



## The Contradictions of Neocolonialism in Ousmane Sembene 's *The Money Order*

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### ABSTRACT

The sociopolitical and economic climate of post-independence Africa has been one of intense civic unrest and convulsion. As a committed novelist, Ousmane Sembene strives to oppose and expose the repressive practices of neocolonialism, employing his literary craft in a fight for social justice and a rise in national consciousness. Therefore, the focus of the present paper is to examine the contradictions of neocolonialism as fictionally delineated in his novel *The Money Order* (1965). These contradictions are caused by the national body-politic, namely: politicians, the educated elite, bureaucratic professionals and the commercial class. Relying on Fanon's revolutionary views in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), the study highlights the ideological stance of the novelist that has prompted fictional elements of social realism to unveil the predicament of the masses and give moral guidance and a sense of direction to society. The paper concludes that the contradictions of neocolonialism can only be resolved through a true revolution launched by the masses themselves.

**Keywords:** Neocolonialism, Ousmane Sembene, *The Money Order*, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.



### Introduction:

Ousmane Sembene (1923–2007) was one of the most prominent African writers. He started his literary career as a poet, short-story writer, novelist and essayist. He believes in the functional role of the artist as a mirror and conscience of his people. He also thinks that a committed artist suggests and persuades the populace to see the reality and strive for social change and betterment. He shows deep concern for the disillusioned masses. It is argued that all his works are concerned with the plight of ordinary people who are oppressed and exploited by neocolonial repressive governments. They also manifest his protest against corruption, hypocrisy and neocolonialism, which is why most of his works are censored in his country.

Due to the limitations of the written word to influence the public, Ousmane turned to cinema. He creates character types and embarks on a new medium, film, to make the masses see, feel, think and help themselves (Busch, Annette and Annas, Max 2008, xiii). It is worth mentioning that the novel under scrutiny, *The Money Order*, was filmed in a local language (Wolof) and given the title *Mandabi* (1968); it became his first long feature-film. In short, Ousmane's literary works and cinematic production have "promoted the cause of freedom and social justice and have aspired to restore pride and dignity to the African people and the diaspora" (Demissie, 2007, 309) As a very talented filmmaker, he is known as "the father of African cinema" (Murphy, 2010, 56) and has received wide international recognition.

### Theoretical framework:

The term neo-colonialism was first coined by Ghanaian President Nkrumah (1974), who defines a neo-colonial state as one in which there appear:

All the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus political policy is directed from outside. It is a state in which political power lies in the conservative forces of the former colony... . (p.250)



After independence, the direct rule of the white man was replaced by indirect rule by the traditional ruling class; a vague and puppet bourgeois class known as neocolonialist. In the neocolonial period, a bourgeois leader plays the role of a "Manager for Western enterprise" (Fanon 1963, 154), and in practice makes his country "the brothel of Europe" (Fanon 1963, 154). NeoAfrican rulers exhibit materialism, immorality and pretentiousness. They become engines of self-aggrandizement and the most extravagant luxury. Consequently, these rulers are incapable of maintaining social sanity and welfare in African society. All these constitute what Fanon calls "the pitfalls of national consciousness" (1963, 148). These are the evils of a capitalist economy invading a morally equipped traditional communal set-up that Ousmane Sembène presents in *The Money-Order*.

Unfortunately, the yearnings and aspirations of the masses after gaining independence were shattered by the new African political elites. African states after independence were not established on the principles of nationalism. Commenting on the deviations of nationalist governments from the principles that underlie nationalism, Fanon claims:

National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been. (1963, p.148)

For an effective delineation of the political culture and its concomitant crises, part of the analysis will be based on Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*. In the chapter entitled "Pitfalls of National Consciousness", he conducts an elaborate survey of the contradictions of neocolonialism. These include the dubious activities of political parties and greedy politicians who "behave like common sergeant-majors, frequently reminding the people of the need for silence" (Fanon, 1963, 183). To this, he adds the "intellectual laziness" (1963, 149) of the new elites. He also mentions corrupt bureaucrats and professionals teleguided by politicians. From Fanon's



analysis, one can identify the elements affecting the machinery of political culture, namely, party leaders, educated elites, bureaucratic professionals and the commercial class.

