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Resilience And Resistance: Women's Agency In Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* And Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*

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This paper provides a comparative examination of women's agency and intertextuality in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* and Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*, focusing on their roles within post-colonial African societies. The analysis explores how both authors portray the struggles of African women against the backdrop of cultural, social, and colonial oppression. In her work, Aidoo presents Sissie, a young Ghanaian woman who navigates the complexities of colonialism, diaspora, and migration. Sissie's journey from Ghana to Europe exposes her to racial discrimination and cultural dislocation, highlighting her struggle for identity and agency. Conversely, Sembène's work satirizes the power dynamics and polygamy in post-colonial Senegal through the character of El Hadji, a businessman whose impotency symbolizes his moral and societal corruption. The women in *Xala* reflect varying degrees of submission and resistance to patriarchal norms, with characters like Rama showing a nascent challenge to these structures. Both West African novels use interior monologues and flashbacks to depict the protagonists' inner conflicts and societal constraints. While Aidoo's Sissie actively confronts and critiques the racial and cultural prejudices she encounters, the women in Sembène's narrative are primarily portrayed within the confines of traditional and neocolonial expectations. The paper argues that despite these differences, both works underscore the persistent patriarchal subjugation and the nuanced ways African women navigate and resist these constraints. The comparative analysis reveals a shared theme of women's resilience and the therapeutic power of female solidarity, illustrating a progression from traditional subjugation to modern self-assertion in the face of ongoing patriarchal oppression. The study concludes that while resistance methods differ, Aidoo and Sembène emphasize the critical need for women's agency in overcoming the multifaceted challenges of post-colonial African societies.

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INTRODUCTION

A feminist theory of agency explains how women in male-dominated societies survive in a manner that reflects their unpretentious needs and concerns, and it must explain how it is possible for women to advance criticisms of sexist social and political institutions and to post active resistance. Feminist social and political philosophy as well as feminist ethics, presume a theory of women's agency that accounts for their capacity for individualized taste, choice and action. The idea of women's agency was noticeable to feminist philosophers since women's identities framed themselves in milieus that were, in some respects, unfriendly to their interests.

The rise of intersexuality and agency has sparked diverse debates, particularly regarding feminism and its objectives in post-colonial Africa. Feminism and agency have been received with mixed feelings, leading to alternative definitions and terms to describe the struggle of African women. The diversity within feminism and the available agencies and institutions for women to emancipate themselves and advocate for their rights respond to various concerns and needs of women. The agency-based approach to intersexuality pertains to gender-based participation and contributions in post-colonial African societies and their efforts to liberate themselves from social, cultural, and colonial bondage. Several African writers and

authors conclude that women's agency-based and feminist roles in African culture are universal, although they differ in objectives based on culture and region (Sonowal, 2021; Nyamwiza, 2023).

Recent studies have explored the representation of women in African literature, with particular attention to how feminist ideals manifest in post-colonial settings. For instance, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* examines the protagonist Sissie's experiences as she navigates through colonial and racial discrimination during her travels from Ghana to Europe. This novel emphasizes the struggle of African women against not only gender oppression but also racial and colonial subjugation (Sonowal, 2021). In contrast, Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* critiques the socio-political landscape of post-colonial Senegal through the lens of El Hadji, a corrupt businessman whose impotence symbolizes his moral and societal failures. The novel underscores the continued subjugation of women under patriarchal and neo-colonial structures (Ogundokun, 2013).

The examination of these texts reveals a significant gap in the literature: while both novels address the intersectionality of gender, race, and colonialism, there has been insufficient comparative analysis of how these intersections affect women's agency differently across varied cultural contexts. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a comparative analysis of the two selected novels,

focusing on the distinct and shared experiences of women in these post-colonial African societies.

Aidoo's work portrays Sissie as an independent and assertive character who critiques both the African diaspora and the colonial remnants in Europe. The novel's structure, which blends poetry, letters, and prose, enables a multifaceted exploration of Sissie's internal and external conflicts. Sissie's journey highlights the complex interplay between personal liberation and collective identity, challenging the traditional roles assigned to African women (Nyamwiza, 2023). This paper builds on previous analyses by emphasising Sissie's confrontation with both gender and racial discrimination, showcasing her resistance against being defined by her outsider status.

