harmattan*, Ousmane Sembène writes a brief foreword to the reader, a relatively rare phenomenon for this author:

Je ne fais pas la théorie du roman africain. Je me souviens pourtant que jadis, dans cette Afrique qui passe pour classique, le griot était non seulement l'élément dynamique de sa tribu, clan, village, mais aussi le témoin patent de chaque événement. C'est lui qui enregistrait, déposait devant tous, sous l'arbre du palabre, les faits et gestes de chacun. La conception de mon travail découle de cet enseignement: rester au plus près du réel et du peuple.
(p. 9)

[I do not intend to produce a theory of the African novel. I remember, however, that long ago, in that Africa that is revered, the griot was not only the dynamic element of his tribe, clan, and village, but also the authentic witness of each event. It is he who recorded and deposited before us, under the tree, the deeds and exploits of each person. The conception of my work is derived from this teaching: to remain as close as possible to reality and to the people.]

It is important to consider this declaration since it clearly indicates that Ousmane Sembène's realism is derived directly from an African vision of literature. However, in so far as this vision of literary expression is intimately associated with the

interpretation of the lives of individuals and their relationship to their social context it is also an ideological statement. One can say that there are several recurring themes in Sembène's work and that his ideological thought includes consideration of various aspects of the human condition.

However, the major ideological principle that characterizes his work is the recognition of the rights of women in society and the affirmation of their economic, social, and cultural role in the dynamic determination of the destinies of African peoples.² I emphasize the plural of women since Sembène's work is devoid of the individualistic love-marriage, or love-triangle focus which makes up the vast body of western prose fiction.³ There is individual action by Sembène's female protagonists but this type of action has to be seen within the context of the isolation often imposed on them through marriage. In this way, even their individual acts of revolt are not individualistic and divisive but are actions that tend toward the healing of specific ills in society. Sembène has therefore chosen to produce his work within the specific cultural norms of African society, which tends to live out its tensions and conflicts on a family, community, or collective basis.

It is no coincidence that Sembène's prose fiction shares the characteristics of a great diversity of African writers. It has the aesthetic and ontological depth and versatility of Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*;⁴ the deeply rooted commitment to the working poor of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*;⁵ the courageous defiance of Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*;⁶ the religious cynicism of Driss Chraïbi's *Le passé simple*⁷ and Assia Djebar's *Les femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*;⁸ and the very precise aesthetic elements of African literary expression we find in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.⁹

In a recently completed work, "Poétique linguistique de la littérature sénégalaise: Une analyse diachronique,"¹⁰ Sada Niang details the semantic and linguistic evolution in the works of Ousmane Sembène. Niang identifies four linguistic stages in the evolution of Sembène's prose. The first stage spans the period 1956 to 1960 with the publication of *Le docker noir*, *O pays, mon beau peuple*, and *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*. Niang writes of this period:

De la première à la troisième et en très peu de temps nous passons d'une utilisation indifférenciée et quasi mythique du registre standard de la langue française à une contextualisation partielle de ce registre puis enfin à un usage qui pose l'existence d'un sous-texte wolof au niveau de la narration tout aussi bien que celui des dialogues. (Niang, p. 68)

[From the first work to the third, in a short period of time, we progress from a consistent and almost mythical use of standard French to a partial contextualisation of this register and finally to a means of expression which produces a Wolof sub-text in the narration as well as in the dialogues.]

Thus by the time that Ousmane Sembène wrote his second novel, published in 1957, he had begun to transform the French language primarily through the dialogues. In this

novel *O pays, mon beau peuple* a group of men gather before the time of prayer:

*Tous les notables de la Croyance étaient là.
Avez-vous passé l'après-midi en paix?
Paix seulement, répondait l'assemblée, et la famille?
En paix, et vos familles?
En paix, disaient les gens.
Que la paix augmente en ce saint lieu, dit Moussa en s'accroupissant.* (pp. 16-17)

[All the notable personages of the Faith were there.
"Have you passed the afternoon in peace?"
"In peace only," replied the assembly, "and your family?"
"In peace, and your families?"
"In peace," said the others.
"May peace grow in this holy place," said Moussa as he squatted.]

