



TRANSGRESSING SILENCE: FEMALE AGENCY AND THE
POLITICS OF THE UNSPEAKABLE IN OUSMANE SEMBÈNE'S
WHITE GENESIS

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Abstract

Ousmane Sembène's *White Genesis* interrogates the intersections of religion, morality, and gender within a West African Muslim community. Centred on a forbidden taboo that is strategically obscured by communal silence, the novella reveals how patriarchal and religious structures suppress women's voices while masking deeper moral ruptures. This article analyses how Sembène reconfigures female silence as a form of resistance rather than a marker of submission. Drawing on postcolonial theory and Islamic feminist criticism, it argues that the figure of the "Other" woman traditionally burdened with shame and exclusion, emerges as a moral witness whose presence unsettles the authority of male-dominated institutions. By transforming silence into a medium of ethical intervention, *White Genesis* advances an African feminist vision rooted in moral accountability, communal responsibility and a redefinition of voice that exceeds the limits of spoken expression.

Keywords: Ousmane Sembène, *White Genesis*, female agency, silence and taboo, religion and patriarchy.

Introduction

Ousmane Sembène occupies a distinctive place in African literary and cinematic discourse as a writer committed to exposing the moral contradictions of postcolonial societies. In *White Genesis*, one of his provocative texts, yet least examined, he turns his attention to the interplay of religion, gender and moral authority within a Muslim West African community. The novella's engagement with an unspoken transgression that is carefully veiled in communal silence functions as both a social allegory and a feminist critique. Within this moral and spiritual landscape, Sembène foregrounds the figure of the West African Muslim woman, long constructed as the cultural "Other" in both Western and local patriarchal narratives, as a site of moral insight and resistance. Through her silence, he illuminates how women, particularly those rendered socially peripheral, confront and reinterpret the boundaries of faith and tradition. By portraying this "Other" woman as both victim and moral witness, Sembène exposes the patriarchal control of truth and the religious complicity that sustains it while suggesting the possibility of an alternative moral order grounded in female ethical insight. Cham (1984) once asserted that Sembène's creative vision appears to be driven by a commitment to unveiling the contradictions within postcolonial African societies. Whether in fiction or film, Sembène's narratives are grounded in a dialectical tension between oppression and consciousness, a

tension that propels both characters and readers towards ethical awakening (Snook, 2021). In *White Genesis*, this ideological thrust manifests through exposing the hypocrisy within both religious and customary authority, compelling the reader to confront societal structures that sustain women's subjugation (Vrancken, 2020). Similarly, although Murphy (2015) claims that Sembène sometimes operates within traditional notions of femininity, his work nevertheless opens up the terrain and gives voice to a wider range of concerns than was touched on by the preceding generation of African writers. According to him, Sembène's fiction as well as his films consistently "imagine alternatives" to oppressive social orders by centering the perspectives of the marginalized, particularly women and the poor. His aesthetic practice therefore functions as a form of moral pedagogy that seeks to awaken political and ethical consciousness through narrative. In its unflinching depiction of female suffering, communal complicity and moral decay, *White Genesis* embodies this artistic vision. More than a narrative of transgression, it unfolds as a sustained meditation on silence, faith and resistance, interrogating the ways religious belief and cultural tradition converge to reinforce patriarchal authority.

Theoretical Context: Orientalism, Postcolonial Feminism, and the Muslim Woman

The portrayal of the "Other" woman is central to both colonial and patriarchal discourses that inform and shape representations of Muslim women in literature and society. More than any other figure, the Muslim woman has come to symbolize the *otherness* of Islam and of Islamic societies. Across literary and media representations, she is habitually portrayed as static, unchanging, tradition-bound and eternally confined within patriarchal structures, while on the other hand, women elsewhere are seen as moving steadily toward autonomy and modernity, embodying mobility, choice and self-realization. Within colonial epistemologies, the Muslim woman emerges as a key figure through which the cultural, moral and civilizational difference of Islamic societies is imagined, produced and maintained. She becomes a symbolic site upon which anxieties about religion, modernity and gender are projected. Her identity is framed through tropes of veiling, seclusion and silence, which are taken as visible markers of an entrenched patriarchal order.

