

## Review

# A paradox: Post-modern, postcolonial Guelwaar

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Post-modern in its critique of language, contesting of binaries, and resistance to closure, Sembène's 1993 film *Guelwaar*, later made into the novel of the same name, calls for real political change, constituting a paradoxically post-modern work with postcolonial political intentions and goals. Despite the apparent contradiction of styles and worldviews, the coincidence of the post-modern and postcolonial implies, Sembène's film illustrates as critics across the globe have identified, that these opposing realities coexist, just as Jameson's (1986) Marxian analysis had identified the overlapping of economies and modes of representation. According to Cornis-Pope (2012), "what needs to be developed is a mediating consciousness that can compare, translate and interface cultures" (p. 144). In fact, paradox is a mode where the postcolonial and postmodern meet. Sembène's use of paradox throughout the film recalls works of the period of the European Renaissance since, like it, postcolonial Africa represents a struggle with conflicting value systems and ideologies. Blending the legacies of West African and European traditions, literature, and orature, Sembène's film features irony as a strategy for representing the complex contemporary reality of his society and so undermines the polarity which some critics identify between postmodern and postcolonial sensitivities and goals.

**Key words:** Sembène, post-modern, postcolonial, paradox.

## INTRODUCTION

Although postmodern and postcolonial criticism both aim to deconstruct oppressive ideologies, some critics see them as fundamentally opposed in their effects. In her discussion of the post-modern/postcolonial nexus, Loomba (2001) contends that "While many critics believe that post-modern ideas of multiplicity and fragmentation make the standpoint of marginalized historical subjects visible, others argue that post-modernism carries these ideas to the extreme so that we cannot understand historical dynamics at all" (p. 240). According to O'Hanlon and Washbrook (1992), post-modern theory "tends to inhibit rather than to promote an active politics" (p. 154). In addition, according to Loomba (2005), "there is a long-standing debate, outside of postcolonial criticism as such,

whether Marxism and deconstruction are philosophically compatible (p. 211). Loomba (2005) concluded that "We need to consider the utility of both Marxist as well as post-structuralist perspectives for thinking about postcolonialism and its aftermath" (Loomba, 2005, p. 210). Recognizing this apparent paradox in postcolonial methodology, she calls for postcolonial critics to innovate and create new paradigms that navigate the inherent contradictions (Loomba, 2005, p. 211). Noting a similar paradoxical hybridity, Mark Mathuray, in his analysis of Ben Okri's *The famished road* (2003), takes issue with critic Douglas McCabe who identifies the novel as postmodern because of its eschewing of final truth because according to Mathuray, the novel's

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transcendentalism contests this claim, and Mathuray (2015) adds that the novel's "privileging of African folkloric and mythic literary models" (p. 1101) and denouncing of neocolonialism situate it rather in the postcolonial camp (p. 1102). Mathuray (2015) even comments that, due to the postcolonial aspects, the novel might be viewed in the same way as Frederic Jameson sees Third World literature, as "national allegory" (Jameson, qtd. in Mathuray, 2015, p. 1102). Mathuray suggests that rather than seeing the novel as a meeting ground of the postcolonial and postmodern, one should consider that "Okri's text instead places these two discursive frameworks at loggerheads with each other" (Mathuray, 2015, p. 1102). Ultimately Mathuray (2015) concludes that, because of the novel's use of modernist techniques such as fragmentation, eclecticism, and anti-realist strategies (p. 1109), it is rather an example of "a distinct African modernism" (p.114) which contests "catastrophic postcoloniality" (p. 1114) which had failed to address the needs of true subalterns in the society. In effect, Mathuray (2015) describes a paradoxical, anachronistic condition which Jameson had addressed in the concept of "combined unevenness" (Mathuray, 2015, p. 1108) in postcolonial magic realism which "depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features ...a mode of production still locked in conflict with traces of the older mode" (Jameson, "On Magic Realism," 1986, p. 311). Similarly, Sembène's (1993) *Guelwaar* exhibits characteristics of both capitalist and precapitalist societies, producing hybridity and paradox, a cultural phenomenon which Colie (1966) had seen as a characteristic of societies in transition.

### Deconstructive strategies

In fact, in their deconstructive strategies, postcolonial works align well with post-modern ideology. In some cases, the goal of a postcolonial author is to dismantle a controlling European ideology or history, and so "absences are particularly important [...] the gaps in the record, the blind spots of epistemology and ontology become the locus of the possibility of genuine change" (Tiffin, 1988, p. 177-8). Erosive postcolonial strategies Tiffin (1988) identifies include those where "Destructive binaries are impossible to sustain, character escapes categorization both within and between texts, life and death are not absolutes, and no text is ever finally written" (Tiffin, 1988, p. 178-9). This post-modern model, clearly also in effect in *Guelwaar* (1996), can be experienced as liberation and not merely a crisis in representation (Tiffin, 1988, p. 179).

