

Between Hotel Mama and petrol station manager: The representations of women's realities in a selection of African films

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Declaration

I, Kevin Joseph O'Reilly, hereby declare that:

- This treatise is my own work.
- All sources used or referred to have been documented and recognized.
- This treatise has not previously been submitted in full or partial fulfilment of the requirements for an equivalent or higher qualification at any other recognized educational institute.

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Abstract

The roles that women perform as depicted in African films are often dictated to by the type of society they find themselves in. At first glance traditional societies can be seen as oppressive because of the presence of certain cultural practices. Alternatively modern urban settings appear to offer women authority and empowerment through employment. However, with a closer examination one sees that the situation is not so simplistic. Such is the case when certain traditional practices that are deemed oppressive through a Western perspective, are still found in urban societies.

Films on the subject of African women have to be cautious not place their characters in stereotypical roles. Therefore, it is not enough to merely portray African women as ‘oppressed’. African films that engage in a feminist critique need to present ‘realistic’ portrayals of African women. Such characters are layered and complex. The film Faat Kine (2000) depicts such a character in the authoritative protagonist Kine. The film La Vie est Belle (1987) examines the issue of polygamous marriages and patriarchy from the point of view of two African women living in France. Touki Bouki (1973) examines two young characters living in Senegal and questions the possibility of escape from ones circumstances. Traditional practices such as polygamous marriages are explored in Xala (1975), and Finzan (1989) explores cultural practices such as forced marriages and female circumcision.

This treatise will consider women and work in both traditional society and urban settings. African feminism will also be investigated for the purpose of exploring common social perceptions of women in Africa.

Key Words

- **Feminism**
- **African Feminism**
- **Patriarchy**
- **Tradition**
- **Westernisation**
- **Employment**

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine various issues women in Africa face, as depicted in African cinema. I also intend to explore the depictions of patriarchal oppression and social conventions in the various films by exploring how women characters cope and interact in societies that are undergoing social change. Finally, this study will consider what is needed for women in Africa to become liberated by analysing African feminism.

The depiction of women characters in post-colonial African films reflects the type of society they live in. Deepika Bahri (1996) notes that “[i]n a literal sense, ‘postcolonial’ is that which has been preceded by colonization”. However, by prefixing any words with ‘post-colonial’ one inherently refers to the influence of European nations or rather the West on the rest of the world (Bahri 1996).

The women are divided into those who perform traditional tasks and those who perform modern roles. Some are depicted as submissive to men and others are depicted as objects of desire. The focus will be on women characters in the films that are now seeking, or have achieved a level of financial independence, which allows them to challenge men’s authority. The type of women depicted in these films are women who are not earning a living by menial tasks, they instead are economically empowered and socially dominant. Their strength and wealth place them in a position to defy men on several levels. The social change in these films is a result of urbanisation.

In these films patriarchy is the foundation of the society. However, women are challenging the role of the man of the house when he fails to provide for the family financially as promised. Double standards are evident, where men are allowed to cheat on

their wives, but women are beaten for cheating on their husbands. The films show that equality of gender is still lacking in traditional African culture.

Poverty and traditional life have not been completely eliminated by urbanisation and development. This is because the places that are the focus of these films are often poverty-stricken areas. A significant outcome of this type of society is the power play between men and women as a result of access to economic empowerment.

Chapter one will discuss the “new African woman” (Ellerson 1997:32) and will examine how she is economically empowered and how she opposes male authority and social conventions. Chapter two will discuss women who attempt to overcome oppressive traditional practices whilst maintaining an African identity. Chapter three will discuss African feminism and the role of African cinema as an educator.

In attempting to address the topic of representations of women’s realities in a selection of recent African films, I hope to examine the different types of work the women characters perform i.e. subordinate positions and strategies of asserting themselves in society, the depiction of economically empowered women as seen in these film, and identify possible messages of directors to their audience. I will also discuss the shift from patriarchy and its effects in the home in view of polygamy, or male domination to a more egalitarian society.

I will analyse the following films using my own personalised interaction with the selected films and support them with secondary sources. The following nine films will be focused on in this treatise: Chikin Biznis (1998) by Ntshaveni Wa Luruli, Faat Kine (2000) and Xala (1975) by Ousmane Sembene, Finzan (1989) by Cheick Oumar Sissoko, Hyenas (1992) and Touki Bouki (1973) by Djibril Diop Mambety, La Vie est Belle

(1987) by Mweze Ngangura and Benoit Lamy, Une Couleur Café (1997) by Henri Duparc, and When the stars meet the sea (1996) by Raymond Rajaonarivelo. These films - which ironically all have male directors - were chosen because they have prominent women characters that challenge the social norm.

Issues of importance are the effects of westernisation, urbanization, polygamous marriages, patriarchy, and traditional African practices.

David Popenoe, Brenda Boulton and Peter Cunningham (2001:420) describe urbanisation as “the movement of people from rural to urban areas”. They further note that the public mind-set of urbanisation is often pessimistic (Popenoe *et al.* 2001:439). Popenoe *et al.* (2001:439) remarks that “[u]rbanisation was regarded as an uncontrolled influx of masses of people into an environment they were not properly equipped to survive in and which, in itself, was not developed adequately to absorb these masses”. Chapter One will examine various effects of urbanisation and the opinions of men in some communities regarding female employment.

Popenoe *et al.* (2001:280) defines polygamy as “[m]arriage involving more than one man or woman at the same time”. Polygamous marriages and the effects on women as depicted in the films Xala (1975), La Vie est Belle (1987) and Une Couleur Café (1997) are discussed in Chapter One. This chapter will also investigate a social study that looks at the effects of colonialism and urbanization on the interactions between men and women in a traditional society. This study highlights many stereotypes with regard to male authority. Chapter One will make use of general film studies to discuss ways in which female characters are depicted in African films, such as the way they are

positioned in the frame. Furthermore, the shapes of the women's bodies and the stereotypes that are associated with these shapes will be considered.

Chapter Two explores two films by Ousmane Sembene. Faat Kine (2000) explores issues of employment and empowerment and Xala (1975) allows for a discussion of different representations of women.

In Chapter Three statistics that point to the plight of women in Africa are used to explore common social perceptions of women. Finally, the role of African film in African feminism is discussed.

Literature Review

This review of literature falls into two broad categories. The first part of the review will examine literature on film studies and the second part will examine literature on feminist studies. The film studies section focuses on the depiction of women in African cinema. The feminist studies texts chosen are those that focus on studies about women in Africa from an economic and social perspective.

Film Studies

Of key importance to this study is Kenneth Harrow's book entitled With open eyes, women and African cinema (1997). This text focuses on the images and roles of women in African cinema. The parts that are most relevant to this study are those sections written by Suzanne MacRae (1997), Beti Ellerson (1997), and Kenneth Harrow (1997).

MacRae (1997) focuses on the depiction of mature and older women in African cinema examining issues such as polygamy and arranged marriages. MacRae (1997) examines characters such as Mamu and Mama Dingari in La Vie est Belle (1987) and Adja and Oumi in Xala (1975). Some of these characters she views favourably and others she criticises. For example, she criticises the mothers who benefit from their daughters' marriages but is sympathetic to those women who find themselves in polygamous marriages.

Ellerson (1997) examines the male gaze and the positioning of the female body as denoting status. Ellerson (1997:32) also proposes the idea of the "new African woman" who benefited from Westernisation but maintains an African identity. She also examines

the “modern African woman” (1997:32) and notes that she is depicted in positions that denote greater status than the traditional African woman.

Harrow (1997) discusses the differences between Western feminism and African feminism. Harrow notes that Africa has embraced an “International Feminism” (1997:137) as opposed to accepting a European or American feminism. International feminism can perhaps be read as socialist feminism. Craig Smith (2001) describes socialist feminism as those that “seek to reveal oppression, achieve economic equity, and embrace non-hierarchical sharing”. Harrow notes that for African women, International Feminism focuses on the issues of “[the] lack of choice in motherhood and marriage, oppression of barren women, genital mutilation, [and] enforced silence” (1997:138). He considers how this feminism is presented in African cinema and what this means for African women. A common theme in these three texts is the evidence of a Westernisation in African women.

In Melissa Thackway’s (2003) book entitled Africa shoots back: Alternative perspectives in Sub-Saharan Francophone African film, she examines the subject of “African Women and Film: On screen and behind the camera” (2003:147). She (2003:160) notes how film can take on an educational role. She also takes an in-depth look at the film Finzan (1989) and examines the effects of oppressive traditional African practices of female circumcision and arranged marriages, and notes how the “patriarchal system” (2003:170) is prevalent in village life and in some cases can be supported by the women who are its victims.

Farida Ayari (1996:181) in African experiences of cinema believes that “[t]he image of women in African cinema is the result of a male gaze”. However, she does note that “a

positive heroine” can be found in a film such as in Xala (1975) with the character of Rama.

Joseph Gugler (2003:7) notes that African film often concentrates on “social, cultural and political issues”. It is because of this that African film can appear didactic. Oliver Barlet (Gugler 2003:8) remarks that “in many African films one finds an aesthetic close to news footage (documentary images, rejection of effects, unsophisticated editing), non-professional actors, the use of natural settings and a degree of improvisation”. This is largely the result of a lack of finance in African filmmaking. However, this appearance gives African films a sense of being an authentic reflection of life in Africa. These budget restraints also have the added benefit in that the directors have total control over their films. Directors in Africa can play many roles in the production of their own films, such as being the scriptwriters or the editors on their films. Ousmane Sembene comments on this situation stating that “one can be both a woodcutter and a sculptor at once” (Niang 2001).

Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike (1996:197) discusses some of the oppressive circumstances that many women in traditional African societies can find themselves in. The main traditional practices explored in this selection of films are polygamous marriages. Ukadike (1996:197) notes that women in many African countries are still seen as “sexual objects”. Ukadike (1996:197) quotes Sembene when he remarks that many women in Africa are still denied the right to speak.

Feminist Studies

Margrethe Silberschmidt (2004) discusses social research conducted in Kisii and Dar es Salaam and found that colonialism created a schism that allowed male authority to be challenged. This study also provided examples of gender stereotypes and how they affected the interactions between men and women.

Sheila Radford-Hill (1986) considers the usefulness of feminism for social change for black women. She argues that black women need to “mobilize around issues that they perceive to have a direct impact on the overall quality of their lives” (1986:164). Only by doing this will they be able to separate themselves from the quagmire they find themselves in with regards to Western feminism and allow themselves to move forward.

Jane Parpart (2002) examines empowerment from a post-development point of view. She finds that “gender inequalities do not disappear simply through giving voice to women or including them in development activities” (2002:52). She therefore proposes that the current thinking on development, empowerment and participation be reconsidered (2002:53).

Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay (1976:1-18) describes the different stages that literature on women in Africa went through. The literature was originally written primarily from a “male perspective” and became a topical issue for “European observers” (Hafkin & Bay 1976:2). Then in 1960 scholars began to romanticise African women and wrote from this narrow perspective (Hafkin and Bay 1976:3-4). Hafkin and Bay (1976:4), however, note that with “field research and the accumulation of additional data, more balanced interpretations of women’s activities appeared”. Hafkin and Bay state that the data that

appears in the book entitled Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change (1976) offers a more objective representation of women in Africa.

When analysing African film from a feminist critique it is helpful to focus on certain areas. The most obvious of these is patriarchy because this affects women in both the domestic sphere and in her social interactions. Hafkin and Bay (1976:9) note that “[g]iven the relative prominence of women in precolonial Africa...it is interesting that numerous African societies possessed culturally legitimated ways to ensure the subordination of women”. One example given is the traditional practice of female circumcision (Hafkin and Bay 1976:10), which is one of the main issues in the film Finzan (1989).

Another area of importance to examine is women and work. Deniz Kandiyoti (1997:91) notes that “[t]he material bases of classic patriarchy crumble under the impact of new market forces”. This suggests that empowerment can be obtained with women finding employment.

