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Sembène Ousmane's *Xala*: The Use of Film and Novel as Revolutionary Weapon

Abstract

Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* was written as a novel and made into a film in 1974. It is a biting attack upon the newly risen bourgeois class that has ascended to power and wealth in Senegal since independence. The ideological framework of *Xala* rests upon Marxist assumptions adapted to and modified by the circumstances in Africa. The distinctively Senegalese features which mark Sembène's portrayal include Muslim and traditional religious beliefs which form the basis of the class oppression and the sexism depicted in *Xala*. They also supply the title to the work since *xala* means impotency in Wolof, and it is described with great humor by Sembène, as the result of a marabout's curse. Sembène's treatment of the theme of class oppression focuses upon the great disparities that exist between the wealthy, elite classes and the impoverished masses, especially the beggars and cripples who live on the streets of Dakar. By focusing upon the issue of acculturation in the film, and by emphasizing the importance of imagery related to sight and the act of seeing, Sembène effectively overcomes the deficiencies of the novel in creating the film version of *Xala*.

Keywords

Sembène Ousmane, *Xala*, film, novel, bourgeois, Marxism, sexism, oppression, classes, impoverishment, imagery, sight, act of seeing

**SEMBÈNE OUSMANE'S *XALA*:
THE USE OF FILM AND NOVEL AS
REVOLUTIONARY WEAPON**

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Sembène Ousmane's works, originally inspired by the struggle against colonial domination, now reflect the revolutionary intellectual's protest against corrupt statism. *Xala*¹ was conceived as such a revolutionary tool, and as such stands both against the corruption of the contemporary, neo-colonialist establishment and for the basic values of the revolution of the common people. But this idea of a «true» revolution advocated by Sembène is not a simple transplantation of European ideology—it is marked by the particular nature and demands of Senegal's situation. Classical Marxist thought combines with African social and religious configurations: together they must be seen as a package, as encompassing a total political *Weltanschauung* in which revolution today presses its demands as insistently as did the movement for independence in the past.

Written in 1974, and made into a film the same year, Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* offers us a unique opportunity to compare the effectiveness of African film and novel as vehicles for social and political protest. The structure of the plot is a simple one: El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, the protagonist, decides to celebrate his financial success since Independence by taking a third wife, N'Gone, despite the feelings of his first two wives. On his wedding night he finds himself struck by *xala*, an impotency resulting from a curse. He attempts to find the cause, which he suspects lies with one of his other wives, and seeks a cure with marabouts, Muslim spiritual authorities credited with strong magical powers. In the end we learn that El Hadji was a thief, as well as a corrupt businessman, and that it was not one of his wives but a man he had robbed who ex-

acted the revenge.

The title «El Hadji» is a Muslim honorific denoting venerableness and religious devotion: in *Xala*, El Hadji is a symbol for an exploitative capitalism merged with an equally corrupt government, for a religious hypocrisy linked to the oppression of women and the abuse of traditional authority. He thus affords Sembène the opportunity to attack a host of ills in one character.

Historical Muslim resistance to European colonialism developed from the early days of French penetration into the interior of Senegal. There were extensive campaigns led by Lat Dior and Samori Touré in the 19th century, and mass movements like those of the Mourids and the Hamalists which extended to the present day. To many, Independence marked the culmination of a long struggle. In both novel and film, *Xala* begins with images of El Hadji accompanying other black business leaders as they take over the Chamber of Commerce formerly occupied by the French. The formal espousal of official «revolution,» now dubbed «African socialism» by Senegal's head of state, is portrayed in this scene in which the prominent African Muslim joins with other blacks in replacing their earlier European masters.