The use of the word "Croyance" (Faith), with a capital letter, emphasizes the importance of the assembly but also immediately creates a social context that is culturally appropriate. The men have gathered just before the time of prayer and are about to discuss an important matter. The greetings used are translated directly from Wolof and do not in any way correspond to greetings used in standard metropolitan French. From this point onwards Sembène's characters normally greet one another according to the cultural norms of their society. Deviation from this pattern is usually indicative of the degree of assimilation and alienation of a particular character. Hence in the short story "Taaw," published in 1987, the group of young men greet one another in a particular slang—a form of pidgin consisting of Wolof, French, and English:

*-Ey! Boy! Comment? Vous êtes tombés du lit? s'exclama Taaw. . .
-Non! . . . Non! . . . Boy. Nous sommes tombés de la natte, répliqua Mam Ass, faisant de l'esprit.* (pp. 69-73)

["Hey, man! What! Did you fall off your bed?" exclaimed Taaw. . .
"No! . . . No. . . man. We fell off the mat," replied Mam Ass, jokingly.]

This new language of the young, unemployed men is indicative of the ideological and cultural distance that they have travelled from their fathers against whom the young men are in a state of open revolt. It could also be said that the frequent use of "Boy" and other expressions in English signals the extent to which this particular language register has evolved in terms of North American usage. The normal cultural greetings built around the notion of "peace" have become entirely hypocritical, empty formulas which maintain their beauty only for those who do not see or do not wish to see the fundamental contradictions between the discourse and its connotations. In the daily realities of the young men of "Taaw" there is no peace, nor is there harmony, but only

hunger, unemployment, family conflict, and humiliation.

However, it is in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* that we witness the mastery of semantic and linguistic devices that has produced a distinctive cultural vision in Ousmane Sembène's work. For many of us this great novel remains his masterpiece, and we look forward to the day when he will produce a film version of this great African epic.

I already pointed out several years ago, in an article,¹¹ that Penda is the main protagonist of this novel. During the march from Thies to Dakar, the wives and daughters of the striking railroad men reach a crisis situation (pp. 298-302). Penda is leading the march, but the seriously alienated Awa, who defines herself as the "wife of the foreman Sène Massène," attempts to gather some of the women around her in revolt. In the three pages that it takes Sembène to describe this particular incident we have three distinct semantic registers. Firstly, we have the standard international French of the protagonist Penda and the women who are ideologically close to her. This standard international French represents, in the text, the use of standard Wolof as a means of communication. This is a discourse that is firm but persuasive. It is a semanticism of positive cooperation but which, in an unambiguous manner, establishes Penda as leader.

Secondly, we have the orders addressed to the men. This is a significant socio-linguistic phenomenon since in the long march between the industrial town and the capital city Penda gives only commands to the men she encounters. For example, she says to the small group of men who are accompanying the women:

Il faut qu'elles marchent. Vous, avec vos bidons, allez en tête et ne donnez à boire qu'à celles qui sont arrivées aux arbres, là-bas. Et toi, amène-moi près des autres. (p. 299)

[The women must continue walking. You men with your water cans, go ahead and give to drink only to those who arrive at the trees over there. And you, take me to the others.]

Four imperatives, four orders in three short sentences addressed to a group of men under her direct command. The rapid succession of verbs in the imperative form and the rapid succession of pronouns underline the superior/inferior relationship. Symbolically, Penda wears a military belt around her waist and this item of clothing emphasizes her position of authority. This is a new female discourse that announces the birth of a new gender relationship. This is not the voice of pleading but the assurance and security of a woman who is aware of her importance, her duties, and her responsibilities in her society. The men are forced to accept her command and some of the women find it difficult to adjust to this new situation.

Thirdly, in Penda's words to Awa and the other women in revolt, the semantic elements of the discourse are characterized by a refusal to respond directly to Awa's cruel taunts. Awa's mixture of Wolof and French bears only a surface meaning that is destructive and unsettling in its intention to manipulate. This very unstructured and individualistic language register, which is neither Wolof nor French nor a recognizable pidgin based on the two languages, aptly reflects the social and cultural alienation of this

character who is used as a foil to Penda's characterization. Finally, Penda uses a method of rallying the women that seems, on the surface, to have nothing at all to do with the circumstances. By counting the women she uses a deeply held fear of enumeration to stir them all.¹² The belief system of the women goes far beyond Islam to a realm of consciousness in which indigenous religion and culture reign. Without replying to their protests she continues relentlessly counting—using the deep connotations of this enunciation which transforms a seemingly innocent exercise in the French language into a very threatening discourse in Wolof that is evocative of witchcraft. But this discourse is destined to achieve a particular social aim which is crystallized in the paragraph that closes this incident:

La colère et la crainte se partageant leur cœur, les femmes rassemblèrent leurs pagnes, ajustèrent leurs mouchoirs de tête, rejoignirent la route et reprirent la marche. A quelque distance les hommes suivaient, menés par Boubacar. (p. 302)

[Anger and fear tearing at their hearts the women took up their pagnes, adjusted their head scarves, went back on to the road and began to march again. A little distance away the men followed, led by Boubacar.]