Conversely, *Xala* by Sembène utilizes satire to expose the entrenched patriarchal norms and corruption in post-colonial Senegal. The character of El Hadji, through his impotence, becomes a symbol of the impotence of the nation's corrupt elite. Sembène criticizes the persistence of neo-colonial attitudes and the exploitation of women under the guise of cultural traditions. Previous studies, such as those by Ogundokun (2013), have focused on the socio-political critique within the novel. This paper will extend the discussion by examining how the female characters in *Xala* navigate and resist their subjugation, drawing parallels and contrasts with Sissie's experience in *Our Sister Killjoy*.

The paper argues that while both novels highlight the resilience and agency of African women, they also reflect different strategies of resistance shaped by their specific cultural and socio-political contexts. In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Sissie's journey underscores the importance of self-awareness and solidarity among women as a means of combating racial and gender oppression. In contrast, the women in *Xala* display resilience through their enduring presence and subtle defiance within the constraints of a deeply patriarchal society.

By situating this analysis within the broader framework of post-colonial feminist discourse and employing the theoretical lens of intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the diverse ways African women assert their agency. Intersectionality, as Crenshaw posits, explores how multiple social identities intersect with systems of oppression and discrimination, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1991). This theoretical framework will inform our analysis by examining how Sissie and the female characters in *Xala* negotiate their identities and resist oppression based on intersecting factors of gender, race, and colonialism.

This study aims to provide a nuanced comparison of *Our Sister Killjoy* and *Xala*, highlighting how Aidoo and Sembène portray the complexities of women's experiences in post-colonial Africa. By addressing the gap in the existing literature and employing intersectionality as a theoretical tool, this paper seeks to enhance the understanding of the intersectional nature of gender, race, and colonialism in shaping women's agency in modern West African literature.

WOMEN IN AIDOO'S OUR SISTER KILLJOY

The author of *Our Sister Killjoy* uses the protagonist woman, Sissie, to work against the stereotypes that bind African women, particularly based on African cultures and neocolonialism. Sissie portrays a strong front against sexism, racism, and biases in Western countries. The first woman character in the novel is the protagonist Sissie. She is a young Ghanaian woman who travels to Europe for a scholarship. During the journey, she encounters a radically different German culture and experiences and understands what life looks like for the wealthy and elite in established European countries. Sissie is confronted on all sides by new experiences and radical newness. She faces cultural and racial challenges to survive and adapt to the new environment. However, she honestly did not know

that she would expect such a radical difference between her usual life in her home country, Ghana, and life in a passage seat of a Mercedes Benz. She is pessimistic and critical about the world around her as she always thinks frequently concerning the issues of colonialism and seism. Despite being a product of being Ghanaian and African, she acknowledges many flaws in African societies.

Marija Sommer is a German national and a friendly woman who finds Sissie in Germany and attempts to control her. Merely Sissie is dumbfounded by the excitement and radical changes she is required to adapt to. Therefore, Marija is used to symbolize the journey of adoption for Sissie. She teaches Sissie different tips about what life in Germany looks like, just as a close friend. Moreover, she offers her unconditional love to Sissie.

WOMEN IN SEMBENE OUSMANE'S *XALA*

Ousmane Sembene's *Xala* is an archetypal travesty on the neo-colonial and post-colonial Senegal's bourgeoisie with nuances of greed of colonial masters and their native supporters. Embedded in this narrative is a set of female characters with a variety and depth of character that depicts textual contests of patriarchy, sexism and racism. Female agency stretches from a complete traditional religious twist as epitomized by Adja, to the headstrong and dogmatic representative of the native Wolof language in the post-colonial Senegal, Rama. On the other hand, Oumi is refined and libertine, revealing materialism. Bayden, another female character, destined to be a widow twice, has a commanding personality and fervently wants her niece N'Gone to get married to a rich man to have a perfect life, as is the practice in the African culture. The narrative exhibits an ironic representation of both feminism and submission through its female characters.