Kandiyoti (1997:91) provides some examples of patriarchy affecting women in the domestic sphere, such as “[u]nder classic patriarchy, girls are given away in marriage at a very young age into households headed by their husband’s father” (1997:89) and “[i]n classic patriarchy, subordination of men is offset by the control older women attain over younger women” (1997:90).

Kenneth Little (1973:38) notes some “traditional opposition to the idea of wives working”. For example men in the south east of Uganda expressed fears of women finding employment. The men feared that “women who went out to work would not bear

children” and “for a wife to earn money not only constitutes a threat to a husband’s authority and to his ability to control her but may enable her to abscond” (1973:38).

Both Kandiyoti and Little offer examples of patriarchy in Africa and resistance that women experience in finding employment. These issues are of importance when analysing African films because they help the viewer to understand the reasons for the characters’ actions.

1 - New African Woman

Hafkin and Bay (1976:3) note that in the sixties one saw a general increase in literature about African women. It essentially consisted of articles written by female anthropologists and women scholars. Hafkin and Bay (1976:4) comment that “Unfortunately, early in this period some of the literature that emerged was romantic or historically inaccurate”. It appeared the trend was to “search for great glories to counteract a past that had ignored and distorted the history of women and of Africa” (Hafkin & Bay 1976:4). The scholars romanticised the African woman by writing about “great queens, amazons, and matriarchy” (Hafkin & Bay, 1976:4). The trend today appears to be to find ‘strength’ in ordinary women. Therefore, the films depict strong women who have left their village to find work, or women who oppose the cultural practice of female circumcision, or a single mother who has to raise her children on her own. Their strength is seen in their ability to resist male authority or overcome financial hardships or abuse.

Women Defined by Men

Harrow (1997:ix) states that “[w]omen are defined, their oppression detailed for them, their path to liberation laid out for them – sometimes by men, sometimes by non-Africans, sometimes by other African women”. However, the following films, namely: Chikin Biznis (1998), Faat Kine (2000), Femmes...et Femmes (1998), Hyenas (1992), La vie est Belle (1987), Touki Bouki (1973), Une Couleur Café (1997), and Xala (1975) offer several different images of women.

Kandiyoti notes that the common usage of the word patriarchy refers to “any form or instance of male domination” (1997:86). In this essay, this broad definition of patriarchy will be used.

Patriarchy has been embedded in many African traditions by men. Hafkin and Bay (1976:9) give the example of “West Africa women [who] kneel in front of their husbands”. An example of an oppressive traditional practice seen in the film Finzan (1989) is female circumcision. However, here men are not solely responsible for continuingly enforcing practices that are oppressive to women. As in seen in the film Finzan (1989), women can sometimes support oppressive practices. In the film, the character Fili is sent to her uncle’s village. There it is discovered that she is not circumcised. Upon this discovery the people of the village insist that she must be circumcised. The women of the village, however, find themselves divided on the matter. Thackway (2003:171) remarks that “[s]ome support her, while others defend circumcision on traditional grounds, revealing that women are as capable of perpetuating oppressive practices as men”. Fili tries to convince the women who want to have her circumcised, that the practice is wrong. Fili says to the group of women: “City women are mobilized against excision. It’s a bad thing”.

Her boyfriend – Segi – also refuses to marry her if she is not circumcised. Fili points out that he did not mind sleeping with an uncircumcised woman. Segi responds saying: “If I take you to France with me, migrants and their wives will laugh at me”. To which Fili replies: “Don’t you know that excision is bad? It takes away a part of what makes us women”. Fili is unable to convince the women that she has the right to choose what traditions she adheres to and so they forcibly perform the circumcision. This perhaps

illustrates the real life situation. Such as the case of the 17-year-old Togolese woman, Fauziya Kassindja, who made media headlines when she applied for political asylum in the United States to escape genital mutilation. Kassindja had escaped Togo in 1994 to avoid an arranged marriage and the female circumcision that would have been part of the ceremony (Frances Althaus 1997). When the American Embassy interviewed members of Kassindja's family they confirmed that when Kassindja fled, she believed she would be forced to endure the circumcision ritual (Celia Dugger 1996).

Urbanization and modernization have brought about a certain amount of disruption in traditional practices. Silberschmidt (2004:235) discusses research findings (from mid-1980s to mid-1990s) of a study conducted in Kisii and Dar es Salaam on "socio-economic change and changing gender roles and relations" (2004:235). This study is significant because it explores traditional roles of men and women in a typical African social environment. The study also points to real stereotypes that exist in traditional African cultures. These stereotypes will be linked to the selected films to show why the characters act in specific ways.

Silberschmidt (2004:234) reports that "socio-economic change and breakdown of traditional social institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa have left women in a disadvantaged and vulnerable situation with increasing burdens and responsibilities". This change occurred as a result of the men being unemployed and therefore losing their status as the provider.

Silberschmidt (2004:235) notes, from the responses gathered in the socio-economic study, that before colonialism the men occupied the roles of cattle herders and warriors. This, however, changed during colonial times. The men now left the villages to build

railroads and urban centres. When these constructions were finished the men went back to the village but things had changed. While the men were away the women were forced to take on those roles traditionally done by men. The women were now the cattle herders and farmers. The men were now without work. As a result, Silberschmidt (2004:237) contends, the “men cannot fulfil their breadwinning role, and men’s status as head of household is seriously challenged”. This created an imbalance in the patriarchal ways of old. Furthermore, Silberschmidt (2004:236) notes that the traditional “[m]ale control over women weakened”.

Male Dominance Challenged

Silberschmidt (2004:240) suggests that the inability of men in Kisii and Dar es Salaam to provide financially had led to the men’s traditional dominance being challenged. Silberschmidt (2004:240) notes that, “[w]hile men are in power structurally and in theory, men have become increasingly marginalised and disempowered in practice”. This disempowerment, as a result of no longer being the breadwinner and the head of the household, resulted in the men’s pride being damaged (Silberschmidt 2004:240). In an apparent attempt to re-establish their pride, the men sought mistresses. Silberschmidt (2004:239) observes that the men in Kisii and Dar es Salaam felt that in order for them to “build up [their] pride” they would need to “‘relax’ and to be ‘comforted’” (2004:239). The words ‘relax’ and ‘comforted’ were polite euphemisms for sexual intercourse with other women. Silberschmidt (2004:239) notes that: “Relaxation and comfort are provided by ‘extra-marital’ partners”. A self-serving belief that many of the men shared was that

one woman cannot satisfy a man. As will be seen in the films discussed, men often use this belief as an excuse.

Silberschmidt (2004:242) notes the perception that “[m]asculinity is so valued, so valorised, so prized, and its loss such a terrible thing that one must always guard against it”. This in a sense makes the men fragile. This is perhaps why some of the male characters in the film act violently when they feel their authority is being challenged. One can see this in the film Chikin Biznis (1998) when the recently paroled character Spider tries to strangle Busi – his girlfriend – for cheating on him.

Silberschmidt (2004:242) notes, “women and female sexuality represent an active and threatening power to male identity and masculinity”. Another film that demonstrates this type of behaviour is the film Une Couleur Café (1997). The main male character Docteur acts in a similar way when Kada – his new wife – challenges him by refusing to allow him to sleep with her. Docteur does not physically strangle Kada - like Spider does to Busi - he only threatens this. Docteur sees Kada’s defiance as a challenge to his masculinity. In one scene Docteur even questions his own masculinity. Docteur asks his two wives: “Am I still a man? Neither of you is pregnant”.

Silberschmidt (2004:236) discovered that the men’s self identity or rather their perception of masculinity was linked with their ability to control women. Silberschmidt (2004:236) notes that that the men interviewed “would immediately emphasise their status as head of household” and their “right to correct (=beat) an obstinate wife” (2004:236). However, being unable to be breadwinners affected their masculinity. Silberschmidt (2004:234) remarks that “[w]ith unemployment and men being incapable of fulfilling social roles and expectations, male identity and self-esteem have become

increasingly linked to sexuality and sexual manifestations”. With this, the women’s opinion of men seemed also to diminish. Silberschmidt (2004:236) suggests that “[w]omen have no illusions about men as providers”.

Another reason for the men seeking mistresses was that the women used techniques to attract men. Silberschmidt (2004:239) observes the belief that “[w]omen employ certain techniques to capture a man’s mind – without them being aware of it”. These techniques could mean something such as emitting a “smell which men cannot resist” (Silberschmidt 2004:239). Silberschmidt (2004:239) suggests that “[f]rom that point of view, women’s sexuality also represents an active and threatening power”. This ‘technique’ that some women allegedly used is merely another excuse that the men had for infidelity.

African Women as Exotic Others

Traditional healers are also commonly thought to be able to give a woman the ability to attract men. In Une Couleur Café (1997) the main character’s white French mistress, Maria, goes to see a traditional healer to help her attract Docteur’s attention. This might be understood as one of the supposed techniques women use to attract men. She is jealous of African women; “They have big behinds that men adore. The way they arch their backs! They’re so erotic. Especially when they walk!” says Maria to the marabout. Maria pays one thousand francs for the consultation. The Marabout gives her a chain to wear around her waist that will supposedly attract Docteur’s attention. This suggests that a white western woman needs some ‘extra help’ to have the same sexual appeal that is natural to African women. Maria feels she cannot compete with Kada and Awa for Docteur’s attention. This belief of Maria’s that African women are more erotic is the

Western stereotype of the exotic other, resulting from the projection of exotic images onto The Other, as seen in the 1960's texts mentioned above.

Maria tries to embrace her desired 'African-ness' by dressing in an Afro-chic way and preparing what she thinks is a traditional African meal, for Docteur. This leads to one of the many funny moments in the film. In a previous scene, Awa told Maria about an African dish that is supposedly made with grass. Maria, in an attempt to romance Docteur, prepares this accordingly. Maria tells Docteur that because he is a soccer fan, she used turf from a soccer field to prepare the dish. Docteur is astonished at being told this and tells Maria that Awa was only joking; however the humour of this moment does not lead to laughter but embarrassment in Maria, and some alienation in Docteur towards Maria.

Promiscuity

Silberschmidt (2004:239) notes the belief that "a man needs to go outside [his marriage] to feel like a man" and that both the men and, conversely, women believed that "a real man needs to demonstrate that he can handle more than one partner" (2004:238). A second belief is that a man needs three wives: "one to bear his children, one to work and one for pleasure" (2004:238).

These beliefs are reflected in the films La Vie est Belle (1987), Une Couleur Café (1997), Chikin Biznis (1998), and Xala (1975). In La Vie est Belle (1987) Nvuandu is married to Mamu and wants to marry Kabibi, believing that sleeping with a virgin will cure him of his impotence. In Une Couleur Café (1997), Docteur is already married to Awa but he leaves France to find a second wife. He is also at the same time cheating on

his wife with his French mistress, Maria. When Docteur returns with his new wife, he even has the audacity to pretend that she is a gift for his first wife. After Docteur has brought Kada to live with him, he asks Awa: “Do you like the gift I gave you?” To which Awa responds: “You call a co-wife a gift? She’s a gift for you. Not for me. What do I get out of a gift like that?” Awa clearly does not feel that Docteur took a second wife to help her. In fact it now means she will have to sleep by herself on some nights, in the lounge on the floor.

In Xala (1975), El Hadji is married to both Awa and Oumi but feels that he needs a third wife and takes a virgin bride even though he cannot afford to marry again. Siphon in Chikin Biznis (1998) is also not content to be with only one woman. He therefore chases after Busi, and tries to win her over by offering her money. Siphon tells Busi he will do anything for her, but she is not so easily fooled. She says to him, “no, I don’t want to be your hit and run victim”. Siphon tries to convince her by telling her that he will divorce his wife. She laughs at this and says: “Men, and I suppose you’ll buy me a jumbo jet too”, to which he answers: “Why not, you deserve it”. When he puts money down on the table, she tells him: “No...I’m not for sale”. The male characters from these examples demonstrate that women are sometimes viewed as sexual objects, while the women, though dependent on men, are seen to openly criticise and resist male dominance to some extent.

