

Muslim Identity and Cultural Dilemma in Sub-Saharan African Fiction: An Example of Sembene Ousmane's *The Money Order*

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Abstract

The author examines the Islamic dimension of literature as a means to a more cogent understanding of the identity and cultural crisis described by Sembene Ousmane's *The Money Order*. He focuses on the experiences of African Muslims who lost traditional space in the multicultural postcolonial arena. The fiction illustrates the gradual substitute of traditions and customs that shaped bonds in new ways such as false ideology and new means of commerce and relations. Sembene in the fiction shows a Muslim community rife with internal contradictions. It is, therefore, necessary to examine some of the different social, political and psychological behaviour with which Sembene invests his characters who grapple with the conflict between traditional and modern ways of life.

Key words: Muslim identity, cultural dilemma, Sub-Saharan African Fiction, *The Money Order*, Sembene Ousmane

Introduction

Harrow Kenneth in his famous book, *Faces of Islam in African Literature* (1991:10), challenged the critics and scholars of literature on the inadequacy of critical essays on Sub-saharan African fiction inspired by Islamic norms, visions and worldview. Two decades after this observation, quite a large corpus of critical reviews and commentaries has been articulated on renowned Muslim and non-Muslim writers whose creative texts have been influenced by the place of Islam in their milieu. To increase the list of the existing critical reviews of African literature and Islam, the paper provides a watershed of the historical issues concerning Muslim identity and the conflict of modernity in the short story of a selected sub-Saharan African writer.

In contemporary African literature, cultural nationalism is no longer a popular discourse as it was in the 1960s. This might be because the transition in which African values had to contest with western tradition has phased out. Today, the recurring theme in African literature is the failure of post-independence African states to harness diverse resources and direct them towards the attainment of common ideals. Writers are preoccupied with the political and social environment since independence, which is marked by a ceaseless cycle of misrule, corruption and general misery.

However, *The Money Order* remains important in the history of African short stories because of its subject, style and philosophical nature. Sembene is a writer who is conscious of cultural disruption in his depiction of post-independence African states, in general, and Senegal, in particular. The depiction of the conflict of culture and the dislodgement of the systems and structures of thought of the African

Muslims, among whom Islam has made a mark, is the focus of this paper. The story is aesthetically ideological and polemically committed to the cultural, social and political affairs of African Muslims. The paper is, therefore, an epistemological reading of the crisis of social evolution in sub-Saharan fiction driven by the Islamic worldview. The study gives an overview of issues concerning Muslim identity and the conflict of modernisation. The essay explores selected social, political and cultural aspects of both past and contemporary Muslim societies in Africa.

Islam is not the focus of Sembene's short story, but Islamic values and teachings are interwoven in the plot. Thus, Islam forms the backdrop of the story, though not the driving force. With colonialism in Africa, the conflict between Islam and modernity becomes an impetus for the creative sensibility of many sub-Saharan writers, and Sembene's short story is a typical example. The short story as a sub-genre of prose fiction emerged as an appropriate literary form in response to prevailing conditions. As a distinct epistemological and generic form, the short story is artistically sufficient as a viable medium for exploring topical issues. It is a significant platform for postcolonial discourse because of its hybridity and versatility and its concern with identity, gender, urbanisation and modernisation. Literature in the 1960s reflected an increasing sense of alienation, stemming from the failure of political systems, heightened repression and the consequences of defeated nationalism. The period of post-independence in most African states compelled writers to focus on various socio-political matters with their attendant problems of corruption, greed, lust, self-gratification, moral decadence, crime and violence. Contemporary issues such as the impact of colonialism, culture conflict, exploitation, oppression became the major concerns. The viability of the short story as a genre of literature in the sub-Saharan African context assumes a convenient medium for writers to respond to the traumatic and often dehumanising conditions of life. The paper's brand of criticism is grounded in postcolonial theory.

Defining Post-colonialism

This is an extrinsically motivated analysis of Sembene's short story. The literary text is analysed as it portrays external reality of cultural crisis in sub-Saharan Africa. Theoretically, post-colonialism relates to a way of investigating colonial repression and its aftermath in the form of oppositional ethical values. The major concern of this theory is the notion that western imperialism represses other cultures. Sharad (2003), for instance, employs post-colonialism to describe the experiences of all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonialism to the contemporary period. Post-colonialism does not only capture the situation in the independent countries that have won freedom from the colonizers, but also the process of conceiving and constructing various sets of discursive practices to resist colonisation, its ways, ideologies and legacies. Central to the postcolonial theory is the idea that the colonised countries were not only subjected to political power but to

a range of ideological, cultural and intellectual structures that the colonising power deliberately built as part of the imperial strategy.

