

THE CINEMATOGRAPHIC LEGEND OF AFRICAN FILMS: OUSMANE SEMBÈNE

Bratish Sarkar

Assistant Professor, Amity University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

Ousmane Sembène's literary work, composed of a dozen novels and essays, is characterized by its critical charge and empathy for the poor. It puts a lot of emphasis on commitment and activism. Each time, Sembène portrays the relative modernity of postcolonial societies against tradition. Self-taught, the man had been a mason, sharpshooter, docker, before embarking on literary and cinematographic writing, in order to imprint his mark on the essential struggles of his time for the justice, freedom and dignity of his people. He left behind an impressive work, marked by commitment and indignation, which has influenced several generations of Senegalese and African intellectuals.

KEYWORDS: *African Cinema, Neorealism, Négritude, Relative Modernity, Postcolonialism*

INTRODUCTION

The man who nicknamed "the father of African cinema", Ousmane Sembène was born in 1923 in Ziguinchor, capital of Casamance (Senegal) in a modest environment. At the age of 13, he transferred from school due to indiscipline, he became a mechanic and mason, began to read, to go to the cinema. In 1944, he was enlisted in Senegalese riflemen to liberate Europe. After the victory, he returned to Dakar, but promised to be unemployed; he decided to return to this continent for the freedom of which he risked his life. He moved to Marseille, became docker, trade unionist to the CGT, member of the French Communist Party, and militates for equal treatment of workers from the colonies, against the Indochina war and soon against that of Algeria. And he read a lot, especially since a few years on the port ended up breaking his back.

He was a director. But he was also an actor, screenwriter, writer and above all an obstinate activist, building his multiform work on his political and social commitment. In 1956, he wrote his first novel, the Black Docker, on his personal experience. His vision of literature is militant. He wanted to help Africans and become aware of their situation of dominated. In 1960, he recounted a strike of the 40s in the railways in Thies and further south to Kayes. This is the Wood of God, a novel considered today as a classic in many countries of West Africa. With independence, he returned to Senegal, travelled to Mali, former French Sudan, and Congo. Cinema seems to him a more effective way to reach the African people. It changes professional and artistic direction. At the age of 40, he left for Moscow, at VGIK, the most famous film school in the East, taken courses of achievement. He directed his first short film, Borom Sarrett, in 1962. Four years later, he directed La Noire de..., a short feature film (sixty-five minutes) that made him famous abroad.

Each time, Sembène portrays the relative modernity of postcolonial societies against tradition. Ten years ago before Sembène finds the trays. In 1987, he turned Camp Thiaroye, the story, little known here, the revolt and repression by the French forces of Senegalese riflemen abandoned by the army on their return to Africa. The film is worth more by its intentions than by its realization. *Guelwaar* (1992) is more successful. Sembène attacks here relations between Islam and other religions, in this case Christianity (*Guelwaar* is a Christian who, dead, is buried in a Muslim cemetery). Always miscreant, then he directed *Faat Kiné* (2000), a feature film to the glory of the woman, especially a single mother, betrayed by the men she has known. She will save herself by achieving exceptional social and economic success.

Ten years ago, on June 9, 2007, Senegalese filmmaker and writer Ousmane Sembène disappeared in Dakar at the age of 84. Self-taught, the man had been a mason, sharpshooter, docker, before embarking on literary and cinematographic writing, in order to imprint his mark on the essential struggles of his time for the justice, freedom and dignity of his people. He left behind an impressive work, marked by commitment and indignation, which has influenced several generations of Senegalese and African intellectuals.

Ousmane Sembene, was all fire all flame. Regarded during his lifetime as the greatest African filmmaker and one of the most important novelists on the continent, the man was in no way predestined for this distinguished career that was his. His fate was indeed all traced when, in 1923, he came to the world, in Ziguinchor, in the green Casamance, in southern Senegal.

In the Sembène family, they were fishermen from father to son for generations. The tradition could only be perpetuated, but it was without taking into account the individual temperaments that sometimes push the fishermen's sons to revolt and tear themselves away from their fate. This was what happened to the son of Moussa Sembène when, as legend had it, he was removed from school at the age of 13, for slapping his teacher who wanted to force him to learn Corsican. At age of 15, the teenager arrived in Dakar, following many formations some "more forbidding" than others, before being mobilized during the Second World War. A sharpshooter within the colonial army, he participated in the war in Niger, Chad, North Africa and Germany, and then returned to Senegal when the war was over.

In Dakar, he would see with his own eyes the humiliations inflicted on demobilized skirmishers. He was also witnessing the great railway strike of the Dakar-Niger (1947), which went down in history as the first strike in Africa, which shook the colonial apparatus. These events would serve him as a source of inspiration when he later written *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, his naturalistic novel to the Zola to which the name of Sembène is forever associated. The book is today part of the great classics of African literature.

At the end of the 1940s, decolonization was still not on the agenda, to the despair of African youth who saw their future prospects fade away. The young Ousmane escaped despair by embarking illegally in 1948 for France. The next twelve years, which he would spend first in Paris, then in Marseilles, constitute a turning point in the life of this fisherman's son from Ziguinchor. He worked for a time as a mechanic in the Citroën factories in Paris, then as a docker on the port of Marseille.