Polygamous Marriage

A traditional practice commonly depicted in these films is the polygamous marriage. The marriage scene in Xala (1975) is a very interesting example of a polygamous marriage.

El Hadji's two wives, Awa and Oumi, are both required to attend his wedding to his new wife, Ngone. Both women are seated in the same room; Ellerson (1997:32-3) notes that Awa is on the left and Oumi on the right, which signifies a visual juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern African woman. Ellerson (1997:32-3) further notes that "[w]hen seated inside the bride's house, Awa, the first wife, is in the left half of the frame, dressed in head covering and an elegant white *boubou*, with a chewing stick in her mouth". She appears bored by the proceedings. It is clearly not a day of celebration for her. She has been through it before and knows her place. Ellerson (1997:33) observes that "Oumi, the second wife, is on the right half of the frame, dressed in a black sleeveless sheer dress, wearing a wig and sun-glasses". She is dressed fashionably, whereas Awa is dressed traditionally. The audience knows from the previous scene with the husband and Oumi that there is a power play between the two wives. Awa appears to hold more sway because she is the first wife. Oumi's authority would emanate from being younger than Awa, therefore, being more attractive. However, with age she is losing her beauty. This is perhaps why Oumi is more threatened by the virgin bride who has the beauty of youth.

Ellerson states that the contrast between Oumi and Awa is "both stunning and mocking" (1997:33). According to Ellerson, this specific marriage scene sees Sembene addressing and criticising polygamy, co-spousal rivalry and the effects of westernisation (1997:33). This positioning of the two women is all the more interesting because the audience knows that a third wife is going to be added into this power play. Ellerson (1997:33) notes by "[p]ositioning the first two wives in *Xala* on opposing ends, one side a 'traditional' woman and the other a caricature of westernisation, Sembéne engages a reading of the polarity of femininities".

Gugler (2003:128) notes that in Xala (1975) the men defend polygamous practices and men are seen congratulating El Hadji on taking a third bride. However, Gugler remarks that their polygamy “no longer serves traditional ends” (2003:128). El Hadji’s desire for a third bride is merely a sign of his own greed. Futhermore, Gugler (2003:128) notes, “unlike their forebears, these co-wives no longer operate a joint household”. In the case of El Hadji, his two wives do not even live in the same house. El Hadji is, however, eventually condemned for his irresponsible extravagance. He is both criticised and humiliated.

El Hadji’s second wife in Xala (1974) can be seen to “compete with the first [wife] for sexual access to the [husband] and/or control of domestic affairs” (MacRae, 1997:21). She dresses in a western fashion and acts in a western way, this can perhaps be seen to give her more power over Adja who is the more ‘traditional’ wife. MacRae states that “[t]o support her taste in clothes and life style, El Hadji’s wife Oumi drains him like an inexhaustible bank” and that “[m]oney seems the only source of power he retains in this marriage, and he substitutes it for personal responsibility” (1997:21-22). This leads to El Hadji’s downfall. He is unable to keep up with the lavish lifestyle so he steals rice meant for the country and sells it. MacRae (1997:22) states that “[t]hese women have adopted the purely economic rationale for marriage which custom has taught them”. The women force their daughters into marriage to better their own financial situation, and then the daughters treat their marriages in the same way.

Another traditional custom seen in these films are arranged marriages. Kandiyoti (1997:89) notes that, “[u]nder classic patriarchy, girls are given away in marriage at a very young age into households headed by their husband’s father”. Kandiyoti (1997:89),

further, notes that “[t]here, they are subordinate not only to all the men but also to the more senior women, especially their mother-in-law”. It is often the situation that the man the daughter is to marry is a lot older than she is. MacRae (1997:21) states that these parents “‘sell’ their daughters to rich, powerful older men without regard for the prospect of marital harmony”. MacRae (1997:18) observes, “[b]y independently brokering advantageous matches for their marriageable daughters these women accrue profit and prestige for themselves and often maintain their control over these daughters”. MacRae (1997:21) maintains that these films criticise such women and argues that: “Although these women must support themselves and could justify their allegiance to traditional practices, the films condemn their greed...and their indifference to the personal happiness of their daughters”. Often it is the father who decides whom the daughter marries – such as is seen in the film Une Couleur Café (1997) – but in some cases it is the mother who decides – as seen in the film La Vie est Belle (1987).

In La Vie est Belle (1987) Mama Dingari makes an arrangement with Nvuandu, that he will take Kabibi as a second wife. The daughters’ choice is often not taken into consideration, while the audience knows from the plot that she is actually attracted to Kourou. In the film Une Couleur Café (1997), a daughter is weary of leaving home because she is unsure if her circumstances will improve with marriage. Kada tells Docteur, “I’m not leaving Papa’s house to go sleep in the grass”.

Nanyuma in Finzan (1989) is the subject of criticism from the villagers. Her husband has recently died and according to their customs, she must marry her husbands’ brother, Bala. She however refuses to marry him. Nanyuma goes to her brother-in-law for help, but instead, he has her bound with rope and taken back to her village. This image of an

African woman tied with rope can perhaps be read as a metaphor for the oppressive nature of many African practices such as arranged marriages and female circumcision.

Petty (1996:191) notes that: “Nanyuma fights for the right to choose her own destiny, [and] map out her own future by refusing her impending marriage to her dead husband’s brother”. She therefore refuses to allow her destiny to be dictated to by a man. After Fili’s forced circumcision, it appears that Nanyuma has become completely despondent with the village. In the final moments of the film, she is shown walking off, saying:

This world comes from our wombs. It mistreats us. We give life, and we’re not allowed to live. We produce the food crops, and others eat without us. We create wealth, and it is used against us... We women, are like birds with no branch to perch on, there’s no hope. All that’s left is: We must stand up and tie our belts. The progress of our societies is linked to our emancipation. (Finzan 1989)

This is the final message of the character to the women of the village. It is meant to stir up the women into coming together to oppose oppressive practices such as arranged marriages and female circumcision (Thackway 2003:173). However, Petty (1996:191) notes that: “Her situation is not resolved at the end of the film, but she makes it clear as she takes her child and leaves the village that her fate is in her own hands”.

The New African Woman

The women in these films discussed in this essay all face a number of different challenges. However, what they have in common is the representation of what Ellerson (1997:31-32) calls the “new African woman”. The “new African woman” is the economically empowered women or the educated student. What they have in common is

their defiance of male authority. Some examples are Grace in Chikin Biznis (1998) and Mamu in La Vie est Belle (1987). Ellerson states that:

With the rise of African women in westernization contexts, images have evolved to represent the ‘new African woman,’ the ‘modern African woman,’ as well as the double-faced African woman confronting the dichotomous African / western paradigm. (1997:32)

This dichotomy can be seen in many of the women characters, such as women who still cling to certain traditional practices that may be deemed as oppressive, or those that are educated but still hold certain superstitious beliefs (Gugler 2003:129). In Xala (1975) Rama is seen asking her mother if she put the curse on her father. As Gugler (2003:129) notes, it is a surprising that Rama – being an educated woman – would believe in a curse. Ellerson (1997:32) notes that this “transformation of African womanhood faced with the force of European aesthetic impositions has resulted in a duality within African femininity”. This is the challenge that the new African woman faces. She needs to be able to find a balance between maintaining an African identity on a continent that is increasingly becoming westernised, and living a modern, urban lifestyle.

Women and Employment

Silberschmidt interprets the comments of some of the women interviewed in the sociological study as very critical, for example; “a woman is better off without a husband” and “men are so delicate; they break so easily” (2004:236). It appears that most of the women were financially empowered, including those that did not have full-time jobs. Silberschmidt (2004:238) notes that “[t]he majority who referred to themselves as

'housewives' were actively involved in the informal sector, baking and selling *mandazis* (small sweet buns), preparing 'lunches', [and] selling second hand clothes etc".

In the film Une Couleur Café (1997) one sees such an example of a woman being sent to marry a man and live with him and his other wife. However, the new wife, Kada, is not seen to be under the control of the first wife, Awa. Instead the two get along and decide to better their situation. In Une Couleur Café (1997) both Kada and Awa decide to earn their own money. Kada sells bracelets and Awa works at a sweatshop, sewing. Kada complains to Awa that every time they need money, they have to beg their husband Docteur, for it. Kada says: "'We have to wiggle our hips' and say 'Doc, I need money'". Kada says to her co-wife, Awa: "What I earn selling bracelets will be for us. Not a cent for him! We'll have our own bank". Awa, emboldened by Kada's defiance, now chooses to only give Docteur part of the money she earns. Awa says: "In our bank, put in half of what I earn". Awa says to Kada: "If he finds out, he'll be mad". This strategy of 'plotting' against the husband's authority shows a re-assessment of sisterhood in a polygamous marriage, suggesting that it may also facilitate mutual empowerment for the co-wives.

The Depiction of Five Different Women: Grace in Chikin Biznis (1998)

Kandiyoti (1997:91) states that "[t]he material bases of classic patriarchy crumble under the impact of new market forces, capital penetration in rural areas". The same can be said for urban areas. This can be seen in Chikin Biznis (1998) with the characters Thoko and Grace. When we first see Grace, she is wearing fashionable clothing and shoes. She however is sweeping in these clothes. Grace owns a shebeen. She is depicted as a

‘shebeen queen’, fearlessly wielding considerable power over her drunk patrons. In one scene, she is telling an inebriated patron to go home. She grabs him by the collar, then tells her assistant Babyface, to take her car and take the patron home.

In the beginning of the film, an angry mob comes in chasing Babyface. The crowd is angry because he was paid R100 to take photos for a lady, but he did not do this. She manages to calm down the mob enough for them to leave. It is clear to the audience that there are not many situations that this shebeen queen cannot handle. Her economic power has given her a physical sense of superiority, she lacks fear and uses the helper’s strength to assert herself.

Busi in Chikin Biznis (1998)

Busi in the film Chikin Biznis (1998), is a much weaker woman than Grace. Busi’s profile reads like a stereotype: single mother with two children and a husband (nicknamed ‘Spider’) in jail. This stereotype of course is not isolated to the African continent. Busi’s husband - who makes a brief appearance towards the end – is a violent mountain of a man and is said to have killed another man. Busi is unlike the character Nzazi in La Vie Est Belle (1987), in that she is not actively seeking a man to ease her plight. She appears resigned to, but at peace with her situation. When Spider is released from prison, he returns home. He instantly knows Busi has been having an affair. In the real urban setting of the sociological study, Silberschmidt (2004:238) notes that “[b]oth men and women agreed that a man’s honour, his reputation, his ego are severely affected if he cannot control his wife”. Therefore, Spider would believe that his reputation is a stake if he does not punish Busi for cheating on him. Busi is not a weak woman because

she is accepting of her soc-economic position. She is weaker because unlike the other women in the film she does not challenge male authority. Grace is stern with her male patrons, Thoko defies Siphon on many occasions and Siphon's mother even challenges him. However, Busi is a victim and does not appear to do anything to adequately protect herself from Spider's abuse.

Anta in Touki Bouki (1973)

In Touki-Bouki (1973) the student, Anta, is an example of a defiant young woman. Ellerson (1997:33) suggests that because Anta is a university student, she is an "oppositional figure" (Ellerson, 1997:33). In one particular scene she is even rude to another older woman in the village. When this woman comes to buy food from her mother, Anta does not believe she will pay for the food. Anta takes the vegetables out of the woman's bowl. She tells the woman that she knows she will not pay for the goods. Anta's mother is embarrassed by Anta's actions. However, Anta appears unperturbed, and says, "we also want a TV". The two older women then ridicule Anta and blame her actions on the university; however, the customer tells Anta that despite her university education she will not live any better than anyone else. The two older women, therefore, accept their position.

