

**AZUAH, Unoma Nguemo. 2005. *Sky-High Flames* (Novel). Baltimore: Publish America. 164 pages. ISBN 141373247X**

*reviewed by*

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### **Fierce, Yet Cleansing Flames**

*Sky-High Flames*, by Unoma Nguemo Azuah is set in Nigeria a generation ago. The dedication makes it plain that the novel is a fictionalization of the author's late aunt's story. The first chapter is set during a phase of limbo when the main protagonist, Ofunne Ofili, and her best friend, Awele Ojei, are awaiting news of their success in passing their primary school examinations. The first paragraph establishes the narrator's engaging voice in her specific family circumstances, as well as her wider cultural context:

"I was almost driven to hate my parents. My father never approved of anything I did. He felt he knew what was best for me, and my mother picked on me like a bird with a sharp beak. As the first daughter, I've always had to cater to everyone's need, but any minute spent by myself was called daydreaming. Maybe my father was impatient because he had two wives. He was either settling a quarrel or wondering what they were up to. They kept him busy. The first he inherited from his father. My mother, he married out of love. Maybe my mother was afraid I would fail her as a first daughter if she were not harsh with me. But for whatever reason my parents were the way they were, I couldn't wait to leave home and attend high school. I wanted to be well educated with a high school certificate. I wanted to become a teacher and get married to the man of my dreams. Then my life would take the course I wanted it to take. I would miss going down the Oshimili River; I would miss hunting for snails at its banks. I would even miss Iloba and Ike, my brothers, but I would be happy to take a break from my parents and to work towards what I want" (7).

Ofunne is immediately established as intelligent, perceptive, sensitive and moderate. Her rural life has offered her simple pleasures, but her family life presents difficulties with a particularly gendered dimension: her parents' polygynous marriage, her father's patriarchal role, and her mother's need to socialize her daughter appropriately to achieve social validation. While she attempts to understand the cause of these problems, and while she is loyal and loving towards her family, Ofunne's hope is to escape her parents and siblings and achieve her dreams of education and a happy marriage. As

with many a female *Bildungsroman*, however, these high hopes prove a poignant example of dramatic irony.

The second chapter explores a sense of culture shock as Ofunne and Awele become boarders in "Queen Elizabeth's dormitory" at a girls' high school run by white nuns. Azuah adopts the middle ground with regard to issues of colonialism, simultaneously revealing Eurocentrism and a lack of respect for indigenous names and customs on the part of the teachers, alongside a commendable dedication to education for their pupils. Ofunne successfully amalgamates aspects of the school's teachings and her traditional belief system, for instance adopting Christianity while retaining her belief in the river goddess Onishe; however, she is less successful in negotiating her family's pressure for her to enter into an arranged marriage, which curtails her opportunities to complete her education.

The remaining half of the novel reveals Ofunne's increasing disillusionment with her husband. Her loyalties are divided and she has difficulties in seeking help or speaking out against the abusive man. However, she is a resourceful woman, and sets up a business selling fish, which makes her financially independent. She also receives comfort from an older woman, and from a visit by her friend, Awele. After the stillbirth of her much wanted baby, Ofunne discovers that her lying, philandering husband has infected her with syphilis. This knowledge acts as a catalyst, and she decides to leave him, and take charge of her own destiny by resuming her education.

The novel successfully enters the consciousness of a young African woman faced with a number of typical problems in traditional societies: the domestic labour required of girls, and not their brothers, in preparation for a lifetime of drudgery; the requirement to fulfil social expectations by marrying; the attainment of social status through childbirth; and the expectation that wives will accede to the sexual double standard. Unlike Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1980 [1979]), however, which has a number of similar thematic concerns, *Sky-High Flames* is not a despondent text, as Ofunne does not vest her sense of self in others, but in herself. Although she has powerful dreams of foreboding, she trusts her own instincts sufficiently to move beyond victimhood to agency. Author Azuah's vision of marriage is a dark one, and she clearly reveals the power politics in sexual relations between men and women. Yet Ofunne's husband is not portrayed as a cardboard villain, and has moments of consideration and charm. The chief means of emotional support within the novel is provided

by female solidarity, although not all the female characters are trustworthy or kind. Like Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1984 [1973]), *Sky-High Flames* celebrates friendship between girls and between women, but illustrates the social pressures which make rivalry and distrust between women inevitable. *Sky-High Flames* ends with a brighter vision than *Sula*, however. The title can be interpreted as referring to the incendiary power of social and cultural obstacles in women's way; yet it also implies the conflagration of inner yearning experienced by women, which has the capacity to consume material problems in its quest for self-actualization and dignity. This ambiguity, along with the interstitiality and hybridity found in the novel, confer an emotional depth and suppleness to the dilemmas explored throughout the book.