### Discussion:

The contradictions arising from a politics of opportunism, deceit and the suppression of neocolonialism are the main preoccupations of Sembene in *The Money Order*. In this novel, he satirically probes whether political parties and their leaders really have the genuine aim of redeeming the masses who put them in power. That political parties and their leaders do not cater for the social welfare of the people is well represented in this novel. Dealing with the dehumanization and degradation of man, Sembene shows his sympathy for the ragtag of society. He exposes the rampant poverty and diseases that torture the existence of the majority. These sufferings arise from social mis-planning and maladministration. This is due to the concentration of the means of distribution in the hands of a minority. In the post-colonial society depicted in *The Money Order*, begging is turned into a profession, because the system has failed to educate and absorb the people into a well-planned and reliable labour market. After a bloody encounter between the protagonist, Ibrahima Dieng, and a photographer, his wives and their neighbours, in a monotone, attribute their tribulations to "intrigue, nepotism, unemployment, immorality, the indifference of the authority" (Sembene, p.120). Therefore, the majority live in scarcity and the city is full of beggars who roam the streets in post-colonial societies. He explores the degrading social existence via the symbolism of decay and squalor. Using illustrative and convincing images, Sembene presents, in the novel under scrutiny, the physical disabilities and painful existence of these beggars. The agonizing existence of beggars chanting for arms is shown by portraying them as a "human milestone" (Sembene, p.102) and a "human trunks on wheels" (Sembene, p.102). Through detailed descriptions, he effectively presents human beings dehumanized by a social system that lacks planning and rational ideological guidelines. Baidy, one of those who have come to borrow money from Ibrahima Dieng is described as a "walking skeleton, with



very prominent features" (Sembene, p. 95). The beggar outside the "*Services des Domains*" (Sembene, p.104) is portrayed in the same horrible way: "He had hollow empty eyes, his cheeks were like a pair of horse's bars, and he had a strong piercing voice" (Sembene, 104). The effect of this artistic strategy is immediate. It appeals to humane generating pathos and soliciting pity for these hopeless dregs of humanity.

The indifference of the new political elites to the social conditions of the masses leads to the antithetical structure between rural and urban areas. In other words, political leaders neglect the rural and peasant population, while they concentrate much of their activities in urban areas. The narrow operation of the nationalist government in urban areas has its roots in a narrow party operation. Fanon asserts that nationalist parties imitate Western political parties; therefore, "they do not direct their propaganda towards the rural masses" (Fanon 1963, 88). Furthermore, the election of party men is always "a one-way ticket to the city" (Sembene, p.102). Sembene makes the plot structure flexible so that the reader can oscillate easily between rural and urban settings. Characters that serve as a link between the two areas are created. These devices make offer ample opportunities to evaluate the differences between the two areas.

In *The Money Order*, the postman who brings "the money-order" to Ibrahima Dieng complains about the poor state of the roads. The neglect of the rural masses is reflected practically by Ibrahima's lack of education, which makes him tremble when he is confronted with "documents" in the city. The character of Astou, Ibrahima's sister, who has just come from the village to the city, is employed by the novelist to accentuate the miserable conditions of villagers. Astou relates her story of woe, a chronic famine that has been gnawing at their existence for months. She recalls the deprivations of the time: "I am alone with the children, and we have nothing. Nothing at all. I had to borrow from left and right to get here. Even these clothes I have on, some of them belong to my second veudieu" (Sembene, p.108). The predicaments of individuals like Ibrahima Dieng and his sister are used symbolically to represent those of people living in the countryside.



Apart from being neglected, the traditionalism of the peasant population is gradually eroded by modernism. Fanon argues that one of the major contradictions between rural and urban dwellers is that the latter neglect traditions that are highly valued by countryside people. Sembene's deep exploration and characterization of the couple in *The Money Order* helps to prove this argument. Here we see European acculturation and individualism at work. During his ordeals, Dieng decides to visit his cousin newly arrived from France, with a white woman as his wife. The wife is worried by an unexpected visit by her husband's relative. Thus, we see Dieng's cousin making an excuse to extricate himself from his wife's threat: "Here our relatives and in-laws only come to see us when they want something. So, why should we bother ourselves with African social customs" (Sembene, p.100). The couple see this as an intrusion into their privacy: "The notion of mutual responsibility that helps and sustains the members of the same community in time of need was foreign to their milieu" (Sembene, p.100). The tone of Dieng's cousin indicates some resentment at an African tradition which encourages communal responsibility.