Of the same generation as her husband, Adja Awa Astou, El Hadji's first wife, converted from Christianity (her name had been Renée) to Islam, signaling, in the novel, that same revolt against the past. Now, as a Muslim, she represents the highest religious ideals set forth by her and El Hadji's new faith. She had accompanied her husband to Mecca on the traditional pilgrimage, thus winning for herself the honorific «Adja,» the female equivalent of «El Hadji.» She is totally obedient and submissive to her husband: she accepts polygamy without dissent, and even bows to El Hadji's discrimination against her conjugal and sexual rights in favor of his other wives—again without a word of protest. She demands only that her religious, moral and social respect be maintained. When El Hadji urges her to enter her co-wife's house on the way to his third's wedding, she refuses to leave the car. Her dignity as «Awa,» first wife, demands that she be the honored one to whom the others must defer, not vice versa. When her husband becomes impotent, she protects his dignity by refusing to allow the subject to be discussed, particularly by her modern, revolutionary daughter, Rama. In all this she is an exemplary Muslim wife. But for the Marxist, this represents delusion, not heroism: «The door closed, leaving Adja Awa Astou alone again. As others isolate themselves with drugs she

obtained her daily dose from her religion» (p. 25).

At its worst the Muslim faith serves, in the Marxist views of the novel, as an instrument used by the men to oppress the women. El Hadji, who is not particularly devout, uses this, his «patrimoine religieux,» as he calls it in the film, as an excuse for taking a young, beautiful creature as his third wife. When his daughter objects, he slaps her forcefully and evokes religious tradition, exploited here most blatantly for egotistical purposes.

The special stamp of El Hadji's Islamic convictions is marked by the incorporation of traditional religious beliefs: fetishes, protective amulets, potions, spells and curses all appear prominently in *Xala*. Indeed, the title, *Xala*, reinforces this fact: *xala*, meaning impotency, is a Wolof, not an Arabic, Muslim term. However, even when extensively assimilated with Islam in the practices of the marabouts, these traditional beliefs do not lose their antipodal opposition to Westernized cultural and religious practices, and therefore do not come to be associated with colonialist or neo-colonialist models. They are not overtly acknowledged by the dominant governing elite, whose affected acculturation is heavily satirized, particularly in the film. Rather, they remain the province of the villagers and the urban poor, the last, sad weapons of beggars and the poverty stricken who lack the arsenal of Western values. The marabouts and beggars who cause and cure the *xala* are all indigent or non-Westernized. For Sembène they represent the masses—not defined abstractly an economic class like the urban proletariat—but simply the masses of African people who have refused or not had the chance to accept modern European ways and have generally suffered from the Western presence.

In contrast to them, the wealthy bourgeois Africans, many engaged in trade and finance and enjoying the government's favors, have risen to occupy the places of the former white colonialists. If the country is still indebted to France economically, and is indebted to and controlled by the metropolitan country as much as ever, still a new bureaucracy and infrastructure of African origins has sprung up, often the most visible sign of the corruption which casts its shadow over the masses in their slums and villages. The Mercedes now have chauffeurs for black «*hommes affaires*;» businessmen are portrayed as cynical and corrupt middlemen acting as stooges for the silent and invisible forces of an ever-dominant European capital.

As with most African questions, the reality of everyday life

does not leave one with pure choices, but rather midway between the two poles of the modern European and the traditional African worlds. A character caught strikingly thus is Rama, El Hadji's eldest daughter. El Hadji wishes that this daughter had been a son (as did Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*), since she is both more courageous and less mercenary than his other children. In the novel she drives a Fiat, and by dress and ideological choice asserts her identity as a modern African against both European «Tomism» and African, Islamic traditionalism. It is she alone who tells her father of her opposition to his third marriage and refuses to accept polygamy for herself when the time comes. In the film version her revolutionary role is made more visible and is accentuated. Instead of a Fiat, she is on a mobyette, out for all the city to see. Her hair is plaited in the traditional African fashion, not straightened in the modern European style. And her University work involves translations into Wolof, not French, which she refuses to speak in the film.

Yet she enjoys the fruits of her father's corruptly earned wealth, and all her actions take on somewhat the air of a bad conscience. This point is brought out at the end of the novel in which the differences between her and the lumpenproletariat are stressed. When the host of beggars and cripples comes to Adja Awa Astou's house and attacks El hadji, Rama is filled with indignation and anger. Her loyalties divided, her bad conscience—or is it bad faith?—leaves her «bursting with anger. Against whom? Against her father? Against those wretched people? She who was always ready with the words 'revolution' and 'new social order' felt deep within her breast something like a stone falling heavily into her heart, crushing her» (p. 112). Rama's position must have been the most compelling of all, for the successful revolutionary author himself whose own dilemmas are most accurately reflected in her anguish.