### Hybridity

With postmodern critiquing of identity and language,

*Guelwaar* (1996) is yet centered around a political speech and a call to action. In fact in the words of Amadou Fofana (2005) in his analysis of the film version, "His [Guelwaar's] speech is meant to spur critical thinking among the diegetic audience, and by correlation and extension, among the spectators, or external viewers of the film as well" (Fofana, 2005, p. 14). By moralizing and presenting a coherent political message, Sembène's film seems to realize atypical aims in a post-modern work. In fact, Sembène's work is notably hybrid and paradoxical. N'Gom (2002) sees the value precisely in its ability to synthesize oral and written traditions and ideologies in its form (p. 408) and identifies Sembène's appeal to African cultures in his use of Wolof words in French narration and the evocation of the tradition of griot storytelling to the community (p. 415). In N'Gom's (2002) view, *Guelwaar* communicates an assertion about the reality of Senegal in the 1980's, its "recolonization" through indirect economic means and institutions. Thus, the final sequence of the film ironically casts the work as an allegory, an anachronistic "African legend of the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

### Postmodern hybridity

Through film, rather than theory, Sembène (1993) recognizes paradox as a *modus operandi* in the postcolonial era. Thus, *Guelwaar* (1996) presents a critique of monolithic identities and of the ideological nature of language. The film focuses on hybridity as its narrative is centered on a naturalized Frenchman's search for his deceased Christian African father whose body has been confused with that of an elder from the Muslim community. While announced as deceased in the opening scene, the character of Guelwaar continues to play a polarizing role in the community throughout the film, and, rather than bringing the two communities together in their common grief, the deaths of the two elders only accentuate their differences. The investigation into the disappearance of the father reveals communities dealing with mistaken identities, complex and sometimes phantom relationships, a proliferation of linguistic ambiguities, and a conflation of the economic, religious and political systems. The flux in cultural and economic realities and the questioning of linguistic signs of contemporary Senegal postmodern condition which, like the period of the European renaissance, is riddled with conflicting value systems.

### Postmodernism

Sembène's work contests simple realities, identities, national origins, genres and preconceived concepts.

Haynes (1999) cites the film for its potentially hypocritical nature: an African film against foreign aid

financed by European governments and corporations (p. 22). One could say that the film is, benevolently considered political, real and complex or, in the best sense, opportunistic. In fact, the film later became the source of Sembène's 1996 novel of the same name. According to Sembène in the author's note of 1994, this seemingly illicit coupling of film and novel is a "bigamie créatrice et fécondante" (Sembène, 1996, p. 10). A script evolving into a novel about a dead man's political speech, Guelwaar (1996) is at the crossroads of oral, written and cinematic culture.

### **Postmodern politics**

Haynes (1999) affirms that post-modern criticism need not necessarily remain detached from any concept of political action and material reality. In his view, in the contemporary situation, "it becomes necessary and useful, practically as well as theoretically, to recognize the extent to which the political landscape has taken on a Foucauldian, post-modernist form, in which political resistance is far from dead, but takes numerous dispersed forms, often at lower levels of political expression: in the 'popular,' the politics of everyday life, a "politique par le bas" (p. 22). Guelwaar realizes this succinctly in his call to Africans to resist foreign aid at the local level.

### **Postmodern linguistics**

The film shows the arbitrary nature of linguistic signifiers and how they carry social meaning and create and reflect divisions within societies. When it was determined that Guelwaar's body has been mistaken for Meyssa Ciss, a Muslim, and the prospect of opening a Muslim tomb arises, the local Muslim peasants say to the village chief, Baye Aly, "It's Meyssa Ciss in that grave, got it?" indicating that they will ruin the chief's reputation if he does not comply, knowing he misappropriates public funds. The identity of the man in the grave is temporarily determined by politics and convention, not physical reality. Further, when the Muslim community learns of the presence of Pierre Henri Thioune, Guelwaar, in their cemetery, one of the mourners, Meyssa's wife, complains that she will not continue mourning for an "atheist" knowing him to be the defunct Catholic. In this case, language announces views on religious diversity, and thus as much about the speaker as the characteristics of the individual in question. Sembène seems to comment on the impossibility of coordinating action between communities when the very words used to grasp it are inherently ideologically motivated and politically divisive. He deconstructs language by showing that it is ideologically biased, one of the "two main purposes in deconstructing a literary text" according to Tyson (2006,

p. 259).

