

# Cultural cacophony: conrad and sembène on african culture



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Literature has always served as a window into the souls of cultures.

However, the perspective from which one looks through that window can substantially shift one's view of the culture in question. No where is this comparison better seen in literature than with the African culture, depicted in 1899 by Joseph Conrad in his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, and again by Ousmane Sembène seventy-five years later in his 1974 novel, *Xala*. Given the two wildly different upbringings and cultures of the two authors, their works beautifully showcase two opposing perspectives of African culture, the former from an outsider and the latter from an insider.

To properly understand the works of these authors, it is imperative to understand their diametrically opposed lives. *Heart of Darkness* author Joseph Conrad, a Polish-British writer born in the nineteenth century Russian Empire, worked in both the French and British merchant navies. During these seminal years of his life, the British Empire was at its pinnacle, dominating every corner of the globe as a result of centuries of colonialism and imperialism. The imperialist ideology, of British exceptionalism and superiority, went on to greatly influence Conrad's literary work, particularly his 1899 work in question. Ousmane Sembène, on the other hand, enjoyed a drastically different upbringing on the other side of the world. Born in Senegal, Sembène was, from an early age, acquainted with the Serer religion, a religion indigenous to Senegal. Though he asserts he did not take his religion seriously in his youth, his 1974 novel *Xala*, made heavy use of Serer themes and ideas.

With regard to the effects of the authors' respective upbringings on their later publications, Conrad's works bring a classical British imperialist sentiment to them, with *Heart of Darkness* being perhaps the best example. The novel revolves around Marlow and Kurtz, two European sailors trekking deep into the Congo. This highlights the most glaring difference between Conrad and Sembène's works: perspective. Looking at Africa from the outside in, Marlow and Kurtz look upon the people of Congo as savages, describing their mere movements as being with the "...complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages" (Conrad 27). Perhaps more searing than Conrad's portrayal of Africans is their antithesis to the protagonists. All European colonists, per Conrad's description, were " Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame" (Conrad 4) carrying forth " The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (Conrad 5), as though the seeds of the British imperialist dream were being planted to spread like a field of wild daisies. No attempt is made of hiding the imperialist nature of the Europeans, while every attempt is made to present the actions of the protagonists with the nobility of missionaries " as though [they] had got a heavenly mission to civilize [the native peoples]" (Conrad 10). Conrad could not make this juxtaposition more manifest. It would often seem, to a neutral observer, as if Conrad had written *Heart of Darkness* merely as a propagandistic manifesto lionizing the illustriousness of imperialism.

In the sharpest contrast, Sembène's *Xala* brings the authors own unique perspective: that of an insider within the culture. Sembène understands African Culture in a way Conrad clearly does not, the result of an upbringing in Senegal immersed heavily within the culture. *Xala* follows the life of Abdou

Kader Beyè, referred to as “ El Hadji” in the novel, over the course of several weeks. El Hadji, a businessman native to Africa, as he descends from success to shame. In West African culture, taking on a third wife, as El Hadji does at the onset of the novel, is seen as making a man a leader or a noble captain. This cultural element, alongside the countless others Sembène includes, pay tremendous respect to the culture from which they originate, the exact opposite of Conrad’s work. This is even further underscored by the inclusion of the President of the Chamber, a character held in poor regard by his peers. When speaking to the protagonist, the President asserts “ In business you must have the Englishman’s self-control, the American’s flair, and the Frenchman’s politeness.” (Sembène 47), conflating success with the ways of prominent Western cultures. The President’s disconnection with his own country’s culture and his hunger for that of another is derided by El Hadji, who mocks the President, asking “ What are we? Clodhoppers! Agents! Petty traders! In our fatuity we call ourselves ‘ businessmen’! Businessmen without funds” (Sembène 48). His final line highlights the foreign interests that dictate the region’s economic power, with no true economic self-representation present. The contradistinction in just this one scene symbolizes Sembène’s greater disdain toward a Westernized, colonized Africa and his preference for the indigenous culture. Ultimately, Ousmane Sembène’s own West African roots enable him to offer one of the most authentic, scathing critiques of local culture, as he is perhaps the best positioned to observe it.

Conclusively, though the two authors are distinctly separated in their time periods, personal backgrounds, and literary depictions of African cultures,

they are bound together by a deliberate assertion of their unique perspectives. Both recognize the power of the perspectives from which they view the world around them, as ultimately, the power of literature to sort through a cultural cacophony and focus one's attention on the story of individuals transcends time and place.

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