The negligence and irresponsibility of political leaders and their parties are exacerbated by the complex and merciless bureaucratic set-up. The post-independence administrative machinery is based on the autocratic background of the colonial system, dressed up in institutions such as the judiciary, civil service and police. Setting this complex machinery against the mass illiteracy of the people, the novelist foreshadows the looming ominous crisis that besets the system. Sembene is conscious of the dilemmas of such a structure patterned purely in the colonial mode. Dieng is used as a mirror via which the social evils around him are exposed. The novelist makes him the victim of "an incredible scenario of bureaucratic bungling and stupidity" (Abrahams 1978, 123). Apart from this, Dieng's character is employed by the novelist as a clinical reflector via which the ills of Senegalese society can be perceived and diagnosed.





The central character of Dieng and "the money-order" constitute the symbolism through which Sembene unveils the absurdities of various departments, such as the post-office, the police station, the Registry and the bank. The indolence of the civil service is indicated by the long queues in these departments. With an apt use of dialogue and a scenic device in the post office, Sembene depicts the frustration of Dieng at a civil service stupefied with disrespect, incivility and arrogance. Dieng's problems are exacerbated by illiteracy. Those in power do not seek the total socialization of the people through education, so that they can continue bullying them. They do not want the masses to become enlightened and critically conscious of their sociopolitical milieu. Hence, "the money-order" and identity cards are meaningless "sheets of papers" to Dieng. In spite of the arrogance of the post-office clerk, Dieng is careful not to annoy him. As a common notion in Dakar goes: "Never upset a civil servant. He has great power" (Sembene, p.88). Then, one is forced to ponder the utility of a functionary of an independent state, which fails to cater for the people. This is an outright negation of what independence should be.

Such negation of the spirit of independence is still recorded in the police station. The police in *The Money Order* show themselves to be part of a cruel, corrupt and uncivil bureaucracy. It is through them that unjust taxation is imposed on the people. In search of an identity card, Dieng is harassed by their "cavernous voice" (Sembene, p. 90). They also demand "money for kolanut" (Sembene, p.90) before they can render any service to the helpless Dieng and his type. Corruption and bribery are evil elements that ruin the political systems of postcolonial states. Ironically, the bribes the police take in addition to their normal pay are not justified by their sense of duty. The sluggish attitude of the police towards work is criticized by the masses at the station. The masses frown at "the slowness of the service" (Sembene, p. 90).

The same laziness is seen in the Registry. Sembene creates a dramatic scene to satirically expose the bureaucracy of this department. One of the customers in the Registry complains about the atrocious attitude and indifference of the officials: "officials did not care and they lacked a sense of duty towards the public" (Sembene,



p.96). Another example is presented when a woman vehemently registers her protest against this laxity and corruption of the civil service:

... the woman impudently attacked the mentality of the administration since independence. She spoke loudly: for more than a week she had been coming, morning and afternoon, and if anyone thought she was going to pay a bribe ... he was mistaken. (Sembene, p.98)

Boosting their economic ego and that of foreign investors, the new leaders introduce a new system of business transactions to disorganize traditional economies and propagate the practices of Western capitalism. In *The Money Order*, "the money-order" attached to the protagonist's life is symbolic of the economic contradictions in a post-colonial society. Ibrahima Dieng, the protagonist, symbolically stands for the spirit of communalism and simple economic mode of life in the traditional set-up. "The money-order" and cheques constitute a symbolic signpost of Western capitalism standing as a threat to traditional economies. It is important to mention that Sembene blames the new African middle class that fails to educate and enlighten the common people. Therefore, the new system of transactions is complicated, and an old man is reduced to a ball, which everybody in society kicks.

The new economic order affords the privileged class the chance to exploit and dupe the masses. A few privileged people like Mbaiye know the dynamics of the economic system. Mbaiye represents the selfish national middle class who prove that ordinary uneducated people can be cheated and duped. He cashes "the money-order" for Dieng and robs him of 25,000 francs. Mbaiye is vividly portrayed as a good example of: "new Africa's puffing businessmen, always dressed in impeccable suits, wearing black caps, holding handbags and carrying themselves heavily about with an air of false responsibility" (Ohaegbu 1974, 21). This satirical delineation of Mbaiye is the novelist's tool to manifest the irrationality of the wealthy minority of Mbaiye and his sort.





