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#### OUSMANE SEMBENE'S XALA: AN ANTI-BOURGEOIS NOVEL

#### Ahmed Saber

Je dénonce, d'une manière brechtienne, la dictature de la bourgeoisie sur le peuple. Cette bourgeoisie . . . ets une bourgeoisie d'un type spécial qu n'est pas tant composée de possédants que d'intellecturels et de cadres adminstratifs. Cette bourgoisie se sert de ses connaissances, de sa position, pour maintenir le peuple sours sa domination et pour accroître sa fortune.

#### Ousmane Sembène

The post-independence period and its disappointments have distressed many African intellectuals and writers. According to their view, the attainment of independence by African nations has not only brought on characteristic problems of nation-building, but has also accelerated class formation. Indeed, it has triggered a dog-eat-dog fight in the quest for political power. This relentless struggle has resulted in the emergence of a new political elite which, having taken political control from its masters, rules and dispenses favors to those who helped to consolidate its power and ensure its security while crushing and destroying those who opposed its rule. It is in this perception of postindependence that Sembène wrote his novel, Xala, to express his concern and sympathy for the exploited masses. It also expresses his disenchantment with the newly enriched Senegalese bourgeoisie, and his conviction that it has failed to fulfil its mission to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the masses. Through novelistic handling of the interplay of cultural, economic, political, and social themes, the choice of characters and characterization, narrative structure and language, Sembène vividly traces not only the story of the emergence of this Senegalese "pseudo-bourgeoisie" but carefully describes its dramatic "xala," its downfall. To achieve this goal, Sembène has adopted a procedure he calls "la méthode dite de la pyramide renversée,"3 a technique that enabled him to carefully dissect and examine what he termed "Les problèmes de contradictions"4 inherent in postindependence Senegalese society. In essence, it is this particular approach—along with other techniques—which makes Sembène's Xala basically an African anti-bourgeois novel of French expression, and not an erotic one as Adrien Huannou claimed it to be5.

Xala, which Huannou has called "une satire caustique de la bourgeoisie sénégalaise," begins with a brief but dramatic description of the accession to economic control by "une certaine class socio-économique, ou plutôt une couche favorisée de la société qui valonne, émerge en surface et cherche à être à l'image de la bourgeoisie européenne." However, this "couche favorisée" is struck from its very beginning "d'impuissance culturelle, politique, économique."

The way in which the new Senegalese bourgeoisie is introduced in Xala by the narrator is interesting indeed. Before singling out El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye to stand for this class, Sembène first defines, somewhat concisely, its background and setting in the capital, Dakar. By making Dakar their headquarters, the novelist wanted to emphasize not only the city's economic role but the political significance of its close association with the ruling elite. Consequently, the targets of his denunciation are two groups: the bourgeoisie and the political leaders.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator tells us that the new Senegalese bourgeoisie, composed essentially of greedy profiteers and rogues, selfish "Hommes d' affaires," does not intend to serve the country and its people, for their ambition "... était de prendre en main l'économie du pays" (p. 7) in order to enrich themselves and satisfy their desires, thereby confusing nationalism and patriotism with their personal interests. Thus the narrator reminds us of their primary intentions and motivations:

Pour ces hommes réunis ici, c'était plus qu'une promesse. Pour eux, c'était la voie ouverte à un enrichissement sûr. Un accés aux affaires économiques, un peid dans le monde des finances (p. 8).

Later we learn that they have received full support from the government. Ironically, one member of this "pseudo-bourgeoisie" solemnly declares in an arrogant and obfuscating tone:

Nous sommes les premiers hommes d'affaires de ce pays. Notre responsabilité est grande. Trés grande! Nous devons nours montrerr à la hauteur de la confiance de notre gouvernement. Afin de bien achever notre journée mémorable, je vous rappelle que nous sommes conviés au mariage de notre frère El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye. Si nours sommes pour la modernité, cela ne veut pas dire que nous avons renoncé à notre africanité (p. 9).

The above quotation is replete with contradictions which will later be illustrated by El Hadji's characterization.

