

**THE EVOLUTION OF THE "OTHER" WOMAN IN OUSMANE SEMBENE'S
*WHITE GENESIS***

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**Paper Presented at the 28th Annual Conference of NIGERIA ENGLISH STUDIES ASSOCIATION
Held at University of Benin, Edo State, September 12th- 15th, 2011**

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Abstract

Literary representations of women from an Islamic background are not often encountered in works of fiction from West Africa. Yet since it was first published in 1972, Ousmane Sembene's White Genesis has been ignored in spite of its pioneering engagement with women's psyche and the evolution of their lives in Senegalese Muslim society. The following attempts to place Sembene's landmark narrative within the body of literary discourse about "other" women. It examines why Muslim women in particular are too often relegated to the margins of both society and of literary criticism, why in they are continuously fossilized in certain attitudes in spite of evidence to the contrary. It goes on to explore Sembene's unusual reconstruction the image of the Muslim woman and her subversion of expectations as she deals with the constraints of tradition and religion in her life.

The Construction of the "Other" Woman

More than anything else, Muslim women have come to symbolize the "otherness" of Islam and of Islamic societies. Certainly, where this particular religion is concerned, no other subject has attracted more curiosity or proven more susceptible to stereotyping than the Muslim woman. For most part, depictions of Muslim women found in the media and indeed in literature remain unchanging. To the casual observer it seem that while women in other societies are evolving a new understanding of their potentials, and their roles in family and society, the Muslim woman alone remains the same in all times and in which ever location she calls homes in.

Mehdid (1998) and Mernissi (2001) correctly observe that every where one looks, images that devalue the Muslim woman abound and that it is these negative

stereotypes that appear to be of most interest to scholars and researchers alike. Earlier Western studies on the subject of the oriental/Muslim which see the average Muslim woman as a sexually enslaved and repressed person who is shut away in a secluded harem appears to exert a strong influence on contemporary scholarship which continue to see her primary role as that of giving unstinting service and obedience to her lord and master, which is, her husband. El-Solh and Mabro (1994) are similarly convinced that in the eyes of the West, the Muslim woman has over the centuries remained tradition-bound, imprisoned in seclusion, and victimized and is believed to possess little substance or character. Addressing the reductionism inherent in a lot of Western orientalist-inspired feminist scholarship on Muslim women, Marnia Lazreg asserts that:

A ritual is established whereby the writer appeals to religion as the source of underdevelopment in much of modernization theory. In an uncanny way, feminist discourse on women from the Middle East and North Africa (Muslim women) mirrors that of the theologian's own interpretations of women in Islam.... The overall effect of this paradigm is to deprive women of self-presence, of being.

In the discursive homogenization and systematic subordination of "other" women, Western feminists evidently exercise power over the image of Muslim women. While this may not be entirely unexpected, one of the dangers of treating Islamic culture as if it is frozen in time and place is that it obscures how gender evolves historically, socially or politically. Thus the works of contemporary feminists from Islamic backgrounds such as Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El- Saadawi and Leila Ahmed

appear to be more in tune with the variables that influence the condition of Muslim women's lives. Before their involvement, most feminist discussions on Muslim women pitted a secular and mainly western inspired discourse against a religious Islamic one. In her earlier writings Mernissi had also adopted a gladiatorial stance on gender inequality similar to what is found in many Western feminist texts. Then she criticized 'the Muslim social order (which) views the female as a potent aggressive individual whose power can if not tamed and curbed, corrode the social order.' However, after further historical and theological enquiry into Islam, she began to reinterpret its fundamental teachings in such a way that it provides a sanctioning forum for the introduction of new ideas. Hence she writes that:

We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs stems from no imported values but is a true part of the Muslim tradition.

Edward Said (1978) believes that in modern discourse, the "Muslim" has become synonymous with the "oriental" Arab who is appropriated by inherently authoritative modes of writing in which he is depicted as an essentially primitive human being in need of civilizing control. The language of this discourse is described by Roland Barthes as full of "disapproval" and "reductionist" in nature. Sweeping characterizations found in Western discourse which speak of Islam as if it is a timeless monolithic has virtually succeeded in transforming the various groups of people who profess the religion into a homogenous body with little consideration for differences of race, class, gender or culture even when the focus

is apparently on "otherness". Although 85 percent of Muslims actually live outside the Arab world, orientalist discourse in its most extreme form goes as far as to deny the authenticity of Islam in places like the West Africa insisting instead, on tying all forms of the religion to Arabic culture and language.

