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The “New Wives’ Tale” or *The Money Order* by Sembène Ousmane: Reporting on a Modern Intercultural Reception of a Post-Colonial Tale

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In the spring of 2015, Sembène Ousmane’s *The Money Order* was the final text of a survey course on modern literature at Century Community and Technical College in White Bear Lake Minnesota. The class also featured seminal novels such as *The Underground Man*, *Death in Venice*, and *Heart of Darkness*. It was a small class of fifteen, including two men and no minorities nor new immigrants, and the undergraduate returning students in their late twenties were generally engaged even though few had a background in literature. Set in post-colonial Senegal, *The Money Order* resembles a modern fable as it depicts the comic, often tragic quest of its main character and patriarch to cash a large check his nephew has sent him from Paris. His efforts are foiled against a backdrop of bureaucracy, hustlers, and money grabbers. Surprisingly, Ousmane’s work elicited the strongest reaction among my students.

From their comments, it was clear that the students’ passionate response was due to a women-centered reception of the novella. They seized upon the story’s potential quasi-feminist undertones which may be critical of the novel’s depictions of marriage, family, patriarchy, and the role of women in society. On the other hand, questions regarding colonialism, African culture and customs, immigration, bureaucracy, or post office practices prompted little discussion. The fact that the novella is written in French from a Senegalese nation of Wolof language was perhaps lost in translation. The irony of creating a subsequent film decrying colonialism with a budget of thirty million French Francs donated by André Malraux did not elicit comments. The fact that the film exists in two versions, a French one and one in Wolof (a first for Senegal) was merely an item of curiosity. In this instance, diversity and cultural relativism were ignored as they often are despite my best efforts at presenting them. Indeed, the majority of the class saw the tale as a universal and familiar story. Featuring excerpts from the film where people wear traditional clothes and speak Wolof or French did not alter this reception.

On the other hand, the group observed that insofar as the interaction between the vainglorious man and the women of the family went, “it is an old story”. Furthermore, it quickly appeared that the division of labor was not the crux of the tale’s “problem” for that particular class. In their eyes, the story casts a man, a husband, who fancies himself the leader of the family. However, he shirks his responsibilities and lives as a parasite off the women who are left in the background. The women exclusively tend to the family unit, yet they have to step into the public sphere to the point of acting on his behalf (for example, Mety who is the elder wife of the main character and patriarch Dieng engages in transactions with the merchant without consulting her husband because she is impatient for him to fulfill his duties). And though when questioned to this effect, none of the students admitted to being a feminist, or even supporting any of the tenets of feminism, it seemed that this would be the prism the majority would employ to interpret Sembène’s *Money Order*

The students noted that the patriarchal African society depicted in the novel focused on the life of men, namely their comings and goings. Men comprised small social groups at prayer, the market, the town square, or the post office, while women were mainly represented as isolated discordant backdrop figures. Women seem to add to men’s discomfort in society. Dieng’s wives argue with him about the price and receipt of rice. They are nagging, even oppressive to their husband when in his company, but much is at stake in these interchanges, including the basic welfare and economy of the family which relies much on the procurement of the rice and the
Dieng’s dealings with the grocer. His control or lack of control of the food supply is highlighted and an item of gendered contention. As the narrator says, “Food was the province of the women, and they intended to defend it” (94). The first wife is depicted as mostly bitter, aggressive, while the second spouse seems on the verge of acquiring those traits. Notably they present a united front when Dieng protests that they engaged the family further in debt at the food store and without consulting him. Another example of women’s readiness to criticize the order of things occurs at the post office when Dieng in line to inquire about his money order and a woman behind him keeps protesting, even after he believes she has received what she wanted. The students’ feminist interpretation is supported by the text and subsequent film (“Mandabi”), both by the same author, while it is doubtful that at the time Sembè Ousmane was composing his novella and film he could have been perceived as an ardent feminist. His conclusion alludes to the social changes Dieng and his male neighbor intend to implement. Politics and social conditions are the domain of patriarchal activity as much as food would be “province of women”. Yet the students interpreted this conclusion as a final evaluation of Dieng and his neighbor as manifestly unable to bring himself up to speed to navigate this designated male domain and unlikely agents of change.

Karen Lindo reviewed the perceived feminism of Sembè Ousmane in a 2010 publication (cf. Hall of Men). Perhaps his faithful realism allows for an indictment of (African) patriarchy whether the author intends it or not since in a 1968 interview, he identifies the targets of his writing and filmic activities. He situates his art in realistic aesthetics, Leninism, Brecht inspired as engaged art, and he admits that he is mostly alienated by Parisian leftist intellectuals as well as by the new bourgeois and intellectuals of Senegal (Cf. the 1968 interview conducted by Guy Hennebelle). Perhaps the novella and subsequent film of Sembène is like an Oliver Stone film: It is double edged and can be interpreted in favor of his characters or against them. The fact that feministic readings are sustained by The Money Order remains fascinating. Perhaps over optimistically my female students unanimously projected that women will be at the forefront of any potential changes in Africa. After all, it has been interpreted as the main message of Sembène Ousmane’s film Faat Kiné (2001). This later film is perceived as an evidence that the author is preoccupied with women’s potential engagement alongside men in the social fabric of post-colonial Africa. Faat Kiné is about a single mother and a successful businesswoman inserting herself in the male dominated oil market. Perhaps the intervention of Mety dealing with the merchant at the food store prefaces feminine insertion in the commercial world. They intervene successfully if only temporarily during the settlement dispute of Dieng with the grocer. At any rate and despite the obvious focus on male characters of The Money Order, the novella was interpreted as a tale concerning the wives, and it appeared to prompt the students into desiring feminist changes in their own Minnesota community.

Bibliography/Filmography