In Xala, Sembène tells us that the "impotence" and the collapse of these bureaucratic and profligate businessmen are due to many factors, namely greed, moral depravity, and their inability to adapt their resources and energy to the progress of the country and the welfare of the masses of the population. Because of their dishonesty and irresponsibility and their retrogressive and oppressive behavior, their cry for Africanization and patriotism is but a deliberate mystification of the population. Worse, they prove to be agents of neocolonialism and imperialism, or what the author describes as "résidus de l'impérialisme." Therefore, Sembène depicts them as being anti-social and enemies of the people. And it is through the portrayal of El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye that he delineates these Tartuffian "Hommes d'affaires."

After having introduced us to the nature and character of the new Senegalese bourgeoisie in the first three pages, Sembène moves to encapsulate the whole group of these parvenus in the depiction of a single individual, El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, bourgeois hero, or rather anti-hero of the novel. Thus El Hadji becomes a striking personification for a whole set of values and principles pertaining to his class. "J'ai voulu ce personnage vraiment comme typique de la catégorie sociale dominante que je dénonce," 10 Sembène has asserted.

Indeed, El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye emerges as key-character in Sembène's novel, for the whole canvas of Xala is skillfully woven around him. Therefore, the novelist's characterization of this figure is quite significant because it is through the parable of El Hadji's impotence that Sembène centers his attention on social criticism. In essence, "El Hadji is a symbol for an exploitative capitalism merged with an equally corrupt government." It is through his "xala" that Sembène displays and exposes the immoral ways in which the Senegalese upstarts enriched themselves, and the process of their degeneration and their eventual "xala" or impotence to tackle the cultural, economic, political, and social problems of the country. Hence El Hadji's "xala" becomes "leur 'xala' collectif, leur impuissance en tant que classe dominante." 12

Sembène traces not the glories of El Hadji's success as a businessman but rather his downfall. El Hadji, a former nationalist politician, is fifty years old and is about to marry his third wife. Once, during the colonial period, he had been a primary school teacher but had lost his job because of his trade union activities. He is a polygamous but not devout Muslim. His "religious hypocrisy" is, however, linked to the "oppression of women and the abuse of the traditional authority." Since independence El Hadji has emerged as an important businessman in Dakar. To add more prestige to his reputation and enhance his social rank, he has made a pilgrimage to Mecca, taking

along his first wife Awa Astou with him. Hence, people call him El Hadji," a Muslim honorific title usually denoting venerableness and religious devotion. As for his wife Awa Astou, she is called "Adja," an honorific name give to a woman who goes to Mecca. As a matter of fact, El Hadji's background and personality include some ambiguous or rather contradictory aspects. He wants to be both a modern Europeanized man and an African traditionalist. He has married a second, "modern" and emancipated woman, Oumi N'Doye, while his "troisième union le hissait au rang de la notabilité traditionnelle. En même temps, c'était une promotion." (p. 12). The contradictions of his character and background are well summed up by the narrator in the following words:

El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye était, si on peut dire, la synthèse de deux cultures. Formation bourgeoise européene, éducation féodale africaine. Il savait, comme ses pairs, se servir de ses deux pôles. La fusion n'était pas complète (p. 11).

Thus El Hadji's background is intended to suggest not just his character but also the opportunism and the vile ways in which he and his colleagues have reached their prestigious positions and acquired their wealth. We are meant to understand that his peers, like El Hadji, have betrayed their country and wronged its people. Their corruption and moral depravity are illustrated and conveyed by El Hadji's extravagant style of life, his religious hypocrisy, cultural alienation, polygamy, and display of wealth. If Béti has used Perpetue's death as a device to delve into the political and social world of peasants, Sembène has chosen the leitmotiv of temporary sexual impotence of "xala" to unfold and explore the nature of the bourgeois world of post-independence Senegal. Hence it is through El Hadji's "xala" that we come to learn by the end of the novel that he and his fellow-businessmen are, in reality, a clique of rogues, thieves, hypocritical capitalists.

