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# West African Cinema

## **Week 3: Class 1 Gender and Society**

Culture acts as a medium of interaction for society. It is the guideline that reflects the norms, beliefs and the values of the members that are living together in particular territory. It is the common practice in the globalized world to reflect their lifestyles and belief system through films. Same is the case with West African culture that is highlighted in the world through films and literary masterpieces. Several filmmakers of the Nollywood have attempted to reflect the cultural history of the west Africans, however, only some have been successful in this venture (*The Troublemaker*). To be more precise, it is the effort of Sembène Ousmanethat is most remarkable in the Nollywood. He is the man behind the process of social change in West Africa. He is an artist who highlighted several pressing issues of the time in order to find a perfect solution for such complexities.

Sembène Ousmaneand his films also contributed to the quest of women rights and privileges. Among his many productions, the notable is Trouble maker one and the trouble maker two. Both the films intended to raise awareness about gender issues and the right place of woman in society (*The Troublemaker*). The trouble maker one shows the negative emotions in family and its influence on lives. Furthermore, the trouble maker reflects the typical mindset of the African culture where female subjectivity is portrayed by men in society. Nevertheless, this is an attempt on the part of Senegal director to illustrate the impacts of colonial history on their African culture and associated tendencies in the women struggle (Niang et al.).

Gender issues are common in every corner of the world. Women are termed as the weak section of the society. Hill mentions that similar things have been observed in African culture as well. Several movies and literary pieces are a testimony to the social malady where women are caught mercilessly and have to face the brunt of being women in the society (Hill). The Nollywood and the film directors also illustrate this mindset through their films and productions. The director and producer Sembène Ousmaneare doing the same thing with his artistic work. Undoubtedly, he is the most powerful person when it comes to Nigerian film-based industry Nollywood. He is the person who is vocal about the grievances that are met by women in society. Ousmane mentioned in one of his interviews that this film is an effort to focus and correct the ongoing state of affairs in western Africa (Niang et al.).

To begin with, this widespread gender-bias is too obvious in West African culture. It has been witnessed that the negative side of women is shown to the viewers in order to perpetuate this concept of vulnerability. This wrong display of charaterstics of women and their potential is not something that is happening today. It is long and archaic prance of the world to subjugate women on the basis of their sexuality (Frank Ukadike). Besides, this shows that Africans have inherited the culture of their colonial masters where women were not treated equally. After gaining independence, the West African followed the same course and considered their half section of the population ineffective and worthless. Even this social and gender-based problem was promoted to project the viewpoint of men in society. This ongoing state of affair stressed everyone out and the Senegal director Sembène Ousmane tried to rectify the situation in the West African culture. Therefore, he took the course of his films to raise awareness in society. He projected the usual trends of the society where women are treated as unequal and inferior creatures.

The film trouble maker part one is one among the series of films that continued the struggle of women rights and their image in the society. Nigerian cinema is much typical like every other cinema where women are not given due importance in their characters and reward. This is reflected in the above-mentioned film as well where it is depicted that women are often jealous of one another. Even they try to inflict harm on one another whenever they get a chance. Rapfogel and Porton mention that such emotion of envy is what makes up the women (Rapfogel and Porton). So, the trouble maker is reflecting the gender stereotypes where a woman tries to harm children in any way and wishes to hurt them out of her envy nature. The director Sembène Ousmane elaborates the concept of social stratification of males and females in his film and in great length. However, this is the wrong view in the projection of women as they are such envious beings. This is total subjectivity of the men in the society as they want to tarnish the image of women in society. In this purview, the approach of men in western Africa is not promising for their counterparts. They want to ruin their potential with their subjectivity as reflected in the article where the researchers mentioned the lop-sided view of the African men in the film industry or the outside. Henceforth, the power imbalance in the African society and the projection of this phenomenon in films is a characteristic feature of Nollywood where women are pictured as the feeble and the frail creatures of the society (Smith).

In addition, another film in the series Trouble Maker two is the continuation of the same stereotypical approach of the men in society. In this movie, the gender-based issues are different but reflect the same old colonial mentality of the past such as gender-divide. At the beginning of the movie, a naive chicken farmer from New Jersey moves to Greenwich Village to open a coffee house. He faces different obstacles and then the problem of both genders is highlighted in that cultural setting. However, the display of woman in this movie is not that negative as part one. In some images, it reflects the strength of a woman in several aspects of life (*The Troublemaker*). The womanhood is not much praised in the African diaspora and they are the victim of the patriarchal system. In this movie, the sexual orientation is displayed as well. Therefore, gender stereotypes are quite widespread in African society and the African cinema which is the domain of men in society.