Except for Rama, the women are generally portrayed as victims. The first and only faithful wife, Adja Awa Astou, suffers deeply but patiently because of her husband's polygamous choices—enduring the decline in his favors and, in the end, of his fortunes as well. Her nobility is admirably figured in her majestic bearing and, in the film, in the telling roar of the sea and the wind which accompany her as she leaves the wedding celebrations of the third wife. She dresses in traditional fashion and belongs to a generation older than that of the other two wives—but still her villa

and wealth, all bestowed by El Hadji, place her in the ranks of the new African bourgeoisie, living in the suburban, luxurious quarters of Dakar with their well-trimmed yards and well-patrolled streets. The pathos of her victimization, like the purity of her religious beliefs, is thus qualified by her material conditions.

The second wife, Oumi N'Doye, wears an elaborate wig and dresses in modern European clothes in a sexually appealing style. In the film especially she is played as a domineering, almost castrating female. In the novel her function as servant to El Hadji's sexual and worldly tastes is accentuated. Above all, her mercenary qualities, seen in conjunction with her style and place in the marriage, clearly accord with the classical Marxist doctrine which holds that in the bourgeois marriage the woman is exploited and her role is reduced to little more than that of a prostitute. In the novel this aspect of Oumi's nature is emphasized when El Hadji's fortunes collapse and she deserts him to become, probably once again, a high fashion woman of easy virtue.

The third wife, N'Gone, is purely a sexual object. She is seen, not heard. In the novel her more vulgar features are emphasized, as is her inconsequential and shallow personality. She is depicted as being the adjunct or counterpart of her «mother,» actually her aunt, the Badyen, who arranges the marriage and clearly manipulates El Hadji with the beautiful young girl as bait. The helplessness of N'Gone is reflected in the impotency of her aunt, whose two former husbands have both died and who cannot now find herself a third due to the superstitious belief that husbands die in threes. However, the Badyen is not left bereft of powers. It is she who knows how to challenge the foolish male ego of El Hadji and to seduce him with her niece. She is characterized in the novel as manipulative and greedy, but with the particular insensitivity of the victim, who grasps with the anxiety of the threatened, aware of having no other recourse to power.

She is thus a counterpart to El Hadji himself and to all the corrupt businessmen who resemble her in their own practices, mirror her situation in their own life style, and yet, ironically, have exploited her counterparts in all of their own women. Love and hatred, as with the African-European relationship, are also reflected in the male-female relationships because they are based upon power, upon an authority which devolves not from natural gifts or venerable customs but from force wielded always for selfish interest.

Along with the position of women, it is the question of language which bears particularly upon the African context of revolutionary ideology in *Xala*. The issue of language lies at the core of acculturation—the process of replacing the African cultural identity with the European. The image of European modernity has held out an attraction that all the rhetoric of Negritude and struggling for liberation have not been able to diminish. For the poor and illiterate, the modern American gangster movies, Kung Fu and «Spaghetti» Westerns continue to serve «la mission civilisatrice,» along with the French *coopérants* who still teach African schoolchildren throughout their former colonies, still using the French language and focusing upon traditional French subjects such as French, not African, geography, history, and literature. The unforgettable, anguished cries of the North African writers, Jean Amrouche and Mouloud Feraoun still testify eloquently to the continuing crisis of identity introduced by the process of acculturation: «I feel that I'm condemned to being different, to an irreducible and disturbing singularity...I am Algerian, and I think that I am completely French.»² «Good Lord, what am I...Let someone tell me what I am! Ah yes! That isn't enough.»³

In Algeria the government has attempted to solve this problem by the policy of Arabization, in which the education in the early school years is carried out exclusively in Arabic. Nonetheless, the universities still rely upon French language instruction to a large extent, and the replacement of French by Arabic in Maghrebian culture has not yet occurred for the vast majority of Maghrebian authors.

