

Religious Hypocrisy and Extremism: Bane to Good Governance in the Selected Novels of Two Francophone African Writers

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Abstract

The study is centred on religious issues as captured in the literary works of Sembène Ousmane and Ferdinand Oyono. It interrogates socio-religious matters in Sembène Ousmane's *Le mandat, Les bouts de bois de Dieu, Guelwaar*.and Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*. The choice of these literary texts is guided by the fact that the novels represent different cardinal periods of the socio-religious realities in Africa. Religion is a vital instrument of socialization and mobilization around the world. It is equally a delicate issue being a value based matter and it is on this premise that we consider the subject-matter significant and worthy of studying. The article deploys sociological approach or perspective as its theoretical framework and content textual analysis as its methodology. It argues that religion is often used to influence people's thinking, sentiments, sense of judgment, and actions in any given human society. The study reveals that the novelists are dissatisfied with the way religion is used to enslave humans and manipulate them to their detriment. It is based on this that the works examined are considered novels of resistance, which are aimed at attaining human development as regards socio-cultural, economic and political consciousness for self determination.

Keywords: Religious hypocrisy, Extremism, Good governance, Francophone African writers, Literature.

Introduction

Literature is a social institution, using as its medium, language, a social creation ... Literature represents life and life is in large measure, a social reality, even though the natural world and the inner or subjective world of the individual have also been objects of literary imitation (Wellek and Warren, p. 228). As long as social injustice and economic imbalance persist in human societies, revolutionary writing and debates will continue to exist. It is a reflection of the society itself. Akwe remarks that protest literature has existed in various forms throughout literary history. It is characterised by the existence of a clearly-defined standpoint, a tough ethical conviction, a strong verbal tone, a manifestation of anger, but typically, a positive belief in the ultimate triumph of fair-mindedness by awakening the peoples' consciousness to social ills that ravage society (45). Instead of providing social infrastructure and creating sustainable opportunities and national development, post-colonial African leaders have caused more gaps between the poor and the rich. What they talk about is the stomach infrastructure. With gross impunity and recklessness, they display their loots, from public treasury, for everybody to see. This ugly trend has aggravated cases of armed robbery, kidnapping, cyber crimes, pipeline vandalism, militancy, terrorism and other security challenges in most African states. Creating awareness on the social responsibility of a creative writer on socio-economic and political matters, Ofeimun opines that it is possible to tell the truth and on the basis of the positions you take, try to change public policies ... I think a writer will be deceiving himself, if he believes he can draw a line between himself as an artist and himself as a citizen of society who has positions that he considers right and deserving expression (63).

Writers in contemporary African society have always been saddled with the responsibility of voicing the happenings around them. Unlike their counterparts in history and journalism, writers do not hit the headlines overtly but painfully and artistically bear the burden of exhuming, schematically and consciously, socio-political happenings around them, even when they are deeply entrenched and sometimes escape the eye of the average person. The writer's critical antenna is sensitive and picks up every issue for information, education and entertainment. Sometimes they lampoon and satirise the society as they skillfully present their facts.

This artistic effort has produced many works of literature as demonstrated in the novel, poetry and dramatic genres (Onyijen, p. 109).

Theoretical Framework

Sociological approach is of the view that literature should be seen in light of the structure and historical stage of the society that produces it. Although literary works are produced by individual writers; they are basically a reflection of the collective life, which could be interpreted as the social existence of a given society. René Wellek and Austin Warren developed the social approach. In their book titled, *Theory of Literature*, they identified three areas which should be of interest to a social critic. The first area is the writer's background; that is the author's biological/hereditary and environmental factors, which help understand and explain social attitudes as well as opinions that appear in a particular literary work. The world that is imitated or created and presented in the work itself is another area. This aspect investigates the culture and society, which are depicted in the text. It also considers how the fictive, imaginary or poetic world reflects its outer world. The third area is the target audience. The third determinant examines the kind of impact the literary work has on its readers. In other words, this aspect interrogates the nature of reception of a given text. This is the area which interests the group of critics called the *receptionists* (Dobie, pp. 15-16). The adoption of the sociological approach of literary criticism can also be justified because the critical approach is believed to be "the most apt to render a full account of modern African literature." The literary approach takes into consideration "everything within our society which has informed the work" (Irele, p. 9).