In a nutshell, it can be concluded from the above discussion that gender stereotypes and gender-biasness are quite common in African cinema and in the associated film industry Nollywood. The renowned film director, producer, and the author contributed Sembène Ousmane tried to illuminate this state of affair in the West African culture. His two movies the trouble maker and the trouble maker part two represented the same tragedy of women in Africa culture where they have been subjugated on the basis of their sexuality. The movie Trouble maker totally presents that woman are not sincere to their own kind which is a biased view. Similarly, the part Trouble maker two also shows women as incapacitated. Women are not as week and feeble as they have become due to this subjective nature of the men in society. The time is ripe to challenge these centuries-old traditions and beliefs about women. Women must be treated equally and the current power-imbalance between genders must be done away with. Perhaps, this is the way to change the fate of African people and their position in the world.

## **Week 3: Class 2 Symbolism**

African people constitute diverse demography in their region. These people are important social actors in the region thye migrate too. Since the immigration trend from Africa is not new and they have lived in other regions for too long, therefore, they have been successful in making their place in literature, culture, and society of the host region. Symbolism is what these people have even perceived by the thoughtful minds of the host region. African history in America is one of the oldest traces of how they have been part of American society. Unfortunately, the African community was forced for being slaves and could not enjoy the social privileges there, therefore this trend remained prevalent throughout the other parts of the world too.

The culture disrespect the African have faced have a remained a hot topic. There is a wealth of literature available about this aspect too. Murphy has talked about this in his article as well. His article does not take into account the demographic qualities of African people from any specific region, rather he has talked about generally. He believes that the worst symbolic attributes of the society are attached to our community (Murphy). He based his arguments on the pretext that since the African people left their lands and were not interested in building their own society, therefore a wide space prevailed in our region. This space limited the development of our culture, values and other societal aspects. Resultantly there left no other attraction in the region known as Africa. These were the same reasons that the literature and culture remained underdeveloped also. There was not anything attractive among the African culture that could be read or talked about. This is what which gave birth to symbolism. This symbolism attached to the African community is worst in its kind. Every ill is attributed as symbolic to African people.

Other than literature there are many movies made in Nollywood which are the reflection of this same aspect. The movie return from Europe also suggests this very aspect (movies). The main character of this movie Thomas who traveled to Europe in his early ages has spent much of his life living there. He has experienced many changes in his personal life and felt changes in his coastal surroundings too. Although he was able to financially support his family back thee in Nigeria, during his last years in Europe he felt that he has attained nothing more than discomfort. He believes that despite his utmost efforts for making his life better, he remained jailed in imparting the true spirits of making life better in his people. This movie is the real depiction of such facts.

Similarly, there are many other aspects in this movie which relates to Murphy's article. Since he has challenged the established norms about Africa and its people, he has linked this to theories of African cinema too. He argues that African cinema is different from other established cinematic cultures around the world. In addition to many distressing features about the film industry, it is also worth noting that there is the absence of indigenous cinematic culture. He has based his presumption on many established facts. He argues that since the African people remained too negligent toward their own culture, therefore it affected the upbringing of their cinema also (movies). The dearth of film stories, absence of strong themes and lack of actors and models for telecasting is all because of lack of resources.

This aspect is related to Thomas, who is the central character of the movie Return from Europe. He traveled to Europe back in his late twenties, because he could not found anything substantial for his self in his country. It forced him to move abroad and find some new working opportunities which can serve his purpose of handsome earning. He moved, he settles and he earned some handful amounts also, but his primary purpose which was to make the life better for its people back there in Africa remained unachievable. Throughout the movie he does not blame his self for all such failures, rather he believes that there was nothing much in his homeland to invest in. There was no education, no talent and not any human resources that could be considered worthy to be cared for.

David Murphy has explained this aspect by linking it to the cultural identity and social backwardness. He argues that since the African region, unlike other regions of the world remained failed in preserving its heritage and cultural attributes, therefore it resulted in the collapse of their identity. He mentions that it takes some human guts to feel proud of one’s own self or on the culture. To write on, to articulate that and to present it in new and fresh form is all of secondary importance. He argues that since the people and the ruling elite of Africa remained failed in preserving their heritage and social classes, it resulted in demolishing of their own selves.