African Literature and Islam

With the advent of Islam in North Africa, the religion spread through the Sahara desert and the Sahel to the Savanna region of Western Sudan, which includes Senegal. Today, Muslims are the overwhelming majority in North Africa. The reason is that the region is a society where the indigenous African has become Islamised over a long period of time. Being a predominantly Muslim community, the Islamic ways supplanted most of the indigenous cultures. This has been so since Islam is not just a religion but a way of life. In a way, Islam embedded within it cultural rather than separate religious matters. Senegal is a complex society where the indigenous Africans have become Islamised and westernised. The configuration of divergent values is very important in the reading of *The Money Order*. There is common ground expected of the conflict between Islamic Africa and the West.

Thematically, the concern of this paper is not what Islam is but the notion of a religion and tradition that represents itself in literary texts vis-à-vis its co-existence with western traditions. Islam does not exist in a vacuum and cannot be aesthetically appreciated in isolation from its cultural and social context. The universality in the practice of Islam has uniquely transformed various heterogeneous people into one identical entity called Muslim. Literature in Sub-Saharan Africa emerged at a time when a large scale social and economic change was taking place and African writers showed overwhelming concern and preoccupation with the influence of these changes. Keith Booker's essay (2009:12) "The African Historical Novel" shows clearly that African literature assimilated a great injection of energy from the historical phenomenon of decolonisation, which infested the literary expression with a sense of historical urgency and the urge to impact on the building of a viable postcolonial culture for the new nation. In tandem with the social change, Irele (2009) discusses the influence of the Koran in the creative consciousness of African writers. He posits that the Koran has been a normative reference for modern African fiction in Arabic. The Koran is also seen as the most fundamental source of knowledge on Islam for Muslims. It also provides the textual guide for all forms of knowledge whether scientific, legal, political or social. For this reason, African writers have shown through their creative texts that the Koran is not only a holy book but also a repository of knowledge. Islam, therefore, shapes the vision that conditioned some writers' perception of life, thoughts and actions. The impact of the Koran also extends beyond the literature in Arabic and Afro-Arab in Kiswahili and Hausa, which existed through the transcription of Arabic languages into Arabic scripts called '*al-ajami*', was predominantly Islamic in perspective. 'Narrative' in this tradition equally turned on the articulation of an Islamic outlook. Irele (2009: 6) further observes:

The Koran is invoked as central to the novel's celebration of an enduring heritage of Islamic culture by which the whole communities of Muslims have sought to define their place in the world ... The Islamic experience is presented as a distinctive current of a modern awareness and sensibility, and Islamic religion and tradition as essential components of a universal humanist.

The prominence of themes clustering around Islamic hagiography, religious virtue and duty and dependence on formal and technical norms and conventions drawn primarily from the Koran and Arabic creative tradition reflects abundantly in African novels. Some creative works in Africa such as Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated*, *The Suns of Independence*, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* as well as several others, have been inspired by Islamic beliefs, cultural practices and social patterns. Indeed, literary expression in Sub-Saharan Africa written in colonial languages has important components that often include Islamic elements. Harrow (1991) mentions Sembene Ousmane, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ousmane Soce, Ayi Kwei Armah, Camarrah Laye, Nurudin Farah, Tayeb Salih, Yambo Ouologuem, Mariama Ba, Birago Diop, Hampete Ba, Ahmadou Kourouma, Seyidou Badian, Shaban Robert, Aminata Sow Fall, Abdoulaye Sadju as well as numerous other poets, novelists and playwrights as writers whose creative consciousness is built on Islamic precepts. One observes among these writers two diametrical sets of equally militant and mutually irreconcilable views about Islam.

The first set describes writers whose views and attitudes were shaped by their overwhelming zealous embrace and vigorous advocacy of Islam as the most legitimate and effective weapon of social cohesion and integration of individuals and society. Thus, Islam shapes the vision that conditioned these writers' perception of life and worldview. To this group of writers led by Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Koran is the fundamental source of knowledge for Muslims. It is for this reason that his *Ambiguous Adventure* shows that western civilization is an aberration of traditions and customs that bond Muslim communities. *Ambiguous Adventure* is an esoteric story, whose focus is the journey of Samba Diallo through phases of doubt and uncertainties when his Islamic belief was tested in Paris, a country and culture far from his own.

