A Revolutionary Weapon In The Film And Novel: Sembène Ousmane's Xala: A Novel And Film That Promotes Change

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Abstract

Sembène Ousmane's Xala, which originated as a novel before being adapted into a film in 1974, stands as a powerful critique of the emerging bourgeoisie class that has gained prominence in Senegal post-independence. The narrative framework of Xala is firmly rooted in Marxist ideology, uniquely tailored to reflect the African context. One of the defining characteristics of Sembène's portrayal lies in its distinctly Senegalese elements, including the influence of Muslim and traditional religious beliefs, which underscore the pervasive themes of class exploitation and gender discrimination within the story. The very title of the work, "Xala," holds symbolic weight as it translates to impotency in Wolof, humorously illustrating its cause as a curse from a marabout. Central to Sembène's exploration of class struggle is the stark contrast between the affluent elite and the destitute masses, particularly showcasing the lives of the homeless and disabled individuals navigating the streets of Dakar. Transitioning from the novel to the cinematic adaptation, Sembène skillfully tackles the theme of cultural assimilation by employing visual symbolism, specifically paying close attention to the concept of vision and sight. This strategic use of imagery in the film version of Xala effectively mitigates any narrative gaps present in the written work, enriching the audience's understanding while retaining the essence of the story and its social commentary.

Keyword: Sembène Ousmane, Xala, film, novel, bourgeois, Marxism, sexism, classes.

Introduction

In both Sembène Ousmane's powerful novel "Xala" and its poignant film adaptation, there exists a revolutionary weapon that serves as a catalyst for social change. Through the medium of storytelling, Sembène Ousmane skillfully weaves a narrative that critiques societal norms and exposes the limitations of traditional conventions. By highlighting the struggles faced by the protagonist and the broader community, the work sheds light on the urgent need for transformation and invites viewers and readers to question their own beliefs and values. The innovative approach taken by Sembène Ousmane in blending elements of literature and film not only entertains but also educates, offering a unique perspective on the complexities of human nature and the dynamics of power. Through its exploration of themes such as corruption, greed, and resilience, "Xala" emerges as a thought-provoking piece of art that challenges its audience to reflect on the state of the world and their role within it. By embracing the dual medium of literature and film, Sembène Ousmane effectively amplifies the impact of his message, ensuring that it reaches a wider audience and resonates on a deeper level. Ultimately, "Xala" stands as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling and the potential it holds to inspire positive change in society.

Sembene Ousmane's literary works, initially ignited by the fight against colonial dominance, have evolved to mirror the intellectual rebel's disapproval of corrupt governance. A prime example of this transformation is his work 'Xala,' which was purposefully crafted as a tool for instigating change. In this way, 'Xala' not only rebukes the dishonesty within the modern neocolonialist system but also upholds the fundamental principles of popular revolution. Sembene's vision of a genuine revolution is not a mere transplantation of Western ideas; instead, it is uniquely woven with the intricacies and necessities of Senegal's political landscape. By merging classical Marxist doctrines with indigenous African social structures and spiritual beliefs, Sembene propels a comprehensive and cohesive political ideology. This allencompassing worldview fosters a contemporary call for revolution that echoes the fervor and determination of the country's fight for independence in the past.

Written in 1974 and subsequently adapted into a film in the same year, Sembene Ousmane's Xala presents a valuable opportunity for us to delve into the comparative effectiveness of African film and literature in addressing social and political issues. The narrative's foundation is elegantly straightforward: the central character, El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, decides to celebrate his newfound financial prosperity post-Independence by taking a third wife, N'Gone, disregarding the emotional upheaval this decision causes

among his existing wives. However, his joy quickly turns to distress on the wedding night when he is unexpectedly afflicted by a curse known as xala, rendering him impotent. Determined to uncover the source of this affliction, El Hadji embarks on a quest that leads him to suspect his own wives, ultimately seeking aid from marabouts, revered Muslim spiritual leaders known for their potent mystical abilities. The story culminates in a surprising revelation that sheds light on El Hadji's true nature as not just a corrupt businessman but also a former thief, with the act of revenge being carried out by a man he had wronged in the past.