### **Postmodern paternity**

Both the Catholic and Muslim communities are perplexed with changing, complex, or phantom identities. In the mourning Muslim community, Oumy, the second wife of the deceased Muslim, Meyssa Ciss, in whose tomb the body of the Catholic was erroneously laid, refuses to continue with the fourth month period of mourning required of a widow, thus rejecting any possibility of her bearing the dead man's fetus. Her resoluteness in denying that paternity is backed by the knowledge that the children she had already born were in fact her brother-in-law's and not the descendants of her 80-year-old impotent spouse, Meyssa Ciss, who had publicly acknowledged them. The confusion of her dead husband with the deceased Guelwaar thus eventually exposes a community where identities are fixed by societal relationships which do not reflect biological or supposed objective reality.

### **Postmodern blurring**

Similarly, in the post-modern, postcolonial context, where identities are complex and contradictory, distinctions between politics, religion, and economics appear fluid or arbitrary. Guelwaar's other son, Barthelemy, at the constable's office to report his father's body missing is greeted by the policeman Gora who locates a file on the "dissident." Gora recalls a meeting with Guelwaar where the policeman criticized talk of the misappropriation of public funds at Guelwaar's family's church meetings as politics rather than religion. Similarly, at the police station, a suspect is being interrogated by police for allegedly raping his sister, an instance of a violent violation or blurring of cultural and personal boundaries. The man's mother reflects that, with an absent husband and a rapist son, it would be preferable to be dead than to exist in such a society, a mirror or opposite image of Nogoy Marie's family situation. Eventually, when asked if he is Senegalese, Barthelemy waves his French passport at Gora, at which Gora explains that Bart is a therefore foreigner in his own country. When local chief, Baye Aly, asked why Gora always speaks French with Barthelemy, Gora explains that he is a "black white man" in that he does not speak the local language. These apparent paradoxical assertions signal the complex and subjective nature of what seem fixed aspects of identity and society.

### **Postmodern resistance to closure**

Ultimately, the film resists absolute closure as the eventual recovery and identification of the body does not resolve the issue Guelwaar had admonished against.

Relocating Guelwaar to an appropriate cemetery, the Catholic funeral procession encounters a truck loaded with food aid promised to the inhabitants of Ker Baye Aly in order to placate them after the disturbance. In memory of Guelwaar's denunciation of aid as a form of subjection, the boys in the mourning Christian community empty the sacks and run the funeral procession over their contents. The event evokes a questioning and belies Barthélémy's statement of closure that all has ended well. The boys' defiance represents a turning point and the accomplishment of Guelwaar's mission to denounce foreign aid, but is merely a segment in the ongoing struggle between the communities. Ironically, the denunciation of foreign aid could potentially unite the Catholic and Muslim communities. As Mowitt (1998) points out, the "mutual recognition of the effects of postcolonial dependency subtends and undermines the ethnic rivalry between Muslims and Christians" (p. 133). Yet the film ends still questioning this unifying outcome.

### The Carnavalesque

From the start, the film presents an array of images of paradox and ambiguity. It begins with Guelwaar's disabled son Aloys arriving to tell his mother of Guelwaar's death. While Guelwaar's widow, Nogoy Marie, reflects on the wedding ring her son has brought her, there is an interruption in the narrative, a flashback to Guelwaar's wedding, where the focus on the first wedding kiss and on the ring is juxtaposed with the image of a funeral wreath on a van destined for Guelwaar's body. Thus, the film opens with an invocation of carnivalesque coincidence of opposites.

### Carnavalesque paradox

The fluid and complex nature of society is reinforced through paradoxes throughout the work. With Guelwaar's body missing, the deceased is more central to dilemma of the living as they become more and more involved with his death and its aftermath. "Jamais de mémoire d'homme, mort ne fut plus vivant," Sembène (1996) informs in the novel (p. 38). The mourners were also haunted by the suspicion that a potential fetishist might have stolen the corpse for pre-Christian and pre-Moslem rituals revealing an even more complex religious syncretism and vestigial traditions perhaps deemed already buried in a distant pre-capitalist and pre-colonial past. Due to the co-presence of competing systems of value and interpretation, Sembène's postcolonial texts, like those of the Renaissance, can be seen to privilege paradox. As Rosalie Colie (1966) indicates: Quite clearly, paradoxes are phenomena by no means peculiar to the historical period called the Renaissance, but occur in any period or place where intellectual speculation goes on.