The second group champions a fundamental radical view and artistic conventions which portray Islam as colonial in nature and, therefore, a strong impediment to secular individual and social fulfillment. For instance, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* represents the portrait of social transformation as experienced by different people in sub-Saharan Africa during colonial and post-colonial periods. Primarily, colonialism represented a comprehensive shift in African social equations. It ushered in quite a lot of hurdles that were entirely new. With massive reconfiguration of the African value system, the text adds voice to women's thoughts on life, love, marriage, child-bearing and duty to others. There is an extended focus

on Islam, polygamy, urban lifestyles, economic development and women empowerment in contemporary Senegal. Mariama Ba identifies herself through her novel with modern West African social system destined for the mission of emancipation to lift the people from the bog of tradition, superstition and custom and make individuals appreciate a multitude of civilisations. Likewise, Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars Strike* and similar other novels criticised traditional Islamic practice which encourages a blind submission and passive docility in women. Writers reveal that changes in social structures and in attitudes are necessary if the African woman is to free herself and realise her full potential. Most of these women writers reveal the pains of some Muslim wives subjugated to the implacable laws of polygamy.

African Literature, Islam and Social Criticism

Sembene belongs to the radical group of renowned African writers whose view about Islam has been tainted with a Marxist ideology. Edris Makward (1991) points out the fact that while Sembene's avowed commitment to progress, development and justice in Africa, regardless of race, ethnic origin or identity, religion or sex, is unequivocal, he remains nonetheless profoundly respectful to those elements of cultures and traditions that are parts of his upbringing and that do not necessarily conflict with his basic values. Sembene's condemnation of societal abuses does not necessarily translate to a sweeping condemnation of tradition and religion but comes as a result of his discriminating evaluation of specific individual and communal behaviour and practice. There is one important fact that Sembene ignores in his narrative. Although colonialism touched every aspect of socio-political life in Senegal, its impact seemed to be superficial. The reason is that, in spite of the predominance of colonial modernity, the traditional Islamic society still functions as if the colonial policy of assimilation was a mere interruption in the process of African history.

Makward (1991:191) affirms that Soyinka praises Sembene for his sharp criticism of Islam and Islamic influence in Senegal but berates Cheikh Hamidou Kane for his positive treatment of Islam as an integral part of his people's heritage other than an alien religion imposed through the sword and through intense social and political pressure. The argument is that Islam had been entrenched as tradition before colonialism. Sembene constructs a community of Muslims that grapples with the vices of modernisation, but he conceives the protagonist in his own vision. No character escapes his bitter criticism; not even the masses that he is defending. Thus, the criticism in the story is directed at the masses rather than the social structure that made life difficult for them. A reading of his story convinces us that his protagonist is trapped in a social system that is in a deadlock and no solution to the crisis is in view.

The main character, Ibrahima Dieng, receives a money order from his cousin who works in France. The money order becomes the centre of focus in the

society where poverty is extremely rapacious. Dieng needs to scale the bureaucratic hurdle of presenting an identity card. To obtain the identity card, he needs a birth certificate which he does not possess, because he could not ascertain when he was born. Confused and disenchanted with the complicated process in place, he entrusts the money order to his enlightened nephew who eventually dupes him. What actually accords the money order undue recognition is the endemic poverty of the people who build hope around the money order that does not even belong to Dieng. He inevitably becomes a victim of a social structure which appears to be hopelessly doomed. The narrator's tone enables the reader to see Dieng in a slightly different light. His sense of humiliation does not induce sympathy, because his interpretation of the cause of his misfortune is not really shared by the narrator, who instead chooses to view him with a certain detachment. We see more clearly this ironic distance between the author and his protagonist when after the unpleasant experience, Dieng is simply treated as a victim of ignorance. The ability to learn new ways and forget the old poses a problem for the colonised Islamic community. Two different cultures are involved, and the crisis arising from the two opposing ways leads to the tragedy of Ibrahima Dieng.