Ellerson (1997:33) discusses the status of the female student in Djibril Diop Mambety's film Touki Bouki (1973), noting that she has "a status that has been created outside of traditional African social conventions. As a result, she is allowed to be odd and defiant of traditions" (1997:33). As the proud African female student becomes westernized, one sees "her change of make-up from face paint to lipstick, and her change

of hairstyle from beaded headdress to wig” (Ellerson, 1997:34), to conform with French consumer trends of the period. Anta thus moves from tradition to anti-colonial revolution to western consumer, resulting once again in an inferior position.

Kada in Une Couleur Café (1997)

Another example of a defiant young woman is seen in Une Couleur Café (1997). When Kada and Awa find out about Maria, their husband’s white lover, they refuse to serve Docteur his food. Kada also refuses Docteur his “marital duty”. When Docteur enters the bedroom he asks: “Kada are you ready” and she replies “No marital duty tonight”. Docteur, who cannot believe this defiance, asks: “Are you crazy? A wife obeys her husband”. Kada replies to this: “You’re a windshield wiper! First here, then there! That’s fine”. She then gives him an ultimatum: “Now you listen to me: Until your string bean comes to live with us, you won’t touch me. See this body? You won’t touch it again! I’ll do like you and get me a fellow. A real fellow!” This infuriates Docteur, who says: “Just try. I’ll wring your neck”. He then demonstrates by twisting his hands in front of her face. Kada’s actions after this scene confirm that she claims the right to an extramarital relationship herself, which unfolds into a love-relationship and concludes the plot as it leads to her separation from Docteur and her marriage to Pierre (an Arab immigrant) under French law.

Rama in Xala (1975)

Ayari (1996:183) find a positive heroine in Xala (1975). She considers El Hadji’s daughter Rama to possess admirable qualities. Ayari (1996:183) comments that: “She is a

cultivated student who speaks to her father only in Wolof. She symbolises a certain kind of modern Africa”. Ayari (1996:183) further goes on to state that “she does not allow herself to be suffocated by the weight of tradition nor does she get carried away by the intoxicating mirages of modernity”. Rama is able to alternate between western and traditional African clothing and language use and social spheres. By doing this she is presenting a “new attitude towards modernity” (Harrow 1997:144). Whenever she chooses to dress in traditional clothing she “reaffirms her determination to shape her role within the space of her own cultural definitions” (Harrow 1997:144).

A Husband’s Fears of the Wife Working

Little (1973:38) gives examples of the beliefs of men in the south-east of Uganda who expressed fears of their wives finding work. Little states that “[f]ears were also expressed that women who went out to work would not bear children” and that this “objection was particularly strong when the employment of wives involved being under the authority of a man who was not their husband” (1973:38). This would be a strong opposing factor to men allowing their women to move to the city. Little (1973:38) states that, “in the view of some men, for a wife to earn money not only constitutes a threat to a husband’s authority and to his ability to control her but may enable her to abscond”.

This financial independence, men believed, lead to infidelity. Silberschmidt (2004:238) notes the men in Kisii and Dar es Salaam believed that “[a]s soon as a husband starts declining economically, his wife will take advantage and go out to look for other men to satisfy her material needs”. Therefore, the men felt threatened by financially independent women. This infidelity is seen in Une Couleur Café (1997) when Kada

chooses to have an affair with Pierre. Silberschmidt (2004:238) even notes that “[s]uccessful businesswomen in Dar es Salaam are even said to pay younger men for sex – a new situation and a new threat to men” as depicted in Faat Kine (2000) and La Vie est Belle (1987).

Spatial Differences Between Traditional and Westernised African Women

Ellerson (1997:35) states, “[w]hile the differences between the ‘westernized’ African woman and the ‘traditional’ woman are illustrated by dress and adornment, the contrasts are often depicted spatially, as can be seen in how the body is used”. Traditional women are often depicted sitting down or bent over, performing some kind of work such as planting or filling a bucket with water. Urban women, such as the women seen in Faat Kine (2000), are seen standing straight or sitting at a table. These different positions denote a difference in power. Ellerson (1997:35) states the traditional role “includes women sitting on low stools and on the ground rather than sitting on western-style furniture; eating, napping, washing, cooking and performing daily activities outdoors rather than in the confines of the interior of the home”. The poorer women in the urban yard of rented rooms that are owned by Mama Dingari, in La Vie est Belle (1987), are seen outside, washing clothes or braiding hair. In Faat Kine (2000), the wealthy women socialise outside, however, they are not sitting on stools but at a table at an expensive restaurant, suggesting a role shift to power and leisure.

Similar to the differences between the older woman, Adja, and the younger woman, Oumi in Xala (1987), there are also stark differences between young Anta and her old

mother in Touki Bouki (1973). One of the first characteristics of the visual representation is the height and positioning of their seat. Ellerson (1997:33) notes “[t]he opening scene portrays [Anta] writing seated in a chair at a table”. The audience assumes that she is doing university work, therefore, she is the one privileged to sit at the table. The mother, however, “is seated on a low stool behind a table” (Ellerson, 1997:33). This is a visual cue to the audience of the different positions of ‘power’ the two women have. Anta is on a higher level because of the tertiary education, despite the poverty that both she and her mother endure. The background to both Xala (1987) and Touki Bouki (1973) is the poverty-stricken peri-urban area of Dakar. These two films therefore show different responses to the same environment.

Ellerson (1997:36) suggests that the audience is given a chance to compare the student and the new African woman to other women in the village. As Anta walks past other woman, we see how they compare to Anta’s lifestyle and appearance. Ellerson (1997:36) notes that: “At several locations in *Touki Bouki* the camera stops as Anta continues [walking] along; the women serve as text from which to read the body in relation to the unconventionality of the ‘new African woman,’ the student”. Ellerson also notes that,

[a]s she passes, one may make a checklist of female corporeal practices: bunches of women stoop while washing clothes in a washing area; a young girl lowers a pail from her head and dumps its contents; young girls wait their turn in line to fill their buckets with water at the public water faucet... (1997:32)

Hence, it is emphasised that Anta does not perform these tasks. We can assume that either the mother performs them, or Anta has a little sister who does them. Ellerson (1997:36) states that, “Compared to the women in each of these scenes, Anta stands outside of their conventional femininity”. She wants to escape her circumstances. She wants to escape tasks such as washing clothes in a public area, or having to perhaps one

day send a daughter of her own to fetch water. The character depicts hope, but also youthful arrogance as well as modernisation. Since we see her changing to fashionable dress later in the film, we later recognise that she has no high ideals after all.

Body Shapes

MacRae (1997:18) remarks that the shape of the woman's body is dictated by her age.

The young woman is skinny, the mature matron is plump and round (from bearing children), and the older woman is stooped and emaciated. MacRae (1997:18) suggests that these "cinematic portraits of women" (1997:18) can be seen to "express social assumptions about the distinct function of the "three ages" of women" (1997:18).

MacRae (1997:18) states that: "Young women tend to be tall and wear form-fitting clothes, either western or African, to complement their willowy bodies. Their appearance radiates youthful beauty and sexual vitality rather than fecundity". An example is Anta in Touki Bouki (1973) who is tall, slender and wears a close-fitting top and pants in the beginning of the film. This image is however subverted since this is bland and unattractive clothing. By the end of the film, however, upon boarding the ship to France, she has changed into different clothes to appear more feminine and westernised. She now wears loose fitting, more 'elegant' clothing. MacRae (1997:18) notes in contrast "the typical matron is heavier, more robust, and wears African clothing with matching head ties. Loose garments accommodate her amplitude". The mature woman sometimes even makes her own clothes, like Thoko in Chikin Biznis (1998). MacRae (1997:18) states that: "Their figures express the African association of fertility with fleshly magnitude. These women emanate the prosperity and confidence attained through their increased

power and status in the family”. Examples can be seen in women such as Kine in Faat Kine (2000), Mamu and Mama Dingari in La Vie Est Belle (1987), and Thoko in Chikin Biznis (1998).

An opposite of the voluptuous matron is the underweight old woman. MacRae (1997:18) observes that: “Elderly women are thin, almost emaciated, with sparse hair and wrinkled features, etched by years of experience”. Unlike the fashionable clothing the young women wear, the stereotypical old woman wears “rough, homemade garments” and lives in poverty (MacRae, 1997:18), eking out a lonely existence. MacRae (1997:18) states: “They live alone or at least without husbands. They have ceased to be sexual objects or potential mothers and can no longer perform hard labor”. They rely on others to take care of them. In Faat Kine (2000), Mammy is such a woman. She relies on her daughter, Kine, to look after her. MacRae notes they may even “evoke social ostracism or even persecution as dangerous witches” (1997:19). In Hyenas (1992) the character of Linguere Ramatou fits the physical traits of older thin woman, however, she is not reliant on anyone. On the contrary, the entire town relies on her for financial support. She has, therefore, managed to invert the image of the helpless old woman. Body shapes can, therefore, be seen to act as visual stereotypes that evoke social connotations or, occasionally and for dramatic purpose, subvert them.

Mature Matrons and Elderly Women

The young tertiary student is not the only one to be caught in negotiating social change. MacRae (1997:17) discusses how “[m]ature matrons and elderly women” also experience the tension of negotiation. MacRae (1997:17) states, “[t]he painful tension between

tradition and change affects these women dramatically because they, more than their younger sisters, are wedged between old and new social expectations”. Mature and elderly women have distinct advantages over young women. “Because of their repertoire of experience and their relative freedom from the cycle of pregnancy and child rearing, mature and older women have developed greater personal autonomy and social sophistication than their younger counterparts” (MacRae, 1997:17). This can be seen in characters like Siphó’s mother in Chikin Biznis (1998) and Mamu in La Vie est Belle (1987). When Siphó leaves his wife Thoko, she goes to see Siphó’s mother. She tells the mother how Siphó is behaving and the mother says she will teach him a lesson. The mother has him taken by force to a hospital to assess whether he is ‘crazy’. She says to Thoko that “he can’t just walk out like a hobo”, thus asserting both a sisterhood between wife and mother-in-law and a mother’s corrective influence over her son.

The difference of ‘power’ between younger women and the mature matron is evident when Nzazi, the neighbour in La Vie est Belle (1987), goes to Mamu’s house to find Kourou – the man she met the previous night at a nightclub. Nzazi mistakes Kourou – Mamu’s houseboy for her husband. Nzazi asks: “Where are you hiding your husband? Don’t try to be so clever! You’re old and ugly!” At this point the two fight. Mamu manages to chase Nzazi out of the house. Mamu replies: “I haven’t time to waste on a trollop like you!” To this, Nzazi replies: “He’ll be mine and you can’t do a thing!” It is clear that Mamu has the authority in this situation in that she does not have to fight for a man. Mamu says to Nzazi: “Shame on you! Who ever fought for a man?”

MacRae (1997:25) refers to some ways in which older women can be cinematically portrayed. MacRae notes that older women are sometimes endowed with a “mythic,

sometimes archetypal, resonance that transcends ordinary social reality” (1997:25). One such woman is seen in When the stars meet the sea (1996). In this film a blind old lady with mystical powers is seen to guide the main character, Kapila, to his destiny. MacRae (1997:25) notes, “[t]heir special knowledge surpasses rational understanding and ordinary experience”. The blind woman is able to command lightning with her walking stick, her face can appear in puddles of water and she is able to appear and disappear at will. She is similar to Ramatou in that she is not vulnerable. MacRae (1997:27) notes that “[i]n *Touki Bouki* and *Hyenas* [Mambety] characterizes older women as agents of divine vengeance”. The older woman is revered because she is believed to possess knowledge that has been forgotten by many. However, in this film she also functions as an alter-ego to Kapila, and emphasises his destructive side.