This binary not only erases the diversity and dynamism of Muslim women's lived experiences but also reinforces power asymmetries in global knowledge production. It obscures the ways in which Muslim women negotiate, reinterpret and challenge patriarchal structures within their own societies, while simultaneously positioning them as passive subjects awaiting liberation from external forces. Consequently, the representation of the Muslim woman as the quintessential "Other" becomes a discursive strategy that legitimizes both colonial paternalism and patriarchal authority, shaping how she is perceived, written and spoken about in literature, media and public discourse.

Sociologists and Muslim feminist writers such as Mehdid (1998) and Mernissi (1991, 2001) posit that such reductive and devaluing images of the Muslim woman continue to dominate Western discourse perpetuating a legacy of representation that is rooted in early Orientalist imaginaries. These depictions, often filtered through the colonial gaze, portray the Muslim woman as sexually repressed, socially secluded and entirely subservient to male authority. Such imagery not only homogenizes diverse cultural experiences but also functions as a discursive tool that reinforces the binary opposition between the "liberated" Western woman and her supposedly "oppressed" Muslim counterpart. El-Solh and Mabro (1994) similarly observe that within Western narratives, the Muslim woman has historically been confined to an emblematic role, imprisoned in seclusion and portrayed

as a perennial victim devoid of agency, intellect, or individuality. They argue this persistent stereotype serves ideological ends to validate Western feminist interventions and to reinforce civilizational hierarchies under the guise of emancipation. Nour (2021) reiterates that such reductive constructions remain deeply ingrained in Western cultural and academic discourses where the Muslim woman continues to function as a symbol of oppression rather than a complex historical subject. Consequently, these portrayals obscure the realities of Muslim women's lives, silencing indigenous voices and erasing the multifaceted negotiations through which women in Islamic contexts articulate their subjectivities.

Furthermore, Lazreg (1988) observes that Western feminist discourse often reproduces the logic of patriarchal theology in its tendency to deprive Muslim women of self-presence and agency. She argues that in much of modernization theory "a ritual is established whereby the writer appeals to religion as the source of underdevelopment. In an uncanny way, feminist discourse on women from the Middle East and North Africa (Muslim women) appears to mirror that of the theologian's interpretations of women in Islam. The overall effect of this paradigm is to deprive women of self-presence, of being" (p.87). For Lazreg, such a discourse normalizes the association between religion and underdevelopment, constructing as it does a narrative that erases historical and cultural specificity. By homogenizing "Other" women within a singular framework, Western feminism paradoxically reproduces the very structures of epistemic dominance that it purports to challenge.

This erasure of difference is rigorously contested by Muslim feminist scholars Fatima Mernissi, (1991), Leila Ahmed (2012), Nawal El Saadawi (2024) whose discursive interventions have reintroduced historical complexity, theological nuance and sociocultural context into the study of women's experiences in Muslim societies. Prior to their contributions, feminist discourse on Muslim women framed a secular Western-informed model of emancipation against an oppressive, religious, Islamic counterpart. Mernissi (1992) in particular challenges this binary by revisiting Islam's foundational texts to demonstrate that principles of dignity, equality and social participation "stem from no imported values but are a true part of the Muslim tradition (pp. vii–viii)." In this regard, her view aligns with Lazreg's critique of Western feminist discourse. Both scholars, though writing from distinct perspectives, reveal how Western feminism can inadvertently replicate the epistemic violence of Orientalism when it positions itself as the ultimate arbiter of women's liberation.

Within this broader framework, Said's *Orientalism* (1978) provides a critical lens through which to understand how the "Muslim" has historically been conflated with the "Oriental," a figure constructed as primitive, static and in need of civilizing intervention. This model remains profoundly relevant as recent scholarship demonstrates that the underlying logic of Orientalist discourse continues to shape media and academic representations of Islam and Muslims (Mostefa & Benneghrouzi, 2018; Shi, 2023). Consequently, Islam continues to be portrayed as a monolithic and ahistorical entity, a depiction that obscures its internal diversity and dynamic evolution. Such representations also effectively erase the spiritual and cultural specificities of non-Arab Muslim communities particularly those in regions such as West Africa. The marginalization of Muslims in this area is thus reinforced within global narratives of Islam. But Sulaiman and Sulaiman (2022) argue that far from being passive recipients of religious tradition, African Muslim women have asserted agency and intellectual presence even within Islamic movements that emerge from time to time in the sub-Saharan West African space and in so doing redefine both faith and gender discourse in local contexts. Drawing on postcolonial and Islamic feminist critiques, *White Genesis* revisits the