Sembene presents the protagonist as a typical example of the ordinary African man who is ill-prepared for the challenges of postcolonial legacies of a capitalist system in the face of abuse and massive corruption. The fiction draws attention to the incongruous state of African new social customs. Communal living becomes debased by new economic structures. The introduction of monetary system and rapid urbanisation gave birth to moral debasement. Unfortunately, the faith and practice of Islam became deficient in combating the daunting challenges of the emerging social evolution.

The theme is satirical. This might be because the goal of Sembene is to ridicule rather than to propose strategies for reconstructing the nation. One critical observation is that the story offers no discernable solution or satisfactory conclusion to the problem of cultural dilemma in Africa. As a postcolonial African writer, one expects a broader solution to the dilemma of African states. The principal objective of African literature is to reinstate the matrix of African history and culture and suggest long-term changes capable of breaking the contemporary neo-colonial deadlock. The manner in which the indigenous civilisation can break the neo-colonial deadlock is left unsaid. In a sympathetic tone, the narrator says:

We must try and understand Ibrahima Dieng. Conditioned by years of blind, unconscious submissiveness, he fled from anything likely to cause him trouble, be it physical or moral. The blow of the fist he had received on his nose was an *atte Yallah*: the will of God. The money he had lost too, it was 'ordained that it was not he who should spend it. If dishonesty seemed to have upper hand, this was

because the times were like that not because Yallah wanted it so.
(p.118)

From this narration, it is clear that the story reflects the mentality of a character who persistently upholds the basic tenets of Islam, even though the practices have proved incapable of surmounting the vicissitudes of modernisation. Dieng becomes one of the characters who are physically and psychologically destroyed by the conflict as the effects of the new values loosened the grip on him. In the depth of Ibrahima Dieng's despair, and of the humiliation to which he has been subjected, the strength of his faith sustains him, releasing a stream of hope, though this stream also reveals vast areas of doubt.

As a critic of post-independence set-up in Africa, Sembene finds in traditional beliefs and practices both a kernel of wisdom and serious limitation in combating social problems. A cursory reading of the story identifies the society in the text as distinctively Islamic. In Senegal, religious beliefs are not very different from those of some other African peoples. Like the Hausa in Northern Nigeria, the Senegalese are essentially Muslims and the Islamic religion can be said to be a part of their tradition. The first black community to have been Islamised was the kingdom of Tekror in the Futa Toro near the mouth of Senegal River. This precluded the conquest of the Ghana Empire in the late 11th century and to the Islamisation of a greater part of black West Africa (Gerard 2000).

Therefore, the social reality that appears in the story is more meaningful when related to the Muslim society outside the text. Part of Ousmane's objective in this fiction is to scrutinise the Islamic identity of his characters. For example, each time a character encounters a difficulty, his first reaction as a true Muslim is to recite chapters of the Koran known to drive away evil deeds. A recurring feature of the characters is their general love of divination. They do not only consult the Koran or the marabout but also give alms to beggars to ward off their misfortune. Dieng is shown to have cultivated a similar attitude as narrated thus:

He got up with difficulty and lay down on the bed, reciting verses from the Koran.

I wonder if I'll have the strength to go to the mosque? he said to himself.

His wives and children were forbidden to give alms to able-bodied men or to young men. These two categories were parasites, he said, on the lookout for free meal. When this was discussed in the mosque among the heads of families, he gave no quarter, relentlessly countering the argument of his critics demanding proof from the suras that the faithful had to give alms to these people...

He is really an old man? He asked.

Yes.

All right, then. Give him the leftovers.

And may Yallah make all our misfortune follow them.
This was his ritual form of words whenever he gave alms.
(p.79)

The aim here is to divert future calamities. Such a conception of misfortune portends, at least, a partially optimistic view of fate. Believers live secure in the conviction that between the inexorable fates awaiting an individual and the execution of that fate lays the possibility of the way out. Senegal is a society that has not only been assimilated into an Islamic way of life but is also threatened by further western emasculation. The hybridity reflects the parties involved in the conflict, which is religious and secular. With the advent of political independence, fiction in Sub-Saharan Africa shifted emphases from the dilemma of culture-conflict to an introspective critical look at the society to reflect the socio-political throes of Africa in the hand of Africans and the decline in morality. Protagonists in post-colonial African fiction are clearly seen struggling to adapt or accommodate the demands of the fast-changing world around them.

