

# Female Figures in Sembène's Xala: Between Social Submission and Critical Lucidity

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## Introduction

Francophone African literature of the 1970s inscribes itself within a context of profound postcolonial disillusionment, where the promises of emancipation collide violently with the persistence of patriarchal structures and the emergence of a predatory bourgeoisie. Ousmane Sembène, Senegalese filmmaker and novelist, published *Xala* in 1973, a satirical work that ruthlessly dissects the African neo-bourgeoisie through the story of El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye, a businessman struck by sexual impotence (*xala* in Wolof) during his third marriage. While the male protagonist occupies the narrative foreground, commanding attention through his social pretensions and eventual humiliation, the female figures constitute the true revealers of the social and ideological contradictions of this society in mutation. They function as both witnesses to and critics of a system that claims modernity while perpetuating ancient forms of oppression. The sociocritical approach, as developed by Claude Duchet and Pierre Zima, allows us to apprehend the literary text as "a formalization of the social imaginary" (Duchet, 1979, p. 4), where female characters are not simple passive reflections of sociological reality but significant constructions that mediate tensions between economic structures, dominant ideologies, and emancipatory aspirations. This perspective is enriched by relativized functionalism which, according to Goldmann (1964), recognizes that "social facts can only be understood in their dynamic relation to the social totality" (p. 26), while admitting the relative autonomy of the literary field. These theoretical frameworks enable us to read the novel not merely as a representation of reality but as an active transformation of social contradictions into aesthetic and narrative structures.

In *Xala*, Sembène constructs a social microcosm where each wife represents a different stratum of Senegalese society: N'Goné embodies rural tradition and the values of pre-colonial society, Oumi N'Doye symbolizes bourgeois westernization and

the seductions of consumer capitalism, while young N'Goné illustrates the commodification of the female body in its most brutal form. Rama, the protagonist's educated daughter, introduces a dissonant voice of contestation that refuses the compromises of earlier generations. This functional distribution of roles reveals how "the novel transforms social contradictions into narrative structures" (Zima, 1985, p. 78), making visible the tensions that dominant discourse seeks to obscure. The central problematic of this study interrogates the dialectic between submission and lucidity among these female characters: how does Sembène articulate the representation of patriarchal domination and the emergence of a feminine critical consciousness? To what extent do these female figures function as analyzers of class and gender contradictions in postcolonial Senegal? What forms does their resistance take, and how are these forms conditioned by their structural positions? Our hypothesis is that the apparent social submission of women in *Xala* masks a critical lucidity that expresses itself according to differentiated modalities depending on their position in the social relations of class, gender, and generation. This lucidity is not always explicit or revolutionary, but it nonetheless constitutes a form of consciousness that potentially undermines the system from within. This analysis will unfold in three movements: first, the examination of social submission as a structural position imposed by the patriarchal and capitalist system; second, the identification of forms of critical lucidity that emerge despite or through this submission; finally, the highlighting of the revelatory function of these female characters in the narrative and ideological economy of the novel. Through this tripartite structure, we will demonstrate how Sembène's literary craft serves his political vision, creating a work that is simultaneously a scathing social critique and a nuanced exploration of human consciousness under oppression.

## Social Submission as Structural Inscription

### The Polygamous Apparatus as System of Oppression

Polygamy constitutes in *Xala* the primary structural framework of feminine subordination, operating as both cultural institution and economic system. Sembène presents it not as a simple cultural practice to be defended or condemned according to relativist principles, but as an economic institution that "transforms women into goods of status consumption" (Sow Fall, 1982, p. 112). El Hadji accumulates wives as he accumulates positions on the board of directors, in a logic where "the possession of several women signifies the social success of the modern African man" (Sembène, 1973, p. 12). This accumulation reveals the fundamental continuity between traditional patriarchal structures and modern capitalist accumulation, suggesting that the two systems reinforce rather than contradict each other. N'Goné, the first wife, accepts the arrival of the co-wife with a resignation that initially appears total. The narrator emphasizes that she "kept silent, lips pressed together" (Sembène, 1973, p. 18), manifesting this constrained submission that patriarchal structures impose on women of her generation. Her acceptance does not stem from free consent but from an internalization of social norms which, according to Bourdieu (1998), functions as "symbolic violence" where "the dominated apply to relations of domination categories constructed from the point of view of the dominators" (p. 46). This concept of symbolic violence is crucial for understanding how oppression operates not merely through external coercion but through the colonization of consciousness itself.