They tend to constellate; however, in a period, like the Renaissance, of intense intellectual activity, with many different ideas and systems in competition with one another. (p. 33)

Thus, Guelwaar's criticism of food aid appears to be the polar opposite of the Renaissance paradoxical encomium which praises something unpraisable (Colie, 1966, p. 5). Guelwaar criticizes what is apparently uncriticizable, a gift of food.

### Carnavalesque ambiguity

The scene at the cemetery participates in carnivalesque ambiguity not unlike that described by Bakhtin (1984) in his analysis of the fertile ambiguity in Rabelais's society. Both diagetically and metaphorically Guelwaar speaks from beyond his mortality. In perhaps a nod to magic realism, the Marxist Sembène has Guelwaar's widow, Nogoye Marie, insist that she repeatedly hears her former husband communicating to her both in the home and at the Muslim cemetery. Despite the severe division between the Christian and Muslim communities and their dogmas, the grave evokes a common human condition anchored in life's universal cycles. Furthermore, the men at the cemetery begin to reminisce about Guelwaar's past exploits, recounting how he had once disguised himself as an old woman in order to carry on an affair with one of the wives of the muezzin, thus associating the story with the genre of the farce and its logic of reversals. The humorous tale ends with a reminiscence of Guelwaar who is seen in a flashback running out of the tent, having abandoned his transgender garb and thus revealed naked as male in a full carnivalesque reversal where the love-making devolves into a desperate run to save his life from angry villagers who discovered his ploy. Sembène, in this graveside laughter, reveals a society as multifaceted as the renaissance world Bakhtin evokes in his analysis. According to Bakhtin (1984), Rabelais's laughter was complex, ambivalent and communal. "True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it" (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 122-123). Like Rabelais's text, *Guelwaar* (1996) evokes a contradictory whole and an ambivalence which also seem pertinent to the postcolonial and post-modern condition.

### Paradoxical postcolonialism

"Post-colonialism" itself paradoxically attests both to the period marking *the end* of overt colonial exploitation and also to its *continuation* through indirect means in society and culture, another of the epidemic of paradoxes the heritage of centuries of colonization left. Certainly, colonization, formulated in the context of "civilizing" missions and evangelization, was much other than what it

claimed to be. Similarly, Guelwaar calls attention to the contradictory aspect of foreign “aid” as both help and hindrance to the affected population. Paradoxes mark both social and epistemological conflict. “One element common to all these kinds of paradox is their exploitation of the fact of relative, or competing, value systems. The paradox is always somehow involved in dialectic: challenging some orthodoxy, the paradox is an oblique criticism of absolute judgment or absolute convention” (Colie, 1966, p. 10). Guelwaar’s criticism of food aid points to the hypocritical belief in the value of food aid, which, although seen to enrich a population, is often used to placate it and make it dependent. His position is clearly moral. However, the preponderance of paradox throughout the text also points to the epistemological crisis of the postcolonial and postmodern condition.

### Foreign aid and foreign language

Foreign aid is double-edged in how it affects the giver and the taker much as is the nature of writing in postcolonial Africa where the former colonizers’ language is used to criticize the former colonizer and where languages at the same time create global communities and divide local inhabitants through their spheres of influence. When the document from the hospital attesting to the fact that it is the body of Guelwaar that the Muslim community has buried in their cemetery is presented to Mor Ciss, the patriarch of the community affirms that he cannot read French, a cultural and linguistic residue of colonialization left behind. Similarly, the Catholic community, having arrived at the Muslim cemetery, cannot at first identify the tomb of their lost family member, being unable to read the Arabic inscriptions on the tombs.

Irony in the contemporary political and economic situation in Senegal is furthermore presented as Gora cites the cases of young French nationals who visit Senegal each year working at the harvest while a native son like Barthélémy, having become European, remains comfortable in France. Barthélémy asserts however that, often, apparent gifts are political and that, ultimately, foreign aid mostly benefits a corrupt few who take money out of the country for foreign investments of their own ending up in European banks. Similarly, Gor Mag notes the disturbing change in social, economic and political views he has seen where what were once vices, such as misappropriating public funds, now pass as virtues. He adds that those who took over after the French are not better than them and do not even speak the local languages. Gor Mag explains that the Christian community elders had asked Guelwaar to denounce foreign aid in a public speech in order to end the corrupt cycle. Significantly, in the scene which is a recollection of Guelwaar’s speech denouncing foreign aid, there is a banner announcing North/South cooperation, uniting the

polar opposites in true carnivalesque style.