Mbarka, a merchant, is a petty trader in the chain of distribution. Cheating poor people like Dieng, who buys rice on credit, is the only way he thinks he can build his business. He creates a problem of artificial scarcity by hoarding. As asserted by Fanon, the African petty bourgeoisie are uncreative, redundant and unproductive. Mbarka portrays the true epitome of the ineffectuality, deceit and arrogance of the contemporary African commercial class.

Apart from exploitation of the ordinary man in the street, the new economic system stains the morality of contemporary society. Human relationships are adversely affected by money. The race for wealth has crippled any sense of moral uprightness that befits everybody in society. As one of the characters in *The Money Order* points out, "Money seems to have taken the place of morality in our country" (Sembene, 126). Money makes people corrupt. The clerk in the Post Office, the police and the people at the Registry want their "palms to be greased" (Sembene, 83) before rendering services to people. Ambrose, the photographer, is an illustration of how the human sense of probity can be tainted by money. He collects money from Dieng without producing the passport that he needs to collect "the money-order". This is the reality of a capitalist society that is responsible for the annihilation of the communal links that encourage traditional values of solidarity and dignity.

People's obsession with accumulating wealth in modern society creates a serious problem of alienation. Influenced by Marx, Fanon elaborately deals with this crucial issue. Alienation is a social situation whereby individuals, or a class or a majority, are isolated from their social reality and privileges around them. This may be due to their history, education, poor economic status and birth. This is a situation created by the capitalist system, where a minority arrogates the wealth of a nation for themselves. The novelist perceives that the bourgeois-proletarian stratification prompted by the neo-colonial economic attitude is responsible for this alienation. Sembene explores this crisis of human relations using the technique of contrast, which achieves a satirical effect. In *The Money Order*, Sembene exposes such social separatism through a description of Mbaiye's house:



Mbaiye's villa stood in the middle of the shanty town and tumble-down shacks. In the sitting room, crammed with armchairs, chairs and vases of artificial flowers, blue was the dominant colour. (p.127)

This bridge between the world of the privileged and the underprivileged is fictionally represented in the action that Sembene has Dieng perform in Mbaiye's house. Dieng is embarrassed and made uncomfortable when the fan is switched on. He declines to eat not because he is not hungry, but because of his fear of the environment where he finds himself. Such is the social psychology that is created by alienation of the masses. The comic satire of Sembene is at work again. He satirically depicts the snobbish attitude of an accultured African. While Mbaiye is unknotting his tie, coffee is served in the severe heat. According to him, his doctor has recommended that he go for recuperation in Paris. Such is the ego-boosting and self-destructive pride of the traditional bourgeoisie. On any slight excuse, they waste the nation's money overseas, while the majority are suffering. A justification for Dieng's fear in Mbaiye's house is related to Fanon's view. Fanon admits that colonialism quickens the estrangement of the national middle class from the people. Dieng is not used to the "cosmopolitan mould" he finds himself in in Mbaiye's house. The etiquette of the Government Reserved Area is one of alienation.

In spite of this gloomy social climate, the novelist is optimistic and he emphasizes the need for a better society. He asserts that the revolution that will bring about an egalitarian society is not to be launched by any of these treacherous classes. The true revolution, according to him, can only be launched by the oppressed themselves, which is reflected in Bah's speech to Ibrahima Dieng:

" Things will change"

"Who will change them"

"Tomorrow, we will change all that"

"Who is 'we'?"



"You" ... "Yes, you Ibrahima Dieng" (Sembene,136)

Therefore, he gives the masses a deep insight into their predicament along with the practical possibility of solving their problems. It is evident that the masses in the novel are awakening and relentless in their efforts for total liberation. Through political education, the "voices" of the "silent" masses are broken and their consciousness is awakened.

### Conclusion:

In *The Money Order*, Sembene exposes the sociopolitical problems of the post-independence era. He shows deep concern for the disillusioned masses. Ibrahima Dieng is a symbolic representation of the suffering masses of the world who have been deprived of their natural existence and rights because of a lack of education and employment. Their lives have been manipulated by the minority in power. Sembene presents the hollowness, shallow inner logic and apathy of the various constituents of the body-politic, namely: politicians, educated elites, bureaucratic professionals and the commercial class. In delineating the contradictions of the neocolonial period, the novel offers committed awareness, moral guidance and a sense of direction to the oppressed masses.

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