Sociocriticism allows us to read this submission not as an individual psychological trait: a personal weakness or failure of will, but as an objective position in a system of social relations. N'Goné occupies the position of the traditional wife whose legitimacy rests on the anteriority of marriage and maternity. She has fulfilled her primary function within the patriarchal system by bearing children, particularly sons, and her long tenure as wife grants her certain privileges even as it constrains her. Her apparent submission paradoxically guarantees her stability in a system where "women can only negotiate their position by accepting the rules of the patriarchal game" (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 89). This negotiation within constraint characterizes much of women's agency in oppressive systems, not the heroic refusal of all accommodation, but the strategic navigation of limited options.

### Alienation through Consumption: The Case of Oumi N'Doye

Oumi N'Doye, the second wife, embodies a different form of submission: that of the bourgeois woman alienated by ostentatious consumption. Sembène describes her living in "a universe of false luxury, of imported trinkets" (1973, p. 24), where she mechanically reproduces the codes of the Western bourgeoisie without understanding their cultural context or questioning their appropriateness. Her living room, "furnished in the European manner with garish bad taste" (p. 25), symbolizes this cultural alienation that masks domination under the appearances of modernity. The mimicry of European bourgeois life becomes a form of self-colonization, where the adoption of the colonizer's aesthetic replaces genuine cultural transformation. Sociocriticism reveals here how "consumption functions as ideology that transforms relations of domination into differences of lifestyle" (Goldmann, 1970, p. 152). Oumi believes she escapes the condition of the traditional woman through the adoption of external signs of modernity: European furniture, Western clothing, French

language, but she merely exchanges one form of submission for another. Her total economic dependence on El Hadji places her in a situation of "domestic proletarianization" (Delphy, 1998, p. 31) where she exchanges her sexual and reproductive availability for access to consumer goods. The terms of her subordination have changed, but the fundamental structure of dependence remains intact. This alienation through consumption reveals the ideological function of peripheral capitalism that "maintains the subordination of women by displacing the terms of their exploitation" (Amin, 1973, p. 201). Sembène shows that apparent modernization does not overturn gender relations but reconfigures them according to the requirements of the new neocolonial economic system. The traditional patriarchal family and the modern capitalist economy prove remarkably compatible, each reinforcing the other's mechanisms of control. Oumi's situation demonstrates that access to consumer goods and modern lifestyles does not necessarily translate into genuine autonomy or liberation from patriarchal control.

### The Reification of the Female Body: Young N'Goné

The third wife, also named N'Goné, represents the most brutal form of feminine reification. Sembène presents her as "a barely nubile girl" (1973, p. 8), offered in marriage to El Hadji in a transaction that resembles a purchase more than a union. The narrator specifies that "her father, a poor griot, had seen in this marriage the opportunity to rid himself of a mouth to feed" (p. 32), crudely exposing the economic dimension of matrimonial exchange. This transaction strips away any romantic veneer, revealing marriage as a fundamentally economic institution where women serve as currency in exchanges between men. This young woman embodies what Rubin (1975) terms "the traffic in women" where "women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favors, sent as tribute" (p. 175). Her position in the polygamous system is purely instrumental: she serves to signify El Hadji's social status, demonstrating his wealth and power through his ability to marry a young, beautiful woman. No consideration is accorded to her subjectivity or her own desires; she is reduced to an object that circulates between men, her value determined entirely by her youth and beauty. Sociocriticism allows us to interpret this character as a narrative condensation of contradictions between tradition and modernity. El Hadji mobilizes traditional structures (polygamy, dowry, family mediation) to satisfy modern ambitions (social prestige, rivalry with business world peers). This young N'Goné is thus "doubly alienated: by traditional structures that reify her and by capitalism that commodifies this reification" (Fatton, 1986, p. 134). She represents the convergence of multiple forms of oppression, where age, gender, and class intersect to produce a position of almost total powerlessness.

### Material and Symbolic Constraints

Beyond these three wives, Sembène systematically exposes the constraints weighing upon all the women in his novel. Economic dependence constitutes the material foundation of their subordination. None of the wives exercises remunerated professional activity; all depend entirely on El Hadji's income for their survival and that of their children, which places them in a situation of "structural dependence" (Delphy, 1998, p. 56) where their material survival is conditioned by their acceptance of the patriarchal system. This economic arrangement ensures that resistance carries enormous risks, not merely social disapproval but potential destitution.

