



Characterization of women in Ousmane Sembene's novel

"XALA"

Ankita Pandey

Assistant Professor (Guest), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya College, Delhi University

Abstract: Ousmane Sembene's novel Xala is a quintessential burlesque that mocks the neo-colonial and post-colonial Senegal's bourgeoisie. Although the main focus of the novel is to unravel the impact and greed of colonial masters and their native supporters, the focus of this paper will be on the characterization of female characters in this novel. The variety and depth of each character are gripping for the readers. From the complete traditional religious bend of Adja to the headstrong and opinionated representative of the native Wolof language in the post-colonial Senegal, Rama. The character of Oumi who is educated and libertine shows a glimpse of materialism. Bayden is another woman in the novel who was destined to be a widow twice but has a powerful persona and ardently wants her niece N'Gone to get married to a rich man and have a perfect life according to the African culture. The ironic representation of both feminism and submission is astounding through the females in the novel.

Keywords: Depth of character, Tradition, headstrong, opinionated, libertine, Feminism, Submission in African Culture.

Adherence to Religion: The first wife "Adja Awa Astou" of the protagonist, El Hadji is a board member of the Chamber of Commerce and an affluent person in post-colonial Senegal. Adja is the epitome of patience, commitment, and chastity. She is the most submissive character in the novel Xala who doesn't object to the third marriage of her husband nor question him for the decision. She is a true believer in love for which she against the will of her father married El Hadji and also converted into a faithful Muslim from Christianity. She is devastated from the third marriage and the feeling of insecurity, loneliness, and betrayal surrounds her but she quietly inhales all the pain and finds solace in the worship of her God.

She also attended the third marriage and is subjected to the negativity of her second wife Oumi who accuses her of being the provocater for the alliance of El Hadji and N'Gone.

She is a faithful wife who loves El Hadji despite all the wrongs he has done to her because she is aware of polygamy in Islam and prefers to stay calm.

The theme of adherence to religion is starkly visible in the novel through her character. She is the embodiment of native African culture and tradition. On the resistance of her daughter Rama who is the fierce woman for the third marriage, Adja tries to calm her down instead of venting her pain. She even misses Papa John, her father who has abandoned her after marriage and conversion. The reminiscence of her previous life is another ingredient of agony in her life yet she chooses to stay conscientious towards both her marriage and Islam and remains a devotee to Allah. She also wishes that her husband's problem(of Xala (sexual impotence)) gets solved soon so that he can be at peace. Later towards the end of the novel, El Hadji realizes that his true family is with Rama and ADja who stayed firm in his hard times and truly loved him.

We also see how Adja is forced to spit on her husband when the revelation of his cheating and crooked reality comes to the surface which evokes extreme pain and tears in the eyes of a loyal wife.

Rational, Fierce, and Mental tenacity: Rama, daughter of Adja and El Hadji is the headstrong, aware and doting daughter who is obstinate when it comes to anything morally wrong. She is against the concept of Polygamy and firmly stated her negation of her father's third marriage and his negligence towards her mother. She tries to

educate her mother about her rights and even respects tradition since she is pursuing her university degree in Wolof language which is the native language of Senegal.

She is not afraid to stand against the patriarchal setting as she strongly confronts her father and defies his marriage and also asks him to take care of her mother and fulfill his responsibilities for which she got slapped but still, she is not frightened to take a stand.

She is a rational individual who decides to not attend the marriage she also tries to bring reconciliation between Papa John and her mother but fails. Although she is obstinate in her opinions yet she loves both her parents. El Hadji is very vocal in the story that he could use Rama's moxie in a positive way in his business if she would have been a man displaying a gender-biased theme to which Rama is a reply from the author who is denying all the biases and proves to be a befitting reply to all rudimentary themes.

She also tries to protect El Hadji when the beggars barge into her house to humiliate and reveal the truth about her father to which she is dumbstruck.

Rama is a character that is blended between the native African culture and the western rightful ideals. She in other words is a true personification of the potential of African Tradition and Society.

Materialism and Physical greed: Oumi N' Doye is the second wife of El Hadji who is the true representation of a materialistic, rapacious, and marauding woman. She is westernized Senegalese who speaks French, follows all the magazines and fashion of the colonial country. Her knowledge of the colonial language and lifestyle gives her overconfidence and she hits the rock bottom when she gets to know about her husband's third marriage which makes her angry and envious. She only expects physical satisfaction and financial upliftment for her and her children. She is very apprehensive when she gets to know that her husband is suffering from Xala, she rebukes him and accuses him of not giving her any physical satisfaction. She even demands financial gains in barter for his physical inefficiency. She and her children are completely money-driven and devoid of any emotional companionship. After the downfall of her husband, El Hadji she shifts to a poorer area and chooses to stay out with rich men at night to fulfill her luxury and maintain her luxurious lifestyle without keeping respect for the institution of marriage.

Hidden Feminism in Patriarchal Senegalese culture: The character of Yay Bineta or Bayden, aunt of the third wife of El Hadji, N'Gone is the portrayal of feminism in the traditional environment of Africa. She is twice widowed and ready for the third but no one wants to be her third victim so she remains a single powerful woman who now wants her niece to get married and live an affluent life with a rich man who can physically satisfy her. She is educated and uses her wit to manage the alliance between N'Gone and El Hadji. She is very much traditional and asks El Hadji to follow all rituals and traditions but he denies it. She teaches N'Gone to be submissive and asks her to be docile. Bayden also firmly takes her niece back home when El Hadji's Xala is announced. She is not willing to keep her with a man who cannot satisfy her physically and moreover financially. Towards the end of the novel we see that she makes use of her in-depth knowledge about tradition to her advantage, She used Islamic law and El Hadji's failure to consummate his marriage and proves it to be a valid reason to fetch a large amount of El Hadji's wealth.

Cultural Impotence: The third wife N'Gone is a victim of cultural impotence where a woman is subjected to lead a set pattern of life which is presumed to be an ideal lifestyle for an ideal and respectful woman.

She is submissive to the decisions taken for her, silently hears and follows all advice given to her by her aunt. The author has created this character to show the multi-facets of other characters.

For El Hadji, the marriage was not because of emotional understanding or want of companionship but as a symbol of power and richness in African Culture that states that a man who has a lot of wife and children and is able to support them is a real man of high class.

For Adja, she is just a reflection of her own value in the life of her husband that brings affliction to her

For Oumi she is a subject of envy that replaced her and is causing her to doubt her place in the life of El Hadji. She is threatened to lose the physical intimacy as well as the financial support from her husband.

Conclusion

Through the above description, we can analyze the different cultural differences between the women in the novel. Each and every female character has some kind of deeper theme attached that the author want to depict. The opinionated women in the time of recent freedom in Senegal is something that led to the novel being made into a movie a year later when the novel was published. This late 90's novel based on the African culture and the post-colonial life of the people who go through different experiences in life leaves the reader in complete awe of the author. The women and each element that they show are completely mindboggling. It shows strength, patience, firmness, and also negative facets of women like Oumi who are materialistic enough to value true relationships. Hidden feminism through Yay Bineta and her assertion in making every decision which is supported by her brother and his wife is also commendable. Bayden's brother in the novel stated how his wife wore the pants in the house which is an anti-patriarchal statement.

REFERENCES

- Xala (1975), Senegal
- Genova, J.(2013). Cinema and Development In West Africa. Indiana University Press.
- Herbst, Jeffery. States and Power in Africa. Princeton. Princeton University Press 2000
- Sembene Ousmane, Xala (Westport: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1976), trans. Clive Wake.