In the film "Xala," the title of "El Hadji" carries a profound significance as a Muslim honorific, signifying venerableness and deep religious devotion. Specifically, within the narrative context of the film, El Hadji is portrayed as a symbolic representation of the detrimental fusion between exploitative capitalism and a corrupt government. Moreover, he embodies a stark depiction of religious hypocrisy intertwined with the systemic oppression of women and the misuse of traditional authority. This multifaceted portrayal of El Hadji in the film provides Sembene with a powerful platform to critique a broad spectrum of societal issues and injustices all encapsulated within a single character. Sembene skillfully utilizes El Hadji's character to explore the pervasive themes of economic exploitation, political corruption, gender inequality, and the abuse of power in a manner that allows for a comprehensive examination of the interconnected web of social maladies prevalent within the depicted society. Through El Hadji, Sembene effectively conveys a scathing commentary on the various ills and injustices that plague the society, presenting a layered and thought-provoking narrative that serves as a mirror reflecting the complex interplay of power dynamics and social structures within the film's setting.

Historical Muslim resistance to European colonialism evolved progressively from the early days when the French began penetrating the interior of Senegal. Notably, pivotal campaigns were spearheaded by significant figures like Lat Dior and Samori Toure during the 19th century. Moreover, mass movements such as those led by the Mourids and the Hamalists have continued to resonate through to the present day. The attainment of Independence was widely viewed as the pinnacle of a protracted and arduous struggle. A powerful depiction of this monumental shift is portrayed in Xala, where imagery captures El Hadji and other influential black business leaders reclaiming the Chamber of Commerce, a site once dominated by the French colonizers. This poignant scene symbolizes the formal embrace of a new era marked by the proclamation of "revolution," which has now been aptly renamed "African socialism" under the leadership of Senegal's

head of state. The unity showcased as the prominent African Muslim figure aligns with fellow black compatriots to supersede their former European masters encapsulates a definitive moment in history—a testament to the indomitable spirit of resistance and resilience against colonial oppression.

The novel revolves around the story of Adja Awa Astou, El Hadji's first wife, who made a significant transition from Christian faith to Islam, which not only symbolized a strong rebellious position against her former beliefs, but also highlighted her unwavering commitment to her new religion. As a devout Muslim, she exemplifies the highest spiritual values espoused by both herself and El Hadji in their shared religious journey. Notably, her pilgrimage to Mecca, a deeply revered tradition in Islam, granted her the prestigious title "Adja," mirroring the esteemed status of her husband as "El Hadji." Despite societal norms permitting polygamy, Adja Awa Astou displays remarkable grace and obedience by accepting this arrangement without objection, even when faced with disparities in her conjugal and sexual rights compared to El Hadji's other wives. Her primary concern lies in upholding her religious, moral, and social reputation, understanding the significance of her role as El Hadji's dutiful first wife. This steadfast devotion is further evident when she tactfully protects her husband's dignity in the face of impotence, choosing to maintain a veil of silence around the sensitive issue, especially shielding him from any potential disrespect or discomfort, notably from her radical daughter, Rama. Thus, her portrayal as an exemplary Muslim spouse reflects her deeprooted adherence to her faith and her unwavering loyalty to El Hadji, even amidst challenging circumstances. Interestingly, while some may perceive her actions as rooted in a sort of naivety or illusion, Adja Awa Astou finds solace and strength in her religious beliefs, drawing parallels between others' reliance on substances for escapism and her own reliance on faith for spiritual sustenance.

El Hadji's Islamic convictions leave a distinctive stamp on his persona, intertwining traditional religious beliefs into his spiritual fabric. The narrative of Xala illustrates the essence of his beliefs through the inclusion of symbols, fetishes, protective amulets, potions, spells, and curses that represent the essence of his beliefs. The very title itself, Xala, a term from the Wolof language denoting impotency, not Arabic or Muslim in origin, underscores the fusion of traditional practices with Islam. Despite the amalgamation with Islamic teachings by the marabouts, these age-old beliefs maintain a stark contrast to the Westernized cultural and religious norms and are not associated with colonial or neocolonial ideologies. These beliefs remain relegated to the fringes, embraced by the common folk, the rural villagers, and the marginalized urban

poor, serving as the remnants of a bygone era for those who lack access to or reject Western values. The marabouts and beggars embodying the themes of both affliction and remedy in the story are portrayed as impoverished or untouched by Western influences. Through Sembene's lens, they symbolize not just an economic class like the urban proletariat but the broader spectrum of African society that has resisted or remained excluded from the sphere of modern European influence, often bearing the brunt of the West's presence on the continent.

