



Literature and Society: A New Reading of Sembène Ousmane's *Le Mandat*.

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Abstract. Literature is an essential platform for socio-political, cultural and economic struggles among other things. This creative art called literature is a source of dialogue, debate, exchange and innovation. A form of creativity which enhances transfer of culture and knowledge that are useful for coping with societal tasks. In other words, it paints life with a view to share human experiences, feelings, imaginations, observations, findings, predictions and suggestions for prevailing social realities. However, as open and flexible literature is, practitioners; writers and critics alike are advised to desist from arbitrariness. We conceive literature as something more than art for art sake not because such stance is wrong but because literature has other potent roles to play in human society. In this paper, we attempt to decode Sembène Ousmane's *Le Mandat* with a view to unmasking the representations of a society in literary work. In other words, we demonstrate the relationships between Literature and Society, using fiction as our theoretical back-up. The paper concludes that literature is a functional weapon for social criticism which will bring about sustainable developments in various human societies.

Key words: Literature, society, culture, social realities, representation, post-independence

Introduction

In the 1920s, Senegal produces her first novelists and this makes the country to supersede other African francophone countries as regards literary /creative writing. One of the African literary giants from Senegal, Aminata Sow Fall, once paints the fundamental function of literature in Africa as that tool which exposes societal ordeals with an intention to awakening and sensitizing the consciousness of the African people about the problems/challenges which bedevil them. In 1985, Aminata

Sow Fall affirms: “I draw people’s attention to certain problems...This is the way I conceive literature first...we have so many problems that I think that art for art’s sake is a luxury that we cannot afford.” Truly, Africans need art, including literature more than the narrow scope of an entity for its own sake and benefit. Since art is a product of a given human society, it must therefore connect with and reflect the environment, which paves the way for its birth or creation with a view to improve or at least maintain the basic rudiments in the society for mutual co-existence of different competing partakers in the ecological make-up and map of a society.

Like his counterpart, Aminata Sow Fall, Sembène Ousmane frowns at the blind attachment to religion and superstitious attitude to life accepted by a vast number of Africans, particularly the Senegalese. Stating her position, Aminata Sow Fall remarks: “I am, in the Novel, (*Beggars’ Strike*), denouncing the attitude of the society towards the poor, the beggars as it were. One must, by the way, properly understand the beliefs which cut deep into our society. From the outside we have the same perception of the beggars as the Western world that is an indigent person to whom one throws a coin from time to time. But within themselves, these people conserve what their culture has bequeathed to them, and which stipulates that if you are ill, giving charity to a beggar can help you to recover your health.

From that point, the beggars become the mysterious representatives of something extra-natural and their strike, their refusal to accept alms, can take on unsuspected dimensions as I describe it in the novel...”

Edward B Taylor (1997), defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habitats acquired by man as a member of society”. According to Daramola (2003), culture is also defined as that universal and uniquely human phenomenon consisting of patterns of thinking and believing, doing and behaving, making and using that all humankind learn in growing up as members of a human society. Culture is defined by Carey as a process, but it can also refer to a shared attributed of a human group

(such as their physical environment, tools religion, customs and practices or their whole way of life). Culture also can refer to texts and symbolic artifacts that are encoded with particular meanings by and for people with particular cultural identification.

UNESCO sees culture as “What has shaped societies’ and individuals’ ways of life; while certainly rooted in ancestral values, it is also a source of dialogue, exchange, innovation and creativity, and the foundation stone of endogenous systems of solidarity, forms of expression and ways of transmitting knowledge that are as valid for meeting the challenges of tomorrow as for preserving traditions”, (UNESCO, 2005). In a simple term, culture is an aspect of people’s identity which promotes social integration and organization among a community of people. However, culture is never static; it is dynamic, hence, it should adapt itself to the changes which come or evolve with time. In this modern world which is ruled by science and technology, an unhealthy attachment to cruel crude culture is unacceptable as it hinders societal development

One major literary element employed by Sembène Ousmane in his novel, *Le Mandat* is satire. The practice of making fun of a human action with the primary aim of correcting the character’s excessiveness or weakness is known as satire. “Satire is pleasurable mechanism evolved by the society through which it copes with deviation from accepted codes of behavior” (Adeoti, 1994). Hence, satire is an attack on folly or vice demonstrated by an individual, a group of people or a given society with the intention to correct such dirty or unacceptable behavior. From listeners, viewers and, or readers, satire is used to achieve a reaction of contempt.

