

**LITERATURE AS INSTRUMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT: A SURVEY OF SEMBENE  
OUSMANE'S GUELWAAR**

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**Abstract:** *That there is a relationship between literature and a society, which produces it, is no longer news. However, the extent of the perceived interconnectivity between literature and its milieu remains a serious argument among literary theorists, historians and other practitioners of creative arts generally. In an attempt to contribute to the debate on the meeting point between literature and the environment which paves the way for its creation and production, we examine Sembène Ousmane's Guelwaar with the view that Art is not only for its own sake and purpose but also for the development of the society, which it claims it is a product of. This paper therefore is premised on the pragmatic approach which stresses that literature performs certain functions. The paper concludes that literature is a potential tool for sustainable developments in various human societies.*

**Keywords:** Literature, culture, development, empowerment, society, corruption, woman emancipation.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Through protest writing, militant but reasonable African creative writers condemn the follies and the vices in their societies. They frown at corruption, bad governance, repressive policies, woman oppression, moral decadence and societal disturbances such as religious intolerance, with a view to making positive changes, which might accelerate human and material development in Africa and the world at large. The primary aim of these committed African writers is the genuine struggle for cultural and socio-political revolution using literary activities as a platform. The different peoples of the world are made to understand the African world view through writing both now and before independence. For instance, as a leader of the *Etudiant noir*, Léopold Sédar Senghor assured that members of the group adopted African traditional poetry as a sub-genre of literary expression. The publication of Léon Damas' *Pigments* revealed that a good number of African poetic forms were expressed in the work. The *Légitime défense* and *L'Etudiant noir* emphasized the expectations, hopes and aspirations of the Black people living in Paris during the time, most importantly to create a more ideological, philosophical and literary-oriented

movement. It was premised on these zealous efforts of the writers and the founders of *Légitime défense* and *L'Étudiant noir* that led to the creation or birth of Negritude. Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon-Gontran Damas were the founding fathers of Negritude movement. Aimé Césaire coined the term, "Negritude" and used it for the first time in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, published in 1939.

According to the first user of the word, Aimé Césaire, Negritude is defined as « la simple reconnaissance du fait d'être noir, et l'acceptation de ce fait de notre destin de noir, de notre histoire et de notre culture ». Another founder of the Negritude movement, Léopold Sédar Senghor views Negritude as « l'ensemble des valeurs culturelles de l'Afrique noire » and later adds that Negritude is « le refus de l'Autre, le refus de s'assimiler, de se perdre dans l'Autre...Le refus de l'Autre, c'est l'affirmation de soi. ».

Whether we see Negritude as « simple awareness of the fact that we are Blacks and the acceptance of our destiny as Blacks including our history and culture » (Aimé Césaire) or "The totality of cultural values of Black Africa; the rejection of the 'other', the rejection of assimilating oneself and gets absorbed and carried away in another man's culture...The rejection of the other (European culture) is the acceptance of one's own culture" (L. S. Senghor): it is as a matter of fact obvious from the definitions of these founding fathers of Negritude that the movement's main objective is the practical reappraisal, reconstruction or re-orientation of the Black people and their cultures particularly as regards the contact with the western/European culture. Negritude is primly concerned with culture; to project black culture and civilization as well as to resist and reject influx of external practices, norms and values, which can pollute and damage the African culture. "Literature was (and it is still) the most efficient medium of manifesting African culture and civilization, while poetry became the most effective genre for expressing it ... not just to illustrating and defending Africa's cultural values ...but also to the rehabilitation of Africa's damaged image, ... (Cyril Mokwenye, 2000).

It is against this background that this paper is anchored. We, however, extend the frontier of our discussion beyond poetry because poetry is not the only genre of literature. There are three major genres of literature namely: drama, poetry and prose. All these branches of literature have potential ingredients which make them functional platform to showcase Africa's beliefs, feelings, norms, values and aspirations which can translate into desired growth and societal development. "Literature is not just a piece of writing, which only entertains. It is equally, at the same time too, 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. 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).

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 adopt 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. For the purpose of this work, we see society as an association of people, which comprises units that integrate for living together. It concerns people that have rules of behavior such as beliefs, customs, traditions, conventions, social values and norms by which the said society can change and protect the well being of the community. The families, religions, trade unions, pressure groups and professional bodies are some examples of units of a given society. Society is “a particular community of people who share the same customs, laws, etc”, (Hornby, A. S. 2000).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Pragmatic approach is our theoretical framework which provides the guided principles for this article. Theorists who adopt the use of this critical theory see literature as a product of many functions within a given society. In other words, these scholars 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. Language is the vehicle, the context or the medium by which message content/information in any literature is been conveyed and disseminated to its publics. Hence, language and literature are two inseparable kinds. "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, 1968).