In contrast to them, the wealthy bourgeois Africans, who are predominantly involved in various sectors such as trade and finance and benefitting from governmental privileges, have ascended to take over the roles previously held by the white colonialists. Despite the ongoing economic dependency on France and the continued influence exerted by the metropolitan country, a noticeable emergence of a new administrative system and infrastructure with African roots has occurred, often standing as a stark symbol of the corruption that looms over the impoverished masses inhabiting the slums and rural areas. The luxurious Mercedes cars are now occupied by chauffeurs serving black businessmen, reflecting the changing dynamics. These businessmen are frequently depicted as dubious and dishonest intermediaries manipulated by the concealed yet potent forces of the dominant European capital, a portrayal that underscores the complexities of power relations and societal structures in the region.

In the realm of African dilemmas, the complex fabric of everyday realities often presents individuals with a conundrum that lies somewhere between the stark contrasts of modern Europe and traditional Africa. Within this intricate tapestry exists a notable figure named Rama, the firstborn daughter of El Hadji. El Hadji's yearning for a son, akin to Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart, is intertwined with Rama's character, who embodies a unique blend of courage and integrity, distinct from her siblings' more materialistic tendencies. Her symbolic choice of driving a Fiat and her sartorial and ideological preferences stand as a testament to her endeavor to forge a modern African identity that resists the paradigms of European influence and Islamic tradition. One pivotal moment arises when Rama vocally opposes her father's third marriage and staunchly rejects the notion of polygamy for herself in the future. The cinematic rendition of Rama portrays her revolutionary spirit more overtly, depicting her cruising through the city on a mobylette, her hair intricately plaited in the traditional African style, echoing her defiance of conforming to Western aesthetics. Furthermore, her academic pursuits, focused on translating works into Wolof rather than French, underscore her commitment to preserving her cultural

heritage and resisting linguistic assimilation portrayed in the film adaptation.

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. The day that a host of beggars and cripples attack El Hadji at Adja Awa Astou's house, Rama is filled with indignation and anger and he will do anything he can to stop them. There is a rift between her loyalties, and she has a bad conscience, or is it a bad faith on her part? It leaves her bursting with anger as a result of her bad conscience. 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 was probably the most compelling of all, as the successful revolutionary author himself was ensnared in her dilemmas in a similar manner to her anguish, which is most eloquently reflected in her own anguish.

Except for Rama who stands apart from the general portrayal of women as victims, the character of Adja Awa Astou exemplifies unwavering faithfulness in the face of profound suffering caused by her husband's polygamous choices. Despite enduring a decline in his affection and ultimately his material wealth, she exhibits remarkable nobility through her dignified demeanor. It is through her traditional attire and belonging to an older generation than the other wives that her elevated status in the emerging African bourgeoisie becomes evident. Her victimization and steadfast religious convictions are intertwined with the material wealth she enjoys, further highlighting the complexities of her character within the societal backdrop of suburban Dakar.

In both the film and the novel, the portrayal of the second wife, Oumi N'Doye, is multifaceted and laden with symbolism. Her striking appearance, characterized by an intricate wig and modern European attire exuding a seductive allure, positions her as a dominant figure with overtones of emasculation. Specifically, the film amplifies her authoritative demeanor, painting her as a figure who exerts control over El Hadji. However, the novel delves deeper into Oumi's role as a servant catering to El Hadji's desires, both carnal and materialistic. Notably, her mercenary attributes, intertwined with her fashion sense and marital status, align closely with classical Marxist principles regarding the exploitation of women within bourgeois marriages. This ideological stance emphasizes the reduction of women to mere commodities, akin to the role of a prostitute. As the narrative unfolds, Oumi's

true nature becomes apparent when El Hadji's circumstances take a downturn, prompting her departure and likely return to a life characterized by luxury and promiscuity.