The situation of the West African woman cannot be examined without taking into consideration feminist ideas as it pertains to them because the notion of gender is also deeply implicated in their religious identity. However here again we find that Western feminist discourse tends to 'colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of other women' (Mohanty, 1988). Echoing what Madhu Kishwar has also observed concerning the power relations between East and West, Aihwa Ong (1988) similarly writes that the prevailing situation is one where 'Europe is theory' and Africa is 'native informant'. She further argues:

Western feminists look overseas, they frequently seek to establish their authority on the backs on non- western women, determining for them the meanings and goals of their lives.

A singular composite image of African women as ignorant and speechless is constructed to exemplify women who are most exploited and oppressed. Muslim women in West Africa consequently find themselves in a double bind. On the one hand are demeaning orientalist perceptions about them and on other are the prejudices of Western led feminist studies.

Sembene's *White Genesis*

Numerous literary attempts at conveying the African character have dwelled on the central role religion plays in society. Much of Soyinka's writing draw upon traditional Yoruba religious concepts to explicate his ideas of social justice. Several other writers including Achebe, Oyono and Ngugi wa thiongo to mention a few, visit the subject matter of Christianity frequently. In his seminal text *Faces of Islam in West Africa Literature*, Harrow (1991) drew attention to a body of literary that has emerged from West African which is of Islamic inspiration. He goes on to assert that Islam has come to:

Occupy increasingly important spaces in the lives of various people – psychological spaces, governing first the territory of the mind, at times motivated by economic or other self-interested concerns, and then larger, external spaces of an increasingly political and social nature.

Undoubtedly in the light of recent world events, the Islamic religion has evidently remained a powerful force in the minds of those who profess it as well as in the imagination of those who write works of fiction from within it. Significantly however, while Islam has played an important role in West Africa, one that predates Christianity, the tendency has been to sideline its impact on society and on the literature that has emerged from it. The arrival of novels such as Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1971), Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1972), Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1982) generated some excitement when they were first published, but the prevailing attitude has been one of none engagement with what is a important element in West African society.

Where Sembene is concerned, most critical discussions on his work have focused on how his declared interest in socialist ideology is represented in his writing. Yet in a number of his films and narratives such as *Ceddo* and the collection of the short stories *Tribal Scars and White Genesis*, he creates distinctively Islamic societies by drawing upon religious icons and idioms in attempt to convey and enhance meaning even as he acknowledges the primacy of indigenous culture. In addition to his portrayal of the impact of Islam, is an evident concern with issues to do with women that has led Victor Aire to describe him as one of Africa's important feminist writer.

In *White Genesis*, the complexity of his representation of women particularly in rely on interlocking themes of religion and tradition, gender and caste, morality and justice all of which implicated in the struggle of the central character Ngone war Thiandum. At the same time he negotiates literary boundaries of what is considered an acceptable topic for fictional narratives and Islam's dislike of what seen as the frivolous occupation of creative writing. As Said (1975) explains, 'the desire to create an alternative world, to modify, or augment the real world through the act of writing which underlines the act in the West is inimical to the Islamic world-view'. As a result, in Islam, stories are regarded as 'merely ornamental variations of the world rather than completions of it or models for transforming it.

Nonetheless the novels of Sembene like those Zaynab Alkali, Mariama Ba, Ibrahim Tahir and Ibrahim Gimba 'testify to a growing desire of writers to focus entirely on comportment as defined according to a Muslim ethos' (Harrow, 1991). Indeed it is in *White Genesis* we find that are an effective cross- fertilization of conservative

and innovative ideas that are both social and literary in nature. Thus it is as a griot who bears witness or testimony to what is admirable as well as what is reprehensible in his society that Sembene tackles a subject matter that most writers avoid. Working as a concerned griot working from within a moralistic and didactic framework, he attempts to interpret the socio-historical and cultural heritage of his community. In traditional Senegalese society, griots have historically served multiple functions as chroniclers, storytellers, mediators and advisers, roles which the character of Dethye Law fulfils in *White Genesis*. But as Françoise Pffaf also notes, the griot occupies an ambiguous position in Senegalese society. While he enjoys freedom of expression and respect for his knowledge and oratory from all, he is also stigmatized because he belongs to what is considered an inferior caste. This contradiction is illustrated in Sembene's novel when other characters attempt to gag the eloquent Dethye Law.