This economic dependence is doubled by a symbolic violence that naturalizes masculine domination, making it appear as the inevitable order of things rather than a social construction that could be otherwise. Sembène shows how "women themselves participate in the reproduction of patriarchal order" (1973, p. 67) by educating their daughters in respect for traditional norms. Young N'Goné's mother teaches her that "woman must practice patience and obedience" (p. 35), thus perpetuating the schemes of perception that legitimate domination. This transmission of patriarchal values across generations demonstrates how oppression becomes self-reproducing, with each generation of women preparing the next for subordination. Relativized functionalism allows us to understand that these constraints are not archaic survivals destined to disappear with modernization, but functional elements of the neocolonial system. As Amin (1973) observes, "peripheral capitalism needs the maintenance of patriarchal structures that ensure the reproduction of the labor force at minimal cost" (p. 187). The submission of women is therefore not a residue of the past but a condition of functioning in the present. The neocolonial economic system depends on women's unpaid domestic and reproductive labor, which subsidizes capital accumulation by reducing the cost of reproducing the workforce.

## Emergence and Modalities of Critical Lucidity

### The Silent Consciousness of Elder N'Goné

If N'Goné, the first wife, appears submissive on the surface, an attentive reading reveals her profound lucidity regarding mechanisms of domination. Her silence is not ignorance or passive acceptance but a survival strategy in a system where "feminine speech is constantly devalued or repressed" (Stratton, 1994, p. 78). When she learns of the third marriage, "she said nothing but her gaze spoke volumes" (Sembène, 1973, p. 19), suggesting an acute consciousness of the humiliation suffered. This silent eloquence demonstrates that the absence of verbal protest does not signify the absence of critical awareness. This lucidity also manifests itself in her understanding of domestic economy and her shrewd management of limited resources. N'Goné meticulously manages the budget that El Hadji allocates her, stretching resources to meet her family's needs, unlike Oumi who squanders without counting or consideration. This economic rigor reveals "a practical consciousness of power relations" (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 89) that allows her to maximize her relative autonomy within the narrow margins the system leaves her. Her competence in household management gives her a certain authority and respect, even within a structure of subordination. Sociocriticism allows us to identify here what Scott (1990) terms the "arts of hidden resistance" where "the dominated develop a critique of power that expresses itself offstage" (p. 4). N'Goné cannot openly contest El Hadji's authority without risking her position and her children's welfare, but she develops a critical lucidity that expresses itself in private spaces, far from the masculine gaze. Her position structural position as first wife confers upon her a legitimacy that, although subordinate, allows her to "negotiate the terms of her submission" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). She uses her seniority and her status as mother of El Hadji's children to maintain her dignity and protect her interests.

### Rama's Revolt: Generational Lucidity and Education

Rama, the eldest daughter of El Hadji and N'Goné, embodies explicit critical lucidity that refuses compromise or accommodation. A student at the university, she openly rejects her father's polygamy and refuses to participate in the ceremonies of

the third marriage, making her dissent publicly visible. Sembène presents her as "a modern young woman, conscious of her rights" (1973, p. 41), educated in the Western school but profoundly attached to authentic African values, uncorrupted by neocolonialism. She represents a synthesis that transcends simple dichotomies between tradition and modernity, seeking to recover what is valuable in African culture while rejecting both colonial impositions and indigenous oppression. Her lucidity manifests itself first in the refusal of the French language as the primary medium of family communication. She systematically addresses her father in Wolof, despite his reproaches, who sees in this practice "a lack of culture" (Sembène, 1973, p. 43). As Ba (1981) emphasizes, "the choice of language is a political act that reveals ideological positioning" (p. 56). By privileging Wolof, Rama affirms her belonging to an authentic culture in the face of the factitious westernization of the comprador bourgeoisie. Her linguistic choice is not reactionary traditionalism but a deliberate political statement about cultural authenticity and resistance to neocolonial alienation. Her critique is not limited to cultural questions; it extends to penetrating analysis of economic relations and class dynamics. When El Hadji complains of financial difficulties following his third marriage, Rama observes ironically that "polygamy costs the bourgeois dearly" (Sembène, 1973, p. 78), revealing her understanding of the contradictions between traditionalist pretensions and her father's capitalist practices. She sees clearly that her father invokes tradition selectively, using it to justify personal desires while abandoning traditional obligations of communal solidarity and redistribution. Relativized functionalism allows us to understand that Rama represents a specific social fraction: educated youth, straddling two worlds, who "develop a critical consciousness of the contradictions of the neocolonial system" (Fanon, 1961, p. 148). Her lucidity is not innate but results from her objective position at the intersection of multiple determinations: generation, education, gender. She benefits from educational opportunities that were unavailable to her mother's generation, giving her analytical tools and alternative perspectives that enable her to question what earlier generations accepted as inevitable.