The intensive usage of the *passé simple* in French emphasizes the rapid succession of actions as they continue on the march with the men following them. It is as though Sembène is telling us that it is only women who can organize themselves to undertake their own struggle against oppression. Sympathetic men will have no alternative but to follow and serve.

We learn in this same novel that one of the men had molested Penda while she was in the union building. She slapped him publicly, thereby asserting herself and demanding respect from all of the men.¹³ To their sexual violence she replied immediately with violence, humiliating her assailant and asserting her right to appear anywhere without being molested.

Once again I refer to the short story "Taaw" because it is in this work that a mother—Yaye Dabo—revolts against her subjection to the will and arbitrary behavior of her husband. She is often brutalized by her husband and witnesses the repeated beatings administered to her children. Her husband is truly an odious man. In this case it is not polygamy as such that is criticized, as it is ridiculed in *Xala*, it is the assumption of male superiority and the pretensions to despotic male authority that lead Yaye Dabo to assert her rights in a most dramatic and meaningful manner. In her revolt she pushes her husband roughly to the ground, publicly repudiates and humiliates him "before witnesses" as she says, and forbids him to return to her home.¹⁴ In an individual manner she has reversed the order of things in her world and has set an example before the other women and her own children.

It is very significant that twenty years before the completion of "Taaw" Ousmane Sembène completed that masterpiece of short stories, "Véhi-Ciosane." In this earlier short story the mother, Ngoné War Thiandum, kills herself because she cannot

face the shame and dishonor created by the incest committed by her husband and her daughter. The father is eventually killed by their son while the women of the village succeed in expelling the young daughter from the community. In this short story, the women appear to have only very slight glimmers of consciousness of their situation, and this is perfectly understandable if one takes into account the geographic isolation and religious, cultural, and ethnic homogeneity of Santhiu-Niaye. The significant difference in "Taaw" is that the social dislocation of urbanization has, of itself, been an education for women. However, in "Véhi-Ciosane" it is one of the fathers in the community who poses the general problem of older men preying on adolescent girls. This enlightened father says to his peers:

Une fille de même âge que ta fille, une fille qui s'est amusée chez toi avec ta fille, que tu appelais hier, "mon enfant," une fille dont les parents disaient: "Va dire à ton père un tel," une fille que tu as baptisée, cette fille, en l'épousant, c'est ta fille que tu épouses, finit de dire Déthyè Law fixant l'imam avec défi. . .(p. 70)

[“A girl the same age as your daughter, a girl who has played with your daughter in your house; whom yesterday you called ‘my child’; a girl whose parents said: ‘Go and tell your father. . .’; a girl whom you named; if you marry her, you are marrying your daughter,” said Déthyè Law staring at the imam in defiance.]

It is significant that this appears to be one of the least studied of Sembène's works. The subject of incest and adolescent brides of grandfathers is too delicate a subject for most intellectuals. Though the subject of marriage through duress is one of the major themes in *Xala*, its treatment is not as stark and tormenting as in "Véhi-Ciosane." Of course, as we know, incest is a forbidden topic of discussion in many societies and as a result of dealing with this question the Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi was imprisoned.¹⁵ This abuse of the body of young children, and most frequently of young female children, when placed in the context of the infringement of human rights, of religious precepts and paternal authority, is not a subject that many wish to discuss because it is truly a universal situation of sexual exploitation that produces reactions of shame and disgust and that no human community wishes to face with frankness and honesty. For this reason it is the other short story in the volume *Le mandat* that is widely studied and commented on. Academics generally justify their refusal to study "Véhi-Ciosane" by referring to alleged inadequacies of style and structure which they can never specifically identify.

It is very rare that a male character of Sembène's work gives voice to the pain and suffering of women. But in "Véhi-Ciosane" it is the role of the one enlightened man of the community to educate the other men, and Déthyè Law's discourse concerning incest is addressed to his friends of Santhiu-Niaye as much as it is to the readers.

Sembène uses the male characters of his novels and short stories primarily to convey certain symbolic messages through their clothing, their gestures or the social

context. The characterization of Bakayoko, the male protagonist of *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, is a brilliant illustration of this depiction of a male character who despite his positive attributes is intellectually and socially incapable of undertaking the struggle on behalf of the women. He is the leader of the men who, through their atavism, have to have a clearly identifiable single male voice to galvanize them to action. Herd-like creatures through their socialization, men appear to be incapable of meaningful social and economic revolt. The railroad workers who follow Bakayoko win a few concessions from the company but nothing has changed in their relationship with one another and with their bosses. On the other hand, after Penda's death and the return of the women to Thies, the mothers, wives, and daughters of the railroad workers have significantly altered their relationships with one another, with their men folk and even with the company. This, surely, is the final test of meaningful change in society that women are capable of the positive transformation of gender relationships through the consciousness-raising process of revolt.