In Xala, the urban Senegalese bourgeoisie is characterized by its cupidity, debauchery, pomposity, and accumulation of material things. There is evidence of its corruption throughout the novel. And one of the conspicuous aspects of Xala is that all evidence of corruption is demonstrated rather than stated. Thus we always feel its force and witness its agents. For instance, El Hadji marries three wives providing each one of them with a villa and a car. Besides, he spends a fortune to support his polygamous households. He himself owns a Mercedes and has a private chauffeur, Modu. Some aspects of El Hadji's senseless extravagance are shown by the lavishness of his third wedding with a young girl, N'gone, whose fate resembles very much that of Perpetue, for, like her, she experiences a marriage arranged and carried out like a

business affair.

As a result of the "xala," El Hadji cannot consummate his third wedding; his second wife looks down on him because he can no longer perform his marital obligations to her. In addition, his sexual impotence is accompanied by shame and anxiety, for his manhood is in jeopardy. He becomes the target of laughter and contempt that increase his distress and despair:

El Hadji souffrait atrocement de son xala. Cette amertume s'était muée en un complexe d'infériorité devant ses pairs. Il se croyait le point de mire et le Isujet des conversations. In ne supportait plus les rires après son passage, les apartés, les regards insistants. Cette infirmité—peut-être passagère—le rendait incapable de toute communication avec ses employés, ses femmes, enfants et homologues. Lorsqu'il s'accordait des instants de répit, il se replogleait en dedans de lui, il se voyait enfantin, léger. Les remords l'envahissaient comme une marée de boue recouvre une rizière. Revenant à cette troisième union, il ne pouvait se l'expliquer. Aviat-il aimé? Ou simplement la vieillesse l'avait-elle poussé vers la chair plus fraiche? Ou parce qu'il était riche? Fablesse? Libertinage? Episclurisme? La vie conjugale était-elle invivable entre ses deux femmes? Il se refusait à la vérité en se posant toutes ces questions (pp. 67-68).

El Hadji's ordeal and moral suffering have affected his physical appearance. Sembène graphically underlines the psychological effects on his appearance:

Une sourde haine étendait sur lui son emprise et l'aveuglait. Il avait reçu un coup de vieux. Deux sillons profonds, partant du haut des ailes du nez s'incurvaient autour de sa bouche en s'évasant. Le mention s'étai élargi. Le manque de sommeil ourlait ses paupières, bignait ses yeux dans un éclat rougeâtre, traversé par des filaments qui, selon les heures et les endroits, se teintaient de vieille huile de palme (p. 68).

Nevertheless, El Hadji does not suffer alone. In fact, his "xala" has infiltrated his family and disturbed its harmony while his driver Modu is quite worried about his deteriorating condition. But the person who seems to be deeply hurt by the effects of El Hadji's impotence is his first wife Adja Awa Astou. "Elle était dévorée par un sentiment de culpabilité" (p. 78), says her daughter, Rama, to her fiancé.

Eventually El Hadji's "xala" and excessive spending have

brought about both his economic and social downfall:

Tu as déja bénéficié de deux découverts d'un demi-million. Tu as dépassé le seuil admis pour les découverts. Qu'as tu fait des trente tonnes de riz de la Société Vivrière Nationale? Vendus. Où est passé l'argent? Ton train de vie dépasse tes possibilités: trois villas, des autos à crédits. Depuis ton troisième mariage, c'est la valse des chèques sans provision (p. 133).

For these reasons, El Hadji is expelled from the "Chamber of Commerce and Industry." Finally, he finds himself stripped of his social status, relieved of property, and abandoned by both family and friends, save his loyal driver Modu and his first wife, Adja Awa Astou, in whose house he takes refuge.