Furthermore, in *White Genesis*, Sembene at once reconciles the role of the modern writer with the traditional responsibility of the griot. Thus in answer to potential criticism from fellow Africans that a story about incest and the corruption it implies would bring 'dishonor.... To the Black race', Sembene writes in the forward to the novel:

I also know, and so do you, that in the past, as well as in the present, there have been many anonymous heroic actions among us. But not everything we have done has been heroic. Sometimes, therefore, in order to understand a period fully, it is good to concentrate our minds on certain things, on certain deeds, and on certain kinds of action.

Pre-empting in this way arguments against his focus on unpleasant truths, Sembene indicates his intention to be the voice of conscience speaking what needs to be said. Skillfully employing incest as a metaphor for the crimes committed against one's own, in *White Genesis*, he launches into a powerful criticism of forces which work against women and other disadvantaged people in society.

Thus pre-empting reactions against his decision to focus on unpleasant truths, Sembene firmly establishes his determination to be the voice of conscience speaking what needs to be said. In order to do so effectively, no subject can be regarded as taboo. He therefore launches a powerful criticism against forces which work against women and other disadvantaged people by effectively employing incest as a metaphor for crimes committed against one's own. How the psyche of women evolves from one crippled by submissive fear into one that questions the status quo is explored through a skilful depiction of the mental anguish of Ngone war Thiandum.

As the mother of Khar Madiagua Diop who is pregnant with an illegitimate child by her husband, Khar's her own father; events force her to confront her lack of power or voice in a male dominated society which continues to hold fast stifling ideas of tradition and religion. The tale ends tragically as unable to bear the shame and dishonor caused by the act of incest committed by her husband and daughter, Ngone chooses to commit suicide. The incestuous father is eventually murdered by their mentally disturbed son and soon after giving birth, the young daughter is expelled from the village in order to rid the community of the taint.

Setting the story of *White Genesis* in a remote village that is transparently African with overt expressions of Islam in the dialogues and practices of the people, Sembene articulates an eloquent plea for change, particularly for the renunciation of the hierarchical structure of a society based on one gender or caste being superior to another. The novel is a call for society to move away from those practices traditional or religious, that undermines or subordinates some of its members.

One of the least studied of Sembene's works, Frederick Case believes that *White Genesis* is deliberately ignored neglect because it deals with the uncomfortable subject of incest:

The abuse of the body of young children, and frequently young female children, when placed in the context of the infringement of human rights, of religious precepts and paternal authority, is not a subject that many wish to discuss because it is truly a universal situation where sexual exploitation that produces reactions of shame and disgust and that no human community wishes to face with frankness and honesty.

In agreement with the above view, Mary Harmer (2002) also notes the almost universal resistance to discussing incest. In many countries, national pride intensifies further the pressure for secrecy which is already exerted within families. Sembene is a one the few writers who refuse to take the easier option of looking away or to be cowed by society's disapproval of speaking about it. He chooses to ask questions about incest, particularly about the power relations involved, and even more significantly, the loss of language concerning it.

In the novel there is a denunciation of societal abuses which comes from a discriminating evaluation of specific individual and community behavior and practices. *White Genesis* attempts to highlight the link between the notion of incest and other forms of abuse that were not sexual. Hence on closer scrutiny, we find that the narrative revolves around issues of gender and caste as much as they do religion and tradition. Martin Bestman's observation that Sembene 'paints an image of Africa that is convulsive, a world that questions its norms and values,' is in *White Genesis* achieved mainly through the depiction of the two main characters, the mother Ngone war Thiandum and the griot Dethye Law.

As mentioned above, we cannot speak of a monolithic African woman because the experiences of different women are not identical. Sembene appears to be aware of this as he situates his women characters within specific socio-cultural environments in an attempt to underline that although their common gender experiences are crucial to their identity that alone is not the determining factor of their lives. At the very center of Sembene's fiction is a deep concern with people's 'daily struggles in the context of the prevailing religious, social, political, and economic realities determine community mores'(Case, 1996).