The novel illustrates how the author uses various factors to express the gender roles in the book. The four women in the novel each represent a particular stage in Senegalese history and unique aspects of

sexual oppression history. The eldest wife to El Hadji, Awa Adja, represents the conventional Islamic phase in the history of Senegal and the controversial role of women within this context. The second wife, Oumi, is more Westernized than the first; she represents the further breakdown of the traditions and customs and the encroachments of Western consumerism and ideology. El Hadji's third wife N'Gone, is depicted; as a result of the excellence of the neocolonial society and a symbol of the consequences of cultural impotence with no substance, language, identity, or voice. Rama, the eldest daughter of Adja, portrays a union of African and European cultures. Ousmane illustrates how El Hadji's status as a powerful businessman uses his influence to project masculine strength and powers and how he depends on his wives to show his prowess.

Each of El Hadji's wives reflects a feminine prototype. In the novel, *Xala* presents different themes through women, including post-colonialism, religion, integrity, and bourgeois, and a great emphasis on the role of women in a post-colonial society. The author uses imagery that conceals the special role of women. Men treat them unequally, which is common in a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, it was well known that men would certainly never show their dominance by shying off. In the novel, where Hadji's wedding night with his third wife, N'Gone, her aunt was dressing her up in preparation for a sexual relationship she was to have with her husband.

Among the pieces of advice she received from her aunty, according to the Senegal traditions, was that she was supposed to be an obedient woman and listen to her husband. She also advised N'Gone that women and men are not equal. N'Gone is a young woman who finds herself in the intrigue of her elders, whose interests in displacement and dispossession are beyond her understanding. Also, the focus on her virginity as her only face of identity, which gives value to her, reflects the sexist

culture that requires her to trade on her sexuality for a secure life.

However, Hadji did everything possible to prove that he has full control of his wives or that any woman controls his decisions. Adja Awa Astou is a dedicated woman who gave her sexuality in exchange for virtue to earn a reverend status with her community and her family. In agreement with her initial catholic faith, she is portrayed as a holy mother figure, just like the Virgin Mary, and dedicated to her Islamic faith, just like Khadijah was devoted to Muhammad. Oumi N'Doye is likened to Mary Magdalene to Adja's "Madonna" Oumi is sexually voracious. However, she is more conscious of exploiting her physical appeal and pleasing men than satisfying her pleasure.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The ability of women in both texts to emancipate themselves and exercise their agency, or their natural abilities to exercise their own decisions and choices, has been limited by the social, racial, colonial, and cultural identities imposed on them. However, some protagonists have attempted to reverse this perception in various ways, including advocating for their rights and challenging societal definitions and expectations about their gender. For example, in *Xala*, women are represented as having accepted and contented with their roles, not making deliberate attempts to break off from the bondage of masculinity, apart from Rama, who makes some attempts. In contrast, in Aidoo's text, Sissie is depicted as one trying to deliberately fight the status quo and free herself from subjugation.

Women in the two texts are confronted by various oppressive identities, including racism, colonialism, cultural and traditional practices, identity, and sexism. They are perceived as sexual objects meant to please men for their survival. For instance, Sembène uses El Hadji's stature to demonstrate Senegalese society's masculine nature and how men's masculinity is used to oppress women. This also illustrates neocolonialism in a post-colonial

society where men continue to oppress women as part of cultural traditions. *Xala*, for instance, presents women who are satisfied with their cultural and colonial bondage since they feel that is how they should be (Sembène, 1976). They are treated materially, and El Hadji feels that by being polygamous, he attains a higher status in society, as polygamy was seen as a sign of wealth and power. He considers his third wife, N'Gone, and all his other wives as no more than mere properties or playthings, worth only the price of the gifts he has acquired and brought for them.