# The Bourgeoisie's Cultural Alienation

In Xala Sembène is very much concerned about the cultural heritage and cultural dignity of his country. He also attacks "outdated" beliefs and customs. He stresses that Senegal or any other African country cannot progress and develop without a cultural autonomy. Like most of his African colleagues he is quite aware of the extensive damage inflicted on the African people and their culture during and after the colonial period. However, Sembène's perspective and conception of the African culture and its political and social role are at variance with those of the Negritude writers. For Sembène, "la culture, à tous égards, est politique," Is and "l'impérialisme régne au sud du Sahara, comme jadis le colonialisme et l'esclavage." 16

In Xala the parable of sexual impotence is not confined to the delineation of economic and political failure of the post-independence Senegalese petty bourgeoisie, for "la dépendance économique est une forme d'aliénation qui se traduit par la pauvreté culturelle." In this novel, Sembène examines the cultural dilemma or cultural alienation of such a bourgeoisie. He implies that as it did economically, it failed to help Senegal regain and maintain its cultural independence, for it continued to adhere to and support the tyranny of Western culture and mental colonization. In other words, this social elite is trapped between two contradictory ways of life, or what he termed "deux fétichismes":

Le fétichisme technique de l'Europe. C'et-à-dire la conviction de ces gens-là qu'ils ne peuvent rien faire sans l'accord de l'Europe et les conseils de ses techniciens; et le fétichisme maraboutique, qui fait que, sans l'accord et le secours du marabout, toute entreprise serait également vouée à l'èchec. 18

It is through El Hadji's characterization that Sembène denounces the cultural sterility and limitation of the newly enriched Senegales bourgeoisie. Therefore, El Hadji's "xala" has to be interpreted as a symbol of cultural failure or rather cultural alienation of such a social class, which but constitutes "l'écume des surfaces." Hence, it is an obstacle not only to economic and social growth but also to cultural independence. Despite its proclaimed "Africanité," this bourgeoisie established its own values based on the Western culture. For instance, "El Hadji limité, borné, n'était pas plus intelligent que les autres" (p. 98). He is a graphic illustration of cultural alienation. "Vêtu d'un complet 'Prince de Galles,' chaussures bien cirées" (p. 118), "El Hadji ne buvait que de l'eau d'Evian" (p. 31). His cultural alienation and snobbery are also implied by his villas and French furniture, his cars, his food, and his preference for the French language.

# The Bourgeoisie on Trial

El Hadji's troubles have not ended with his economic and social collapse, and with his cultural alienation. He has yet to undergo another painful and contemptuous ordeal before the masses of the population.

To his chagrin, El Hadji finds out as we have seen that the real author of his "xala" was, in fact, the leader of the beggars of Dakar. Therefore, to regain his manhood, El Hadji has to stand a sort of trial and exorcism before a strange group of beggars, cripples, lepers, and other destitutes who have invaded his first wife's home. In an authoritative tone, the leader of the beggars orders him to divest of his clothes:

—Pour te guérir, tu vas te mettre nu, tout nu, El Hadji. Nu devant nous tous. Et chacun de nous te crachera dessus trois fois. Tu as la clef de ta guérison. Décide-toi. Je peux te le dire maintenant, je suis celui que t'a "noué l'aiguillette" (p. 167).

Defeated and humiliated, El Hadji has no other alternative but to obey the angry beggar:

Méthodiquement, El Hadji déboutonnait sa veste de pyjama. Le premier crachat atteignit son visage. . . . Le lépreux, après avoir gonflé ses joues de salive, l'expédia adroitement sur El Hadji. L'infirme renversée se redressa et appliqua une gifle à Rama. Puis elle prit son temps avant de décharger sa bouche sur El Hadji. . . . El Hadji était recouvert de crachats qui dégoulinaient (p. 170).

However, it is not El Hadji alone who is condemned, but the whole class and values he stands for:

Ce n'est pas El Hadji seulement en tant qu'individu qui est mis en accusations, c'et en réalité cette classe bourgeoise dont la fortune n'a pu et ne peut s'édifier que par une accumulation de spoliations.<sup>20</sup>

The accusation and condemnation of the Senegalese petty bourgeoisie are also strongly voiced by the leader of the beggars when he rebukes El Hadji and his business group:

— . . Pourquoi? Simplement parce que tu nous as volés! Volé d'une façon légale en apparence. Parce que ton père était chef de clan, que le titre foncier portait son nom. Mais toi, toi tu savais que ce terrain n'appartenait pas uniquement à ton père, à ta famille. Elargi, je suis revenu te voir! De nouveau, il y eut une seconde bagarre. Cette fois-ci encore je fus bel et bien battu par tes amis du pouvoir. Des gens comme toi ne vivent que de vols.