For Sembène Ousmane, too, the question of language is of major importance. A recurring theme in *Xala* is the opposition between Wolof and French: the young, revolutionary Rama insists upon conversing in Wolof, El Hadji in French. In the novel, Rama and her fiancée, Pathé, have a pact to speak in Wolof, and they fine each other when one of them slips and lapses into French. References are made, in the film, to *Kaddu*, a Wolof language newspaper which associates itself with the plight of the poor African. Language is the weapon of struggle par excellence, and it both answers and raises complex questions which elude simplistic solutions.

For example, the Awa, Adja Awa Astou—the former Renée—now speaks only in Wolof, and it is in her family that the struggle against Muslim polygamy and neo-colonial French

cultural models takes place. In contrast, the household of Oumi N'Doye, the second wife, has capitulated completely to modern bourgeois fashion: «Oumi N'Doye had prepared her *aye* in a spirit of rivalry. A reunion meal. The menu culled from a French fashion magazine... The table was laid in a French way. There were various hors d'oeuvres and veal cutlets. The Côtes de Provence rosé kept the bottle of French mineral water company in the ice-bucket...» (p. 55). Of course, this carries through with all the characters: the greedier children of Oumi are raised in the French manner; the businessmen conduct their Chamber of Commerce meetings in emulation of their former colonial rulers; El Hadji and the other bourgeois constantly affect French mannerisms, even when they eject El Hadji from their number. Here the president proclaims, in the best of Gallic tones, the preeminence of that tradition at the final Chamber meeting in the film: «Mêmes les injures dans la tradition la plus pure de la francophonie» (Even insults are to be in the purest francophonic tradition).

The spoken word corresponds to the class divisions which are strikingly visible to the eye—clothing, food, manners, even religion—and it is here, in their presentation, that we see the core of the problem posed by *Xala*. Sembène Ousmane has written this polemical novel in the very language his heroes oppose, the language of the oppressors—language used here as a purely and totally European cultural expression. As a successful novelist, he has learned to make skillful use of the oppressors' tools, but not in a revolutionary sense. The banal composition and trite polemics—often couched in purely sociological jargon (e.g., «It is worth knowing something about the life led by urban polygamists. It could be called geographical polygamy, as opposed to rural polygamy...etc» (p. 66), betray a tradition of naturalism that dates from Zola and that has scarcely improved on the original. The dilemmas faced by Sembène in choice of style and language are known to most successful African writers who insist upon representing the interests of a class from which their success has removed them. Ngugi's solution, which was to bring his most recent play, written in Kikuyu, to the villages, gave a greater immediacy to his political message, and earned him more than a year in prison. Kateb Yacine turned to the same solution in creating a «popular» Arab language troupe of players in France. In the novel version of *Xala* the contradictions for Sembène are heightened by the fact that he must use French to identify those moments when his characters

are supposed to be speaking in Wolof.

But what he dares not do in the novel—that is, write in Wolof—he triumphantly affirms in the film. Sembène thus solves the one great dilemma of the committed African writer by turning to a medium in which he communicates with the uneducated classes without betraying his ideals. The emphasis on language, which he can now give with clear conscience in the film, is made visibly apparent to a much greater degree than in the novel. When Rama visits her father in his office, she insists upon speaking Wolof while he responds in French. The novel doesn't contain these lines—nor El Hadji's fury when he finally explodes at his daughter. In the film, El Hadji is forced to defend himself against his former business colleagues; at the height of the polemic he assumes his daughter's position, using the same expletive with which she had belabored him, «salauds,» and requests permission to address them in Wolof. The tables are turned on El Hadji, and his former colleagues are aware of the implicit ideology behind his request: they angrily refuse him. The novel does not contain any of this dialogue. In the film the stately bearing of Adja Awa Astu is complemented by her speech in Wolof; Oumi N'Doye's pretentiousness is underscored by her obviously studied use of French. The novel cannot convey any of this. The importance of the newspaper, *Kaddu*, as a revolutionary instrument is stressed in the film, omitted in the novel. Subtitles cannot be used in novels.

