

THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN NOVELIST IN NATION BUILDING
A THEMATIC STUDY OF “*VEHI-CIOSANE*” BY SEMBENE OUSMANE

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Abstract

The African writer must have to reposition his literary vision towards solving the world global problems which include bad governance and other social vices prevalent in his society. Almost all the nations of the world including Nigeria is in one way or another bedeviled by these biting social ills. Undemocratic governance, financial crisis, lack of access to quality education, religious crisis, erosion of national consciousness, economic downturn constitute the other of the day. In the face of all these, it becomes expedient that the African novelist should pick up his literary weapon and be on the vanguard to redress the ailing situation. The focus of this paper is therefore to draw the attention of the African novelist towards developing the type of literature capable of addressing the nagging problems of his society. In this study, we have undertaken a thematic study of Sembene Ousman's famous novel *Vehi-Ciosane*. So as to examine to what extent and in what manner this celebrated African writer was able to address the problems of his Senegalese society. This paper recommends that African writers should refocus their work towards the burning issues in their society.

INTRODUCTION

African literature is divided into three board eras. These three eras include pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial, each characterized by a mammoth of phenomenon. African literature of pre-colonial era was in its oral form as Africans had yet no access to formal education (reading and writing). According to Ajani (2013:1) oral literature manifested itself in songs,

stories, chants, incantations, praise poems and folklores. Its emphasis was on orientating the young towards good citizenry and passing on of traditional values from one generation to another.

The colonial African literature was characterized by denunciation of the evils of colonization. The few fortunate Africans who benefited from formal education were writing to salvage their people from European colonization and also to salvage the African culture that was under threat by western imperialism. A large number of literary works in form of novels, drama, poetry, poems were produced by these African elites. Prominent among them are Ferdinand Oyono's *Old Man and the Medal* and *The House Boy*, the two novels of Oyono demystified the Christian faith. Other ones include Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala* and *Poor Christ of Bomba*, Sembene Ousmane's. *The Black Docker*, where he questioned the superiority of the whites. Here in Nigeria we have the likes of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where he wrote to exalt the African culture. T.M. Oluko's *One Man, One Wife* exposes the close link between Christianity and colonization. Consequent upon that, towards the 1960s many African nations gained their political independence from their European colonial masters. However Lusophone Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau freed themselves from Portuguese control only in the 1970s while the apartheid regime of South Africa also grudgingly came to an end in 1994.

The post colonial African literature was double-faceted. On one hand, even after the independence of African states, one major challenge facing the African writers was that of addressing the problems and consequences of colonialism. Emphasis was on restoring social, cultural and national identities of formerly colonized people. The second challenge was that of

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addressing the questions of abuse of power and exploitation by the new crop of African Leadership. Their regimes were characterized by all forms of social injustices such as political assassinations and imprisonments, nepotism, bribery and corruption, poor social infrastructure. Considering both the first tier of civilian dictators and their subsequent military counterparts together, Africa was heavily bled to the narrow by these rapists.

It is quite unfortunate that given the above social malaise, a large number of African prose writers do not find enough justification to involve themselves in the type of literature capable of enhancing the social lives of their people. They rather prefer to occupy themselves with a type of literature known as aesthetic literature or literature of arts for arts sake. This type of literature which is opposed to political or revolutionary literature cannot respond to the salvation of the oppressed Plekhanov (1975) reacting against the idea of arts for arts sake opines that that is nothing but the inability of the writer to harmonize himself with his social environment and his inability to meet up with his societal expectations. While Uozie (2008) speaking on the expectations of the African writer asserts that the artist as seer, and a man gifted with an extraordinary heightened sensibility hardly remains aloof in a crises situation since he is also a member of his society. Similarly, Jean Paul Sartre (1948) emphasizing on revolutionary (political) literature insists that every writer should approach his duty from a functional perspective so as to better the condition of man in his society.