A woman who is depicted as authoritative because of her knowledge, is Oumi in Touki Bouki (1973). MacRae (1997:27) notes, “[w]e first see Aunt Oumi in *Touki Bouki* as a butcher quietly and expertly slitting the throat of a sheep, then as a raging Fury or sorceress”. She is also the one to bestow praise on those individuals who have achieved success. MacRae (1997:27) comments that “Oumi’s mythical power is reiterated in a third scene where she appears as a traditional praise singer in Mory’s fantasy of his own apotheosis”. This shows that her approval is sought by the people of the village. MacRae (1997:27) adds “[i]nstead of abuse she now confers honor and status on him through her ritually powerful language and gesture”. Oumi’s authority is not therefore a result of money, as is the case with the characters Mamu and Mama Dingari in La Vie est Belle (1987) or Grace in Chikin Biznis (1998), her authority is a result of her mysterious power and knowledge of things forgotten.

An added challenge some women face is the inability to bear children. This is seen in La Vie est Belle (1987). Mamu is a mature matron with money and authority. Mamu's only weakness is that she has not given Nvuandu a child. When Mamu confronts Nvuandu about taking a second wife, Nvuandu says: "Because you're childless, my father threatens to disown me – if I don't take a second wife". The difficulty that a mature, childless woman faces, is that people will assume she is barren, whereas it could be the husband who is sterile. When Nvuandu visits the traditional healer, the healer tells him "only a virgin can restore an engine's force". Therefore, the audience discovers the problem lies with Nvuandu and not Mamu. Women who are unable to bear children can sometimes find themselves being stigmatised. Jaan Valsiner (2000) notes that "[b]arren women in most societies are viewed as potentially dangerous". Childless women can be seen in some traditional societies as witches (Valsiner 2000). Although this is not the issue in this film, Nvuandu still believes himself justified in taking a second wife.

The Negative Depiction of Defiant Women in African Film

African films often depict strong women in a negative light. MacRae (1997:23) states that, "[m]any films indicate a serious moral/ethical dimension in women's defiance of social rules". For example, Mamu is presented as both "comic and ruthless" (MacRae, 1997:22). She is verbally abusive to Nvuandu, she orders around her servant, Kourou, and physically fights Nzazi. MacRae (1997:22) notes that "she belongs to a sorority of liberated matrons who band together to drink, party with handsome young men, and generally flaunt their insolent disregard for their spouses". Mamu is able to do this because she had the "advantages of a wealthy husband, a luxurious house, a car with

chauffeur...and complete freedom” (MacRae, 1997:22). She also tries to sabotage her husband’s marriage by attempting to unite Kabibi with Kourou (MacRae 1997:22). When Kabibi is with Mamu, she says to her that Nvuandu will be waiting for her. To this Mamu says: “As long as you are with me, you can return home any time!” Mamu tells Nvuandu that she can live without him asserting the right of wealthy women and the authority of the older first wife. When he threatens to leave and walks out on her, she merely sweeps the floor behind him. MacRae (1997:22), however, notes that in the end “Mamu repents of her participation in the women’s group and asks [Nvuandu’s] forgiveness”. Nvuandu says, “I always warned you about hanging around with liberated women”, to this Mamu replies, “I know: I shouldn’t have done it. I’m sorry”. The audience is now made to believe that she regrets her actions. The image presented of Mamu as a strong defiant woman is deflated with this ending. It appears that this film suggests that she is allowed to be defiant so long as she is remorseful in the end, underling the liberated image for the apparent purpose of a “happy ending”. Moreover, Mamou makes a choice that stabilises her relationship.

The wives in the films Xala (1974) and La Vie est Belle (1987) can be seen as “shrewish or manipulative” (MacRae 1997:22). MacRae (1997:22) maintains that they are “instruments of satire against husbands or as instigators of comic disorder to upset conventional male control”. It is, however, unfortunate that the actions of these women have to be coated in comedy. MacRae (1997:22) further notes, “The satire and comedy arise from sexual and economic inequality in real life, and the films reflect at least uneasiness and confusion about male-female relationships and at most a criticism of male dominance”. La Vie est Belle (1987) is, therefore, not as bold a film as Faat Kine (2000)

or Xala (1975) for the director is only prepared to depict female characters challenging male authority they are presented in a humorous way.

The Hyena

In several African societies the hyena is symbolic of “trickery and social marginality” (Ukadike, 1994:176). Murphy (2000:244) also notes that “the hyena [is] regarded as a cunning, deceitful animal that cannot be trusted”. As the fox is attributed these kinds of characteristics in the West, likewise the hyena can be seen as the fox of Africa (Murphy, 2000:244). Mambety uses this animal in both Touki Bouki (1973) – which translates into “the hyena’s voyage” (Murphy, 2000:244) - and Hyenas (1992) as part of the key metaphor for the story. Ukadike (1999:136-53) quotes Mambety as saying, “[t]he hyena is an African animal...[that] never kills”.

This is perhaps why Ramatou does not kill Drameh herself. If she can be read as the ‘hyena’ returned to Colobane, then she will not kill Drameh but have others do it for her. If Ramatou is a figurative hyena then she is seen to possess some undesirable characteristics. Ukadike (1999:136-53) further quotes Mambety as commenting, “[t]he hyena is falsehood, a caricature of man. The hyena comes out only at night...He is a liar...[and] The hyena has no sense of shame”. MacRae (1997:28) notes that “[Ramatou] succeeds in turning the people’s greed into self-righteous conviction, exposing the entire town as a metaphoric brothel”. Ramatou can be seen to use her money to manipulate the people of Colobane. She is the metaphorical hyena that has come to prey on the town and its people. MacRae (1997:28) describes her as a “[t]all, stern, dressed in old fashioned yet elegant robes and head-dress of stark white or black, she keeps everything but her

face covered". Ramatou has faced such difficulties in life that she has become bitter and now seeks revenge. A plane crash has destroyed her limbs, which have been replaced with metallic prosthetics. This gives her an almost android appearance, suggesting that she is no longer a woman but a vessel filled only with revenge. MacRae (1997:28) notes that "[Ramatou] radiates cold serenity" and she "dispenses money as if it were common as paper" (1997:28). MacRae further notes that this has the desired effect on the townspeople (1997:28). MacRae (1997:29) observes that "[s]he has symbolically returned from the dead as an alien and created artifice". Her inhuman appearance consolidates her image as an outsider with vast worldly experience. MacRae (1997:29) remarks that "[h]er anomalous appearance is emblematic of her inner self. Suffering and vengeance have wrung from her the last ounce of pity or reflection". These emotions have brought her back to Colobane to kill the town's most popular citizen, Draman Drameh, who had initiated her life of shame. Her plan cunningly involves the townspeople doing her dirty work. Furthermore, the moral degradation of the town also metaphorically denotes the decline of morality in Africa in the face of international capitalism and third-world impoverishment. Here, the female African character has usurped the role of the foreign capitalist and 'consumes' her own people; much like ruthless wealthy businessmen and women can be seen to do. MacRae (1997:29) holds that "[Ramatou] has become retribution itself...ineluctably exposing and punishing hidden sin". Her anger stems from the Colobane court for not give her the justice she felt she deserved when she was a young woman. The audience is told that Drameh denied being the father of her child and instead produced two phoney witnesses to say that they slept with her, thereby discrediting her. Ramatou was then made to leave the city because

of her pregnancy. Ramatou tells the townspeople “I’ve forgotten nothing. The pain is etched on my heart”. MacRae notes that she smiles with “bitter satisfaction” (1997:29) in her ability to manipulate the townspeople. The townspeople’s greed allows Ramatou to “prostitute” them (MacRae, 1997:29).

Male Gaze

The young women in these films are often the subjects of the male gaze. In La vie est belle (1987) one sees that “[d]uring the opening sequence of the film, the camera marks the presence of Kabibi as she is regarded by [Kourou]” (Ellerson, 1997:41). Ellerson (1997:41) observes that “[w]hile carrying a basket on her head as she passes a wrought iron fence, Kabibi is framed as an image to be gazed upon”. Kabibi is thus the focus of the male gaze. Ellerson (1997:41) remarks that “[i]n the concluding sequence, a westernized rendition of African magic is depicted in a trance scene as Kabibi’s face is spotted with paint, her tresses hanging to her shoulder and partially covering her face”. Here Kabibi resembles the ‘exotic’ African woman (Ellerson, 1997:41). The audience is invited to gaze upon her. Kabibi is also seen to be in a trance-like state, suggesting that she is no longer responsible for her actions. Ellerson states:

We find the same ‘male gaze’ as that which is so pervasive in western films, fixed upon the African female body, just as colonial images of the colonized female both exoticized and eroticized the ‘native’ woman in her ‘natural’ habitat. (1997:41)

The male gaze can also be seen in Touki Bouki (1973). Anta is seen to take off her top and clings to the motorcycle as Mory makes love to her off-screen. According to Ukadike (1994:174-175) this is a “lovemaking” scene. However, due to the restrictions of what can be shown on film in Senegalese custom of the day, the director had to find symbolic

visual representations of what the characters are doing. Hence it becomes a lovemaking scene where only the woman is presented. Ukadike (1994:174-175) observes that when we see Anta undressing, there is a cutaway. He notes that:

The director then cuts to animal images of sheep being slaughtered, followed by a close-up shot of foaming waves. When he cuts back to the scene of lovemaking, what the viewer sees is not the contact motion of two bodies but Anta's fingers clutching a cross hanging on the rear of Mouri's motorbike. The movement of her fingers and the off-screen sound we hear juxtaposed with the foamy waves suggests the orgasmic burst of encounter. (1994:175)

When she is sitting at the beach, her shirt is also unbuttoned. Again this partial nudity in this context is not traditional but fulfils the desire of the male gaze.

When Anta is on the ship to France, she is dressed very differently than at the beginning of the film. Ellerson (1997:34) notes that, "In her 'western' frocks, with pink hat, sunglasses and pants suit she is in stunning contrast to the 'rebel' student of the opening scene". Anta's image is therefore divided up as 'rebel' in the beginning of the film and a stereotypical westerner in the end. Perhaps we can assume she has 'won' her battle, and now she chooses to embrace the western comforts. However, this is probably not the case. She has not achieved her goal, which is escape. She has merely disguised herself in order to blend in.

At the end of the film, the viewer is left to decide what will happen to Anta. Ukadike (1999:136-53), however, gives some indication as to what Mambety had in mind for this character. He notes that Mambety has drawn similarities between Anta from Touki Bouki (1973) and Ramatou from Hyenas (1992). Mambety has indicated that he sees Ramatou as being the Anta that left Dakar (Ukadike, 1999:136-53).

Each of these women represents stages in women's empowerment. Ramatou uses her empowerment to seek revenge, Anta uses it to escape, Rama uses it to redefine herself

and Mamu uses her prosperity for leisure. What they all have in common is that they have all been forced into the situations they find themselves in.

2 – Women, Work and Social Positions

It is alleged that urbanization did not bring about the first women entrepreneurs in Africa (Hafkin & Bay, 1976:6). Hafkin and Bay (1976:6) note that “records of women’s entrepreneurial activities go far back into the precolonial past”. Brooks (1976) gives the example of the women traders during the eighteenth century in the Senegambia region, known as Signares, who were wealthy businesswomen.

It is interesting to note the kinds of work professional women customarily perform. Hafkin and Bay note that African women who have had a western education typically enter the professions of “teaching, clerical work, nursing, and mid-wifery” (1976:6). These are seen as the so-called “feminine” professions (Hafkin & Bay, 1976:6), much as they were in the West during the early stages of women empowerment. In the informal sector they typically engage in farm work. Hafkin and Bay (1976:6) reports that “they prepare farm products or cooked foods for market; raise surplus crops for sale; produce craftwork; and trade farm produce, prepared foods, or manufactured goods”. These roles are reflected in the films. However, these roles are not liberating in themselves.

Employment and Liberation

One of the most successful businesswomen depicted in this selection of films is the character Kine in Faat Kine (2000). The main character is a single mother with two children and the manager of a successful petrol station. This has enabled her to give her children opportunities she never had. She chooses to be single because, as the audience learns later on, she has been treated badly by the fathers of her children.