### **ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT**

Before reviewing Sembène Ousmane's *Guelwaar*, let us give an insight to the writer's ideological disposition by reflecting on some of his other artistic works. It is principally important to point out that Sembène Ousmane is not carried away by the short lasting benefits of independence in Africa, if at all there is any. He zealously frowns at the societal problems with the aims of informing and mobilizing the masses or at least generates and/ or guides public opinions against such social problems so that they can be corrected within the shortest time possible. Since after independence, Sembène Ousmane has been one of the African forerunners in the literary scene. He is a celebrated film-maker and a prolific writer, who serves as a mouthpiece of a particular class in his society, Senegal in particular and Africa in general.

In *Ô pays, mon beau peuple*, Sembène Ousmane protests against what can be described as a repressive social order, which cripples the masses; particularly religious brutality and defeatism. The transformation of African people, from ignorance to the consciousness of their historic rights to fight against social injustice like threats, corruption, violence and other forms of inhuman treatment is the preoccupation of Sembène Ousmane in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*. In a form of a socio-political satire, Sembène Ousmane's *Le dernier de l'empire* x-rays the Senegalese government at the time of writing. The author presents the said government as a league of mandarins, who are only aspired to be a carbon representation of the colonial lords without considering the suffering of their fellow less privileged African brothers and sisters that are the majority. In short, Sembène Ousmane's *Le dernier de l'empire* is an exposée on neo-colonialism.

In an attempt to correct bad governance and/or insensitivity of those elected, appointed or selected into public offices as the case may be in various African societies, Sembène Ousmane exposes political decay in *Guelwaar*. Guelwaar, the major character in the story, dies in the course of a planned civil action/uprising against an international assistance in form of food

supply. To Guelwaar and his followers, the perceived international help is nothing but a “*fine begging*”, which enslaves whoever takes it. Angèle, one of the devoted followers of Guelwaar and wife of Guignane, the oldest man in the community, champions the rejection of the said international food assistance upon the demise of Guelwaar. « Mes enfants et moi, nous ne vivons pas d’aumône » *Guelwaar*, p.59. [“My children and I, we are not going to live on alms]. Angèle openly attacks her husband that what he and his likes in government are doing is tantamount to begging”].

Honestly, it is obvious that political awareness, social changes and practical tendencies which come with them are now the business of all and sundry: men, women, educated and the uneducated members of a given modern society. In a satiric manner, Angèle lashes out on her husband saying: « Jamais nos parents n’ont attend de personne encore moins des tubabs, leur nourriture pour eux et leurs enfants. Sans les tubabs, toi et tes semblables au *Gufernement*, vous crèveriez de faim. Et tu parles d’indépendance ! L’indépendance est valable pour le père de famille qui nourrit sa famille...S’il ne le peut pas, il n’est pas indépendant...Aucune dignité ! » *Guelwaar*, p.60. [“Never did our parents wait for anybody, not even for the white men to provide food for them and their children. Without the white men, you and your likes in government would die of hunger. And you talk about independence. Independence is legitimate for a family man who feeds his family. If he cannot do that, he is not independent... no dignity”].

Corruption has become a cancer worm in most African states, if not all and in *Guelwaar*, Sembène Ousmane does not keep mute on this ugly situation, which has bedeviled the African continent. He strongly opposes this moral decadence by presenting one Amadou Fall in the story. The character traits of Amadou Fall is a symbolic representation of corrupt office-holders, elected, selected or appointed, who loot the treasury of their country at the expense of the tax payers and the dying masses. Mr. Amadou Fall lives in luxury while his country men and women do not have food on their tables. It is ironic that in a country where people are waiting for an international food aid, a government officer enjoys this kind of pleasure: « ... Il est vrai que ses cinq voitures de luxe, son bureau et les chambres à coucher de ses trios épouses étaient climatisés », *Guelwaar*, p.33. [“...His five luxurious cars, his office and the bedrooms of his three wives which were all air-conditioned”]. This expensive life style displayed by a government official or a politician and the abandoned cars as well as agricultural equipment mentioned in the story are proofs of careless wastage which is a common scenario in Africa. Presenting the sordid state of most African communities, Okey, D. Ebele 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.”