figure of the Muslim woman to challenge the homogenizing tendencies of Orientalist and patriarchal discourses, reasserting her as a subject of historical agency, moral authority and cultural complexity. The following examines how Sembène's *White Genesis* negotiates female agency through the transgression of silence and the politics of the unspeakable within a patriarchal religious social order. Centered on the communal crisis that is provoked by an act of incest, the novella exposes the tensions between moral law, religious authority and social hypocrisy. It argues that Sembène reconfigures silence from a metaphor of subjugation into a site of moral and political power thereby revealing the complex ways in which women reclaim agency within the intersecting discourses of Islam, tradition and communal ethics. By foregrounding women's defiance and moral authority, *White Genesis* portrays the unspeakable not merely as a violation of social taboos but as a space where suppressed truths and collective guilt are negotiated. This study investigates how the novella transforms silence into a mode of resistance and employs the notion of the unspeakable to interrogate patriarchal and religious authority. It further explores how Sembène articulates an indigenous feminist consciousness grounded in the coexistence of Islamic and traditional moral frameworks. Employing these lines of inquiry, the narrative is situated within postcolonial feminist debates on gender, voice and representation in African literature.

Silence and Female Agency

The position of the West African woman requires analysis through frameworks that recognise the intersecting forces of gender, faith and culture, as her social identity is shaped by the interplay of these factors. However, as noted by Mohanty (1988), Western feminist discourse have often "colonized the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of other women" (p.61) imposing universalized categories of analysis on contexts it scarcely understands. As Ong (1988) also claims, the assumption that "Europe is theory" and Africa merely the "native informant" continues to permeate much feminist scholarship. Within this framework, Western feminists frequently assert interpretive authority, speaking for non-Western women and defining for them the terms and objectives of emancipation. The result is a composite and reductive image of the African woman as ignorant, voiceless and perpetually oppressed a trope that erases cultural differences and historical complexity.

For Muslim women in West Africa, constrained as they are both by Orientalist constructions of Islam and by Western feminist misreading that fail to recognize the nuanced ways in which agency is exercised within their religious and cultural worlds, this distortion is doubly restrictive. Hence, any meaningful discussion of women's subjectivity in West African literature inevitably entails an engagement with the intersections of feminism, faith and identity especially as in much of the region, religious belief whether Islamic or Christian serves as a central determinant of social belonging, moral conduct, and gender relations. Consequently, West African women's struggle for agency unfolds not in opposition to religion but through it in ways that challenge both patriarchal readings of faith and secular feminist assumptions about liberation.

The pertinent question here is not simply how women resist oppression, but how they reinterpret belief systems to authorize new forms of selfhood and participation. This alternative perspective is illuminated by the works of Islamic feminists Fatima Mernissi (1991, 2001), Leila Ahmed(1992) and Amina Wadud (2006) as well as African feminists who articulate visions of gender justice grounded in local epistemologies such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie(1994), Obioma Nnaemeka (2004) and

Clenora Hudson-Weems (2024) who propose frameworks such as Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), Nego-feminism (the feminism of negotiation and “no ego”), and Africana womanism which privilege complementarity, dialogue and communal well-being over confrontation between the two genders. Thus, both African and Islamic feminist frameworks challenge the persistent Western feminist binary of “tradition versus modernity” in representations of African and Muslim women. The critical task here is to uncover how religiously informed identities can function as sites of resistance and renewal rather than subjugation. It is within this **paradigm** of belief, gender and social transformation that the female characters in Sembène’s *White Genesis* are positioned, revealing both the burdens and the possibilities of being Muslim, female, and African in a society where silence and transgression coexist in a state of unresolved tension.