There is an unholy fellowship between the religious institutions and the established political system. It can be argued that the four Cs (colonialism, Christianity, commerce and civilization) have undoubtedly brought complicity and confusion which have succeeded in setting humanity against itself; nations against nations and people against one another in the world. As it is buttressed by Fafowora,

In the world today, religion threatens to narrow the mutual understanding among nations. Apart from ethnicity and racism, religion is a divisive determinant. Religion can either make men wise and virtuous, or fanatical and hypocritical. As the nation gets poorer, and the struggle for power and control of the dwindling resources of the nation gets fiercer, many will be disposed to resort to religion to promote their own selfish interests, by emphasizing religious differences and promoting religious antagonism. (248)

Sembène Ousmane is dissatisfied with the Islamic culture in his creative writings particularly polygamy and fanaticism. He equally frowns at using religion to adjust, direct or control people's minds to achieve personal interests, which in most cases are laced with exploitative tendencies. It is hard to forget the character of El Hadji Mabiqué, who does not share food with his own sister. Instead of helping his relatives at the time of need he is preaching 'gospel' to the helpless woman. In his words, "I know that life is often hard, but that should not cause us to turn our backs on God. He has assigned a rank, a place, and a certain role to every man and it is blasphemous to think of changing His design. The *toubabs* are here because that is the will of God. Strength is a gift of God, and Allah has given it to them. We cannot fight against it- why, look, they have even turned off the water..." (*God's Bits of Wood*, p. 45). The hypocritical tendency of this perceived devoted Muslim, El Hadji Mabiqué, is further consolidated by the various derogatory words his sister, Ramatoulaye used in painting him. He is called a fornicator, a thief and an old she-goat! (*God's Bits of Wood*, p. 45). Similarly, the chief Imam of Dakar is implicitly an agent of French imperialism. This can be confirmed through his role when he mediates between Ramatoulaye and the police, and his speech at the race course. The Imams and other religious leaders reject the strike action embarked upon by the railway workers. After the prayers and religious services all over the city, there would be a sermon whose theme was always the same: By ourselves, we are incapable of creating any sort of useful object, not even a needle; and yet you want to strike against the *toubabs* who have brought us all of these things! It is madness! You would do better to be thanking God for having brought them among us and bettering our lives with the benefits of their civilization and their Science (*God's Bits of Wood*, p. 206).

In a swift reaction, Bakayoko puts it directly to the so-called Chief Imam of Dakar thus: “The Imam spoke to you of God. Does that mean he doesn’t know that people who are hungry and thirsty are likely to forget the way to the mosque?” (*God’s Bits of Wood*, p. 219). Ramatoulaye, one of the leading figures who insists in fighting injustice done to Africans in the story, *God’s Bits of Wood* can be said to be a Muslim, at least going by her name. But, her appearance and dressing mode reveal that she is deeply connected to African culture or tradition. The several amulets she wears around her neck and those fetish bracelets, which cover her arms to her elbow, are tangible proofs of her connection with the traditional African belief. However, Sembène Ousmane loves the kind of faithfulness displayed by Fa Keita, who continues to observe his prayer despite the humiliation he suffers in the hand of Bernadini, the commandant in the prison; believing that what is worth doing at all, is worth doing well.