In one particular scene where Kine sits with her friends, they discuss some of their troubles. One of the women says: “Single woman, hard working. Head of household. We have all the responsibilities of a man, but none of the advantages”. To this Kine replies: “If it only took work to liberate women, women farmers would be liberated”. What Kine is pointing to is the falseness of the belief that being employed is the same as being empowered.

Parpart (2002:52) observes that “gender inequalities do not disappear simply through giving voice to women or including them in development activities”. Kine’s freedom comes not from her job but because she is prepared to defy male authority and social convention. She is defiant towards the fathers of her children. When Aby’s father comes in to see her at work in the beginning of the film, she says to him: “Up! Up! You may not sit down”. She tells him to get out and says: “Don’t let the knob hit your back!”

Kine has perhaps learnt this strength from her mother. Kine’s mother, Mammy, tells the story of when Kine fell pregnant in school. Mammy says to Kine: “When you got pregnant out of wedlock the first time your father was so furious he wanted to burn you alive. I intervened to shield you with my body”. The film moves to a flashback scene, where Kine is wiping tears from her eyes. The setting indicates that they are very poor. Mammy is seen saying: “Honey, forgive her”. To which the father replies: “You knew your daughter was pregnant. Her school wrote she was expelled. Your shame, you keep it to yourself. A bastard will never be born in my house. Never!” The father then thrusts a burning torch at Kine but Mammy covers Kine with her own body. Gadjigo (2001) notes that: “once she was expelled from school, Faat Kine’s only protection at home came from her loving but powerless mother”. As the viewer sees the mother’s only defence against

the father is to literally use her own body as a shield. As a result her back is badly burned. The film moves back to the present, focusing on Mammy saying: “The scars from the fire stiffened my back like a dead tree. At school, you wanted to be a lawyer. I was proud and flattered at the thought. I counted on you so much”. The mother is clearly still disappointed in Kine’s actions. She tells her: “You got off the camel to get on the donkey. When you brought to the world your first baby daughter, her father refused to marry you. That really shamed your father”. The audience is then shown another flashback where the father is saying: “I don’t support prostitutes and bastards. You will pay rent, water, and electricity. Otherwise, you will have to leave my house!”

It appears that Kine’s ‘crime’ is having had a child out of wedlock. Both the parents and Kine will supposedly be subject to public ridicule. The mother’s actions are twofold. She protects Kine physically from her husband at her own expense, but she is still resentful of her daughter’s actions. She says to Kine: “Everyday I begged God to kill me so I could escape public shame. I also prayed for you to die”.

Kine is the typical present-day African woman in that she is solely responsible for her family’s survival and her children’s education. She is, however, different from the average African woman in that she is not subjected to a husband’s authority. In fact she has severed ties with the fathers of her children.

Gadjigo (2001) remarks that: “Faat Kine could be regarded as a defining text of what ‘feminism’ could mean in 21st-century Africa”. Kine is forty years old, making her born at the time of Senegalese independence (Gadjigo, 2001). She is truly a success story of an African woman who overcomes adversity and achieves happiness. Gadjigo (2001) writes that “[s]he is financially in control, well-connected in the business world, and adept at

manipulating the banking system”. This is seen in the scene when Kine tries to bargain with the bank manager to get a reduced interest rate. The bank manager wants nineteen percent and Kine is only prepared to pay five percent. Gadjigo points to her success noting:

she can afford boy-toys. She owns a car and a stylish villa...She has adopted all the fetishes of the *moyenne bourgeoisie*, including telecommunication knickknacks, modern appliances, and, best of all, a servant who draws her a warm bath when she comes home from work. (Gadjigo 2001)

These materialistic possessions are proof of her success. She has attained luxuries her mother never had.

Even though Kine is seen to come from a background that offers almost no hope for her future, she is still able to attain personal wealth. Gadjigo observes that:

Faat Kine entered a world forbidden to women. By breaking taboos, she unabashedly took control of her life. She faced the world, was rewarded with a degree of financial independence, and moved steadily toward the centre of Dakar’s middle-class. (Gadjigo 2001)

It is at this point in the film, when Kine has attained her first bit of wealth, that she faces another “pendulum” (Gadjigo, 2001). She is swindled out of her money by the father of her yet unborn second child and left pregnant to raise her children on her own. Gadjigo (2001) comments that “[a]pparently, one lesson Kine has yet to learn is that independence can never be a gift. It is hard won”. This is perhaps why she guards it so carefully and is not quick to jump into another relationship with a man. Gadjigo (2001) maintains that the message Sembene is sending with the film is that “[t]here can be no complete or

successful liberation of Africa from the colonial past without a concomitant liberation of African women”.

Ukadike (1996:198) discusses the film Faces of Women (1985), he (1996:198) notes, “[t]he main emphases [of the film] involve the refusal of women to succumb to the machinations of male domination and women’s efforts to share control in the new market economies”. Although this film will not be discussed here, this particular statement could also be applied to the film Faat Kine (2000). Through the film’s main character, Kine, one sees the example of a woman who after much suffering brought on by other men refuses to be subjected again to male authority. Her success is even envied by other characters in the film. As the character Gaye says in the film, “having Kine as a third wife is like hitting the jackpot!”

White Women

Quayson (2000:117) notes that in India during the eighteenth century, “[i]n the growing literature on appropriate female manners, there was an insistence that though women should be educated, this education should not be allowed to transform them into *memsahibs* (white women)”. Docteur in Une Couleur Café (1997) is seen to share this belief of education having a negative effect on African women. Quayson further remarks that “[t]his tension...persists even when women are gaining greater education, freedom and the ability to define the main terms of their marital relationships by their actions both inside and outside the home”. Docteur, in the film, complains to Maria about Kada’s behaviour. He says: “Kada is white now”. Quayson explains that white women were “universally considered to be the epitome of recklessness, disrespect and danger not just

for the home but for all appropriate virtues of feminine civility” (2000:117). Docteur, therefore, believes that because Kada has the ‘audacity’ to challenge him she is no longer acting as a ‘proper’ African woman.

Women Outnumber Men in Urban Migration

With the city offering greater opportunities for women, in certain cases the migration of women to urban areas has outnumbered that of men (Ludwar-Ene, 1993:31). Ludwar-Ene (1993:31) observes that “[q]uite a few come to town as girls or teenagers to join urban households of relations, usually to lend a helping hand in households chores while at the same time advancing their education or learning a trade or profession”. This is reflected in the film Une Couleur Café (1997). Kada leaves her rural village to move to the city (in a different country) and live as a second wife to Docteur. Kada is quite adamant that this should be an improvement of her circumstances and not a step down. She says to Docteur: “I’m not leaving Papa’s house to go sleep in the grass”. When in France she attends school and this is seen to make her defiant of Docteur’s rules. Kada uses what she has learnt to intimidate Docteur when he comes demanding to “perform his duty”. She tells him to “be still”. She says: “Sexual harassment, you get from 8 days to a month in prison”; alluding to the fact that he illegally brought her to France as his “daughter” since polygamy is illegal there. Docteur says to her: “France is corrupting you”.

The Independent still Subjected to Oppression

Thackway writes that African women often live in an “often-paradoxical position” (2003:157). This paradox is the result of African women who have attained economic

empowerment but are unable to erase oppressive traditional practices. Thackway (2003:157) notes that “[w]hilst responsible for their children’s education and very often for their families’ financial survival too, women are still frequently subjected to their families’ and/ or husband[’s] authority”. In Faat Kine (2000) there is one particular scene where Kine sits down to have lunch with her lady friends. The audience learns that one of the women has recently married. The newly married woman says to the others: “It was my father who gave me to a man without consulting me”.

It is clear that these woman are all financially independent, in fact they support their families, including their parents. It is therefore difficult to understand why this woman would agree to such an arrangement. Quayson (2000:103), however, remarks that in the Third World, “women’s existence is strung between traditionalism and modernity”. The explanation given to the audience is simply that their parents are “old fashioned”. One of the women even comments: “Do you see me telling my daughter: ‘I have given you for marriage.’ She would spray me with gas and burn me alive!” This is obviously an exaggeration but it points to the fact that these women still allow themselves to be subjected to traditionally oppressive practices. Kine says to the women: “Mammy always says that our generation of women is affluent and conflicted”. They are affluent because of the jobs they have and they are conflicted because they live in a country where social, traditional and religious norms still dictate how they should live their lives. Sembene (2003) once commented that his film Faat Kine (2000) “is about daily heroism of a kind that can be found anywhere”. This suggests that Sembene does not solely see Kine’s actions as heroic, but rather he includes all the women in the film who face challenges in this description.

Thackway further notes that African women are “officially given little right to speak or make choices for themselves” (2003:157). It is therefore left to women such as Kine to encourage other women to speak out for themselves. In this same lunch scene, Kine says to one of the women: “You are in charge of: your father, mother, children, your brother, sister, cousin. Leave your father’s house. And give your parents an allowance to live on”. The woman – who is obviously not as strong as Kine – replies: “I thought of that. I don’t have that strength of character. And I can’t say no to my parents”. It is clear that even the ability to refuse her parents’ wishes is beyond her. This inability is rooted in her cultural upbringing. However, as is evident from one of the previous woman’s comments, this unwavering obedience to her parents’ wishes is not being passed on to the next generation. The hope therefore lies in the hands of those like Aby and Dijbril. Kine’s son Dijbril clearly does not respect his father or Aby’s father. When one man tells Dijbril that he should kneel in front of his father, Dijbril responds: “It is not I who should kneel down in front of this man. It is BOP [Boubakar Oumar Payane] and Gaye who should kneel and ask this woman’s [Kine’s] forgiveness”.

Dijbril can be criticised for scheming to marry Kine off to Jean. However, it is clear that Jean and Kine have feelings for each other. The argument can be made that Dijbril’s thoughts were only for his mother’s happiness. Furthermore, Dijbril’s actions are in the same spirit as those of Kine’s friends who also attempt to persuade her to date Jean. However, the audience finds out that Kine was already one step ahead of her friends and Dijbril’s plans in that she had already established a love relationship with Jean.

Ngone in Xala (1975)

Ngone does not have much, if any, dialogue in the film Xala (1975). This suggests that she does not have the right to speak. Thackway (2003:176) notes that as El Hadji's third bride, Ngone is merely a trophy wife. Ngone is portrayed as being innocent and evidently naive. Thackway (2003:176) notes that "Sembene intentionally gives her no voice and no existence beyond her marital role in the film". Ngone and Rama appear similar in age, therefore, it perhaps can be argued that if Ngone is given no voice, then Rama must speak for her. Thackway (2003:176) further notes that "N'gone's objectification is particularly clear when El Hadji is seen standing next to a clothes dummy wearing N'gone's wig, which is almost interchangeable with the young woman herself". It is quite clear that El Hadji is not in love with this woman. Her only attraction for him is that she is a virgin. In this society it is evident that female virginity is highly valued as a prize for the husband-to-be. In the scene when El Hadji is meant to consummate the marriage with Ngone, he however is unable to perform it. The family is then seen to bring in a chicken to stain the sheets as 'proof' of her virginity and to conceal the failed nuptial act.

Murphy (2000:242-243) notes another scene that attests to Ngone's real value to El Hadji. Murphy (2000:242-243) remarks that "Ngoné's real value to El Hadji is shown in the scene where the matchmaker prepares the bride for the consummation of the marriage". In this scene, several interesting visuals are juxtaposed. The first one is a nude photograph of Ngone. Murphy (2000:243) notes that "[a]s the matchmaker undresses her and gives her advice on how to fulfil her 'traditional' duties as a wife, we see a nude photograph of Ngoné on the wall in the background". This photograph has been shot "tastefully" (Murphy, 2000:243). However, it serves the purpose of eroticising Ngone

(Murphy, 2000:243). Murphy (2000:243) writes that “[s]hot in profile, showing Ngoné’s bare back and a glimpse of one of her breasts, the photograph acts as a sexual promise of what the marriage is supposed to bring El Hadji”. The photography points to Ngoné’s value which is her youthful beauty and virginity. As Ukadike (1996:194) remarks: “[i]n many African countries, women remain, at best, sexual objects enveloped in a culture of chauvinism”. Murphy (2000:243) writes that by presenting Ngoné in the picture frame she has been both eroticised and commodified. Murphy (2000:243) notes that “[t]he eroticized Ngoné of the photograph is the one that he is marrying” and El Hadji is also expected to pay handsomely for this ‘prize’. Murphy (2000:243) further notes that “[t]his commodification of Ngoné is evident from the extravagances of the wedding reception and the presents which are lavished upon her as part of her dowry”. The most lavish of these gifts is the car given to her family (Murphy, 2000:243). Ironically, Ngoné is seen in few scenes, either as near-naked in the bedroom, or in colourful dresses in a female role.