Female Transgression and the Politics of Silence in *White Genesis*

First published in 1966 by *Présence Africaine* and later translated into English by Clive Wake as part of the Heinemann African Writers Series, *White Genesis* (*Vehi-Ciosane*) appears alongside *The Money Order* (*Le Mandat*) as a single collection. Although *The Money Order* has attracted more critical attention, *White Genesis* occupies a distinctive position within the canon of postcolonial African literature as one of the earliest fictional works to interrogate the intersections of Islam, tradition, and gender in postcolonial Senegal, inspiring writers such as Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall. Despite its relative neglect, the novella remains remarkable for its courageous engagement with a taboo, particularly incest, as a means of examining the moral and spiritual contradictions of a patriarchal and religious society. This approach aligns with Harmer’s (2000) analysis which situates incest not merely as a private pathology but as a phenomenon sustained by social silence, patriarchal authority, and cultural mechanisms of denial, and is further reinforced by recent empirical studies (Ojen & Nweze, 2025) which show how kinship systems and communal authority maintain the incest taboo within African societies.

From the onset, the novella’s linguistic and cultural markers deepen its sense of authenticity and rootedness. Sembène begins by noting that the Wolof term **niaye** is singular, even though French colonial administrators erroneously treated it as plural, a small detail but it underscores the postcolonial critique of the colonial tendency to misread African cultural systems. This sensitivity to language becomes central to the narrative’s construction of its religio-cultural world. Anchored in Wolof markers of time and place, *White Genesis* unfolds within a distinctly Senegalese Muslim milieu. Against this backdrop, the communal crisis provoked by an act of incest exposes the volatile interplay between moral law, religious authority, and social hypocrisy, revealing how cultural and linguistic specificity shapes the community’s ethical and spiritual negotiations. Throughout the narrative, greetings, exclamations, and curses embedded in the dialogue not only identify the characters as Wolof Muslims but also register how Islam permeates the cadences of daily life. The inhabitants of Santhiu-Niaye are portrayed as devout believers who “wear away the skins on their foreheads and knees in prayer five times a day” (9), yet they also “sought comfort in the *adda*, the tradition” (10).

In the novella, Sembène depicts a society whose moral life rests on the dual foundations of Islam and tradition. The people of Santhiu-Niaye navigate a cultural landscape in which religious and customary codes coexist, sometimes harmoniously, at other times in tension. Thus, communal crises are

managed through appeals to multiple systems of belief. When confronted with the incestuous act committed by Guibril Guej Diop, a religious leader, village leaders waver between enforcing Islamic injunctions or upholding traditional law. One elder insists, “According to Koranic law, Guibril Guej Diop deserves to die. That is what the scriptures say” (42), while another declares, “The adda [tradition] has always been the first rule in the lives of our fathers. If that rule is broken, it deserves either death or expulsion” (42). Here, Islam and tradition are presented as distinct, even competing moral authorities. The council’s dilemma is not only how to administer justice but which system, the Islamic or the traditional, has been most profoundly violated. As in Ibrahim Tahir’s *The Last Imam* (1984) when these moral orders conflict, tradition ultimately prevails, revealing its deeper hold on communal consciousness. The revelation of the incestuous relationship between Diop and his daughter ruptures the veneer of communal piety, exposing the contradictions that sustain its moral system. The ensuing turmoil arises less from the sin itself than from the challenge it poses to patriarchal structures that underpin religious and social authority. Through this moment of transgression, Sembène skillfully exposes the moral hypocrisy of male leaders who manipulate sacred and moral codes to preserve their dominance.

Employing the female body as a symbolic terrain upon which issues of purity, violation and redemption are negotiated, Sembène reveals the intricate interrelation of faith, gendered authority and moral responsibility within a postcolonial African context. The complexity of his representation of women arises from an intricate weaving of religion, tradition, gender, morality and justice, all of which converge in the struggle of Ngoné War Thiandum. Her psychological evolution from a psyche crippled by submissive fear to one that questions the status quo is explored through the depiction of her mental anguish. As mother and wife, Ngoné embodies the internalization of patriarchal and religious codes that deny women both voice and agency. Confronted with the scandal of incest, she is consumed by shame and guilt, ultimately choosing suicide as her only available form of protest within a system that permits neither speech nor redress. The father’s eventual murder by his deranged son and the daughter’s expulsion from the village further expose the community’s moral complicity and a social order that silences female suffering while protecting male transgression.

