

**POLITICS AND POETICS OF CULTURE IN OUSMANE SEMBENE'S
MOOLAADEE (2004)**

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Abstract

Feminism has always been viewed in biological and sociological perspectives. This paper takes into consideration how the status of women is defined by the cultural apparatus. In this paper we will try to analyze the role of myth, culture and tradition notably the ancient tradition of Female Genital Mutilation in Sub Saharan Africa and Other countries. Therefore, our approach to this study will be particularly anthropological in the light of thinkers like Raymond Williams, Roland Barthes, Mary Douglas, Gramsci etc. While rethinking the feminist discourse, we will look at the politics of culture vis-a-vis the situation of Senegalese women in African society through the analysis of a Senegalese film, *Moolaadé* (2004) by Ousmane Sembène.

Ousmane Sembène is considered to be the “Father of African Cinema”. *Moolaadé* centers around a woman named, Collé who fights against the practice of excision in a village called, Djerisso in Burkina Faso. She invokes an ancient myth called Moolaadé to protect four small girls from excision. This film is an account of cultural symbols, metaphors and myths which reflect the African society par excellence. Through the analysis of this film, we observe a strong link between Female Genital Mutilation and patriarchy and observe how the males exploit these ancient myths and traditions in order to “sacralize” and legitimize their dominance in the society.

Keywords: African cinema, FGM (Female genital mutilation) or female circumcision or Salindé, Moolaadé, ideology, culture, purification, female sexuality

In the 1960s and 1970s, Third Cinema started denouncing neocolonialism, capitalism and the commercial model of cinema as advocated by the First and Second cinema. The didactic, political and social realist model of African cinema was adopted by a number of filmmakers including in the earlier work of Malian Director, Souleymane Cissé, Chiekh Oumar Sissoko and the Senegalese director, Ben Diogaye Ben and Ousmane Sembène.

African Cinema became an instrument for the artistic and sociopolitical enlightenment of its people in order to achieve what Fanon called “a new revolutionary humanism”. Early African

films were predominantly committed to a social or political message – they constituted a cinema engagé. Hence, the first African films were preoccupied with the need to escape from European hegemony – both at the political and psychological level. We can observe these issues in films like Sembène's *Black Girl* (1966) and Mambtey's *Touki Bouki* (1973). Starting in late 1960s and especially in 1970s, the rhetoric of struggle began to turn from anti colonialism to contestation against African elites, leaders, state corruption, women oppression and the conflict between tradition and modernity.

Ousmane Sembène was born in 1924 in Ziguinchor in the rural southern region of Senegal. He was a well known novelist and film maker. His famous works include *Le Docker Noir* and *Les bouts de bois de Dieu (God's bits of wood)* and several short films like *La Noir de... (Black Girl)* (1966), *Borrom Sarret* (1962), *Le mandat* (1966). His last feature film *Moolaadé* (2004) won the category of “un certain regard” in Cannes film festival.

Moolaadé is set in a small African village called Djerisso, where four young girls feeling threatened by the ritual of "purification" flee to the household of Collé Ardo, a strong woman who has managed to protect her own daughter, Amsatou from genital mutilation. Collé invokes an ancient custom called, Moolaadé (sanctuary) to protect the young girls. The tension increases and we see a clash between the masculine and feminine world.

Through this film, Sembène attacks an old tradition of female circumcision which is still practiced in 38 to 54 member states of African Union, Australia and among other immigrants in France and Europe. Sembène talks about the current situation of excision in one of his interviews:

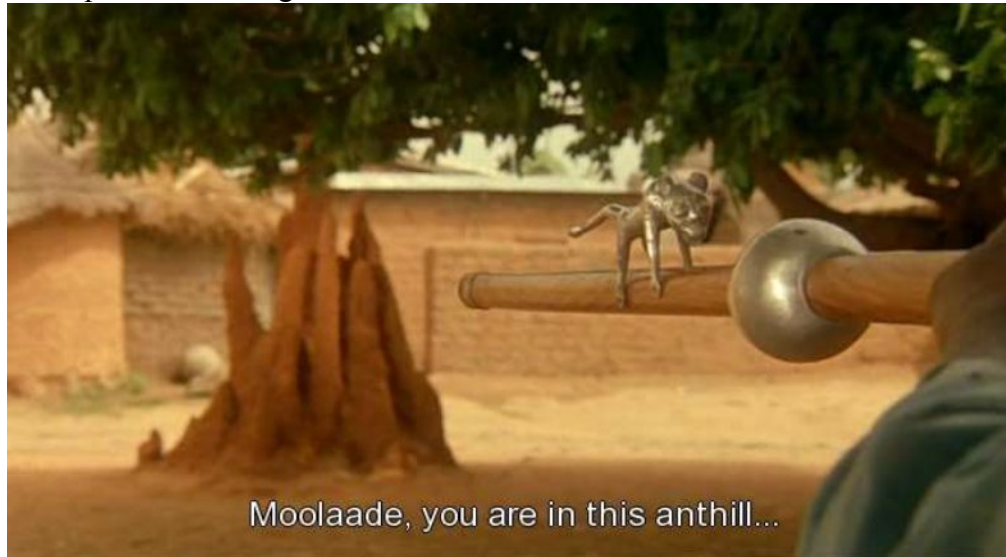
“Whatever the method used (traditional or modern), excision is a violation of the woman’s dignity and integrity. I dedicate moolaadé to mothers, women who struggle to abolish the legacy of bygone days.”
(Ganne, May, 2004)