Certainly, in *White Genesis* there is an insistence on the particularity of place and culture in an attempt to specify the social conditions in which the characters operate. Sembene begins the narrative by explaining that the word *niaye* is singular in the Wolof language but French colonialists had write it in the plural. This piece of information in itself appears insignificant until we realize that Sembene is foregrounding the process and effects of colonial discourse and its inability to properly understand African people, cultures, or languages. In the

novel, markers of place and time are deliberately given in Wolof, defined only the first time they are used thus ensuring that the reader is constantly aware of the distinct characteristics of the setting of the story. Greetings, exclamations, and curses found in the dialogues of the characters identify them as Wolof Muslims.

From the onset, the cultural reality of the inhabitants of Santhui-Niaye is made clear to the reader: 'They were true believers, wearing away the skins on their foreheads and knees in prayer five times a day (p.9)'. Here then is a people in whose daily life Islam is a constant factor but the narrator goes on to inform us that whenever they are faced with a difficult situation, the same people also 'sought comfort in the adda, the tradition(p.10). Explaining the cultural synthesis that appears to have taken place in West Africa, Trimmingham claims that societies in this region did not entirely change their traditional social values or practices when they adopted Islam but remained distinguished by their own peculiar customs.

The same phenomenon is frequently noticed in societies which embraced Christianity but in literary criticism the same distinction is not extended to Islamic ones. The reason for this could be because when Islam was integrated into traditional communal life, it often did so without altering much the arrangement of society in terms of the basic structuring of the family, the authority of its head, the status of women, or the rules of interaction between various groups of people. Frequently a situation develops whereby Islamic principles are simply interpreted in ways which do not conflict with traditional values but are instead exploited in order to perpetuate certain indigenous practices.

Throughout *White Genesis*, Sembene paints a picture of a way of life that is based on a double foundation of Islam and tradition. The people of Santhiu- Niaye are represented as being in a position to negotiate problems by appealing to more than one belief system. Thus when the village leaders are called upon to take action against the incestuous Guibril Guej Diop, they vacillate between wanting to uphold Islamic law regarding the punishment for incest and what tradition requires of them. One of the characters points out that 'According to Koranic law, Guibril Guedj Diop deserves to die. That is what the scriptures say '(p.42). But another village elder insists, 'The adda(tradition) has always been the first rule in the lives of our fathers. If that rule is broken, it deserves either death or expulsion' (p.42). In this instance, the two are seen as separate. The question which the men of the village struggle with is which does incest most offend, Islam or tradition? Eventually as in Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam*, whenever a major conflict of interest occurs between the two, tradition appears to prevail.

According to the historical accounts of Ibn Battuta, West African people once tapped into the revolutionary potential in Islam and invigorated their societies through openness to learning and a willingness to accommodate change, yet Sembene's characters in *White Genesis* are gripped by a sense of inertia fostered by a peculiar view of Islam. The faith they profess at any given moment seems to be based on:

.....the hypothetical promise that one of the best places in paradise like a nail fixed on the cornerstone of every activity of their daily existence weakened and breached their faith in the future. Burying themselves in the old saying: 'Life is nothing', they had reached a state where they no longer felt desire (p.10).

Although Sembene's criticism of this frame is implied in the above, Edris Makward rightly warns that such passages in his writing should not be misconstrued as a 'sweeping condemnation' of either Islam or tradition. What is articulated however, is a vehement opposition to a situation where some members of society cling to the privileges they have carved out for themselves by using religion and/or tradition to justify the exploitation of others. While, the two are frequently put forward to justify why the status quo must remain as it is, in light of the crisis that the community faces, change becomes not only necessary but desirable.

The novel suggests that the evolution of women's psyche of passivity and silence into one of active agency is a major factor in this transformation. More than any other character in the novel Ngone war Thiandum embodies the tensions in her society. Deliberately put in a situation where she is immediately affected by the incest that has taken place between her husband and their daughter, She is forced to question and re-evaluate everything about her life including her identity as a Muslim woman:

Like all women from these parts, Ngone war Thiandum had her place in the society, a society sustained by maxims, wise sayings and recommendations of passive docility: woman this, woman that, fidelity, unlimited devotion and total submission of body and soul to the husband who was her master after Yallah, so that he might intercede in her favour for a place in paradise(p.14).