—Toute ta fortune passée—car tu n'en as plus—, était bâtie sur la filouterie. Toi et tes collègues ne construisent que sur l'infortune des hmbles et honnêtes gens. πour vous donner une bonne conscience, vous créez des oeuvres de bienfaisance, ou vous faites l'aumône aux coins des rues à des gens réduits à l'état de disgrâce. Et quand notre nombre est quantitativement gênant, vous appelez votre police pour... (p. 166).

Sembène makes El Hadji voice his own condemnation and denunciation of this petty bourgeoisie of which he himself is a vivid example in terms of corruption and economic oppression. Thus, after being expelled from the "Groupement," he discloses the perfidious mysteries of this class and its various channels of imperialism and illegal exploitation. He declares that he and his colleagues are, in fact, only middlemen for the white capitalists. Hence he indignantly says:

—Qui sommes-nous? De minables commissionnaires, moin que des sous-traitants. Nous ne faisons que de la redistribution. Redistribuer les restes que les gros veulent bien nous céder. Sommes-nous des Hommes d'affaires? Je réponds, pour ma part: non. Des culs-terreux...

-Bien! Nous sommes des culs-terreux! Les banques appartiennent à qui? Les assurances! Les usines? Les

entreprises? Le commerce en gros? Les cinémas? Les librairies? Les hôtels? etc., etc., etc. De tout cela et autres choses, nous ne contrôlons rien. Ici, nous ne sommes que des crabes dans un panier. Nous voulons la place de l'ex-occupant. Nous y sommes. Cette chambre en est la preuve. Quoi de changé, en général comme en particulier? Rien. Le colon est devenu plu fort, plus puissant, caché en nous, en nous ici présents. Il nous promet les restes du festin si nous sommes sages. Gare à celui qui voudrait troubler sa digestion, à vouloir davantage du profit. Et nous? . . . culs-terreux, commissionnaries, sous-traitants, par fatuité nous nous disons "Homme d'affaires." Des affairistes sans fonds (pp. 138-139).

This passage demonstrates the novelist's skillful handling of his major protagonist whose tirade becomes a successful device of demystification, accusation, and condemnation of the economic impotence of post-independence petty bourgeoisie. The importance of this passage is underscored by its pivotal position in the structure of the narrative. It introduces the climax and denouement of the action.

Furthermore, in Xala, Sembène denounces the continuous support the Government is giving to this bourgeoisie. Even the law comes under attack for its contribution to the rise of such an unlawful, corrupt and socially privileged minority who flourish and prosper at the expense of the masses who have been evicted from their lands. Continuing his invective, and the condemnation of El Hadji and his group, is the beggar:

—Notre histoire remonte à bien longtemps. C'était un peu avant ton mariage avec cette femme-ci. Tu t'en souviens plus? J'en étais certain. Ce que je suis maintenant est de ta faute... Te rappeles-tu avoir vendu un grand terrain situé à Dieko (Jeko), appartenant à notre clan? Après avoir falsifié les nom claniques avec la complicité des hauts-placés, tu nous as expropriés. Malgré nos doléances, nos preuves de propriété de clan, devant les tribunaux nous fûmes découtés. Non content de t'être appropirié notre bien, tu me fis arrêter et jeter en prison. Pourquoi?...(p. 165).