### Feminine Solidarity as Form of Resistance

Another aspect of critical lucidity appears in moments of solidarity between co-wives, notably between N'Goné and Oumi. Despite their differences in lifestyle, worldview, and temperament, they find themselves "united in adversity facing masculine arrogance" (Sembène, 1973, p. 92). This punctual solidarity reveals "a consciousness of gender class that transcends status divisions" (hooks, 2000, p. 112). When faced with a common threat or humiliation, the women recognize their shared subordination and temporarily overcome the divisions that the system encourages. When El Hadji is struck by xala, the two wives momentarily present a common front, exchanging information and strategies for dealing with the crisis. Sembène shows that "in the interstices of the patriarchal system, women create spaces of solidarity" (1973, p. 103), even if this solidarity remains fragile and often instrumental. These moments of cooperation demonstrate that women are capable of recognizing their common interests and acting collectively, even within a system designed to isolate them from each other. This feminine solidarity is not, however, idealized by Sembène. He also shows with clear-eyed honesty the rivalries, jealousies, and manipulations between co-wives who compete for limited resources and masculine favor. Sociocriticism allows us to understand that "competition among women for masculine favors



is structurally inscribed in the polygamous system" (Ware, 1979, p. 201). The lucidity of the women includes consciousness of these internal contradictions that weaken their collective resistance. They understand that the system pits them against each other, but this understanding does not always enable them to overcome the competitive dynamics that structure their relationships.

### **The Speech of Servants: Class Lucidity**

Secondary female characters, notably the servants and domestic workers, also manifest a form of critical lucidity rooted in their class position. Sembène gives them voice in scenes where they comment with sharp irony on the turpitudes of their masters. A domestic servant observes that "the rich have problems that the poor do not know" (1973, p. 87), suggesting a critical distance from the pretensions of the bourgeoisie and a recognition that wealth creates its own forms of misery, even if these are incomparable to the material deprivations of poverty. This lucidity of subalterns is what sociocriticism terms "class consciousness" that "emerges from material conditions of existence" (Marx, 1867/1969, p. 234). The servants, doubly dominated as women and as workers in domestic service, develop "a practical understanding of relations of exploitation" (Delphy, 1998, p. 145) that manifests itself in their sarcastic comments and their capacity to manipulate situations to their advantage. Their position as intimate observers of the bourgeois household gives them unique insight into the contradictions between public pretensions and private realities. Sembène accords these marginal characters an important narrative function: they function as "ancient chorus that comments upon and judges the principal action" (Ngate, 1988, p. 167), revealing the distance between the pretensions of elites and the reality lived by popular classes. Their lucidity is different from Rama's; less theoretical and abstract, more anchored in daily experience and practical knowledge, but equally incisive in its critique of the system. They see through the performances of respectability and modernity, recognizing them as masks for exploitation and hypocrisy.

## **Revelatory Function and Sociocritical Scope**

### **Women as Analyzers of the Neocolonial System**

In the narrative economy of *Xala*, female characters function as revealers of the contradictions of the neocolonial system, making visible what the dominant ideology seeks to obscure. It is through their position in social relations that Sembène exposes "the mechanisms of reproduction of domination" (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 234). El Hadji, the male protagonist, is blinded by his ambitions, his narcissism, and his investment in the system that grants him privilege; it is the women who, through their lucidity and their marginal positions, permit the reader to understand the true nature of the system. Rama, in particular, fulfills a function of "spokesperson for the author" (Bisanswa, 2003, p. 98), explicitly articulating the ideological critique that the novel develops more diffusely through narrative structure and symbolic action. When she declares that "the African bourgeoisie is a sterile, parasitic class" (Sembène, 1973, p. 121), she formulates the political judgment that the entire novel illustrates narratively through the trajectory of El Hadji and his peers. Sociocriticism allows us to understand that this revelatory function is not arbitrary but stems from the structural position of women in the social system. As Lukács (1960) observes, "typical characters are those who concentrate within themselves the essential contradictions of an epoch" (p. 156). The women of *Xala*, precisely because they

occupy subordinate positions, can perceive and name the contradictions that the dominators must repress to maintain their position and their sense of legitimacy. Their marginality becomes an epistemological advantage, a clearer vantage point for social critique.