In Ousmane’s *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, the writer paints the European quarters of Thiès as the “Vatican” to underscore the link between the established political system or order and the Christian religion. El Hadji Mabigué and the Sérigne N’Dakarou, the Chief Imam of Dakar are beneficiaries of the worthless medals in Ousmane’s *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*. We do see the hypocritical tendencies in them as agents of the imperialists. With this, the writer manifests his ideological stance on religion. It is obvious that Sembène Ousmane is upset because he sees religion as a tool employed by the ruling elite to manipulate the masses so as to achieve personal gains. Religion is indeed an agent of neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism is the practice of granting a perceived independence with the hidden intention of making the liberated country “a client state and controlling it effectively by means other than political ones” (Barango, p. 5). The marriage between religious institutions and inhuman political system has worsened human living conditions, especially in Africa because the poor masses are the products of bad leadership or wicked governance and selfish religious order, which enslave the minds.

Culture is the sum of all kinds of acquired or learned attitudinal practices in a given human enclave. “Culture is the dearest possession of any human group and any human being. Anyone cut off from his culture is poor indeed ... Problems rooted on culture, therefore,

take time to eradicate because customs and traditions cannot be done away with overnight" (Okeh, p. 23). In *Le Mandat*, certain traditional aspects of African belief are discussed. As pointed by Sembène Oumane in his imaginary African society, there is a serious attachment to the supernatural. Ibrahima Dieng, who is Ousmane's hero in *Le Mandat*, demonstrates this by giving money to old Nogoi to prepare charms for him, in spite of being a pauper. « Elle doit avoir un gris-gris pour me forcer la main » (*Le Mandat*, p. 158). Africans believe strongly in the functionality of voodoo and African society has experts, who prepare such charms for protection and other purposes. In fact, Dieng holds seriously that traditional medicine can even be effective overseas. He promises to send some charms to Abdou in France. « A la prochaine lettre, je t'envoierai des gris-gris. Malgré que tu ne sois pas à Ndakarou, tu dois te protéger. On peut te jeter un mauvais sort. Il y a ici un vrai marabout que j'irai voir pour toi » (*Le Mandat*, p. 182). Despite all efforts made by different foreign religions, they were less successful in sacking Africans from indulging, whether secretly or openly, in practicing their traditions. Ibrahima Dieng, a very devoted Muslim is still strongly attached to his African custom and tradition as shown in his character traits. As a matter of fact, Ibrahima is an archetypical representation of most Africans, who claim to be Muslims or Christians and yet remain undetached from their fetish practices.

Literature is not just a piece of writing that only entertains. It is equally, at the same time, a means of expressing ideas, views, opinions, experiences, feelings, body of knowledge, cultural values as well as teaching moral lessons and healing souls. Literature has turned out to be a medium of appending 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. The understanding of culture and the society which is the potential ingredient literature is premised on paves the way for an effective development (Ogundokun, p. 53). Sembène Ousmane, in crafting development for his society via literature, kicks against religious uprising, which is a common social problem in Africa and the world at large. He links this ugly trend to ignorance and lack of knowledge on the part of the so-called devotees of the two popular imported

religions in Africa; Christianity and Islam. Knowledge is believed to be power but most Africans just take all they are told by their religious leaders or clerics hook, line and sinker primarily because they are unlettered and cannot read the religious holy books to ascertain things; to verify and to consolidate what their religious leaders preach.

Ndoffène, one of the characters in *Guelwaar* confirms: “Je ne sais pas lire le nassarane” (*Guelwaar*, p. 89) [I cannot read the Arabic words]. In other words, the speaker is saying he cannot read the Qu’ran, the Holy Book, which contains all that a Muslim needs on this earth and the here-after. Surprisingly, the same man who cannot read the Qu’ran believes strongly that if he kills an unbeliever, it is an act of piety: “Tuer un yefer est un acte de piété” (*Guelwaar*, p. 129). In his character traits, Ndoffène has demonstrated religious fanaticism which opens door for hatred and perhaps human destruction. Similarly, those who claimed they are Christians do not abide by the teachings of the religion because they are still not well informed about the “dos” and “don’ts” of the Christian religion. Perhaps, out of their own free will, they just do what they like. In *Guelwaar*, readers are made to see Christians taking a second wife: “Chrétien de naissance, de famille chrétienne connue, Guignane prit une seconde épouse (*Guelwaar*, p. 56). [“Christian by birth, from a well-known Christian family, Guignane took a second wife”]. Apart from violating the principle of one man, one wife which Christianity preaches, African Christians in *Guelwaar* drink around recklessly (*Guelwaar*, p. 70).