Fictional entities are “principally those entities originating in and defined by myths, legends, fairy tales, novels, dramas and other works of fiction,” (Peter Lamarque, 2000). He holds that philosophical interest in fictional entities thus covers a surprisingly wide range of the subject such as ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of language and aesthetics.

“A selection of events on the basis of chronological sequence, casually and the value of judgments has always been necessary; that is to say information about reality has been presented to and by the human species in the forms of narrative fiction known to us as History, and the statements of politicians and journalists”, (Joan Rockwell, 1974). From Rockwell argument, it can be deduced that everything is fiction on one hand and on the other hand, fiction is reality.

“Works of literary non-fiction may be defined as those that aspire to be factual and true. These two values, however, are not the same thing. Works of fiction are not factual, but they can be true in that they represent a state of affairs that we recognize as potentially, perhaps profoundly, true.

On the other hand, work of fact can distort the truth... By itself, a list of facts may be accurate, but such a list lacks the kind of truth that may be found in works of history, or biography or documentary. When a work reflects an aspiration to be both factual and true, it satisfies a necessary condition for literary non-fiction.” (John Warnock 1989).

As a matter of fact, it is strongly difficult to separate fiction from non-fiction because the two are essentially co-extensive. They have interlocking relationships which cannot be automatically deconstructed. The elements of fiction can be found in non-fiction. Hence, no work of narration; drama, poetry or prose is totally fictional/imaginative or non-fictional/true. “... literature itself has its own purpose and determinants... never wholly autonomous it draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life experience of its producers in their time... but it never speaks for the totality of that culture,” (Warner Berthoff, 1981). Hence, literature or any work of art generally is not closed, independent or self-sufficient on its own. There is a connection between literature and the milieu/environment where it is produced.

Again, “The writer has no means of escape, we want him to embrace his time closely, and it is his lot: it is made for him and he is made for it,” (Sartre, 1948). Society means an association of people, which comprises people that have rules of behavior such as beliefs, customs, traditions, conventions, social values and norms by which the society can change and protect the trade unions of a given society. Society is “a particular community of people who share the same customs, laws, etc” while development stands for “the gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger, etc”, (Hornby, 2000).

The society is situated in literature and other arts. “The general resemblance to reality is what makes art recognizable to the rest of us. But what makes art artful is the fact that the artist imposes his own matter upon these forms in a way that gives them another responsiveness to another inevitability, a new necessity and probability,” (Murray Krieger, 1976).

Literature has turned out to be “a medium of discussing and explaining contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society; since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. It is far from being ambiguous that literature buys into the expressive function of a given language. And, the understanding of culture and the society, which are potential ingredients on which literature is premised, paves the way for an effective development”, (Ogundokun, Sikiru A., 2013).

Theoretical Framework

The term “faction” in the words of Emenyonu (1991) is the art of “juxtaposing real and identifiable facts with fiction”. Cuddon (1998) attests that faction originated around 1970 in United States to describe fictions which are blended with facts. He argued further by citing Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1996) and Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* (1968) as examples of faction. In Nigerian literary

palace, Kole Omotosho's *Just before Dawn* (1988), Wole Soyinka's *Isara* (1989) and Uche Mowah's *Eating by the Flesh* (1995) are categorized as faction. Cuddon upholds that faction as a literary genre might easily apply to historical novels which fictionalize a great deal of periods, facts or novels incorporating actual living personalities in a narrative that deals with recent events pertaining to historical facts. Tulloch also agrees with the view of Cuddon by painting faction as a blend of fact and fiction.