For this reason, the ruling class is criticised for being a tool of imperialism. Dieng's misfortunes are due to the inefficiencies of the nationalist leaders who instituted a culture of corruption and total dereliction of duty. African leaders continue to operate a poor administrative system inherited from the colonial masters. Hence, some disillusioned characters realise that independence has not fulfilled the aspiration of the people. The narrator reveals his disgust for independence through some characters who remark the grip which materialism has on the evolving neo-colonial capitalist community:

Money! It's crazy how people fight over money since independence;
said a man in babouch, making his way through the crowd...

A curse on the man who invented money! agreed a woman
next to him. It is true money has taken the place of morality. (p.
108)

Through this narration, the author calls attention to the negative consequences of materialism. The anti-masses socio-economic policies engendered severe poverty, economic hardship and unbridled struggle for survival among the people. Social vices such as armed robbery, theft, money ritual, prostitution and unwarranted begging became pervasive. Adebayo (1988) observes that through *The Money Order*, the centre of literary discourse moves away from the colonial to the neo-colonial, from the exploiting colonial masters to a collaborating national bourgeoisie. Thus, the story focuses on the degenerate state of African social customs. It throws more light on the conflict of identity in a Muslim community that contends with the wave of new socialisation. "I am afraid times are hard. Life isn't what it used to be. You can't count on your neighbour any more. Nowadays, everyone looks after himself (p.128). In the milieu depicted here, social life easily

engenders distrust and suspicion.

The problem that militates against the traditional society of Senegal in particular and some parts of sub-Saharan Africa in general becomes apparent. At the beginning, Dieng believes that his predicaments are the work of Allah. However, his experiences after the money order teach him a horrible lesson. At the height of his disenchantment he bursts out: "It's over now. Me, too, am going to put on the skin of hyena. Why? Because it is only cheating and lies that are true. Honesty is a crime nowadays" (p.28).

Dieng's experience in the story has several implications. Firstly, it shows that nothing has been done to simplify the labyrinth of administrative procedures inherited from the colonial authority, making life impossible for the common man. Dieng is being pushed here and there by insensitive civil servants in a bid to cash the money order. Another significant implication is the role of money in the society. The story shows the gradual exaltation of money to the status of a demi-god since independence. Dieng realises that no one can get anything done without having to bribe officers in cash or kind; that excessive craze for money dehumanises the society. Initially, he forms the opinion that his neighbours are the causes of his misfortune until towards the end of the story when he realises that the basic problem of everybody including himself is the emerging cultural hybridity that poses a threat to Africa. Despite Dieng's awareness, he does not provide any solution to the basic problem. In fact, his stand worsens the situation, particularly as he goes to accept the view that if you cannot beat them, you may as well join them. In this way, Dieng hardly qualifies as a typical hero.

The story denounces the socio-political and economic misadventures of African communities. The writer holds a strong pessimistic view of the contemporary African conditions. Bestman (1975:140) affirms:

Ousmane is highly critical of the new breed of political leaders who are indifferent to the endemic poverty of the masses; he denounces their corruption, their incompetence, their lack of devotion to the people, their complicity with foreign powers.

The Money Order's imaginative atmosphere revolves around the search for an African identity. The story shows the fast crumbling positive values in Africa. The interest in fiction stems from the notion that it is a valid reflection of the society from within which it is written. Writers are influenced by the day-to-day occurrences and trivia that ultimately shape experiences. Like most dynamic societies, Africa is undergoing socio-cultural changes that would have far-reaching effects on how people perceive norms such as belief, identity and general social interaction. African writers within this milieu mirror these changes and at the same time reflect the ambivalence that is perceivable at any period of any great change.

In conclusion, *The Money Order* depicts sub-Saharan African society with its explosions and sufferings. Dieng's fate is a collective tragedy that could be

considered as the inability of the marginalised Africans to win freedom and assume their destiny in a predominantly Muslim community where all the initiatives are left to foreigners who control the people's social evolution. The situation becomes problematic when people discover to their own anguish that they do not fit any longer into their own community. Events and situations as well as impact of historical dialectic on human values have turned them into pariahs. Ibitokun's (1998) essay "Social Pariahs and the Romanticism of Disillusionment" makes it clear that in African literature certain categories of characters are noticeable in fiction. There are those who witness the colonial setting and who, due to their individualism, are thrown outside the fence by the very societies to which they belong and whose interests and customs they endeavour to defend and promote.

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