### Neocolonialism

These indications represent a society whose values are contested and in flux due to colonialism and neocolonialism. In fact, Mbembe (2001), tracing the history of the postcolonial situation, recalls that the colonial authority initially presented itself as a benefit to the African colonies, “as a *free gift*, proposing to relieve its object of poverty and free it from debased condition by raising it to the level of a human being” (p. 34-35). The colonial power was supposed to help the indigenous in the colony and provide a moral education which included teaching the value of work (Mbembe, 2001, p. 35). According to Guelwaar, European colonization did much of the opposite. In many instances, colonial and later neocolonial authorities coopted religious, ethnic, and family groups to make them clients and beneficiaries of the state. “The state was also able to control ethnic and regional tensions, either by creating jobs in the public services or through borrowing or direct intervention in the productive system” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 43), creating a process where “economic *things* were converted into social and political things” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 46). Similarly, in *Guelwaar* (1996), as described by both the eponymous hero and his son, political officials manipulate international aid using it to appease tensions and create a political alliance with the local community.

In *Guelwaar* (1993), the state, as represented by the deputy mayor, and the police commissioner, pacifies a religious community, represented by the Ciss family, with gifts of foreign food aid. Yet, it is the imam, ironically in a violent and offensive outburst, who stops a brawl resulting from the degeneration of the discussion into accusations. When the prefect arrives, representing secular authority, Amadou Fall, who had ordered Guelwaar’s silencing, denounces the Catholics, citing that Islam has its roots in Senegal. The contention of religiously motivated action conceals the violent cover up of the appropriation of economic aid for political gain. In this instance, the political, religious, and economic spheres appear inseparable. Barthélémy counters with a reflection on the multinational aspect of religion in Senegal with Muslims making pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia and Christians to Jerusalem, calling into question the existence of a purely African religion and the appropriateness of religious considerations in the matter. Ultimately, the imam, Birame, opens the grave to ultimately settle the dispute revealing Guelwaar’s body in the tomb and end the contentious debate. Ironically, Marxist Sembène leaves it to a religious leader to proceed to definitive action. Recognizing the futility of debating cultural claims, Birame removes the body in a way respectful of both communities and their claims to truth while effectively settling the initial case at hand.

*Guelwaar's* (1993) condemnation of the acceptance of foreign aid in Senegal occurs after the economic crises of the 1980's. According to Mbembe (2001), MEW economic and political systems in former African colonies allowed corrupt postcolonial regimes to maintain unjust systems of domination rather effectively through the 1970s (p. 43). However, deregulation in the 1980s disrupted the systems (Mbembe, 2001, p. 55). In short, to "neo-liberal all out deregulation policies are thus undermining the arrangements that had, in practice, enabled the postcolonial potentate, at least in some countries, to reach more or less dynamic compromises with the indigenous systems of coercion, and to finance the relations of subordination" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 56).

Like *Guelwaar*, Mbembe (2001) sees the solution in direct action: "With or without international creditors, Africa must face up with the challenge of the competitiveness of its economies on the world level. This challenge cannot be victoriously met in the current world economy without an increase in productivity" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 57). The manipulation and concealment of social realities in contemporary Africa, no matter how complex and changing, as described by both Sembène (1993) and Mbembe (2001), can only delay needed change.

Ultimately, Sembène's (1993) film points to paradoxes in the postcolonial African situation and in human society. The film shows that religion can provide a veil for political or economic actions. Identities are varied and complex, yet identifying commonalities could unite groups. Although, language is an imperfect grasp on reality and inevitably ideological, fiery words, like those of *Guelwaar* or *Birame*, can produce change and incite or subdue violence, and a Marxist film maker can see a religious leader as an effective agent of change. Sembène's film, much like the texts of the European Renaissance, represents a world profoundly ambivalent, where the roles of politics, religion and economics are closely intertwined. Sembène's post-modern filmic text posits a real world response to neocolonialism. The investigation of *Guelwaar's* death is "both autopsy.... and cure" (Eisler, 2006, p. 85) for the postcolonial legacy. The work exposes how language, identities, societal structures, and cultural beliefs are fallible and biased, yet postmodern film can contest social realities and create the possibility for new relationships. As critics have shown across the globe, the contemporary situation, especially in postcolonial Africa, is paradoxical; syncretism and hybridity are topical, and dogmatism of any kind can be an obstacle to thought and action. Paradox is an ancient trope still relevant as a to vehicle of thought today, as it allows for the interfacing of conflicting conflicting systems of representation, societies and values. Sembène seems to have discovered the utility of paradox as a postmodern, postcolonial trope.

## Conflict of interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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