Throughout his prose fiction it is very clear that it is primarily through the discourse on and of his female characters that Sembène's ideological messages are conveyed. The narrative discourse of the text gives us a very clear indication of Sembène's perspectives on the condition of women. From the descriptions of the comfortable, wealthy old woman Djia Umbrel (*Le dernier de l'Empire*, p. 125) reading a book on African women written by an African woman, to the three wives of El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye in *Xala* and the poor women of *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* and "Taaw," we obtain a consistent vision of oppression and of a growing revolt against subjugation.

But despite the examples of courageous revolt against exploitation contrasted with the negative words and actions of the alienated, Sembène's work also expresses a great optimism as far as individual human beings are concerned. One has only to think of the reversal of Awa's attitude and behavior toward the end of *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* and the birth of consciousness of the aged Cheikh Tidiane Fall in *Le dernier de l'Empire*. The ideological recuperation of characters who are initially drawn in a negative fashion points to an aesthetic that transcends mere social realism and that has a very clear didactic purpose.

In this context it is important to realize that Sembène's work does not dwell on the voluntary or involuntary submission of the women to their sexually, economically, psychologically, and socially inferior state. Even though in *Le dernier de l'Empire* (Vol. 1, pp. 94-98) we see a female secretary as the plaything of a minister, this is an incident of social importance rather than a theme. Such incidents are not gratuitous but lead to the central ideological theme of the work. Invariably, as in "Taaw," the oppression that is analyzed is a prelude to a significant revolt, but the abuse of male power has to be underlined in order to emphasize the degree to which husbands and fathers have become quite depraved individuals deeply in love with themselves and very protective of their outrageous privileges.

Perhaps the most outrageous but most significantly symbolic scene in all of Sembène's work is the moment in "Taaw"¹⁶ when Goor Yummbul forces his pregnant daughter, Astou, to swallow her own vomit. But such scenes of extreme cruelty are

infrequent in Sembène's work and his portrayal of the subjugation of women serves to prepare us for the revolt against such oppression. At times Sembène gives us only examples of frustrated aspirations and thwarted hopes of liberation but they are nevertheless hopes that provide evidence of a deep consciousness and the potential for change.

In "Lettres de France"¹⁷ we read the inner thoughts of a young Senegalese woman as she writes to her female friend:

Te souviens-tu de nos rêves? de nos ambitions de jeunes filles? Nous voulions être affranchies de la tutelle d'un mari; être nos propres maîtresses, acheter ce que nous voulions, sans avoir à s'expliquer, ou à attendre qu'une tierce personne nous donne de quoi nous le payer: en somme être libres.

[Do you remember our dreams, our ambitions when we were young? We wished to be free of the tutelage of a husband; to be mistresses of our own destiny; to buy whatever we wished without having to give explanations to anyone or without having to wait for someone else to give us money. In short we wished to be free.]

In her letter Ta Nafi expresses the women's struggle primarily in personal economic terms, and this is indeed a major trait of Sembène's female characters: they envisage freedom primarily as freedom from economic dependence. Ta Nafi is married to an elderly, unemployed man in Marseille. She is practically imprisoned in the unhealthy atmosphere of their one room that seems to re-create, in France, the culture of Senegal and to render the social and psychological stifling of the woman doubly burdensome.

Ramatoulaye, in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, and Yaye Dabo, in "Taaw," have also taken very practical economic steps to alter their condition. In *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* the march led by the female protagonist, Penda, leads to a liberty of action that the women had never known before. Their consciousness of their strength and their ability to effect change in society result in a militancy that has the potential of setting the entire society in motion. In "Taaw," where the immediate results of Yaye Dabo's dramatic revolt appear to outweigh the long-term consequences, her actions are presented within the following context:

. . . La famine, la sécheresse ne poussent pas seulement les familles à l'exode, elles détruisent, disloquent la communauté, brisent l'unité familiale. L'urbanisme, l'expansion du centre commercial poussent les mal lotis vers le faubourg. Et ici, parmi nous, nous avons des pauvres misérables. Demain c'est de ces faubourgs que naîtront le chef ou les chefs, les vrais. (p. 170)

[. . . Famine and drought do more than compel families to leave. They destroy, dislocate the community and break up family unity. Urbanization, the expansion of the commercial center push the have-nots toward the suburbs. And here among us we have poor miserable people. Tomorrow it is

from these suburbs that the true leader or leaders will be born.]