Thus, African literature right from the periods of pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial had always remained committed to the task of enhancing the condition of the poor people of Africa. It is therefore on the above stand points that the contemporary African writer should find

his relevance. It is also from the above premise that we shall be giving the analysis of Sembene Ousmane's *Vehi-Ciosane*. We shall therefore carry out a study of major themes in the novel and examine to what extent these themes reflect on the social lives of his people of Senegal. We cannot undertake the study of the biography of our author and the resume of the Novel in question due to the limited scope of this study. The novel in question is written in French. Quotations from the text are rendered in English for the understanding of our numerous readers.

VEHI-COISANE WHAT ROLE IN NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION?

The entire novel is characterized by themes which the author has carefully chosen to address in one way or another the nagging problems of his 1960s post independent Senegalese society. These are problems reminiscent of a newly independent nation and are still hunting our African states up till date. Let us examine them from the following perspectives: Illiteracy, political apathy; abuse of political power, gender inequality, urban migration.

Illiteracy

Simply put, illiteracy refers to ones inability to read and write in a given context. However, Babalola (1998) conceives the illiterate as a person who lives in a state of primary consciousness or one who lives in ignorance of his potentialities and often resigns himself to fate. He went further to define the contrary (literacy) as act of critical understanding of man's situation in the world which entails functionality in society and in one's occupation. This canker worm which has undermined African development and more so that of Senegal is vividly captured in Sembene Ousmane's *Vehi-Ciosane*. The author reflecting on the future of Senegalese

children decries the government's inability to provide enough schools for the timing population of Senegalese children. He puts it in the following way:

Peut être quand ton âge d'aller a l'école arrivera, trouveras-tu une place et plus tard prendras-tu connaissance de ces lignes... ta mère, elle, notre contemporaine, illettrée-en français comme en arabe n'a as pas la possibilité de lire ces pages. (1966:16)

Translation: May be when your time to go to school comes, shall you ever find a space and shall you ever make out meaning out of these lines. Just like your mother, my age mate, who was illiterate in French and in Arabic was not capable of reading these pages. (1966:16)

The writer probably wishes to use this tactful manner to draw the attention of government and may be that of the public to the problem of illiteracy prevalent in his society.

Political Apathy

According to Wikipedia, online encyclopedia, political apathy is the indifference on the part of any citizen of any country with regard to their attitude towards political activities. It is equally a situation where one shows no interest or refuses to participate in a matter that affects him and thereby resigns to his fate. In Senegal just like in Nigeria, there is an alarming rate of political apathy among the citizens. The masses and most elites show reluctance in confronting issues that oppress them on daily bases partly due to ignorance of their civil rights and partly for fear of the

consequences of their action. This social malaise is reflected in the prologue of the text..

Sembene Ousmane shows his disenchantment with his Senegalese counterparts who disapproved of his sensitive write-up for fear of the consequences it might have on his people. He puts it thus:

Pendant des années, je me suis entretenu avec quelques-uns d'entre vous Vos raisons ne m'ont pas convaincu. Certes, vous étiez d'accord sur ce point: "N'écris pas cette histoire" Vous argumentiez que ce serait jeter l'opprobre sur nous.....

Translation:

For several years that I have interacted with some of you Your reasons never convinced me: Hence, you have always argued: "Don't write this story" for it will humiliate us.

(1966: 15)

It is very clear from the above statements that the author wants to instill into his people the culture of political activism which is a powerful weapon for social change.

Abuse of political power

Most people consider African independence as a blessing in disguise. The hopes and aspirations of the people were shattered as the dividends of the long awaited independence were

far from being realized. The post independent Senegalese society (just like every other African nation) was seriously being hunted by flagrant abuse of political power, monopartism, lack of basic social amenities, lack of national consciousness, perpetuation of stay in office. Little wonder Aliou Dorboe (2010) laments that since independence and for 40 years, Senegal was ruled by the Socialist Party (PS).

In *Vehi –Ciosane* for example, Sembene Ousmane never wasted time to x-ray the undemocratic practices of this regime. He decries the situation thus:

Cela est si vrai que la solidarité raciale n’a pas empêché

les assassinats; les détentions illégales, les emprisonnements politiques des dynasties régnantes aujourd’hui en Afrique. (1966: 15).