The theme of the impact of language on the revolutionary ideology in Xala extends beyond just the role of women. In Africa, language plays a crucial role in the process of acculturation, where the traditional African cultural identity is gradually replaced by European influences. The allure of European modernity remains strong, overshadowing even the passionate advocacy of Negritude and the ongoing struggles for liberation. This attraction is perpetuated through various mediums such as modern American gangster movies, Kung Fu films, and "Spaghetti" Westerns, all serving as elements of the so-called "civilizing mission." Furthermore, the continued presence of French cooperants in African schools, teaching subjects like French geography, history, and literature, further emphasizes the dominance of the European perspective. The poignant expressions of anguish by North African writers like Jean Amrouche and Mouloud Feraoun vividly depict the ongoing existential crisis brought about by acculturation, as they grapple with the conflicting identities of being Algerian yet feeling completely French. The poignant plea for clarity and self-identity resonates deeply in a world where cultural assimilation blurs the lines of individuality and belonging.

In Sembene Ousmane's works, such as Xala, the question of language emerges as a central theme with significant implications. A striking contrast is depicted between Wolof and French, symbolizing deeper ideological divides. The character dynamics between Rama and El Hadji exemplify this tension as they assert their linguistic preferences, highlighting the power struggle inherent in their conversations. Notably, the novel portrays Rama and Pathe's commitment to Wolof as a form of resistance, enforcing fines for any deviation into French. The portrayal of Kaddu in the film serves as a poignant reminder of the role of language in shaping cultural identity and reflecting societal issues. Ultimately, Sembene Ousmane skillfully navigates the complexities of language as a tool for liberation and introspection, underscoring multifaceted nature in the context of social change.

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In the gripping crowd scene depicting an unfortunate accident, we witness a man hailing from the countryside becoming a victim of robbery, emphasizing the profound dimension of societal inequality and injustice prevalent in the narrative. This man, who had ventured from his droughtridden village to the city to secure provisions such as grain and seeds for the impending planting season, tragically lost all he possessed to a thief. The subsequent actions of the thief, squandering the stolen funds on luxurious attire and eventually maneuvering his way to take El Hadji's seat on the Chamber of Commerce council, serve as a stark illustration of Marxist ideology concerning the concept of private property as theft and the elite class being essentially a consortium of robbers. Unveiling a striking chain of events, the narrative illuminates how El Hadji himself is unveiled to have engaged in thievery, having cunningly appropriated the belongings of his own clan. Through this revelation, the audience comes to grasp the cyclical nature of deceit and malfeasance within the community, as the thief's actions mirror El Hadji's transgressions, encapsulating a never-ending cycle where betrayal and deception reign supreme. The perpetual ebb and flow of treachery among the characters symbolizes a fractured society devoid of genuine unity, where alliances between individuals are frail and driven by self-serving motives rather than communal welfare. Conversely, the impoverished strata of society portrayed in stark contrast exhibit a profound sense of solidarity and camaraderie born out of shared adversity. They are bound together not by greed or opportunism but by a collective striving for survival amidst overwhelming hardship. The destitute find solace in their unity, collectively navigating through calamities that far surpass the individual misfortunes of El Hadji. Their resilience stems from the unwavering understanding that their survival is intricately linked to their ability to coalesce as a community, transcending the selfish pursuits that plague the privileged class.