He continues to argue that the people of Africa were not caring about their culture and values. They kept on migrating from one place to another and adopted the third class working opportunities for themselves. Finally, such all poor classifications resulted in the collapse of their image as substantial citizens. The symbolism of Africans started from thereon. Each bad and worst attribute in the Western world was attached to these people and they were ranked as the low standard community as well. The author argues that no one was to be blamed for such poor stratifications other than these African themselves. Since they have been so uncaring about their values and culture, this is exactly right what has happened to them.

The last and much important aspect of the movie is when Thomas returns back to his pawn country. He experiences no such change in his society. Other than a feeling attraction for his land and admitting what he has done badly in his slice abroad, he thinks that still there are chances for improvement. He plans to permanently relocate to his country and to work for uplifting the social life of his people. The film concludes when Thomas starts imparting new faith in his own people. Similarly, Murphy argues that despite such destructed and worst condition of culture, there exist many opportunities for African people to uplift themselves. He concludes by connecting the cultural aspects of African people with that to the American and Western people. He mentions that Africans must adopt strategies which have up brought these Western cultures.

## **Week 4: Class 1 Immigration, Displacement and Dreams**

Africa is undoubtedly the region with sewer problems to this day. The immigration trend in this region is not new. People have moved previously from this area towards Europe and other regions of the world. In such regions now African community adds great cultural addition. They are also slightly busy in changing some established norms of those regions. The interesting thing which is evident from their existence into such culture is uniqueness. They have not completely submerged in those cultures, as like Asians etc. Walter mentions that this non- aligned cultural aspects suggest is that despite being living in a modernized world, it is hard or even sometimes difficult to take over the complete cultural aspect of the host region (Walters). This immigration has largely added workforce capabilities into different regions. These people have worked hard to establish these regions but have not cared for making better the conditions in their home region. This is the reason the immigration trend is still continuous from these regions.

This displacement also had a very lasting impact on the culture and music of Africa. Many Nollywood movies of this day depict that these displacements and immigration on one side have negatively affected the domestic culture of Africa and on another side, this has impacted on the way music was composed in the region. Larkin argues that music had to remain different in Africa compared to other regions in the world (Larkin). He mentions that since the prehistoric times there was a special song which the people of Africa used to sing just to pay tribute to the Holy Prophet. The writer argues that this music changed with time. This change was not abrupt rather it took time. In its initial stages, people of the modern day Africa started detaching themselves from this music and then with time they started feeling ashamed of celebrating such functions.

This aspect is also evident from the movie titled My Nigerian wife meets my London Wife (HardRock Nigerian Movies - latest Nollywood movies). The plot of this movie suggests that the cultural difference has created anonymity among the characters. The Nigerian wife is different in each aspect with the wife of London. Both have totally different living styles, both manage two different cultural aspects and both see life differently. The movie is divided into two parts and both of these parts of the movie shows how immigration, displacement, and dreams affect the lifestyles and the life pattern. This aspect is very much evident from Larkin's reading also. Although he has not explicitly referred to the changing trends in culture, the gist of his article makes it clear that cultural differentiation is what is caused by the wrong way of chasing dreams.

The male character in the movie assigned has traveled to long to arrange finances to meet his dreams. In the new land, he is able to find a true companion. He has changed his own way of living and is now managing himself to become part of this society. When his other wife from Nigeria comes to meet his London wife, she experiences a total change (HardRock Nigerian Movies - latest Nollywood movies). The way they both interact with each other, the way they enjoy their private time and the way they walk and interact with society is way too different from that of his Nigerian wife. This movie and the reading suggest that the contemporary West African culture and cultural history is largely based on the trends of immigration and displacement. It has not only changed the way their films were made but also changed their literature. Today, the immigration and the pursuit of goals by moving away from the homeland is part of many new movies which are made in Nollywood.

What impression such trends leave for the upcoming generation is that there is no more charm in their own culture. This will leave the space for mass migrations. There are various other reasons for the continuation of such trends. For example, the political and domestic conditions, the security conditions and the weak economic conditions all will act as the catalyst to continue this all. The interesting aspect of all this is the absence of discouragement in African literature. No scholarly literature is available which talks about the discouragement of such aspect. For example, the literature being discussed here. The West African cinema has also developed an audience which is interested in such content too (Larkin).

Immigration from Africa towards the Westerns countries is not a new trend. It's been more than three centuries that people from this land are migrating towards other countries for better working opportunities. This has affected human development in this region in many ways. Not only it has created a dearth of skilled professionals but also has resulted in creating unequal social opportunities for people. Brian and Larkin have explained this cause and effect relation in Africa in their reading. Not only just this reading talks about the causes of declined literary and musical culture in Africa but also it sheds light on how globalization has negatively affected the social process in the African region. Similarly, the assigned movie My Nigerian Wife meets my London wife shows how globalization has traveled from one region to another. The wife from Nigeria and from London are actually the two sides of different cultures. Although they both are related to one another both shares may dissimilarities. These readings and movie have summed up the reasons as to why there is much social differentiation exists among the African people.