Prostitution

Another topic often examined in African films is prostitution. Of this Thackway (2003:163) suggests that, in “Francophone African films that deal with the question of prostitution, it is the economic hardship that forces women into prostitution in the first place that is denounced, rather than male oppression or prostitution itself”. In the film Hyenas (1992), Ramatou, is said to have been a prostitute roaming the world before returning to her former hometown of Colobane. Upon her return to Colobane she tells the citizens that she became a prostitute in an attempt to survive. However, her reason for leaving her homeland was not due to financial difficulties but as a result of the

persecution she received from the town. Once she is home, she buys the courts to ensure success for her revenge. When confronted by two citizens of Colobane who want to see the town prosper and ask her to buy the factories so that they can be reopened and start producing again, she answers them: “The problem is, I can’t buy things twice over, it’s all mine already. The factories, the fields, the town, the roads, the houses, they’re all mine”. She further tells them: “I had my agents buy the whole lot. I closed the factories. Fighting me is a waste of time”. Ramatou explains to the two men the reason behind her bitterness. She says: “I remember that day in Colobane. It was raining heavily, the people were sneering at me and I was pregnant”. She is therefore seen as being forced into prostitution out of the need to survive. She, however, returns to Colobane “richer than the World Bank”. She further tells the two men: “Life made me a whore and now I’ll make the world a brothel”. All the people of Colobane are now at her mercy and she instigates its destruction. In this film male oppression is the source of Ramatou’s prostitution and is personified in Draman Drameh. He is, therefore, made to pay with his life. Mambety’s Hyenas (1992) can perhaps be read as a warning against the foolish continuation of patriarchal intolerance.

Contrasting Women Presented in Xala (1975)

A good example of different roles of women can be seen in Sembene’s film Xala (1975). It is useful to draw comparisons between El Hadji’s two wives, Adja and Oumi, and El Hadji’s daughter Rama. Thackway (2003:175) comments that “Rama is a positive synthesis of the other principal female characters” in the film Xala (1975). This character should not be thought of as being merely a typical rebellious young woman, the type of

image one conjures up of the socially conscious university student who attends political rallies. She is sincerely perceptive of the precarious situation of Senegal's recent independence. Her mother however is the complete opposite in that she is the stereotypical African woman who is obedient to her husband and does not question his actions. Thackway (2003:175) notes that "Adja symbolises the archetypal proud, silently suffering African woman". Thackway (2003:157) further remarks that Adja is "at one extreme, dressed in traditional Senegalese clothing, consistently loyal to her often unworthy husband, and faithfully fulfilling her senior wife duties even when these are painful to her personally". Adja's other opposite is El Hadji's second wife Oumi. Oumi is anything but silent. She is seen making demands of her husband, which basically amount to her asking for more spending money. Thackway (2003:175) comments that: "At the other extreme, is her father's far more rapacious, jealous and inconsistent second wife Oumi, who dresses in a Western wig, sunglasses and clothing". The western styled clothing is a visual clue to this woman's priorities. She is motivated by self-indulgence. Thackway (2003:175) notes that she "represents the shallow new African bourgeoisie who revel in all things Western". Though Rama, is too, seen as being modern, she is not portrayed as shallow as Oumi. Thackway (2003:175) notes that she dresses sometimes in "Western-style jeans" and other times in a "Senegalese *boubou*". Her jeans hint towards her student lifestyle whereas her Senegalese *boubou* shows that she feels comfortable wearing traditional clothing. This indicates that she is not prepared to abandon her Senegalese culture for all things Western.

Thackway (2003:175) further notes that "[Rama's] clothing suggests [she] is capable of benefiting from the positive elements of Western culture whilst at the same time

affirming her Senegalese identity”. Rama demonstrates the ability to balance both old and new, being both liberated and maintaining a cultural heritage. Thackway (2003:175) states that “Rama’s combative spirit is evident as soon as she appears in the film, advising her mother to divorce her father...or at least not to attend the wedding as duty requires”. Rama also defies her father by speaking to him in Wolof and refusing to speak to him in French (Thackway 2003:175), because she sees French as the language of the colonisers. Thackway (2003:175) also notes that: “[Rama] later refuses to drink his imported French mineral water in gesture of rejection of Senegal’s neo-colonial ties with France”. Rama’s refusal to drink the water can also be read as her disapproval of her father’s actions. Thackway (2003:176) notes “[h]er father’s third marriage disgusts her, causing her to declare that all men are bastards, and to refuse to withdraw the insult”. Of the scene where Rama defiantly faces her father, Thackway (2003:176) observes that she is seen “refusing to succumb to his menacing show of force and refusing to accept the patriarchal order represented by both her father and the male-instigated system of polygamy”. Here the audience sees that Rama is not only concerned with political matters. Here she is concerned with a traditional practice that she sees as being oppressive. She therefore condemns her father for taking a third wife. Thackway (2003:176) notes that the film Xala (1975) enables Sembene to “highlight the suffering that polygamous marriages cause to women, and to denounce men’s egotistical motivations for taking several wives”. This film shows that women in polygamous marriages do not benefit from having co-wives, rather there is a feeling of detriment and resent among these women.

The only two women portrayed in a positive light in Xala (1975) are Awa and Rama. Awa can be seen as someone who represents tradition (Gugler 2003:128) and Rama is someone who symbolises an “African modernity” (Gugler 2003:128). Gugler (2003:128) comments that Awa “portrays quiet dignity, patient devotion to the principles of a Muslim marriage, loyalty to her husband even in his ruin”. Gugler (2003:128) equally sees positive characteristics in Rama, he remarks that Rama “embodies the future, reborn Africa, a society that will draw on its own language and culture while emancipating women from patriarchal traditions”.

If one compares Rama to Aby in Faat Kine (2000), one sees that Aby is shallow in contrast. Aby wishes to leave for Canada even though her mother does not want her to. Aby even looks down on the type of work her mother does. She says to Kine: “In Canada, I’ll work to supplement what you will send me... You want to waste my future!” Kine tells her that it is a question of money, to which Aby responds: “I’ve passed my Bac and don’t want to become a gas station manager”. Kine, evidently hurt and disappointed, tells Aby that if she wants the money she must ask her father for it. When Aby asks her father for the money, he says that he cannot pay: “Are you kidding? Do you know how many people I am supporting?” He tells her that Kine should pay. Aby’s father appears to have forgotten who has paid for Aby’s education up until this point. Gaye does not realise the extent of the sacrifice Kine has made for her children. He is clearly not prepared to do the same for his daughter.

It is clear that liberation did not come from women finding employment alone. Employment provides some empowerment but much more is needed for true liberation. The films discussed thus far portray characteristics needed to become authoritative in a

male-dominated world. Perhaps the answer can be found in the qualities of the characters Kada, Kine and Rama. These female characters provide a voice for those women who are denied it.

3 – African Feminism

Ayari (1996:181) maintains “the image of African women in African cinema remains essentially that created by men”. Ukadike appears to agree with this belief when he states “[f]emale subjectivity in Africa, as elsewhere, has often been defined by men rather than by women” (1996:194). This argument can be made since the majority of the directors in Africa are men, although Cham (1996:2) notes this is changing. Ayari (1996:182) remarks that she is not insisting that the image of African women presented in African cinema is entirely inaccurate. Ayari (1996:182) does, however, believe that there are details or ideas that will escape the male gaze.

Women Existing Through Men

Petty (1996:190) remarks that the character Sana in the film Yaaba (1988) is “an old woman [who is] considered a witch and forced to live on the fringes of society since she has no family and no children”. Petty (1996:191) argues that Sana only appears to exist through the twelve-year-old boy she adopts. Petty (1996:191) states that: “Sana is presented as what she represents for patriarchy and treated more as a symbol than a living, suffering individual”. In Rajaounarivelo’s film When the stars meet the sea (1996) one sees a similar character to Sana in the blind woman. Even though she is a spirit, she is still tangible to others. This is can be seen when the young boy steals money from her. The blind old woman who helps Kapila can perhaps be said also to exist only through him. She even seems to suggest this much to Kapila. The blind woman says: “No, I

haven't done anything. I am simply the instrument of your solitude. This is why I'm blind...blind like love and hate...I only exist through your eyes".

Feminism

Radford-Hill poses the question of the role of feminism in the liberation of black women, she asks:

Given the continued lack of participation by black women in the feminist movement, it is appropriate – in fact, critical – to struggle with a fundamental question; namely, is feminism an effective model for social change for black women? In other words, can feminist ideology – an ideology that professes the empowerment of women as its expressed goal – compel black women to organize for their own liberation? (1986:159)

Films such as Faat Kine (2000) and Finzan (1989) would suggest that this is possible.

What is crucial is that the African woman does not lose her own identity when embracing Western feminist ideology. The objective is not to become a 'white woman' as Docteur believes Kada has become in Une Couleur Café (1997), but the goal is to embrace an African feminism.

African Feminism

In his essay entitled Women with Open Eyes, Women of Stone and Hammers: Western Feminism and African Feminist Filmmaking Practice (1997), Harrow discusses the difference between Western feminism and African feminism. Harrow (1997:133) states that for Western feminists, important issues are "the status of the subject, gender identity, gendered language, patriarchy and above all oppositionality predominate", however, for African feminists the focus is on "gender equality and social or economic

justice” (1997:133). Western feminism perhaps finds itself in a more privileged position than African feminism in that Western feminist critiques have achieved a “highly diverse corpus” (Smith 2001). This is perhaps why it has the ability to focus on many more intricate issues such as ecological feminists who “highlight earth cultures and natural preservation” or essentialist feminists “who believe language is gender based” (Smith 2001). African feminism appears to focus on more basic issues to do with liberation of women. This is possibly a result of its relative newness as a scholarly discourse. Harrow (1997:133) further remarks “[o]ne would overturn the club; the other would join it”.

Radford-Hill (1986:164) remarks that “black feminists must build an agenda that meets the needs of black women...to mobilize around issues that they perceive to have a direct impact on the overall quality of their lives”. Those films with a strong feminist perspective help to build and mobilize women with regard to African feminism. This is done by criticising issues such as arranged marriages, female circumcision, polygamy, and spousal abuse.

The Role of African Film Directors

Sembene has always shown a great amount of respect for women in his films. Niang quotes Sembene as giving the following reason for this:

If we do not praise and dignify our women’s heroism, which I see as pre-eminent, Africa is not going to be liberated. Let’s be clear about this: If we do not accord women their rightful place, there will be no liberation. Women work a whole lot more than men do, and if work was in and of itself liberating, women who farm fields daily would have long been liberated. Women’s emancipation doesn’t only depend on labor. If we do not wake up and appreciate justly the role of women and share responsibilities we will lose. But I think there’s a gender revolution going on in Africa anyway, and we will have to conform. (Niang 2001)

Sembene's character Kine makes this exact same statement – of women farmers – in his film Faat Kine (2000). This statement points to Sembene's opinion that employment is not enough to liberate. Employment might equal empowerment but it is only one step of many in attaining a more egalitarian society.