Both the Muslims and the Christians need a thorough knowledge and understanding of the religions they practice so that they can live and co-exist harmoniously with each other. There is no religion that promotes or encourages hatred, killing, destruction of properties or any other forms of man inhumanity to man. Religious conflicts can only tear a society apart; they cannot facilitate the desired environment for any meaningful sustainable development. We can, therefore, submit that most religious chaos and brouhahas are caused as a result of inadequate knowledge of the practitioners of imported religions about what ought to be and what ought not to be as regards their adopted faith. The glorious Qu’ran and the holy Bible advise us to seek knowledge before we serve God, so that we can serve Him well; since people without knowledge will perish. The

enactment of a religious satire of a sort in *Guelwaar* is Sembène Ousmane's selfless contribution in informing his fellow Africans to sincerely know and understand God before they worship Him in whatever religion they find themselves. Religious conflicts are often value based and difficult to deal with. Hence, they must be avoided at every level of the society, at all times.

Since time immemorial, religion has been used to override, rule and, or cage human minds. In an attempt to subvert the perceived hypocritical tendencies of religious order, most African writers in their protest dialogues, undermine the two major imported religions (Christianity and Islam), which were imposed on Africans since the accidental contact between the natives and their invaders. In most of Sembène Ousmane's literary works, there are often two different worlds. The African world view is always symbolized by majority of the characters, the masses and the oppressed while the remaining few characters represent the western world, the self acclaimed lords; the colonial masters and of course the missionaries. In brain washing the Africans, some of them are given medals. But the question is what kind of medals? ... Medals of friendship, hypocrisy, mediocrity or stupid submission? A careful reading of literary works like Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (*The Old Man and the Medal*) and Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (*God's Bits of Wood*) reveal that there are complicity in these issues of medals as they can be summarily described as meaningless medals, which worth nothing in the real sense of it!

Practically, as demonstrated in the selected novels, Sembène Ousmane is unhappy with the Islamic culture particularly, polygamy and fanaticism. He equally frowns at using religion to direct or control people's mind to achieve dubious personal political ambitions, which are laced with exploitative tendencies. One thing is clear; it is difficult to separate people away from their culture. Culture is the totality of people's way of life. It implies the way of organizing affairs, views about the nature and the man-made world. It also constitutes the process of "meeting universal human needs, its hierarchy of values or criteria that determines its behaviour and thought in brief, a people's view of the world, its social heritage" (Laing, p. 1). Soyinka consolidates the aforementioned position when he emphatically affirms, what we have, we hold. What though the wind of change is blowing over this entire continent, our principles and traditions –

yes, must be maintained. For we are threatened. Yes, we are indeed threatened ... but we are entitled to match you history for history to the nearest half-million souls (70-71).

This study has tried to separate what is perceived to be pure fancy from realistic observations and, or expressions of the intended desires as well as sentiments of our selected writer. In achieving his aim, Ousmane has adopted the use of satire and without doubt, he has rationalized the position of two other scholars who believe that only a person who has knowledge of a society from other sources than purely literary ones is able to find out if, and how far, certain social types and their behaviour are reproduced in the novel (Wellek and Warren, p. 104). All of these efforts are attempts to use literature to develop the society. Once again, our adoption of the sociological approach is justified because whether verbal or non-verbal, literature is socially constructed or established. For instance, Meka, Oyono's protagonist in *The Old Man and the Medal* is rewarded for enhancing the work of France in his country and for the loss of his two sons, who fought on the side of France during the World War II. Giving his ancestral land to the Lord for evangelism makes Meka a "good" Christian, on one hand and the loss of his two sons on the other, qualifies him as an obedient servant to the colonial imperialists. To us, these two gifts (the land and his sons) make Meka the loser of everything, like the title of one of David Diop's poems, *Celui qui a tout perdu/Loser of Everything*.