### **The Submission/Lucidity Dialectic as Narrative Structure**

The oscillation between submission and lucidity structures the narrative progression of the novel, creating a dynamic movement rather than a static portrait. Sembène constructs a movement that proceeds from resigned acceptance toward growing awareness and ultimately toward crisis. The *xala* that strikes El Hadji functions as "catalyst revealing latent contradictions" (Miller, 1990, p. 211), forcing each character to position themselves and making visible the tensions that had been suppressed. This narrative structure reflects what Jameson (1981) terms "the political unconscious of the text" where "narrative forms are imaginary responses to real social contradictions" (p. 79). The progression of the novel, which culminates in El Hadji's public humiliation before the beggars and outcasts he has exploited, symbolically represents the necessary revelation of neocolonialism's contradictions. Women, through their growing lucidity, are the agents of this revelation, witnessing and in some cases facilitating the exposure of El Hadji's pretensions. Relativized functionalism allows us to understand that this structure is not merely aesthetic but profoundly ideological. Sembène constructs a narrative that "demonstrates the historical possibility of social transformation" (Goldmann, 1964, p. 187) by showing how critical lucidity can emerge even in the most oppressive conditions of domination. The novel suggests that consciousness is not simply determined by material conditions but can develop in dialectical relation to them, creating possibilities for change.

### **Satire as Critical Weapon**

Sembène systematically mobilizes the satirical register to denounce the illusions and hypocrisies of the neocolonial bourgeoisie. Female characters actively participate in this satire, notably through their ironic gaze upon masculine pretensions and the deflating observations they make. When Oumi observes that "men are all children who need new toys" (Sembène, 1973, p. 134), she formulates a critique that defuses El Hadji's virile pretensions and his justifications for taking a third wife, reducing his grand gestures to childish acquisitiveness. This satirical dimension is central to Sembène's sociocritical strategy. As Frye (1957) analyzes, "satire functions by revealing the gap between ideological pretensions and material reality" (p. 223). Female characters, through their lucidity and their marginal positions, permit this revelation by naming the contradictions that dominant discourse strives to mask or rationalize. Their observations puncture the inflated rhetoric of modernization and progress, exposing the sordid realities beneath. The satire particularly targets the false modernity of the African bourgeoisie, their superficial adoption of Western forms without substance. Sembène shows that "the adoption of external signs of Western civilization masks the perpetuation of archaic relations of domination" (Fanon, 1952, p. 98). Women, because they directly suffer these contradictions, modernity as façade and real patriarchal oppression as continuing reality are best placed to denounce their hypocrisy. They experience daily the gap between the rhetoric of progress and the lived reality of continued subordination.

## Toward Social Transformation? Limits and Openings

The novel's conclusion remains deliberately ambiguous regarding the possibilities of social transformation, refusing easy optimism while maintaining hope. El Hadji is humiliated and financially ruined, stripped of his pretensions before the very people he has exploited, but the structures that produced his trajectory remain fundamentally intact. Female characters have manifested their lucidity and voiced their critiques but have not fundamentally transformed their material condition. This ambiguity reflects "Sembène's sociological realism that refuses easy optimism" (Diawara, 1992, p. 145) and his understanding that individual revelation does not automatically translate into systemic change. Rama embodies, however, an opening, a historical possibility of transformation that suggests futures beyond the oppressive present. Her educated lucidity, her political consciousness, her refusal of compromises and accommodations suggest that "the rising generation carries within itself the potential for rupture with the neocolonial system" (Cabral, 1973, p. 178). Sembène does not describe this transformation in detail or guarantee its success, but he poses its premises through Rama's character and her generation's critical consciousness. Sociocriticism allows us to understand this ambiguity not as narrative defect or authorial confusion but as "fidelity to the complexity of social reality" (Lukács, 1960, p. 201). Sembène refuses the schematism of miraculous emancipation achieved through individual enlightenment, while maintaining the horizon of possible transformation through collective struggle. The women of *Xala* are thus simultaneously victims of the system and potential bearers of its radical critique, their double consciousness positioning them as both witnesses to oppression and agents of potential change. Relativized functionalism suggests that this transformation will depend on multiple factors: evolution of relations of production, political mobilization, cultural transformation, international contexts. Sembène's female characters embody these different dimensions, showing that "the liberation of women is inseparable from the global transformation of the social system" (Amin, 1973, p. 234). Gender liberation cannot be separated from class struggle and anticolonial resistance; these struggles are interwoven and mutually constitutive.