Without having to sacrifice his former audience—we in the West are obviously still available as readers as well as viewers—Sembène has succeeded in broadening his appeal, and more importantly, extending his message to his Senegalese compatriots in a way that doesn't betray what he is advocating. Here we must seek consistency and not judge the film on critical aesthetic grounds which ignore its ideological purposes. The film is more effective than the novel not because of a more sophisticated use of the medium, but because of a more appropriately conceived rapport between visual image and theme, and a more effective oral dimension. The wedding ceremony, for example, is filled with numerous small touches used exclusively in the film, such as the fat man picking his nose, the gay waiter saying «shee-it,» the «oreos» joking about getting away from blacks in Spain and from «Negritude» in Europe—in short, the whole African bourgeois nouveau riche in all its pretentious crudeness, blindness, vulgarity, and condescension. A little touch—the coins El Hadji throws to the

beggars are retrieved by them only at the pleasure of a soldier who filches one for himself. Crude power is displayed in crude style—without extravagant color or plush sets, lacking in sophisticated camera techniques—and yet it is as memorable as the paraplegics whose forlorn presence is felt lingering on the street corner. When El Hadji, piqued by their implacable gaze, has them cast out of his sight, the cripples and beggars doggedly return to haunt their wealthy counterparts, the new elite who have risen from their ranks by thieving, and how are afraid of seeing their own image figured in the others' anguish.

The film and novel both portray the rich as usurpers and opportunists whose pretensions to European culture disguise their recent ascension from the street. They hate the street and its poverty for reminding them of that fact—a point reinforced particularly in the film. In the novel El Hadji complains about the beggars to the president: «These beggars should be locked up for good» (p. 33). However, in the film he has the president call the police to have the street cleared of the *déchets humains*, claiming that they would hurt tourism, that independence should have brought an end to the sight of beggars and cripples. The film version gives greater emphasis to their presence. We are always aware of the poor people in the streets, from the opening shot, to the wedding reception, to El Hadji's return to his shop. They gather in crowds when there's an accident (and even to see the film being made!). We see them shipped to the barren plains outside of town, returning painfully to the streets by crawling and dragging themselves back in the heat of the day. It is their presence, so much less visible in the novel, which goes far in defining the character of the film's setting and its atmosphere.

This dimension is carried further in the crowd scene involving the accident in which we see a man from the country being robbed. He had taken the savings of his drought-stricken village to town to buy grain and seeds for the new planting season, and now lost everything. We see the thief take the money, buy some fancy clothes, and eventually replace El Hadji on the council of the Chamber of Commerce. The Marxist point, that private property is theft and that the ruling class is composed of thieves, is reinforced. At the end we learn that El Hadji had also stolen the property of his clan, and we realize that the thief is merely reenacting El Hadji's crime and that the cycle has come full circle: thieves will continue to be wheeled in and out of place as each dog turns on the other, mak-

ing pacts with the others when necessary, but never forming a truly living community. The poor, in contrast, must band together in order merely to survive. Their misery finds relief in the fraternity created by the commonly shared conditions of their existence. They have learned the law of survival, banding together, and can thus cope with misfortune far greater than El Hadji's.

In the novel bourgeois life and values are underscored by the use of imagery related to sight and the act of seeing. Almost every emotional response is evoked in terms of ocular reactions. The characters are even defined by the appearance of their eyes, as in the case of Adja, characterized by the «frankness in her almond-shaped eyes» (p. 11). When she was hurt by El Hadji, «her eyes were lifeless» (p. 14). People are constantly looking away, or down, or at someone, so as to convey pain or disinterest. The co-wives «watch» the third's happiness (p. 23). Adja, unhappy, has «tiny bright dots (shining) in her eyes» (p. 25). When Yay Bineta and the Badyen check to see if N'Gone has been deflowered, they arrive at the door and knock: «The two women *exchanged glances*. A vague anxiety *appeared in their eyes*. The Badyen turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open. She *peered* hesitantly inside. She was met by the blue *light* of the room. Frowning, she *looked around*» (p. 21. my stress).