As a matter of fact, the scene which describes El Hadji's trial and mortification by the beggar is symbolic. On the one hand, by making the beggar both the cause and the cure (i. e., judge) of El Hadji's "xala," Sembène wants to convey the collective defeat and failure of the Senegalese bourgeoisie of the 1970s. On the other hand, the socialist novelist implies that ultimate political and social power is, in fact, in the hands of the masses of the population. "Elle est dans le

peuple,"<sup>21</sup> Sembène declares. El Hadji's trial has didactic intent for posterity. In essence, his humiliation and punishment by "xala" are both a moral lesson and a warning to all such pseudo-bourgeois, dishonest and corrupt "hommes d'affaires" and usurpers, that their destiny will be similar to that of El Hadji if they do not desist from unjustly oppressing and exploiting the masses.

Quite obviously in Xala, as in Les Bouts de bois de Dieu, Sembène sides with the masses and addresses himself to their economic, political, and social conditions; they are not, however, spared

from his attacks and criticism.

Xala traces the rise of an illicit petty bourgeoisie whose corruption, cultural alienation, and economic failure are conveyed through the parable of a temporary sexual impotence. As a whole, Sembène's fictional world is divided into two major social groups. The first group is represented by El Hadji and his business associates who continue to uplift and serve the interests of neocolonialism and imperialism. The second one is constituted by the underprivileged masses who are symbolized by the beggars. The negative consequences of such a newly wealthy elite are shown notably by fictional devices based on an ironic vision and a characterization of contrast established between El Hadji's style of life and that of the beggars. The novelist wages a series of scathing attacks against the Senegalese oligarchy which divorces itself from the people by its concern with villas, expensive cars, and furniture. Hence Xala comes to be "un procès violent et amer contre la nouvelle bourgeoisie qui s'empâte aus dépens du peuple."22

By its subject, structure, language and array of characters, by its variegated denunciations and satiric attacks against the corruption of the bourgeoisie of post-independence Senegal, by its delineation of the plight of the African woman under the institution of polygamy as well as the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the masses, Xala is essentially an anti-bourgeois novel. It is a book in which Sembène "livre son combat sur plusieurs plans: religieux, social, politique, se voulant apôtre de la justice." It is also a powerful indictment against a certain decline in morality provoked by thirst for money, by individualism and abuse of the rights of the common people. As Kenneth Harrow has said, Xala was conceived as "a revolutionary tool . . . both against the corruption of the contemporary, neocolonialist establishment and for the basic values of the revolution of the common

people."24

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Ousmane Sembène, Xala (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1973). All subsequent page references to this novel will appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Tahar Chériaa, "L'artiste et la révolution," *Cinéma/Québec*, Vol. 3, No. 9-10, août 1974, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Aly Khery N'Daw, "Sembène Ousmane et l'impuissance bourgeoise," an interview, Jeune Afrique, No. 694, 27 Avril 1974, p. 20.

4Chériaa, Op. Cit., p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Adrien Huannou, "Xala: une satire caustique de la société bourgeoise sénégalaise," Présence Africaine, No. 103, 1977, p. 10. <sup>6</sup>Ibid.

7Chériaa, Op. Cit., p. 13.

8Ibid.

9N'Daw, Op. Cit., p. 20.

10Ibid.

11 Kenneth Harrow, "Sembène Ousmane's Xala: The Use of Film and Novel as Revolutionary Weapon," Studies in Twentieth Century Literature, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring 1980, p. 178.

12Chériaa, Op. Cit., p. 17.

13Harrow, Op. Cit., p. 178.

<sup>14</sup>Sembène, "L'Homme est culture," The Sixth Annual Hans Wolff Memorial Lecture, 5 March 1975, African Studies Program, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1979, p. 20.

15Loc. Cit.

16Loc. Cit.

17Loc. Cit.

18Chériaa, Op. Cit., p. 16.

19 Ibid., p. 14.

20 Yénoukoumé Enagnon, "Sembène Ousmane: la théorie marxiste et le roman," Peuples Noirs/Peuples Africains, No. 11, 1978, p. 97.

21Chériaa, Op. Cit., p. 13.

22 Martin T. Bestman, Sembène Ousmane et l'esthétique du roman négroafricain (Sherbrooke: Editions Naaman, 1971), p. 324.

23 Ibid., p. 27.

24 Harrow, Op. Cit., p. 177.