Two minor complaints: a final edit should have eliminated some inconsistencies, such as variants in spelling on different occasions, and discrepancies in age over the course of the novel, and I was sorry that the brilliant cover art-work had no attribution.

Overall, though, *Sky-High Flames* is a sensitively written and absorbing novel, which will be of especial interest to readers with an interest in African writing, particularly Nigerian, and to those interested in novelistic explorations of gender issues. Azuah handles sensitive issues with forthright courage, and she has created an inspiring main character who lingers in the memory. Azuah's novel has deservedly won the 2006 Urban Spectrum Newspaper (Denver, US) National Best Novel by an African-born Writer Award.

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**Sembène, Ousmane. *Moolaadé* (Drama). 2004. Senegal/  
France/ Burkina Faso/ Cameroon/ Marocco/ Tunesia, Colour,  
120 min**

*reviewed by*

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“This is not a film about female circumcision, but about freedom”, Ousmane Sembène said at the premier screening of *Moolaadé* on April 26, 2006 in Berlin. While this statement points at some larger issues raised by the film – such as corruption, globalization, the divisions between generations as well as between the old, spiritual world and the new, secular one, which have been underrepresented in most reviews – Sembène’s following remarks, nevertheless, made clear that, of course, *Moolaadé* is a film about female circumcision.<sup>1</sup> According to Sembène, the film was deliberately directed in an African language, Bambara, to facilitate its reception in Senegal and to make it a didactic tool for local women’s workshops on circumcision some of which Sembène himself oversees. The director also told the audience of

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<sup>1</sup> No work on „female circumcision“ can afford to skip over the difficult question of terminology which has been an intrinsic part of debates on this subject. I have decided to use “female circumcision” in this review, mainly because this is the term Ousmane Sembène himself employs when referring to his directing of *Moolaadé*. Of course, this term needs to be problematized because of its implicit suggestion that female circumcision is somehow similar to male circumcision, which is certainly not the case. Therefore, my use of “female circumcision” is meant to be an expression of respect for the work of Sembène rather than the attempt to employ terminology which correctly describes the procedure under question. Occasionally, I also write “purification” because this is the word used throughout the film. The term “Female Genital Cutting” which I prefer for my own analysis of White hegemonic feminist discourses about this topic can be described as an emerging research paradigm which stands for a responsible, self-reflexive and anti-racist approach to this subject. Yet, it is also a term that has been introduced to discuss “corrective” surgery on intersex infants in the “West” in order to disclose the double standards inherent in “Western” feminist discourses on “female genital mutilation”. However, “female genital cutting” is not a term readily accepted in African Studies, which is why I do not use it here. And while I think that the use of “female genital mutilation” is justified in political contexts, such as campaigns for human rights, it has also been identified as an inherently biased term that has frequently prevented much-needed dialogues between African and Western feminists and activists. Therefore, what is important to keep in mind is that there is no such thing as neutral terminology. The only “solution” is to self-critically reflect on one’s use of terms and to take responsibility for that use.

his plans to synchronize the film in Wolof and Pular to make it understandable for people in other parts of West Africa as well. Sembène's denial to refer to the film solely as one about circumcision must be regarded as a rhetorical strategy to counteract the sensationalism and voyeurism the topic has spurred in the "West" within the past years.

*Moolaadé*, which is set in a tiny village in Burkina Faso, tells the story of various acts of courage. Six girls, who are about to be "purified" through the tradition of female circumcision, escape before they can be cut. Two of them make their way to the nearby city. Four others seek protection from Collé Ardo Gallo Sy, the second wife of Cire Bathily, a village elder. Collé, the film's protagonist, agrees to make her home a sanctuary for the girls by invoking a pre-Islamic custom, the *moolaadé*. She protects the girls by stretching a colored cord across the entrance of her compound – which represents *moolaadé* (or asylum) – and neither the circumcisers who soon arrive to claim the girls nor the male elders dare break the cord. As the story unfolds, we learn that, seven years ago, Collé had shielded her only daughter Amasatou from the ritual of "purification". Ever since, Amasatou has been regarded to be a *bilakoro*, an "unpurified" woman, who is not allowed to enter into a sexual or marital union with any man. Nevertheless, Amasatou is determined to follow her mother's path and intends to marry Ibrahim who has just returned from Paris and who happens to be the chief's son.