## Conclusion

The sociocritical analysis of female figures in *Xala* reveals a sophisticated narrative architecture where social submission and critical lucidity articulate dialectically, creating a complex portrait of consciousness under oppression. Sembène constructs a system of characters where each woman occupies a specific position in social relations of class, gender, generation that determines both the forms of her subordination and the modalities of her critical consciousness. This positioning is not deterministic but creates possibilities and constraints that shape how resistance and accommodation manifest. Elder N'Goné embodies traditional submission but also a silent lucidity that expresses itself in the interstices of patriarchal power, finding spaces for dignity and agency within constraint. Oumi N'Doye represents alienation through consumption, a modern form of subordination that dare not speak its name, masked by the glittering surfaces of commodity culture. Young N'Goné illustrates extreme reification of the female body in a society where persists "the traffic in women" (Rubin, 1975, p. 175), her youth and vulnerability making her the most powerless figure in the novel. Rama, finally, embodies the explicit lucidity of an educated generation that refuses the compromises of

its elders, articulating a vision of resistance that is both culturally grounded and politically radical.

This diversity of female figures allows Sembène to demonstrate that "women do not constitute a homogeneous group but occupy differentiated positions in relations of domination" (hooks, 2000, p. 87). Submission is never total nor definitive; it coexists with varied forms of lucidity and resistance that emerge from material conditions of existence and from the spaces, however narrow, that women create for themselves and each other. The novel reveals both the power of structural oppression and the resilience of human consciousness, the capacity to perceive and judge even when the ability to change remains constrained. Relativized functionalism illuminates the function of these characters in the narrative economy: they are privileged analyzers of the contradictions of the neocolonial system. Their very subordination places them in a position to observe and name the mechanisms of domination that masculine elites must repress to maintain their sense of legitimacy and their investment in the system. As Goldmann (1964) observes, "class consciousness emerges precisely from objective position in relations of production" (p. 134), and we might extend this to say that consciousness of gender oppression emerges from structural position in patriarchal relations. The sociocritical scope of *Xala* resides in its capacity to show that "social transformation simultaneously necessitates the critique of neocolonialism and that of patriarchy" (Cabral, 1973, p. 201). Sembène refuses the hierarchization of struggles that would subordinate gender liberation to national liberation or class struggle, demonstrating instead that gender oppression and class exploitation are inextricably linked in the neocolonial system. The women of his novel are doubly, sometimes triply dominated by gender, by class, sometimes by age, but this multiple oppression also renders them bearers of a radical critique of the system in its totality, perceiving its interconnected dimensions of exploitation. The ambiguity of the conclusion growing lucidity but transformation not accomplished reflects Sembène's realism that "refuses facile utopianism while maintaining the horizon of emancipation" (Diawara, 1992, p. 167). The female characters of *Xala* are thus simultaneously witnesses to present oppression and bearers of the potential for future transformation. Their lucidity does not guarantee liberation, but it creates the possibility of collective action and systemic change. This study invites continued reflection along several axes. First, comparative analysis with other works by Sembène would allow us to identify the evolution of his representation of female figures across his career and in response to changing historical circumstances. Second, the articulation between novelistic text and cinematic adaptation merits thorough examination, as Sembène himself directed the film version of *Xala*, making deliberate choices about how to translate literary representation into visual medium. Finally, the reception of *Xala* in different cultural contexts African, European, American would reveal how readers differently actualize the critical potentialities of the text, finding different resonances and drawing different lessons.

*Xala* remains a major work of African literature precisely because it conjugates analytical rigor and satirical force to expose the contradictions of a postcolonial society. Female figures, far from being simple foils for the male protagonist or peripheral decorations to his drama, constitute the true ideological center of gravity of the novel, revealing that "the question of women is at the heart of all authentic social transformation" (Amin, 1973, p. 267). Sembène's achievement lies in creating characters who are

simultaneously fully realized individuals and representative figures, particular in their circumstances yet typical in their structural positions, making visible through their experiences the larger social forces that shape all lives in neocolonial society.

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