Translation

It is very true to say that our racial oneness does not even prevent

assassinations, illegal detentions, political imprisonments perpetrated

by the present African political dynasties. (1966: 15)

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality violates article 1 of the United Nations Charter which states that all men are freely born and equal before the law. Gender discrimination is a prevalent factor in Africa and more so in a Moslem society such as Senegal. Adama (2001) decrying the situation in

Senegal affirms that women in Senegal are prohibited to speak to strangers including neighbor

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about their matrimonial problems as long as they have “everything” which include food, clothes and sex. Similarly Aminata (2010) opines that it is very difficult to disassociate gender inequality from polygamy which according to him is a common practice in Senegal. Showing his disgust for polygamy, he added that it is a modern form of slavery which violates the principles of equality, promotes gender disparity, disempowers women politically and economically and compromises their contribution to societal development.

Sembene Ousmane exposes this social vice ravaging his society in the manner in which he painted a picture of the matrimonial life of the heroine of the novel (Ngone War Thiandum).

Comme toutes les femmes d’ici, Ngone War Thiandum figurait dans cette société alimentée de...recommandation de docilité passive. On ne lui donnait jamais l’occasion de formuler son point de vue, d’émettre son opinion. Elle devait écouter, appliquer ce que son mari disait. (1966: 31)

Translation

Just like every other woman from here, Ngone War Thiandum lives

in this society that is garnished with submissiveness. She is never given

the opportunity to make up her mind or to express her opinion. She must have to listen and comply with her husband’s directives. (1966: 31)

From the above citation, we can understand that the author wants to lend his own voice towards women emancipation in his society of Senegal.

Rural -Urban Migration. Rural-urban migration refers to movement of persons from rural settlement to urban settlement. In Africa, several people (mostly youths) year by year abandon the rural population for the continents' fast growing cities either in search of easy life or in search of new economic opportunities. This trend reduces agricultural output as the rural population is left with fewer hands to work in the farm.

In "Vehi-Ciosane", the author condemns in strong terms the rate at which the Senegalese youths travel to cities, leaving farm work to suffer in the hands of the old ones. He remarked thus:

Maintenant,...année par année, les bras valides s'en allaient tenter fortunes dans les cités urbaines, où selon toute apparence, la vie semblait plus facile... Aussi, les récoltes s'amaigrissaient. Les pères de familles, les visages tannés par L'excessif soleil...(1966: 23)

Translation

Now... year after year, the able bodied go in search of greener pastures
in the urban cities where life, from all indications, is more comfortable ...
As such, the harvest lessons. Behold, fathers with worn out faces due
to intense sun. (1966: 23)

It is therefore very noticeable from the above standpoints that the entire novel addresses in no small measure the social problems of the people of Senegal and that of Africa as a whole.

Recommendations

The contemporary African novelists should see their work as instruments for social change. For that, the themes of their work should reflect the present social realities such as religious intolerance, global financial crisis, and erosion of national consciousness, democratization, global peace and security.

On the other hand, to reduce the rate of urban migration, the respective African governments and that of Nigeria should make the development of rural settlement a priority.

We also advice for a review of all laws and practices in favor of gender disparity so as to enable all participate in the all important task of nation building.

We hope that the moment the above issues were addressed, our national transformation agenda will turn into a reality.

Conclusion

Sembene Ousmane has rightly selected the themes of his novel to address the socio-political and socio-economic challenges of his beloved country of Senegal. The novelist was very critical of the abuse of political power that characterized the ruling government of Leopold Sedar Senghor. He was also critical of the political apathy displayed by his countrymen and blamed the trend to high rate of illiteracy among the people.

The writer also used the medium of his text to advocate for women emancipation and women empowerment. For that, he condemned polygamy and all forms of gender discriminations.

On the other hand, the writer did not spare the prevalent practice of urban migration and its dangerous consequence on the economy of his nation.

Given the above instances therefore, it becomes clear that the African novelist keys himself into the all important struggle for societal transformation

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