Similar to Sembene, African director Adama Drabo also feels it is critical to focus on the importance of women in African in his films. The African director gave this answer when asked about his reasons for addressing the question of women's power:

The event that made me decide to focus on women took place when the regime fell. I was standing at the roadside, the bridge was blocked, the students and army were fighting, and there was tear gas everywhere. I saw the women from the Mali district come out, about a hundred women, who tightened their belts and said to the youths, 'Stand aside! Let us take your place! The tanks will have to crush us first before getting you.' I said to myself that very day that that was the end of the regime. (Thackway 2003:185)

This statement by African director Adama Drabo acknowledges the importance of the role of women in social change. It also highlights an ideal type of African woman. This African woman is bold and prepared to confront the antagonist, such is seen in the real-life example quoted above, and in the fictitious example of the character Mammy who steps in the way of the torch to save Kine in Faat Kine (2000).

Although African cinema is still quite young in comparison to western cinema, it is no less sophisticated in the messages it portrays. Many African films may appear to be controversial or didactic at times (Petty 1996:187, Thackway 2003:160). This is because many of them “deny conventional and received notions of cinema as harmless innocent entertainment, and insist on the ideological nature of film” (Bakari and Cham 1996:2).

Cham (1996:4) expresses the opinion that African cinema can be used for more than just entertainment. Cham (1996:4) observes that African cinema can be used as a “vehicle” for change. He further believes that film can be used to “critically engage, celebrate and interrogate certain aspects of African cultural beliefs and traditions” (Cham 1996:4).

Some African directors have even taken on the role of educator. The African director Adama Drabo has been quoted as saying:

Personally, I don't want to make films just for their beauty, just for the aesthetics. I am accountable to a people who expect a lot of me because you're incredibly lucky to find yourself behind a camera in our countries and you have to make the most of it every time you can to encourage people to think, to encourage people to ask themselves questions, to surpass themselves, and thus to participate in the effort to reconstruct our countries. (Thackway 2003:184)

Similar to Adama Drabo's opinion, Thackway (2003:160) quotes African director Fanta Nacro as saying, “film is the best means of educating the masses”. Thackway refers to the film Le truc de Konaté (1997) which “adopts a comic mode to educate African audiences about using condoms to protect themselves from AIDS” (2003:160). This educational message about Aids is also seen in Faat Kine (2000). When Kine and her friends sit to have lunch, they discuss one of the woman's husbands. He already has two other wives, so Kine tells her friend that she must tell him to wear a condom when he sleeps with her. As in Le truc de Konaté (1997), the topic is treated with humour. Kine's friend says: “I showed him a condom and whispered put ‘this on’...His ‘flag’ was lowered to 6:30”. In moments such as these the director crosses from merely offering a criticism of social issues to instructing the audience about ‘attitudes’ they should have about certain topics. These films highlight the reluctance of men in Africa to use condoms. Thackway

(2003:160) argues that this denial is perhaps more profound than western audiences would assume. Thackway (2003:160) notes that “this is a culture where men are considered to have unlimited rights over their wives’ bodies. These incidents thus subtly affirm the female characters’ right to control their own sexuality”. Moments such as the one in Faat Kine (2000) break with the narrative to explain the dangers of Aids in polygamous relationships that presumably include extramarital relationships of the men.

Amar Bakshi (2006) comments that socially conscious directors “seek to liberate the minds of men from the unseen institutions exercising power over men”. In the case of Faat Kine (2000) Ousmane Sembene is in this specific scene attempting to educate African women on the need to protect oneself from HIV and Aids. With the ever-increasing Aids epidemic, film has begun to play a role in educating the masses. The AIDS 2006 Film and Video Festival presented by CBC-Radio Canada in partnership with the Royal Ontario Museum, for example, screened HIV and Aids awareness films and documentaries in Canada. One of the films shown was Thom Fitzgerald’s 3 Needles (2005) that told the story of a South African nurse who attempts to save the HIV infected children in her mission. Also in 2006 the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency with the Social Transformation and Empowerment Projects presented the HIV/AIDS outreach programme in Southern Africa. Nelly Matshalanga and Edem Djokotoe (2006) state that the programme used “film as an interpersonal communication tool to provide education, raise awareness and stimulate open discussion about HIV and AIDS with the view to influence behaviour change in the southern African region”. This trend of Aids awareness in film will most likely increase. One will

see in future more and more films and television dramas include the topic of HIV and Aids as a part of its story.

The Role of African Film in Depicting Feminism

What has emerged in African cinema according to Harrow (1997:145) is a “newly shaped African feminism in which the new instrumentality of the camera now figures along with the voices and gestures of working women”. This allows the African women to speak for herself, rather than having someone speak for her.

Ayari (1996:183), however, notes that “nine times out of ten, female characters in African films meet a sorry fate”. One only has to think of characters such as Fili in Finzan (1989) or any of the women in Femmes...et Femmes (1998) to see the truth in this statement. Ayari (1996:183) notes that often “the screen presents characters who cannot overcome” the challenges they are faced with. This creates the image of the characters being trapped in their social and economic position. Ayari (1996:183) goes so far as to remark that “[t]here are almost no positive heroines”, she further comments that “[f]ilm-makers are quick to show us the examples that must not be followed, but rarely do they show women with all their qualities as well as faults without judging them”. She however does note that there are exceptions.

Common Social Perceptions of Women

A common social perception of women is that they are not in general the providers of the family. Mitter (1989:1-2) notes that it is still commonly believed that “men bring the food and women prepare it” (Boserup, 1989:1-2). However, Mitter remarks that this is

nonsensical to accept when statistics show that “one in four families, on average, is headed by a woman” (Boserup, 1982:2). This is reflected in the film Faat Kine (2000) where Kine is the sole provider for her mother, and two children.

Mitter (1989:2) insists that “[t]here is a growing urgency, therefore, for women in the developing world to assert their role not simply as home-maker but as breadwinners and vital workers in the national economy”. Mitter (1982:2) remarks that only by doing this, women will gain political power.

One of the reasons that many African films focus on the roles of women is that women in Africa still face many challenges. Manuh (1998) remarks that: “the material conditions under which most women live and work continue to deteriorate in many countries due to economic and social decline, wars and conflict, and the spread of AIDS”.

Manuh further states that:

Women constitute the majority of the poor and the illiterate in both urban and rural areas in Africa and many young women between the ages of 15 and 25 have been pushed into sex work and face the risk of HIV/AIDS infection. (1998)

Manuh (1998) notes that it quite common for African women to be married by the time they are eighteen years old, and that one in three women find themselves in a polygamous marriage. One of the main reasons for women in Africa being unable to find work is that they have not had access to a formal education (Manuh 1998). Illiteracy is also a contributing factor to unemployment. Manuh (1998) notes that in 1996, sixty percent of women in Africa were illiterate, whereas the illiteracy rate for men was only forty-one percent. Manuh (1998) reports that: “In many African countries, parents still prefer to send boys to school, seeing little need for education for girls”. Some other factors that

stand in the way of girls receiving an education are early pregnancy, forced marriages and domestic labour (Manuh 1998).

Filtering Euro / American Thinking From African Feminism

Oyerouke Oyewumi (2002) remarks that “the architecture and furnishing of gender research have been by and large distilled from Europe and American experiences” and that “[i]t is clear that Euro / American women’s experiences and the desire for transformation have provided the basis for the questions, concepts, theories, and concerns that have produced gender research”. Oyewumi (2002), therefore, finds a problem when applying feminism in an African situation. Oyewumi (2002) notes that “[w]hen African realities are interpreted based on these Western claims, what we find are distortions, obfuscations in language and often a total lack of comprehension due to the incommensurability of social categories and institutions”. Signe Arfred (2002) notes that some African feminist scholars are starting to reject various Western thinking. One particular subject is the topic of gender. These scholars question whether there is a place for gender in an African context. Oyewumi (2002) gives the example of Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel Nervous Conditions (1988). Oyewumi notes that the character aunt Tete is referred to in the novel as having “patriarchal status” (2002:135), and this “exempts her from women’s work” (Oyewumi 2002). From a Western perspective a woman cannot have patriarchal status but in this African context, its use to describe a woman’s status is not questioned. Arnfred (2002) quotes Amina Mama as stating that “we cannot just passively import terms and concepts that have been developed elsewhere, under different social and political conditions”. Therefore, it is essential that new

'questions, concepts, theories and concerns' are generated from an African feminist perspective. Akatsa-Bukachi (2005) notes some challenges still facing African feminism. Akatsa-Bukachi (2005) remarks that "[t]he first challenge thus revolves around the necessity of building a movement for African women, which reflects and is supportive of the diversity within this population". Only by mobilising around key issues will women in Africa truly gain the leverage that is needed to oppose patriarchy and repressive social conventions. It is here then that African cinema can play an important role as educator. However, as noted, African cinema itself is marred with difficulties. This, however, will change as more female directors begin telling the stories of African women.

Conclusion

Thackway (2003:192) makes the comment to female director Anne Laure Folly that “[p]eople often say that the future of Africa lies in its women”. This belief is and was shared by many Africa directors such as Ousmane Sembene (Niang 2001). Even though employment cannot be thought of as empowering in itself, it is still an authoritative platform from which to negotiate. This is because certain types of work may force women to deal with men in an authoritative manner, as was seen with the character Grace in Chikin Biznis (1998) when she is forced to deal with unruly patrons. In the general public certain occupations are also seen as having a high status, such as the example of Kine in Faat Kine (2000) who was admired by others in society for the managerial type of work she did.

The female characters Kine, Rama, Grace and Kada as discussed in Chapters One and Two can be thought of as role models. These women can be said to be “women who have sought to control their lives, and who have understood and dealt with the forces that affect them” (Hafkin and Bay, 1976:18). These women are examples of the ‘New African Women’. They have used their economic empowerment or education to defy male authority and social conventions, whilst still maintaining their African identity.

This, however, signifies that something other than work is needed. Akatsa-Bukachi (2005) believes that creating an easily identifiable identity of African feminism is of specific importance. Akatsa-Bukachi (2005) also states that “[o]ne major challenge for African feminists, is maintaining a position somewhere between their African-ness and white feminism”. Akatsa-Bukachi (2005) remarks one of the ways that this can be

achieved is through women mobilising around certain key issues. These issues could be any of the oppressive traditional practices depicted in African films such as polygamous and forced marriages, female circumcision and opposition to women working.

Various Positive Aspects of Empowered Characters

The selection of films discussed in this treatise depicts strong, weak and destructive women characters. The focus, however, has primarily been on women characters that demonstrate positive qualities. Some of the women characters are depicted as being courageous, intelligent, supportive or selfless. Kada and Awa in Une Couleur Café (1997) can be seen to be supportive of each other when they join forces in opposing Docteur's authority. The student Rama displays intelligence in Xala (1975) by seeing her father and the businessmen and politicians like him for being hypocrites and thieves. Nanyuma displays a considerable amount of courage in Finzan (1989) when becoming disgusted with her village, decides to take her child and leave. Kine displays a sense of selflessness in Faat Kine (2000) by choosing to work to support her elderly mother and pay for the children's education.

A Rejection of Western Concepts

Arnfred remarks that there is a "phallogentricity" in modern Western thinking that sees "woman as *the other*" (Arnfred 2002). Arnfred argues that Western women see themselves as "modern and developed, equal and free, *exactly by constructing the mirror image of the third world woman as other*" (Arnfred 2002). However, Arnfred maintains that there are African feminist who refuse to see woman as "other" (Arnfred 2002). These

scholars question the “applicability in Africa of basic concepts such as ‘woman,’ ‘gender’ and ‘feminism’” (Arnfred 2002). By re-examining modern Western concepts one allows a way forward for African feminism by separating feminism from European / American thinking. African film will play an important role in the re-conceptualising of these terms and ideas.

Finally, much is still needed in the way of exploring gender studies from an African perspective. According to Akatsa-Bukachi (2005) there is still a need for more literature on the topic of African feminism. As this paper has focused on films produced mostly by male directors, a possible further examination is an analysis of African cinema with a feminist perspective from films produced by female directors.

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