However, the novel highlights that besides El Hadji marrying the third wife, the first two wives and their children have been neglected and live in desperate conditions. In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Sissie faces racial discrimination upon arrival in Germany. For instance, she makes a statement about racism and race in connection with the indisputable history between Europeans and Africans: "We are victims of our history and our present. They place too many obstacles in the way of love. And we cannot enjoy even our differences in peace" (Aidoo, 1977, p. 38). Her residing in a foreign land makes her feel out of place because of the prejudice and discrimination she faces for being black. She perceives herself as a victim of the racial construct created centuries ago and continuing to exist in modern societies. She is innocent and naïve, but she is comfortable in her skin and not insecure about questions of race. She is somewhat adventurous and doesn't seem bothered by the fact that she is a foreigner, only black in a white country.

The cultural traditions in the African setting are portrayed in both texts as oppressive, with women considered lesser beings and submissive to men. They are seen as colonized and controlled by men in patriarchal societies. In both novels, women are portrayed as submissive and expected to obey without questioning. The masculine nature of patriarchal African societies continues to display male dominance over women. Women are supposed to be submissive to their men and obey them

without expressing their feelings or opinions or speaking their minds. For instance, in *Xala*, on the wedding night of the third wife, N'Gone, her aunt advises her to be very obedient to her husband and listen to him. She also advises that men and women are not equal. The aunt's advice was meant to trigger Hadji's pride and demonstrate that his wives were not in control of his actions and decisions, reinforcing the patriarchal culture. The first wife of El Hadji is portrayed as a submissive and sympathetic woman who acknowledges that her knowledge of life and the world is curtailed. Her emphasis on religion and domestic and conjugal responsibility does not contradict contemporary reality. Her loyalty to her husband and duty is the main source of her oppression from El Hadji.

Women continue to face suppression from exploitative cultural, social, and colonialist African society. Essentially, women, particularly in *Xala*, have no freedom to make their own choices and pursue self-realization and personal development. Due to the masculine nature of African culture, women are supposed to submit to their husbands without questioning or speaking about their feelings. Everything is determined for them, and they do not have control of their lives. To a greater extent, Hadji demonstrates male dominance by marrying many wives he later neglects. He uses his wives as sex objects to please him and hide his weakness and impotence that threaten his masculine power.

Women are seen to please men sexually to gain material things, including taking care of children. Sexism is perceived as the only survival tool for women under the discretion of men. They are limited by the colonial, cultural, and social norms dominating their societies, surpassing the boundaries and establishing individual identities and agencies that can liberate them from bondage. For instance, the author demonstrates how men in post-colonial Senegalese society gain power, not through intelligence or real business acumen, but by having dominion over women. "In our country, this

so-called 'gentry,' imbued with their role as master—a role which began and ended with fitting out and mounting the female—sought no elevation, no delicacy in their relations with their partners. This lack of communication meant they were no better than stallions for breeding. El Hadji was as limited, short-sighted, and unintelligent as any of his kind" (Sembène, 1976, p. 58). The act of wielding power is reduced to having dominion and having sex with many different women. Hadji became a captain and powerful by marrying three women, thus uniting the sexual and authoritarian spheres. Therefore, *Xala* threatens his power because having low sexual potency literally and symbolically reduces his power.

On the other hand, Sissie in *Our Sister Killjoy* is presented as a strong and independent woman experiencing a decolonization journey. She is determined and willing to liberate herself from colonial, cultural, and racial shackles. At some point, she contemplates why most whites are negatively aggressive towards Africans and dark-skinned people like her. For example, she is disturbed by the kind of reception she gets from the foreign country, and at some point, she questions God on why things are the way they are: "Lord...is that why, on the whole, they have had to be extra ferocious?" (Aidoo, 1977, p. 42). She has difficulties adjusting to the new environment and faces the obstacles of racism. She questions the nature of man regarding race. She questions if white people are perhaps vulnerable, which could be why they are so ferocious in defence. She is determined to create her agency or identity. She further confronts colonialism and the sexualization of women as she expresses her thoughts about her love since her desire for him is against who she is supposed to be. She uses an unapologetic tone as she sees the breakup of their relationship being harder for her despite being the one deciding. She is determined to create her agency and wishes to nurture her essence as an African woman embracing her homeland instead of escaping to foreign exiles like her colleagues (Aidoo, 1977, p. 54). Therefore,

she decides to follow who she is despite having deep feelings for her love.