Meka's arrest and his treatment by the law enforcement agents particularly the beating he receives from Gullet and his imprisonment unmistakably removed the scales from his eyes. Meka and other Africans are disillusioned in their previous optimistic expectations of the improved relationship with the colonialists. Meka's homecoming can be interpreted as a kind of regeneration, a progress from ignorance to awareness. The discovery of "self"; he is no longer strange to the realities of the Missionaries as well as that of the colonial masters. His eyes and mind are completely open to the duplicity of the colonial administration. This duplicity is already announced at the beginning of the novel by the omniscient narrator, in the economic rejection of native drinks; e.g "arki", which is made from bananas and corn in favour of the imported wine from Europe. Oyono uses these collaborative efforts of the church and the colonial administration to demonstrate how these two interlocking

institutions have suppressed African cultural expression and economic sustainability. Indeed, the Third World countries, especially African countries, will continue to have slim chances of socioeconomic and political growth if the Church and the Mosque continue to allow politicians and policy-makers to persistently use them to achieve their aims, in a divide and rule method. The leaders of various religious organisations should also judiciously use money which belongs to the organisations rather than procuring private jets and running expensive educational institutions that members of their sects could not afford for their children or wards.

Conclusion

The study condemns greed; myopic governance, self-centredness and oppression because they have made Africa a continent of hunger and penury. It shows that there is a first class corruption in Africa and that the trend is the genesis of both mental and material underdevelopments. Surveying African literary texts written in both English and French, the study has justified that corrupt practices and unfairness have become a dreaded plague. The trend has entangled both the leaders and the followers. It is not enough to chase away beggars from the streets; there is a need to provide them social welfare. Failure to provide succor for the less privileged is unfair and unacceptable. It will always lead to social crisis. Hopefully, the penchant of some committed African writers; novelists, playwrights and poets are a clarion call for a true re-orientation of people's mind-set towards genuine ways of nation building. Literature is, therefore, capable of guiding and influencing people's reasoning. And, whether it is shaving someone's head in his absence or otherwise, literature has made itself available for the services of humanity.

As a matter of fact, there are positive and negative sides of religions. Religions can make man submissive; easy to control or on the other hand, it can make man fanatical and destructive. Expressing his view as a writer, who is perceived to be a mouthpiece of his community, Sembène Ousmane demonstrates in various ways the manifestations of religious institutions with a genuine intention to principally expose and correct the sad side of this domineering social order. In undermining the Islamic religion, the most popular religion in Senegal, his native country, the novelist and film-maker x-rays

and condemns the robust relationship between the state/the existing political arrangement and the religion, which is indeed hypocritically rooted. In *Les bouts de bois ...* and *Le Mandat*, Ousmane frowns at religious hypocrisy which takes the centre stage in the scheme of societal affairs. He is sad that most religious leaders and the devotees do not practice what they preach. In *Guelwaar*, the writer condemns the activities of religious extremists, who see nothing good in those people that belong to any other religion because they see such individuals as unbelievers. This paper has shown, to some extent that creative writings of Sembène Ousmane and Ferdinand Oyono are protest dialogues on the hypocritical tendencies of religious institutions not only in Senegal and Cameroun but also in African society generally. What the writers want is a religion which will enhance man's wisdom and understanding, promote true friendship, peace and mutual co-operation among the peoples and across nations. It is, therefore, obvious that Africans need a thorough rebirth as regards what they actually believe in and how best they really want to worship or connect themselves to what or who(m) they believe in.

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