Reclaiming Agency: The Evolution of the “Other” Woman in *White Genesis*

More than any other character in the novella, Ngoné embodies the tensions within her society. Placed in immediate proximity to the consequences of her husband’s incestuous act, she is forced to question and re-evaluate all aspects of her life, including her identity as a Muslim woman:

“Like all women from these parts, Ngoné War Thiandum had her place in the society, a society sustained by maxims, wise sayings and recommendations of passive docility: woman this, woman that, fidelity, unlimited devotion and total submission of body and soul to the husband who was her master after Yallah, so that he might intercede in her favour for a place in paradise” (p. 14).

Sembène renders Ngoné’s state of mind with striking clarity. What may be dismissed as ‘outdated’ ideas is in fact, a deeply internalized amalgam of traditional norms and Islamic precepts governing proper female conduct, frameworks that continue to shape the perceptions and self-understanding of many West African women. Such conditioning is not easily overcome. Even the more formally educated and ostensibly ‘enlightened’ Ramatoulaye in Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* concedes at a

moment of acute emotional turmoil that “my heart concurs with the demand of religion. Reared since childhood in their strict precepts I expect not to fail” (p. 8). Her admission underscores how powerfully early socialization, reinforced by religious and cultural authority, continues to shape women’s responses long after they might intellectually question these norms. In another of his novels, *God’s Bits of Wood* (1962) Sembène describes Assitan as a woman who “lived on the margins of her husband’s existence, a life of work, silence and patience” But unlike Assitan who never challenges her subordination, Ngoné’s thoughts oscillate between prayerful supplication to Allah and a catalogue of grievances against the constraints imposed upon her as a woman. As she confronts the chaos that emerges when faith and tradition fail to deliver justice, her troubled mind begins to interrogate her own place and role within society. This internal struggle marks the beginning of a gradual psychological transformation which compels her to reassess the nature of existence, the values of her community and her position within it.

The collective silence that follows the revelation of incest parallels Ngoné’s personal muteness, revealing how complicity and repression sustain patriarchal authority. The community’s concern is not for the victim but for the preservation of social order; the marabout’s spiritual authority shields him from condemnation, while the villagers’ refusal to acknowledge the act transforms silence into an instrument of preservation. Women, in particular, are coerced into this silence that is socially lauded as modesty and piety. Yet within this enforced silence, Sembène inscribes subtle acts of defiance, glances, refusals, and endurance that quietly contest the imposed narrative of shame.

In *White Genesis*, silence is neither absence nor passivity instead it is a deliberate ethical and narrative strategy through which female agency is explored. Ngoné’s muteness, her eventual self-destruction and the community’s collective denial transform silence into a discourse of guilt, repression, and moral critique. In Santhiu-Niaye, speech is tightly controlled by men, yet it is in women’s silence that the novella locates moral reflection, spiritual insight, and subtle resistance. By framing silence as both an imposed condition and a self-fashioned form of defiance, Sembène destabilizes dominant hierarchies of power and meaning. The unspeakable embodied in the incestuous act and its concealment becomes a narrative space through which women assert agency. In this way, Sembène reconfigures silence into an active, ethically charged discourse, demonstrating how women can resist and critique the very structures designed to render them voiceless.

In portraying Ngoné’s frustrations, ontological questions are raised both at the level of the individual and of the larger society. According to Case (1993), culture and religion are interdependent aspects of being therefore it is hardly surprising that in a society that is at once overtly Islamic and traditional African, expressions of being are revealed through factors that are both non-Islamic as well as those that are clearly Islamic in origin. The way Ngoné sees herself and what she considers permissible action on her part is a measure of the extent to which she has internalized, and in some ways, even perpetuate some the oppressive practices of her society. Even when her worst fear is confirmed, she remains incapable of confronting her husband with the knowledge of his incestuous act because in this society, to question things is especially for women seen as ‘a betrayal of their faith, an act of defiance and a crime against the established order (p.10)’. So morally defeated, she continues to receive her husband into her bed.