According to Tulloch (2002), the word, faction is morphologically derived by telescoping the terms "fact" and "fiction". It is believed that faction offers a more direct critic on events and personalities in a given human society and can therefore be used to positively reform the society. Hence, it is an essential feature of satire; a literary composition, which exposes the follies and the vices of people or an individual in a ridiculous manner in an attempt to correct them. In other words, scholars who adopt this theoretical framework are of the view that literature should perform one function or a set of functions, which ranges from aesthetic function; didactic function, therapeutic function and educational function to linguistic function.

By performing aesthetic function, literature appeals to the sense of beauty. To scholars in this field, literature should serve the purpose of delighting, pleasing, enchanting, satisfying and inventive to touch, see, feel, behold and to sense. Literature is in fact, a means of entertainment. This aesthetic function is largely influenced by the ideology of "art for art's sake" (*L'art pour l'art*).

Through didactic function, we expect literature to perfect or correct man's imperfections and shortfalls by teaching certain moral lessons, norms, values and virtues. This pedagogic ingredient present in literature is estimated to moralize and preach moral uprightness as a way of combating different forms of ills or vices in a particular human society.

Scholars in this regard wish to see and ascertain the extent to which a text, a literary composition: drama, poetry or prose portrays morality or immorality. They try to understand whether characters in a work of art are morally sound or morally found wanting. Also, they try to see if a given piece of art puts virtue over and above vices and so on.

Literature is without doubt, expected to perform the function of healing which we described as therapeutic function. Readers are expected to be healed or cured of emotional, psychological, economic, pathological and/or socially related health challenges through reading a text, watching a drama or listening to the recitation of a poem. It is again believed that literature can be employed to develop the language of both the writers and the readers.

Analysis of the text

Sembène Ousmane's *Le Mandat* can be variously described, explained or analyzed. Some critics see it as a sociological novel while others think it is a philosophical novel or a political novel only to mention just a few. However, it is clear that the novel deals with social realities of African states particularly those realities which are associated with the post-Independence period.

Because Sembène Ousmane's *Le Mandat* is a post-Independence work, it is an x-ray of African realities of that political era. As a matter of fact, it is obvious that polygamy, unemployment, poverty, corruption, effect of bureaucracy, illiteracy and blind attachment to cultural and religious beliefs are major social realities in Africa during the period under review in the novel, Sembène Ousmane's *Le Mandat* and of course to date. The themes discussed in the story are not in any way strange as the societal problems in African states, however, the newness in them is the manner at which the novelist presents and treats the said themes in his literary creation named *Le Mandat*.

For a better analysis and understanding of the novel, the summary of the story is a necessity here. The story goes thus: Ibrahima Dieng, the hero of *Le Mandat* receives a letter and a money order of 25,000 francs from his nephew, Abdou, who lives in Paris. The money is to be shared into three: 2,000 francs for Dieng, 3,000 francs for her sister, the mother of Abdou and 20,000 francs to be kept for Abdou, the sender of the money. On the arrival of the said letter and money order, Bah, the postman delivers the items to the two wives of Dieng because their husband is not at home. The household is in an ecstasy of joy and without wasting any time, the wives proudly go to Mbarka's shop to buy foodstuff on credit using the received mail as evidence of being credit-worthy. Dieng is happy about the news of the money order but he is not satisfied that his wives have made the letter and the issue of the money order a public consumption at a common place like Mbarka's shop.

At the post-office, Dieng pays somebody to read the letter to him because he is an illiterate. He stays for a very long time in a queue to get the money but surprisingly when it is his turn, he is asked to produce his identity card to facilitate the clearance and eventual payment of the money sent to him. Dieng does not have an identity card, hence, he is told to go to the police station of his area, where also he will need to provide a birth certificate, three passport photographs and a 50 francs postage stamp before obtaining the required identity card. Frustrated by the requirements, Dieng returns home to be confronted by his neighbors who have come to ask him for assistance. Dieng is unable to meet the needs of his neighbors since he has not got the money in question. He therefore becomes a bad man, in the hands of his numerous neighbors.

The following day, Dieng is further humiliated by the staff of the Administrative office because he cannot tell the exact date of his birth. He is sent away without the birth certificate.

Although disturbed by all these bureaucratic bottle-neck, Dieng decides to ask a distant cousin for help. The latter gives him some money from which Dieng pays for passport photos.