Aminata, the woman who pronounces these words, is very unorthodox in her manners; she does not portray the submissiveness of the other women and is well known for her invective. In a very subjective way she resembles Penda. Indeed, Aminata's words recall Fanon's theory that it is the urban poor of Africa who will lead the revolt against the alienating structures of society.¹⁸ The vision is no longer merely prophetic since we already see the results of the frustrations and aspirations of the young, urban poor of that continent. In *Le dernier de l'Empire* (Vol. 2, pp. 57-61) one sees very clearly that the struggle of the Senegalese people has to be conceived within the context of the universal struggle of oppressed peoples. But in this case it is the narrative discourse that provides us with these elements.

Similarly, in "Le mandat" and "Niiwam" it is more the narrative discourse than the dialogues which describes the abject helplessness of the two male protagonists faced with a bureaucratic state apparatus that they do not understand. In many ways "Niiwam," completed in 1977, is much more powerful than "Le mandat" published in 1966. In "Niiwam," Thierno and his wife arrive in Dakar with their ailing son. The very night of their arrival their son dies on the floor of the hospital and the father has to bury him. As the morgue is full, the father is given the necessary papers with great speed and relief, and he sets out with the little body covered in cloth to catch a bus to the cemetery. Niiwam is the name of the child and the title of the short story which is the tale of the journey to the cemetery. Sembène constantly draws the contrast between relationships in Thierno's home village and Dakar; between death and burial in the village and this undignified almost anonymous happening in Dakar. Very much as we have seen in "Le mandat," the relentless tyranny of the economic order, the frenzied pace of an unadapted technology and the totally dehumanizing bureaucratic structure deprive the individual of any hope of determining his present or future. This is a general situation that engulfs the entire population. The juxtaposition of positive, traditional modes of life and the struggle against dehumanizing technology and urbanization bring out many aspects of the creation of peripheries by international capitalism. Sembène's social analyses are most often implicit in the text. He does not indulge in writing political pamphlets but there is no uncertainty concerning the specific political orientation of his work.

Ousmane Sembène's use of the French language, which he has forced to its semantic limits by producing a new polysemy that is primarily Wolof; his acknowledgement of the primacy of indigenous culture and Islam as the motivating forces of the modes of thought of a people; his commitment to change and his consistent ideological discourse are the textual, literary evidence of a determined revolutionary purpose.

I have the impression, on the basis of a major study in which I am currently engaged, that the exercise of writing in French, that is, the process of concretizing in written form a number of social concepts and realities observed and experienced in an entirely different semantic, syntactic and symbolic framework, leads to a most intimate knowledge of the aesthetic demands placed on an author who seeks to articulate the

aspirations of a people. This explains why the films made on the basis of the published works are even more powerful social statements than the written texts. It is not simply that the visual qualities of the cinema are used to impress us. I would like to suggest that in the particular case of Ousmane Sembène, the aesthetic quality of the film, its psychological and social impact, its lucid ideological discourse are the direct result of the struggle with questions of articulation and the need to bring to the written text a degree of limpidity that permits the intricacies of a multiplicity of contradictions to be expressed.

This is the genius of Ousmane Sembène, that his vision and his work are the expression of his ideology; that his films in Wolof or other African languages are presented in a semantic and symbolic language that conveys several aspects of the same message at one and the same time.

In the field of discourse analysis a distinction is made between the *énoncé* (that which is enunciated) and the *énonciation* (the process of enunciation). Ousmane Sembène has mastered the art of manipulating the process of enunciation in order to convey his message succinctly but in detail. He has mastered the intellectual feat of expressing Wolof concepts and semantic patterns in a language that appears at first to be ill-suited to such cultural enrichment. His serious themes and particular linguistic devices are the negation of the exoticism that a certain audience seeks in African works. His writing is a most careful, studied, and determined enterprise in which his stylistic versatility has been a consistent element.

Ousmane Sembène has achieved his literary success not in order to win prestigious literary prizes but to provide a social and political service to African peoples wherever they may be found. Though his prose fiction is in French he has provided us with a monument to African cultural expression and has demonstrated that, without compromise, and without adhering to some mystical ethos of the French language, this language can be transformed to serve the needs of African peoples as is true of even the most banal means of communication.

I cannot conclude these remarks without reiterating the most important lesson of Sembène's work: It is only through the positive transformation of gender relations, the acknowledgement and respect of the human rights of women, their affirmation and seizing of their economic and social rights, that meaningful, revolutionary change will be engendered in society. When the history of African feminist thought of the late twentieth century is written, a significant chapter should be devoted to the work of Ousmane Sembène.