In Africa, perhaps more than elsewhere in the world, embezzlement, inflation of contract funds and misappropriation of public funds have become the order of the day but our writer, Sembène Ousmane, who can be described as a social pathology is of the view that all these social vices can be corrected and once they are corrected the society will develop; citizens will live happily and fulfilled. It is paramount that maladministration is the major cause of poverty. And, this poverty has blocked the people's consciousness as well as taken away their dignity to see the so-called foreign aid as normal and necessary for their existence. Indices of poverty includes unemployment, which in most cases paves the way for moral decadence such as prostitution, armed robbery, drug trafficking and cyber crimes. For example, Sophie, the daughter of Guelwaar gives herself up to prostitution in Dakar to earn a living and to ensure the survival of her family. She sees this oldest trade, prostitution as an alternative when she finds no job in the city after her basic education “... Après mon BEFEM, mon brevet de fin d'études moyennes, je suis allée à Dakar pour trouver du travail, Trois ! Six mois ! Un an ! Rien. Je suis devenue une prostituée avec une carte professionnelle », *Guelwaar*, p.68. [« ...After my *BEFEM*, (*JSCE*) my certificate at the end of intermediate studies, I went to Dakar to look for work/employment. After three, six months, a year! Nothing, I became a registered prostitute with a professional card”]. Sembène Ousmane does not support prostitution; rather he is showing how frustrating and dangerous the effect of poverty occasioned by bad governance can be on innocent citizens. If the available resources are judiciously and constructively utilized, there will be employment opportunities and consequently, the youths and women will also be economically empowered. The empowerment will in turn enhance sustainable economic growth and socio-political developments, which developing countries are yawning and/or questing for. This of course is the stance of Sembène Ousmane in most of his artistic creations including *Guelwaar*.

Again, to ensure the equality of man and woman in the society painted by Sembène Ousmane, his female characters are portrayed as being intelligent, bold and resourceful. To reconstruct or rebuild our society, active participation of women is an issue that must be taken seriously. This idea is clearly demonstrated in the character traits of Angèle and Oumy who reject men's oppression in strong terms. Angèle condemns her husband for taking a second wife, Honorine: « Quand tu bandes avec Honorine, tu penses chrétien? Avec moi, tu es un chiffon mouillé, *Guelwaar*. », p. 58. [“When you get a hard-on with Honorine, you think Christian? To me, you are a wet rag”]. For Oumy, she refuses to be inherited by the younger brother of her husband after the death of her husband. In the first place, she is forced to marry the said husband as a replacement for some money her father borrowed but could not pay back to the man. What a shameful batter system! An exchange of human being for money is very disgusting. The writer suggests through the character of Angèle that it is the men that actually need liberation:

liberation from the cruel culture and mentality of male chauvinism, begging syndrome and over dependent tendencies on foreign assistance, which eventually enslaves and reduces Africa to mere consuming continent.” Moi, je vais vous dire ceux qui doivent être libérés: ce sont les hommes qu’il faut libérer, les libérer de leur mentalité de phalocrates ; les libérer de leurs prétentions à être des maîtres : les libérer de leurs habitudes de mendigot : les libérer de leur subordination aux tubabs (blancs) », *Guelwaar*, p.61,

Importation of goods and even essential services from industrialized countries like United States, France, Italy, Germany, Japan, Holland and Belgium remains the main source of survival: ” ...les sacs, sachets, cartons importés Des Etats-Unis, de France, d’Italie, d’Allemagne, du Japon, de Hollande et de Belgique”, *Guelwaar*, p.161.

Besides all that we have said, 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 nassaran”, *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 yefere est un acte de piété”, *Guelwaar*, p. 129. 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 Christ religion. Or, out of their own free will, they just do what they like. In *Guelwaar*, we see Christians taking 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 (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/or 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. All these efforts are attempts to use literature to develop the society. Yes, it is not an effort in futility; rather it is a calculated exercise in sagacity.

## CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated in this article how literature can serve as instrument for lasting developments based on pragmatic approach. Our selected author has exposed and condemned in strong terms the fundamental social problems which bedeviled African states and still dwells in them. For recommending solutions to those social problems, the novelist can be described as a social pathologist. Because Sembène Ousmane talks about poverty, unemployment, corruption, ignorance, nepotism, moral decadence, disintegration of social values, religious fatalism/extremism and blind attachment to cruel cultural practices; we are convinced that our author has attempted to cause a positive social change in his milieu. Hence, literature is a veritable tool for actualizing societal developments and global advancement in general. 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 conflicts, barbaric traditions, child abuse, drug trafficking, human trafficking and prostitution among other societal ills.

Three things are responsible for everybody's behavior; desire, emotion and experience. Sembène Ousmane believes that our lives begin to end the moment we become passive and/or silent about things that matter in our environment and society at large. It is this opinion we hold too. Finally, we recommend that writers all over the world should be encouraged in every ramification because they have genuine roles to play in promoting and maintaining peace, security and sustainable developments; economically, geographically, politically and socially.

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