

## Penetrating *Xala*

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Interpreters of Ousmane Sembene's novel *Xala* (1976) tend to agree that El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye's sexual impairment operates metonymically to signify a much larger systemic malfunction in the political economy of postcolonial Africa. That is, a part—in this case El Hadji's flaccid private part—represents the wholesale public emasculation of Africa's petite bourgeoisie, who are seen as a sterile class of corrupt, parasitic entrepreneurs incapable of engaging in productive activities. The impotence with which El Hadji is cursed is thus far more than an embarrassing individual affliction, being in addition a symptom of something gone devastatingly awry in the entire body politic.

Françoise Pfaff has made the interesting observation that

Sembene implies that Africa, in order to grow and truly assert itself, should be fecund and nurturing like a woman.... [He] intimates that the African woman is earth/land and "Mother Africa" the genetrix of a new Africa.... El Hadji is impotent (inability to "plough" through the "earth"/penetrate the woman) because he has misused the fecundity of Africa/woman to assert his social and male ascendancy. A true example of the "rapacious bourgeoisie" denounced by Fanon, El Hadji first robbed a peasant (the beggar) of his land and then diverted tons of rice (another fertility symbol) to his own profit. Africa and N'Gone are fecund but El Hadji is unable to impregnate them because of his socioeconomical/sexual impotence, thus causing the barrenness/sterility of Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Without wishing to belabor an argument so pregnant with seminal ideas, I fear that Pfaff, by conflating N'Gone with Mother Africa, may be pushing the fecundity issue to a point where it is in danger of miscarrying, for N'Gone, at least as presented in the novel, could hardly be construed as a nurturing genetrix. Indeed, her own mother and aunt are eager to marry her off because they recognize she is stupid and suspect her of being immoral. They "dread the month when she won't be washing her linen at nights"<sup>2</sup>—i.e., when she has been made pregnant by one of the unemployed young "loafers" who take her to movies and dances. Described as a "child of national flags and hymns" (7),

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<sup>1</sup> Françoise Pfaff, *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene, a Pioneer of African Film* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984) 160–61.

<sup>2</sup> Ousmane Sembene, *Xala* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1976) 6. All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

N'Gone clearly represents another type of postcolonial profligacy and degradation. She certainly is not a symbol of anything wholesome. Her fecundity is viewed as dangerous because it could bring shame to her family.

There is no other Mother Africa anywhere in sight, for all the rest of the women in the story have serious flaws of character too. The matchmaker Yay Bineta, described as "a dumpy woman with a large behind" (5), is calculating, devious, and materialistic as well as being fundamentally unattractive. Oumi N'Doye is jealous, possessive, and demanding, "a volcano" (75) of emotion who abandons her husband when life gets tough. Even Adja Awa Astou, though presented somewhat sympathetically as an exemplary Moslem wife who manages to maintain her dignity despite numerous annoyances and disappointments, is shown to be addicted to religion and not much fun in bed; she lacks the earthiness essential to a Mother Africa. And Rama, El Hadji's liberated daughter, who at first glance appears to be enlightened and uppity enough to challenge patriarchal privilege, later is revealed as a reactionary upper-class pseudo-revolutionary, one who cannot endure the company of the truly oppressed proletariat and tries her best to protect her father from the ritualized humiliation of an exorcism through lower-class spit. No, none of these flawed women could bring about a regeneration of Africa.

Perhaps a more sensible way to approach Sembene's *Xala* is not by means of a feminist or gynocritical hermeneutics but rather through a straightforward phallogocentric exegesis. Impotence, after all, is a peculiarly masculine malady, and we may be missing the point if we search too assiduously in the text for hidden recesses of meaning when all the pertinent figurative paraphernalia requiring attention may be up front and visible, dangling there within easy reach.