The local chiefs of the CGT (General Confederation of Workers), union which at the end of the war made the rain and the good weather in the working environment. The Senegalese was initiated to Marxism and participates in all the union struggles.

France was then in full colonial war in Vietnam. In the name of the brotherhood of proletarians around the world, Sembène, along with his trade union colleagues, was involved in blocking the port of Marseille to prevent the loading of arms destined for Indochina. At the same time, he attended the Communist Party library in Marseille, where he read Balzac, Zola, Gorky, but also African-Americans whose struggles had particular resonance for this colonized African, who himself was in his country a victim of numerous bullying and humiliation in the hands of a racist and cruel colonial administration.

Always he desired to tell his own experience and to denounce the injustices which he witnessed, Sembène started writing his first novel *The Black Docker*, in which he said his experience as a black worker at the port of Marseille, doubled a complex plot mixing literary plagiarism and romance. This first novel, published in 1956, would be followed by other novels and collections of short stories: *O countries, my beautiful people* (1957), *The Wooden Stubs of God* (1960), *Voltaic* (1961), *The Harmattan* (1963) *The Mandate* (1964), *Véhi-Cisoane* (1964) and *Xala* (1973).

Ousmane Sembène's literary work, composed of a dozen novels and essays, is characterized by its critical charge and empathy for the poor. It puts a lot of emphasis on commitment and activism. It is the replica of one of the characters of the *Black Docker* that best summarizes the literary philosophy of this novelist and storyteller: "You aspire to become a writer, you will never be a good one, as long as you do not defend a cause. You see, a writer must go forward, see things in reality, not be afraid of his ideas... hate poets and painters who only show what is beautiful, who sing the glory of spring, forgetting the bitterness of cold... "

[Ernest,Allen:65]

At this time of the post-war period, Ousmane Sembène was not the only African to take the pen. In 1950s and 60s saw the emergence of new voices expressing prose in the wake of the poetry of the Senghorian negritude, to express the hopes incarnated by the independence that was on the horizon. This first generation of African novelists to which Ousmane Sembène belongs, invented a new literature, an African neorealism to say with an economy of unusual means the times and woes of their societies, emerging from the colonial yoke and promised an uncertain future.

In 1960, Senegal gained independence, ending several decades of French colonization. Many exiled African intellectuals were returning to the fold to participate in the construction of their budding nations. Ousmane Sembène was no exception to the rule. Writer and militant intellectual, he would soon realize the fragility of the hopes raised by "the Suns of Independence" in a country burdened by its inequalities and its traditional evils.

In his novels, the writer denounces the setbacks and vicissitudes of postcolonial African life, while realizing the little impact that literature can have in a country where printed books do not circulate in the absence of binding circuits. The writer to his readers through the publisher and the bookseller. "Ousmane Sembène was one of our first authors to point out the problematic relationship between the African writer and his audience," says Boniface Mongo-Mboussa, literary critic and specialist in African letters. This is probably why he turns to the cinema in the hope of reaching a wider audience.

Persuaded indeed to be better able to be heard through the image, especially in a country where illiteracy was at the time 80% of the population, Ousmane Sembène did not hesitate, in 40 years, to return to school to learn the grammar and techniques of cinematic storytelling. In 1962, he won a scholarship to study the 7th art at Gorky studios in Moscow.

Back to Senegal in the same year, he signed his first short film, *Borom Sarret*, which staged the daily life of a carter, before experiencing success three years later, with his first feature film *La Noire de...* from one of his collections of short stories. This heartbreaking story of a good Senegalese girl who follows in France the couple of cooperants who employed her in Dakar and gives herself death unable to bear the loneliness, the scorn and the workload, is worth to her director the Jean Vigo prize.

Ousmane Sembène's filmography, full of about fifteen titles, including short and full-length films, spans a film career spanning more than four decades, punctuated by prestigious awards and numerous national and international awards. As for his literary work, Senegalese cinema is stamped with anger and revolt against the obscurantisms and inequities of Senegalese society, whose victims are the most fragile layers: workers, women, colonized... as much, his cinema is not reduced to the study of cases, on the model of ethnographic films in Jean Rouch. A model that Ousmane Sembène distanced himself from the beginning of his film career, concentrating his efforts on the history and psychological depth of the characters. "It is not enough to say," he was fond of saying, "that a man whom we see is walking, we must know where he comes from, where he is going. "

[Ernest,Allen:77]

Sometimes he adapted from his novels and his short stories, Sembène's best-known films are titled *Le Mandat* (1968), which depicts the hypocrisy and cruelty of social relations in contemporary Africa, *Le Camp de Thiaroye* (Grand Jury Prize) in Venice in 1988) where the filmmaker returns to the tragedy of the black soldiers starting from the massacre of the Senegalese sharpshooters by French officers in 1945 and *Moolaadé* (Prix Uncertain regard in Cannes in 2004), which is a denunciation of excision. These are powerful and subtle films that vehemently target the social and political injustices of their time, without losing the humour, the taste for satire and the poetry of everyday life that characterize the style of this novelist-filmmaker.

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