In the final sequences of Sembène's film, the contrast, which is skillfully portrayed in the "background" through narrative and formal techniques, becomes increasingly evident. Throughout the course of Xala, the beggars and dispossessed farmers inject life into the naturalistic depiction of Dakar street scenes. They are often seen blessing passersby or playing melodic tunes on the

khalam while stationed in small groups on street corners. Distinguished by their unique physical features, age, and demeanor, they represent a diverse range of perspectives and life experiences. Despite these differences, their collective existence ensures their survival, as demonstrated when they come together to share tea made with a tin of condensed milk sourced by one member, warmly inviting a troubled farmer to partake and unburden himself. In a poignant display of solidarity, Gorgui discreetly offers a portion of the group's earnings to the farmer, illustrating a different value system rooted in communal support, Wolof traditions, and perhaps Islamic principles that advocate against greed. They embody Sam Opondo's notion of engaging with the subversive practices of everyday life within Sembène's works, showcasing how even the most marginalized individuals can instigate social change. The transformative impact of the beggars' companionship on the farmer is profound, as he evolves from seeing the theft of his village funds as a predestined act of God to recognizing his entitlement to restitution in his lifetime.

In the exquisite portrayal of the complexities of power dynamics and subjective experiences within a neocolonial framework, the juxtaposition of the beggars' unified subjectivities born out of marginalization against El Hadji's affluent yet detached existence in the concluding scenes sheds light on Sembène's exploration of the intricate interplay between individual identity formation and societal circumstances influenced by neocolonial forces. emphasizing the beggars' transformative act of collective resistance, where they consciously eschew seeking restitution for the injustices inflicted upon them by El-Hadji and his privileged class, the narrative delves into the profound implications of subverting traditional power structures and questioning the limitations of justice within a system perpetuated by colonial legacies. As the film's denouement underscores the intrinsic links between personal identity and communal accountability, particularly amidst the backdrop of land dispossession as a central grievance, the nuanced character development of El-Hadji symbolizes a reluctant but pivotal acknowledgment of the interconnectedness and responsibilities that define authentic subjectivity, yet leaves the audience contemplative about the uncertain resolution of his journey back to embracing social interconnectedness and shared agency, thus underscoring the timeless relevance of the film's themes in challenging ingrained power hierarchies and fostering collective resilience against prevailing neocolonial paradigms.

Conclusions

This essay endeavors to delve into the nuanced interplay between structures and subjectivities in the context of neocolonialism as elucidated by Xala, shedding light on the power dynamics that legitimize the elites and scrutinize the conduct of individuals across various strata in Senegalese postcolonial society, albeit with differing impacts. By augmenting the existing body of scholarly work on this seminal text, the focus is directed towards the often overlooked correlation, underscoring the essential nature of highlighting Sembène's film's central concern: the manifestation of identity crises within the West African upper class translating into tangible material and cultural deprivations experienced by the populace. This examination further delves into the fundamental notion of ontological and structural decolonization encapsulated in the themes of land restitution and redistribution. The meticulous analysis of the film's portrayal of the significance of attire and language unveils the initial dimensions of this critical perspective; the ostentatious self-presentation of the indigenous bourgeois class exposes the superficiality and imitation which supplant the essence of selfhood with material affluence, while the advocacy of Wolof by Rama raises queries about the class-specific implications of cultural reclamation. The narrative culminates in the revelation of the "primordial crime" of communal wealth usurpation and the resultant deconstruction of El Hadji's identity, signaling a pivotal role for subjectivity as a locus of empowerment for the destitute beggars and dispossessed farmers, grounded in their communal experiences of oppression. Their refusal to acquiesce to any compensation for severance from their lands and livelihoods stems from an informed awareness of the mechanisms that have systematically marginalized them, portraying a steadfast commitment to safeguarding their socio-cultural roots and resisting exploitation.

Sembène masterfully leaves us with a profound understanding of the socio-cultural power embedded within the popular mandate, highlighting the stark contrast between the post-independence governing classes' apparent authority and their actual helplessness due to their deliberate choice to prioritize the limited advantages of serving as mere intermediaries to Euro-American capital, thereby forsaking their true potential influence. Through the intricate exploration of themes such as self-fashioning, language dynamics, and the historical injustice of land theft, Xala successfully delves into multiple layers of its political allegory, skillfully prompting reflection on the complexities of subjectivity. By skillfully intertwining these elements, the canonical film not only offers a thought-provoking narrative but also serves as a poignant reminder to viewers about the fundamental truth that our identities are deeply intertwined with and shaped by the societal structures and norms we are

willing to conform to or challenge, thus prompting us to question the transformative power of the environments in which we choose to exist.

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