To take the most obvious example first, El Hadji himself can be considered a rather blunt, even protuberant phallic symbol. A member of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, he rises and falls, becomes swollen with self-importance and then shrivels up, wants to extend himself beyond his capacity and cannot perform as required. In a sense, he is a classic tragic hero, an overreacher who does not recognize his own limitations and plunges recklessly into a void of self-destruction. But because his fatal flaw is represented as a physical shortcoming rather than as a psychological, philosophical, or spiritual weakness, El Hadji also serves as a comic hero, one who wilts ignominiously instead of tumbling precipitously. The emphasis is not on his hubris but on his pubis.

Sembene reinforces the bathos of El Hadji's situation by repeatedly playing upon polarized images of expansiveness and isolation, movement and stasis, projection and retraction. Philip Rosen has called attention to the importance of journeys and spaces in Sembene's work, noting how "journeys echo and deflect one another, while tracing ... core-periphery geographies." Of *Xala* he says,

there is a point where the film elaborates the journey of El Hadji Abdoukader Beye to the countryside in search of a marabout who can lift the curse of impotence laid on him by a band of beggars. The beggars themselves have converged from the countryside on his place of business and home in the city, in order to wreak the revenge of the impoverished swindled out of their just share.<sup>3</sup>

One can push this comparison further by noting not only how core-periphery geographies function in the characterization of El Hadji and his beggar adversaries but also how journeys traversing these geographies offer ironic insights into the power relationships that are of central concern in Sembene's narrative. El Hadji's honorific title (i.e., one who has made the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca) is a clear indication that he is someone who has traveled long distances. Not a religious man, he nonetheless has made a holy pilgrimage, using "his growing affluence" (3), much of it from ill-gotten gains, to enhance his reputation and prestige. El Hadji also practices long-distance trade, his import-export shop being "a large warehouse, which he rented from a Lebanese or a Syrian. At the height of his success it was crammed with sacks of rice from Siam, Cambodia, South Carolina and Brazil, and with domestic goods and foodstuffs imported from France, Holland, Belgium, Italy, Luxemburg, England and Morocco" (60). El Hadji evidently is a worldly sort of man, having interests that extend around the globe.

And before he falls victim to the curse, he has unlimited mobility, for he owns a Mercedes, employs a driver, has acquired a minibus for transporting his children to school, and has just purchased a two-seater car for his third wife. That these vehicles are emblematic of his potency is apparent from the intramural squabbling that goes on within his tripartite family over access to these resources. Oumi is aggrieved because she has not been allocated a car; the children do not enjoy sharing the minibus; Yay Bineta insists that N'Gone be provided with a chauffeur who can teach her to drive. These are demands on El Hadji's manhood, on his ability to provide satisfaction to all the women in his life. This is highlighted when, imagining that Oumi may have been the one to afflict him with the *xala*, he almost brings himself to beg, "Please, if you are the cause, release me. I'll buy you a car" (67). He is willing to bribe his wife with shared mobility if she will only allow him to get moving again, presumably at his accustomed speed.

Once the curse is on him, El Hadji experiences severely reduced mobility. He is willing to go long distances to consult marabouts reputed to have the power to cure him, but he can go only part of the way by car and must finish the journey in a donkey-drawn cart or on foot. In the end he suffers the humiliation of

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Rosen, "Nation, Inter-nation and Narration in Ousmane Sembene's Films," *A Call To Action: The Films of Ousmane Sembene*, ed. Sheila Petty (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996) 31.

having all his vehicles repossessed; at this point two of his wives desert him for in his diminished state he no longer commands their respect. Now he is almost completely isolated, having been cut off from the rest of the world and reduced to single nuclear family unit. When he stands on a table to serve as the target for the beggars' spit, he is absolutely motionless. El Hadji, who once had driven furiously in the fast lane of life heedless of others, has finally been brought to a dead stop. The final frame of the film freezes his immobility into a tableau of total paralysis.