In significant contrast, while she feels virtually powerless as a woman, she takes pride in her noble caste, the source of another’s oppression. Her family motto shows her the stance she must take: ‘Rather die a thousand deaths in a thousand ways each more terrible than the other than endure an

insult for a single day' (p.23). And yet as a woman, she endured many confirming Ogundipe-Leslie's assertion that 'the most important challenge to the African woman is her own self-perceptions, it is she who has to define her own freedom (1994, p27) In the end, it is Ngone's desire to protect the honor of her family and caste that strengthens her resolve to act as she discovers 'her own capacity to assess events from her own woman's point of view (p. 23)'. Sembene deliberately allows this realization, that is, the possibility that she might after all be responsible for making her own decisions dawn on her after she begins to understand that the door to paradise which is supposed open for her through her husband has been slammed shut by his incest.

The truth of Islam is not questioned directly but nonetheless, it is blamed for the passive inertia it fosters. The subsequent actions Ngone takes continue the break with restrictive beliefs and traditions unleashing the potential inherent within herself and in her daughter through the alternatives she makes possible for her. With the help of her life-long friend Gnagna Guisse, she sets about arranging the future. In a significant departure from both tradition and Islam which require the child to take the name of its father, she bequeaths all her worldly possessions and the noble name of Thiandum on her daughter's child. The idea that because Muslim women activities are largely confined to the domestic sphere means they lack influence is thus belied by the collaborative actions of the two women, Ngone and Gnagna Guisse. Their efforts to resolve the problem of incest are unobtrusive but they nevertheless influence the outcome of the crisis. Even Khar resists the temptation to abandon the baby who would probably be a handicap in her attempt at making a new life away from the village. This effectively signals a turning point, from being a vulnerable child into a self-assertive woman and thereby restoring balance to the natural cycle. The novel seems to suggest that when men abdicate responsibility, it is up to women to take over the reins and force the pace of change. Ngone's suicide finally galvanizes the community into some reaction leading to the banishment Khar from the village.

In engaging with the theme of father-daughter incest Sembene has chosen not to treat it as a matter of fantasy or desire as Bessie Head does in *The Cardinals*, but rather, he is more concerned in what it reveals about the place of women, the trauma it engenders, and the silence it teaches. Neither father nor the daughter speaks in the novel. Instead, it is left to the griot, Dethye Law, to sum up Khar's predicament 'Can a daughter declare publicly: "The child I am carrying is my father's?" (p.46). Through Khar's silence, the novel makes a statement about women's loss of speech and concomitant loss of power. Not only is the community shrouded in silence and secrecy, the text itself revolves around the unspeakable because what is taboo is frequently a prohibition against speaking or writing about it.

Therefore, the crisis generated by the incest in *White Genesis* is articulated not through direct confrontation but through a pervasive, charged silence that functions simultaneously as an instrument of control and site of agency. In Sembène's narrative, silence signifies more than the aftereffect of subjugation; it becomes a site of profound moral and psychological tension through which patriarchal authority is exposed and critiqued. Positioned at the intersection of faith, familial duty, and communal expectation, Ngoné, wife of a marabout and mother of the victim, embodies this tension. Her refusal or inability to speak publicly about the transgression reveals both her internalised subordination and the wider structures that render women voiceless. Within the rigid moral framework of Santhiu-Niaye, women's speech is equated with scandal and impropriety, while silence is idealised as virtue. Sembène subverts this logic by investing Ngoné's silence with tragic eloquence:

her suicide becomes not an act of passivity but a devastating, wordless indictment of the religious and social hypocrisy that shields male offenders from scrutiny.

This dynamic unfolds within what Spivak identifies as the discursive conditions that predetermine the intelligibility of subaltern speech. Women like Ngoné occupy a structural position in which to speak is to risk re-inscription into patriarchal meaning. Thus, silence emerges not as absence but as what Spivak (1988) terms a “strategic refusal”, a mode of agency enacted within, and against, hegemonic discourse (p.308). Ngoné cannot publicly name the incest without being disciplined by a system that construes female articulation as shameful, yet her silence generates an excess of meaning that the patriarchal order cannot contain. Nnaemeka’s notion of nego-feminism (2004) further illuminates how silence operates in the novella as a negotiated form of agency. Nego-feminism emphasises tactical, context-sensitive strategies through which African women navigate and contest power. Ngoné’s silence, the general muteness of the women of Santhiu-Niaye exemplifies this negotiated resistance. Their refusal to speak is neither full compliance nor open rebellion, but a calibrated engagement with power that exposes the moral inconsistencies of the male elite. In their silence lies a counter-discursive critique that refuses to legitimise patriarchal narratives through sanctioned forms of speech.