Collé's defiance and her strong will to not allow that the girls be cut, provokes an impressive show of force on part of the powerful. This includes the circumcisers who attempt to convince the village elders to take action against Collé and her allies, as well as Collé's brother-in-law who urges his younger brother to discipline his wife, which Cire Bathily eventually does in a scene of public whipping. Mercenaire, a shopkeeper who has just recently come to the village to sell his goods, is lynched by some of the male villagers because of his support for Collé and his clear stance against circumcision. Finally, the women's radios are confiscated and burned because they have been airing news that Islam neither requires nor generally accepts circumcision – an information that runs counter to what the village elders have proclaimed, namely that the tradition is demanded by Islam and that women must be "purified" before entering marriage. Despite the pressure that is being exerted on her, Collé does not lift the *moolaadé*, and the girls remain under her protection until one of them is kidnapped by the circumcisers and dies as a result of her wounds. Shortly after, we also learn that the two other girls who presumably escaped to the city have drowned themselves in a well. This tragic turn of events finally

leads to a change and contributes, together with the resistance on part of Ibrahima who keeps his promise to marry Amasatou even though she is not circumcised, to a more positive ending. The film eventually closes with a commitment on part of the villagers to eradicate this harmful tradition, and the circumcisers, one after the other, drop their knives.

*Moolaadé* is neither the first film about female circumcision nor is it the first film on this subject directed by an African in an African language. As early as in 1990, Cheik Oumar Sissoko's *Finzan, a Dance for Heroes* was released which addresses female circumcision using Bambara with English subtitles. In *Finzan*, issues dealing with gender are overlaid with the conflicts that arise between urban and village values. The film focuses on the relationship between Segi, a "modern" man who has just returned from France, and Fili, a village girl. Segi insists that Fili be circumcised before he would consider marrying her. Thus, despite his education abroad, Segi enforces the custom with even greater vigor than some of the more "traditional" village men (DeLuca and Kamenya 1995). While *Finzan* was mostly shown at small film festivals on "Third World" and women's issues, other films have attracted far more attention. This is especially true for Alice Walker's and Pratibha Parmar's 1993 documentary *Warrior Marks* which has been much criticized. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, for example, have demonstrated that this film remained a missionary project entrapped in a Western ethnographic cinematic tradition inseparably linked to the racialization and gendered "othering" of non-Western subjects (Grewal and Caplan 1999). Similar points of critique have been brought forward regarding *Finzan*, which has been perceived as portraying African women as "helpless victims with no agency of their own" and in need of outside assistance (DeLuca and Kamenya 1995, 85).

*Mooladé* differs from these predecessors in important ways, yet it also shares some of their problems. One of several strengths of the film is its sensitive portrayal of African men who are presented as complex characters rather than one-dimensional patriarchal figures in univocal support of female circumcision. Differences among men regarding status and power are being addressed in the same way as the pressures are shown which are placed on African men in the name of adequate masculine behaviour. This problematic is best illustrated in Collé's husband, a nice, but weak man who is under the thumb of a meddling older brother and who finally succumbs to beating his wife even though he loves her. And then, there is Mercenaire who represents the material Western world and who is a womanizer and scales-tipper. Being hardly a figure of morality, Mercenaire, nevertheless,

represents a freedom far more appealing than that which most villagers enjoy at the moment.

Given the nature of its topic and because of its scenes of violence and murder, one might think that *Moolaadé* is a gruesome or even downbeat film. This, however, is far from the truth. The film contains much humour and boasts a colourful cast. Yet, it is precisely this attention to colour which has prompted parts of the audience to argue that *Moolaadé* is a film that serves “the Western gaze”, confirming well-known images of Africa rather than questioning them. Are not brightly dressed Africans living in rural areas dominated by century-old traditions exactly what most Westerners associate with Africa? The title of a 2004 review of *Moolaadé* in the *Los Angeles Times* is indicative of this fear. “Horror in a Pastoral Setting”, the headline reads, thus neatly combining two sets of common stereotypes about Africa: its apparent close connection to nature and a “leisurely, ancient way of life” on the one hand, and its association with savagery and primitivism on the other hand (Thomas 2004). Not surprisingly, horror is first and foremost associated with the circumcisers, who, in *Moolaadé* as well, appear as evil and fear-inspiring women whose actions seem irrational and irresponsible. The use of dichotomies such as good vs. evil and progress vs. tradition, in whose logic most of what is good and progressive is also Western, contributes to this impression. The fact that Sembène manages to successfully subvert these dichotomies in a few instances and through the help of complex characters such as Mercenaire, cannot solve this general problem. And, finally, has not the result been achieved much too easily? If giving up female circumcision is really that unproblematic, why is it still so prevalent in many parts of Africa after more than thirty years of campaigning against it?

Of course, a film like *Moolaadé* which has been widely celebrated by women’s and human rights organizations as a statement against “female genital mutilation” can only end on a positive note. Despite some of the problems that it shares with other films which have focused on this difficult subject, *Moolaadé* will make a difference. After all, it is Ousmane Sembène himself – often referred to as the “father of African cinema” – who has directed this film. *Moolaadé* is his 16th movie and already one of his most successful. It has won the Grand Prize of the 2004 Cannes Film Festival’s “Un Certain Regard” section and has been shown in cinemas across Europe.

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