Shortly, Abdou's mother appears to ask Dieng for her 3,000francs share of the money because she is in dead need of it. Dieng sells his wife's ear-rings at a give-away price to appease his sister. With the help of the distant cousin, Dieng gets his birth certificate, goes to the photographer's shop to collect his passport photos but he returns home beaten to bleeding point without the said photos or his money.

Dieng, having spent some days in bed to recover and after more insults, accepts Mbaye's offer to collect the money on his behalf. Two days after, Mbaye informs Dieng that the cashed money has been stolen! Dieng returns home disappointed and disillusioned. The novel ends with Dieng graduating to the level of self-consciousness and self-discovery of the social reality of the world he lives: "L'honnêteté est un délit de nos jours". It is at this point in time, Bah, the postman arrives again with another letter for Dieng from Paris.

One of the striking themes in Sembène Ousmane's *Le Mandat* is poverty. It is seriously displayed on almost all the pages of the novel. The houses are poorly built and there is always heavy presence of beggars. The beggars are such desperate to the extent that some of them tell lies; change their dress to deceive unsuspecting alms givers who have given them something earlier on. The poverty level is such that people reduce themselves to a level as low as begging for 10 francs. The people are indeed hungry look. We read about a woman "vêtue d'une camisole toute usée." (p.169). Abdou's mother sums-up the sorry state in which the people represented in the novel, Sembène Ousmane's *Le Mandat*, are subjected.

Hear her: « Nous n'avons rien. Rien, ce qu'on appelle rien. Pour venir, j'ai emprunté à droite et à gauche. Même ces vêtements sur moi, une partie est à ma deuxième ... ». Remember, Dieng, who is the hero of the novel, borrows as little as 50 francs as his transport fare to the post-office.

As a matter of fact, a true documentation on Africa will not pardon the issue of poverty. Presenting this common scenario in Africa, Okey(1998) observes: "It is evident today; the rural communities have been cut off from the urban areas because their roads have become impassable. Most, if not all our communities, are smarting from their rustic eerie darkness. The people of our hinterland are hungry for development, and desirous of the opening up of their villages to beat back the forays of want, deprivation, poverty, primitivism, superstition... Generally, they long for better living conditions and the benefit of science and technology."

Unemployment is another social problem exposed in the novel, Sembène Ousmane's *Le Mandat*. The chief character, Ibrahima Dieng has been thrown out of job for a year; the mason has been unemployed for two years (p. 138) and it is on the account of unemployment that Abdou leaves his home country for Europe, France in particular. On page 150, in his imaginary letter to Abdou, Dieng's picture of Senegal is: "**Ici c'est sec sans besoin.**" Again, how the crowd gathers at short notice indicates the idleness of the people, which consolidates the fact that there is a serious problem of unemployment in the land (p. 125, p. 131, p. 138, p. 163, p. 168 and pages 174 to 177). For instance, a crowd gathers on page 163 when Malik, Ambroise, the notorious photographer's apprentice beats up Dieng. And a crowd suddenly gathers to witness the hot war of words between Dieng and Mbarka on pages 174 to 177.

In his social criticism of the African society, the novelist, Sembène Ousmane in his *Le Mandat* paints the general degradation of the black continent since independence. He laments thus: "Dans quel pays sommes-nous? ...je ne reconnais plus ce pays" (p. 169). Still on that same page 169, the author identifies the ugly list of the messed-up state of affairs in Africa, particularly Senegal : « Les pensées les plus secrètes virent jour, la gabegie, le népotisme, le chômage, l'immoralité, la carence des autorités... ». Even before that, the author has pointed out the fall in the cultural value of collective responsibility for a happy existence, which is an old order in Africa. It is this way of life that makes Africans their brothers' keeper. But

now everybody is on his own: “maintenant, chacun vit pour soi” (p. 154). Social injustice is also now the order of the day. It illustrates that some animals are more equal than the others. The likes of Ambroise, the wicked photographer is untouchable for the police. This is the comment of one of the characters about Ambroise: “...cet Ambroise, est un salaud! Avec tous les scandales qu’il fait, il n’est jamais inquiété par la police” (p. 164).