However, women in *Xala* are seen to be submissive and contented with current societal and traditional oppressive cultures. For instance, El Hadji's first wife, Awa, represents an embodiment of African traditions despite her environment being no longer traditional. She dramatizes how traditional ways and practices have been ill-adapted to the difficulties of modern Senegal. She is characterized by patience as she resigns to fate and submits to neocolonialism and cultural bondage. The second wife, Oumi, represents the Westernized culture that has continued to perpetuate the colonization of African societies. She wears European wigs, clothes, dark glasses, and makeup. She is always in fashion magazines and feeds her romantic fantasies as she reads pulp romances. Her competition with Awa and the new young wife leads her to financial extortion and sexual seduction of El Hadji. This demonstrates the position of women in Senegalese culture: they are free to make their decisions independently but still rely on men for their survival. The marriage of Oumi and El Hadji is based on the exchange of services and money, showing the harsh economic judgment of El Hadji of social relations and economic conditions under neocolonialism and colonialism. The third wife, N'Gone, is instructed by her mother on the importance of making her husband feel dominant, indicating a male-dominated cultural society. The first three wives are submissive and seem to have accepted the cultural and neocolonial slavery of polygamous marriage. However, the fourth wife, Rama, seems to take a different stand and commits to asserting herself.

The narrator notes that the relationship between Rama and El Hadji was tense but mutually respectful, showing the sharp contours of gender inequalities in Senegalese traditions: "Today, for the first time in three months since he had slapped her on the afternoon of his wedding, they had had a serious conversation. Rama had been the only one

who dared oppose the marriage. Pity she was a girl. He could have made something of her had she been a boy" (Sembène, 1976, p. 76). Rama is an intelligent and headstrong young woman who participates in academic and cultural activities. However, El Hadji continues to lament his inability to exploit her sexually because of the entrenched fact of her sex.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* and Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* reveals a profound commentary on the complexities of women's agency and intersexuality within post-colonial African societies. Both authors highlight the pervasive impact of colonialism, patriarchy, and cultural traditions on African women, though their approaches differ. Aidoo's protagonist, Sissie, embodies an active resistance to racial and cultural oppression, confronting and critiquing the prejudices she encounters in Europe. Her journey underscores a conscious struggle for identity and self-assertion, portraying a woman who refuses to succumb to the societal limitations imposed upon her. In contrast, Sembène's narrative depicts women who, despite varying degrees of resistance, remain largely confined within traditional patriarchal structures. The women in his novel symbolize different stages of submission and adaptation to their societal roles, with characters like Rama beginning to challenge these norms but not fully breaking free from them. Through feminist and postcolonial literary lenses, this paper concludes that Sembène's novel surpasses the abstract and superficial discrepancies made between the traditional woman and the Westernised woman to construct a more nuanced and salient message where not all women are styled as being victims of polygamy, as some of them oppose it. The writer shows the readers the deleterious as well as the constructive aspects of polygamy, hence accomplishing his aim, which is to edify his people as well as patriarchal and previously colonized peoples.

Both postcolonial novels by prominent novelists and voices of West Africa underscore the resilience of African women in navigating the multifaceted challenges of post-colonial societies. The novels illustrate that while methods of resistance and self-assertion may vary, the underlying theme of women's resilience and the importance of female solidarity is paramount. Aidoo and Sembène, through their nuanced portrayals, call attention to the need for continued struggle against patriarchal and neocolonial oppression. They emphasize the critical role of women's agency in redefining their identities and reclaiming their voices within their cultural contexts. The analysis of these two works reveals a shared vision of progress, advocating for a society where African women can transcend traditional subjugation and achieve true self-empowerment.

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