## **Week 4: Class 2 Conflict and Society**

Conflict is the most prevalent phenomenon in Africa. It is not surprising to relate this prevalence of this conflict with the military regimes and lack of political clout. It is worth noting in this region that people lack political understanding. This has affected it in many ways. For example, there are no much political activities, lack of political participation and absence of strong political parties. Other ways on which it has impacted on the African society is the prevalence of conflict. There is a lack of resources and therefore people fight over minor things. They have no opportunities for work, therefore they rely on some natural things to meet both ends meet. Such conflict over minor things in the African society has resulted in the upbringing of short temper among people. This conflict has been talked about in many kinds of literature. Different authors have based their opinions on different reasons, similarly, many filmmakers have made films on this topic, but different to the literature these films project the military regimes of Africa as the reason of all bad things.

The film titled Our President is back and the reading titled Nervous Confessions have many things in common and also these two relate in many aspects to each other. The director of this movie has excellently presented the cruelty of the military regimes in the movie. Pete Edochie who is playing the role of a military dictator is so cruel to his people. He does not accept the authority of other people and is so careless to his duties. Other than remaining busy with his personal sluggish and extravagant activities, he overlooks his duties. He is also surrounded by the same kind of people who takes advantages of him and use their ranks to subdue others. The worst aspect of their regime is the cruelty and the way they are ruling their people. They are the real depiction of the way the military regime has been ruling the Nigerian people since decades (Nollywood Box Office - 2019 NIGERIAN MOVIES).

The Nervous Confessions by Alioune Sow is also about the same theme. In this article, Alioune has mentioned some historical accounts of the events in African history. He writes that there are reasons why political activities have remained too narrow in Nigeria and other African countries. He argues that the continued dictatorship has prevented the political clout from developing, as a result of the people with time learned to live with such a forced environment. Other reasons such as the weak political economy, lack of justice and ill-developed social structure made space for the dictators to continue. This was the reason as to why the political elites remained to fail in making their space(Sow). The Nervous confession is not just limited to such debates but also covers some worst aspects of military rules. It talks about the reasons for such worst misconduct by military regimes. The author argues that since the dictators are up brought in a tough environment, therefore they react when the authority comes in their own sphere (Sow).

Our President is back also pictured such same aspects. The President in the movie is shown as accumulating all authorities in his own hand. He kills his subordinates for their minor misconducts which depicts how much cruel he is. Along with this, he is been enjoying his official time for his private leisure’s. This shows that how much ignorant and careless he is toward his official conduct. Throughout the movie, he is seen as garnering public support for his self and promising for the resumption of democracy in the country. But till the last minute, he remains to fail in fulfilling his promise. The domestic conditions shown in the movie are also worse and inhumane. Despite promising about delivering each domestic facility, the military dictator med as remains fail in providing justice to his own people (Nollywood Box Office - 2019 NIGERIAN MOVIES). As with the time went on, it becomes clear that the dictator is just working for grabbing more power and fame among people and has no concern with the people living in the country.

In the Nervous Confessions, the author also argues about what brings dictators into the helm of affairs. The author has presented many reasons for this. He has based his arguments on various reasons. He mentions that since the political leadership of underdeveloped countries normally remains ignorant toward public demand, therefore naturally the space left is acquired by the military dictators. Other than these reasons he has also argued that when it comes to the continuation of the political process, the military dictators become hurdles. This is evident just not in the African region but also in other underdeveloped countries(Sow). The last and the most oversee aspect of the military regime is their links with other extra-regional countries. As many of the African regions have remained under colonial rule, therefore the former colonial masters keep on impinging in the domestic affairs of these countries too. This aspect is evident until this day.

This reading is related to the Movie Our President is back in many ways. It throws light on the worst conditions of the domestic affairs, the weak justice, and economic system and on the declining cultural aspect of the already underdeveloped regions. The above-mentioned aspects of the reading and the movie closely depict how the dictators in countries with such conditions make their ways. They have argued in a very close manner as to what are the real causes which make circumstances favorable for the military regimes. Movies with such theme also enjoy reasonable viewership. They have concluded that the lust of power is the dominant cause of prevailing dictatorship throughout the length and breadth of the African region.

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