The beggars by contrast start out immobile and end triumphant after a long and difficult trek to El Hadji's villa. They are still mobility-impaired, and the last line of the novel suggests that they too are about to be brought to a dead stop, but in the film version they are allowed to get their full revenge on a representative of the petite bourgeoisie, the class in society that has brought them low and kept them underfoot. The reversal of power relations between the rich and the poor, the able and the disabled, the quick and the slow, is now complete; the revolution has succeeded, albeit only in a limited sphere. In the unwritten chapter that may be presumed to follow, the beggars are not likely to inherit the earth or extend their own territory significantly. If they survive, they will remain an immobile underclass, despite their momentary advance at El Hadji's expense.

The remainder of the petite bourgeoisie, on the other hand, will continue to thrive, for they have mechanisms in place to guarantee their own safety. If a member of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry misbehaves, as El Hadji does, he can be expelled and another thief put in his place. In attempting to defend himself from complete commercial castration, El Hadji tries to confront his colleagues with evidence of their own economic impotence:

Who owns the banks? The insurance companies? The factories? The businesses? The wholesale trade? The cinemas? The bookshops? The hotels? All these and more besides are out of our control. We are nothing better than crabs in a basket. We want the ex-occupier's place? We have it. This Chamber is the proof. Yet what change is there really in general or in particular? The colonialist is stronger, more powerful than ever before, hidden inside us, here in this very place. He promises us the left-overs of the feast if we behave ourselves. Beware anyone who tries to upset his digestion, who wants a bigger profit. What are we? Clodhoppers! Agents! Petty traders! In our fatuity we call ourselves "businessmen"! Businessmen without funds. (92-93)

El Hadji goes even further and accuses his accusers of bouncing checks and selling quotas just as he has. To him it is a matter of the pot calling the kettle black, but to his colleagues in the Chamber, El Hadji's countercharges smack of class treason. He must be cut off in order for their own corrupt, exploitative practices to continue unabated. El Hadji thus is quickly expelled. His penetration

into the charmed circle is abruptly terminated. He does not withdraw voluntarily; he is forced out, ejected, banished for good once and for all. In this foreshortened condition, a virtual social amputee, El Hadji loses all semblance of prior potency.

The story is told well in both book and film, but in the visual medium Sembene is able to reinforce his message by presenting contrasting scenes focusing on modes of locomotion. The opening motorcade ferrying members of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, one member per Mercedes, through the busy streets of Dakar to El Hadji's wedding reception is nicely counterpointed with the concluding collective procession of beggars, some limping, some on crutches, some crawling or heaving themselves along dusty dirt paths. At the wedding reception itself, guests gracefully stroll in the garden, dance to slow music, or sit in comfort and chat while the beggars and onlookers stand outside the gates silently gazing at the guests or fighting for the coins El Hadji throws on the ground. In another scene, the beggars squat in front of El Hadji's warehouse, but are rounded up by the police, hustled into a police van, and efficiently carted away, while, later, when El Hadji's Mercedes is impounded, the policemen, not knowing how to drive such a vehicle, push it slowly down the street. These scenes help to underscore the grave social and economic disparities by graphically depicting differences in locomotion, privilege, and access to space and goods. In such a lopsided world there can be no doubt about who occupies the vital core and who the periphery. By pairing such scenes, Sembene very effectively projects memorable images of a divided society.

*Xala* thus may be viewed as an exercise in concordial contrasts: virility versus impotence, mobility versus paralysis, center versus periphery, wealth versus poverty, decency versus indecency, love versus money, etc. The primary peg on which the story hangs remains El Hadji's unreliable penis, but Sembene enlarges and extends this protean tool symbolically in so many interesting directions in both film and novel that we are left with an unforgettable impression not just of one man's private life but also of the problems peculiar to unproductive postcolonial societies in which socialism is merely a bankrupt slogan. Ousmane Sembene's *Xala* thereby points with mock-priapic insistence at the real curse afflicting much of modern Africa.