Ngone's state of mind is thus lucidly summed up. Bestman incorrectly describes the above as her 'outdated ' ideas but these are in fact a combination of traditional notions as well as Islamic precepts about appropriate female behavior

which continue to form the basis of the thinking and perceptions of many West African women. Even the better educated and perhaps more 'enlightened' Ramatoulaye in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* 'my heart concurs with the demand of religion. Reared since childhood in their strict precepts I expect not to fail'. Similarly, in another of his novels, Sembene writes of Assitan that 'she lived on the margins of her husband's existence, a life of work, silence and patience.' However unlike Assitan who never challenges her subordination to her husband the union leader Bakayoko in *God's Bits of Wood*, Ngone's thoughts waver between a prayer beseeching Allah for guidance and a list of complaints about all that constrains her as a woman. As she grapples with the sense of chaos that invades her when tradition and faith are corrupted by inaction, her deeply troubled mind is forced to question her place and role in society. This begins the gradual evolution of her psyche into one who interrogates the nature of existence, of her society and her place in it.

In portraying Ngone's frustrations, ontological questions are raised both at the level of the individual and of the larger society. According to Case, culture and religion are interdependent aspects of being therefore it is hardly surprising that in a society that is at once overtly Islamic and traditional African, expressions of being are revealed through factors that are both non-Islamic as well as those that are clearly Islamic in origin which emanate from the individual as much as they are imposed by the community. The way Ngone sees herself and what she considers permissible action on her part is a measure of the extent to which she has internalized and in some ways even perpetuate some of the oppressive practices of her society. Even when her worst fear is confirmed, she remains incapable of confronting her husband with the knowledge of his incestuous act

because in this society, to question things is especially for women seen as 'a betrayal of their faith, an act of defiance and a crime against the established order(p.10)'. So morally defeated she continues to receive her husband into her bed.

Significantly while she feels virtually powerless as a woman, she takes pride in her noble caste, the source of another's oppression. Her family motto shows her the stance she needs to take: 'Rather die a thousand deaths in a thousand ways each more terrible than the other than endure an insult for a single day' (p.23). And yet as a woman she endured many confirming Ogun-dipe- Leslie's assertion that 'the most important challenge to the African woman is her own self-perceptions, it is she who has to define her own freedom.' In the end it is Ngone's desire to protect the honor of her family and caste that strengthens her resolve to act as she makes the discovery of 'her own capacity to assess events from her own woman's point of view.

Sembene deliberately allows this realization, the possibility that she might after all be responsible for making her own decisions to dawn on her after she begins to understand that the door to paradise which is supposed open for her through her husband is slammed shut by his incest. The truth of Islam is not questioned directly nonetheless, it is blamed for the passive inertia it fosters. The subsequent actions Ngone takes continue the break with restrictive beliefs and traditions unleashing the potential inherent within herself and in her daughter through the alternatives she makes possible for her. With the help of her life-long friend Gnagna Guisse, she sets about arranging the future. In a significant departure from both tradition and Islam which require the child to take the name of its

father, she bequeaths all her worldly possessions and the noble name of Thiandum on her daughter's child. Her suicide after this finally galvanizes the community into some reaction. The novel seems to suggest that when men abdicate responsibility, it is up to women to take over the reins and force the pace of change.

In writing about father/daughter incest, Sembene has chosen not to treat it as a matter of fantasy or desire as Bessie Head does in *The Cardinals* but rather, is more interested in what it reveals about the place of women, the trauma it engenders, and the silence it teaches. Neither father nor the daughter speak in the novel. It is left to the griot Dethye Law to sum up Khar's predicament 'Can a daughter declare publicly: "The child I am carrying is my father's?"' (p.46). But through Khar's silence the novel makes a statement about women's loss of speech and concomitant loss of power. Not only is the community shrouded in silence and secrecy, but the text itself revolves around the unspeakable because what is taboo is frequently a prohibition against speaking.

However the idea that because the activities of Muslim women are largely confined to the domestic sphere, it means they lack influence is belied by the impact the collaborative actions of Ngone and Gnagna Guisse. Their efforts to resolve the problem of incest are unobtrusive but they nevertheless are able to influence the outcome of the crisis. Even Khar resists the temptation to abandon the baby who would probably be a handicap in her attempt at making a new life away from the village. This effectively signals a turning point for her, from being a vulnerable child into self-assertive woman and thereby restoring balance to the natural cycle. The intensely moral tone is a result of Sembene's role as the truth

telling griot, but it is also in keeping with the dictates of Islam that requires art to be of meaningful value to society

In *White Genesis*, Sembene, rejects the stereotype of the powerless “other” West African woman who is rarely heard from and successfully gives voice to her suppressed narrative as he demonstrates that in her own way, she is capable of challenging assumptions about who she is and what she is capable of.

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