Before looking at the film, *Moolaadé* through an anthropological and feminist glass, it is necessary to understand the meaning of culture and its relation to the individual and the society. Culture has been variously defined; it is understood as a ‘whole way of life ‘of a people. According to Tylor, an anthropologist Culture is “that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habit acquired by man as a member of society.” (*Primitive Culture: Researches in to the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art and custom, p.1*)

Thus, culture is not an attribute of individuals but of men in a particular society in a particular environment. These social norms and cultural values contribute in forming a particular collectivity considered to be objective as the group has a common manner of thinking what Durkheim calls “social solidarity”. Hence, culture determines the way in which social institutions shape the behavior of individuals therefore responsible for producing what Gramsci calls ‘hegemony’. *Moolaadé* is a manifestation of this ‘hegemony’ in an African society wherein the oppressive tradition of excision emerges out of the old values and traditions which we refer as “Culture”. Lightfoot Klein talks about the importance of customs in African society:

« Custom in Africa is stronger than domination, stronger than the law, stronger even than religion. »
(*Giving Voice to Invisible Women in Developing Countries: Rhetorical Criticism of “FIRE”*, p.6)

Sembène in this film demonstrates a conflict between two African customs: Moolaadé and Salindé. Moolaadé is a pre-Islamic practice. This ancient practice has been transmitted from one generation to another through oral tradition. It is considered that transgression of Moolaadé brings menace to the society. Whereas Salindé refers to the excision (circumcision of clitoris) of young girls in order to purify them. Any girl who has not been excised is called a « Bilakoro » i.e. impure for marriage.



Sembène in one of his interviews talked about the old custom of Moolaadé , he remarked:

« Take the practice of Moolaadé, for example. There are a lot of young Africans who have not heard of it, who are not aware of that tradition. Yet that form of protection and right of asylum has always existed in our society. When you're in a mosque, for example, no one can come and snatch you away. That's a value everyone knew about. For example, if I was abusing my child and he sought protection, I wouldn't have the right to lay my hand on him after that. There are some villages that still abide by these rules but it's a tradition that has been forgotten in the big African cities » (Rapfogel and Porton, Vol. 30, P. 20-25)

On the other hand, Salindé is an old cultural practice which has been manipulated by the males in order to maintain their domination and oppress women. Excision as a practice has a religious and political dimension attached to it. When Collé, the female protagonist in this film, tries to refuse the excision of young girls, the brother of her husband exclaims: « Purification dates back. It is required by Islam. » (Ousmane Sembène, *Moolaadé*, 2004)

But it is very essential to observe that excision is not an Islamic tradition and there is no allusion to the ritual of purification in Koran. It is merely a symbol of male domination and an instrument to control female sexuality. Séverine Auffret explains the origins of excision:

« L'excision des femmes chez les Egyptiens remontent à 5 ou 6000 ans avant Jésus Christ, C'est-à-dire qu'elle plonge ses racines dans le néolithique et qu'elle a du être d'un usage courant dans toute l'humanité protohistorique. L'extension géographique du fait l'atteste : Egypte, Ethiopie, Syrie, Perse, délimitent en effet le foyer de la première néolithisation occidentale. » (*Des couteaux contre les femmes, P.145*)

Hence, excision is a symbol of male power. Mary Douglas who is considered to be the “mother” of Anthropology discusses the notion of order and disorder, purity and impurity in a society. She explains that power is directly linked to this binary system. According to her:

« Uncleaness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. » (*Purity and Danger, P.41*)

Similarly, we observe that Collé's daughter, Amsatou, a Bilakoro who is not excised hence considered to be ‘impure’ thereby excluded from the society. Hence, excision is based on male dominant ideology. Terry Eagleton, a Marxist thinker explains the link between a cultural activity and the dominant class:

« A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; naturalizing and universalizing such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; denigrating ideas which might challenge it; excluding rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such ‘mystification’, as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. » (*Ideology: An Introduction, P.5-6*)

Excision is one of those cultural activities which have been universalized, naturalized and legitimized so that it seems to be a part of culture and day to day life. But there exists a whole politics of power behind the tradition of purification. In one of the sequences, Sembène shows a clear link between this “sacred” practice and patriarchy wherein Amath, the husband of Collé beats her wife in public because she has refused the ritual of purification.



And it is very important to remark that many African women support this practice because of the existence of various myths around it.

« First, it ranks high in the system of merit for women and defines their identity. Second, it is exclusively a female practice conducted by female practitioners and has systems of reward and [womanhood] status acquisition attached to it. Third, it builds women solidarity and provides a power base for women. »

(Steady, P.105)

Hence, we have tried to understand the socio-cultural and political dimension of excision through the analysis of Sembène's last feature film, *Moolaadé*. Sembene tries to express how excision works as a tool for exploiting women based on different myths and male dominant ideologies. The film establishes female solidarity and power against an ancient tradition of "purification" wherein we have observed a strong link between patriarchy and the ritual of Female Genital Mutilation.

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