Sembène Ousmane is not yet done with the list of problems which ravage Africa. He adds corruption in his literary creation, *Le Mandat*. In Africa, corruption is the bane; it has eaten deep into the bone marrow of the polity. In some quarters, corruption is even described as the canker worm, which retards developments in all ramifications. Mbarka represents the corrupt Africans, who can go to any length by cutting corners in getting things done for personal interest/gain. To get rice, he bribes (p. 121).

The general belief is that with money you can get anything done for you without wasting time: “...si tu as de l’argent, alors ça va vite.” (p. 138). On page 140, a woman character captures the image of post-independence Africa, especially Senegal as a porous society, where anything is possible: “...si quelqu’un croyait qu’elle allait graisseroué carter les cuisses, celui-là se trompait”. In a nut-shell, the society is lawless: “...il n’y a pas de loi” (p. 165). On their own land, the ill-fated illiterates are second class citizens struggling for survival. Instead of helping them to get out of the ignorance, which separates them from development and self actualization, the few educated Africans show their superiority over the unlucky unlettered ones! The new bureaucratic policy is a death-trap for the illiterate Africans. We all see what Dieng, the protagonist in *Le Mandat* passes through.

In every human society, money is an issue. A school of thought believes money rules the world. But, our popular religions uphold strongly that the love of money is the root of all evils, which may be committed by men and women that inhabit the world. It can be underscored that money in human existence and relationship is a serious

societal subject. As a means of exchange, which allows whoever that has it do whatever he/she likes; no one frowns at money. It attracts attention and love. Sembène Ousmane feels, an objective social criticism should not play down the role of money in human society. However, our novelist, Ousmane reasons that the love of money is the root of most societal evils and it will lead to a total destruction of what is left of Humanity if care is not taking. The problems caused by money in the society x-rayed in Sembène Ousmane's *Le Mandat* are made clear through the comments of some characters on page 76:

« L'argent! C'est fou ce qu'on se bagarre pour les sous depuis notre indépendance... »

« Malheur à celui qui a inventé l'argent »

« En fait, dans notre pays, depuis quelque temps, l'argent tient lieu de morale. »

Finally, through Ibrahima Dieng, his principal character in *Le Mandat*, Sembène Ousmane states his position on the role of money and his advice about money: « Je te demande de ne pas considérer l'argent comme l'essence de la vie. L'argent comme essence de la vie ne le conduit que sur une fausse route où, tôt ou tard, tu seras seul. L'argent ne solidifie rien. Au contraire, il détruit tout ce qui nous reste d'humanité » (p.182). It is obvious that wealth/money does not bring happiness. (*L'argent ne fait pas le bonheur*).

Conclusion

In this study, we have demonstrated that there is a meeting point between literature and society and that literature can serve as a useful tool for lasting developments. Our chosen novelist has exposed and condemned seriously the common social problems which ravage African states and still dwell in them. For recommending solutions to the social problems, the novelist can be seen as a social pathologist. Because Sembène Ousmane talks about poverty, unemployment, corruption, ignorance, nepotism, moral decadence, disintegration of social values, religious and cultural blindness we are convinced that he has attempted to advocate

for positive social changes in his society. Hence, literature, whether as spoken or written words is a veritable tool for articulating societal developments and global advancement in general based on the numerous functions it performs. With literature, good governance and best practices can be achieved; since this will create rooms for transparency, accountability, youth empowerment, women liberation and eradication of religious and cultural blindness.

We have browsed the story and we have downloaded certain systemic challenges, which militate against the much awaited developments in Africa. These include corruption, illiteracy (the need for education/former training), polygamy, poverty, money and sorcery. For African states to develop and achieve their potentials, all the identified competing problems should be solved. It is obvious that as a result of social struggles among various participants in a class system, there will always be conflicts and/or violent acts until the class less society is actualized.

Kudos to his ability to adopt and use effectively relevant literary devices, Sembène Ousmane is victorious in the engagement of criticizing the African society, particularly Senegal, his home country to prove that literature and society are undoubtedly connected.

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