The characters become cameras, and their expressions poses for the lens of the others—what the existentialists call being-for-others. This imagery recurs throughout the novel and is reinforced by El Hadji's reliance upon «seers» and his vulnerability to the curse of a *blind* beggar. What he doesn't want to see—the obverse image of himself in the street beggars and cripples—is really his own hypocritical, shallow self. A «Hadj» who drinks and steals, evoking his «religious patrimony» to justify his greed and desire for a pretty, young wife; who sleeps through the hours of prayer and seeks a cure from holy men so he can fornicate; whose prosperity is won by theft and who lacks in real charity for the poor—in all respects is really the opposite of a pilgrim of great piety, which is the meaning of the title «Hadj.» Sembène describes this man's problems in terms of seeing, since being, for such a superficial and corrupted bourgeois, resides in the eye—in the impressions created by such wedding presents as a car with a bow around it, by Western businessmen's clothes which replace the African dress, and above all, by an awareness of the other as an object to be seen and judged, and which in turn sees and judges on the basis of appearance.

The obvious superiority of the film medium for expressing this theme is reinforced by an extended treatment of the contrast between wealthy and indigent. The wealthy are seen frequently indoors with elaborate clothes and hairdoes, often cleaning and fumigating the foul odors left by the poor. The colors and clothes of the poor complement the washed-out walls and the large expanses of the open space. Eyeglasses, at times ostentatiously manipulated, sunglasses, references to blindness, and meaningful looks exchanged between the women, all call attention to the visual element.

The fourth dimension added on the filmtrack is the music, often that of a *kora*, which, like the insistent intrusions of the *déchets humains* on the barely enclosed space of the wealthy, weaves like the thread that joins the beggar's chant to El Hadji's *xala*. In the film the ideological statement is total: the shocking conditions of the lower classes cannot be hidden from sight. El Hadji's *xala* must become public knowledge, like the Badyen's official verification of his deflowering of his third wife. His checks must bounce in public, in the end, as he goes bankrupt. His fall from fortune's graces must entail the loss of his public position on the board of the Chamber of Commerce. Just as the marabout reimposes the *xala*, the revolution must take place under the gaze of the poor, in whose hatred the dialectical negative is expressed.

This is the meaning of the final scene, that El Hadji's cure must consist in his debasement, as the poor were debased, in his humiliation, which is also their lot, so as to end his isolation from them. Our senses and sensibilities are challenged in this, and in the frankness exposed in the other scenes intended by Sembène not just to *épater la bourgeoisie*, but to force the viewer to confront a painful reality. Only on the basis of such harsh truth can change and growth take place. Only with *clairvoyance* can revolution pass beyond the rhetoric of the established authorities. The collective exorcism of the *xala* at the end, the communal spitting on El Hadji, represents a revolutionary, fetishistic action, and also a class-conscious assertion of cultural values which alone can give life to a real African socialism if it is not to betray itself in the «language» of the oppressor.

In Africa, to change a wealthy, but impotent expropriator into a poor but normal man is no small feat: magic, curses, and a lifetime of dedication are required. For Sembène Ousmane such enormous forces as these lie in the grasp of the people whose power to

change their condition must also be exercised if there is ever to be a revolution. This devotion to the masses and their viewpoint explains his ideological orientation, his turn to filmmaking, and the greater success he achieves in the film rather than in the written version of *Xala*.

NOTES

1. Sembène Ousmane, *Xala* (Westport: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1976), trans. Clive Wake. All references to the novel, *Xala*, will be denoted by parenthetical indications to the pages after each quotation. Quotations from the film will be given in French without footnote or page number.
2. «L'Éternel Jugurtha,» *Études Méditerranéennes*, 2ième trimestre, 1963, 11, pp. 53-54.
3. Mouloud Feraoun, *Journal* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1962), pp. 70-71.