Bringing Spivak’s (1999) notion of strategic opacity into dialogue with Nnaemeka’s (2004) theorisation of negotiated resistance, silence in *White Genesis* emerges as a discourse that exceeds the binary of voice and voicelessness. Rather than signalling passive erasure, silence becomes a modality through which women navigate a socio-religious order that renders their voices simultaneously dangerous and undesirable. The community’s collective refusal to name the transgression, Ngoné’s muteness, and her final act of self-destruction transform silence into a dense field of guilt, repression, emotional dissonance, and moral commentary. In this configuration, silence functions both as a symptom of patriarchal constraint and as a coded language through which submerged tensions are articulated.

For the women of Santhiu-Niaye, speech is foreclosed by social and religious systems that equate female expression with shame, dishonour, or disruption of communal unity. Yet Sembène renders their very silence expressive, converting it into an indictment of the moral duplicity that structures their world. Their muteness exposes the contradictions of a community that proclaims religious piety while refusing accountability, and it gestures toward a counter-discursive space in which women’s interior lives—though unspoken—subvert the normative frameworks that silence them. In this sense, silence in the novella becomes not merely the absence of speech but a calibrated response to a patriarchal economy of meaning, one that both reveals and resists the ethical failures embedded within the social order.

It is within this fraught interplay between imposed muteness and unspoken defiance that the novella situates female agency suggesting that resistance may emerge not only through articulation but also through the strategic reappropriation of silence itself. By framing silence as both a condition imposed by patriarchal structures and a deliberately fashioned mode of expression, Sembène destabilises dominant hierarchies of power and meaning. The unspeakable embodied both in the incest and in its communal concealment becomes the narrative site through which women challenge selective moralism and articulate alternative forms of subjectivity. In this way, silence is reconfigured as an active discourse of agency, enabling women to subvert the very structures designed to confine them.

Conclusion

In *White Genesis*, the “Other” woman evolves from a passive emblem of shame to a figure of moral and ethical agency illustrating the complex ways women navigate oppressive social, religious and patriarchal structures. Ngoné War Thiandum and her daughter embody the cost of internalized subordination, yet their suffering is not merely personal, it becomes a lens through which the novella interrogates communal hypocrisy and systemic injustice. The daughter’s body, marked by the marabout’s transgression, functions as both a site of unspeakable trauma and a bearer of moral witness, exposing the limits of patriarchal piety that silences women under the guise of preserving spiritual order.

Ngoné’s psychological journey from fear and compliance to reflection and subtle resistance demonstrates the ways in which agency can operate through endurance, moral courage and critical consciousness rather than overt rebellion. Her eventual suicide, while tragic, serves as a silent denunciation of social and religious hypocrisy. This transforms her death into a morally potent act that unsettles the foundations of authority. In this context, silence is both a wound and a weapon: a tool imposed by patriarchal structures, yet simultaneously a space through which women assert critique and reclaim interpretive power. Sembène further situates the evolution of the “Other” woman within the ethical framework of the griot tradition as Dethye Law, a truth-telling figure marginalized by caste and community reveals the risks and limitations of speaking against entrenched authority. By juxtaposing Ngoné’s muted suffering with the griot’s contested voice, Sembène emphasizes that female agency emerges not only in verbal articulation but also in the strategic use of silence, endurance and moral witnessing.

Through this layered representation, the novella demonstrates that reclaiming voice and agency is a gradual and psychologically complex process. It challenges reductive portrayals of Muslim women as passive or voiceless highlighting instead the interplay of faith, culture and personal conscience that shapes ethical action. In doing so, Sembène transforms the violated female body into a site of reflection, resistance and moral awakening marking the painful but necessary genesis of social consciousness. Ultimately, *White Genesis* positions female transgression and silent endurance as radical instruments of critique and reform. The evolution of the “Other” woman underscores that true agency is not merely the capacity to speak but the ability to expose injustice, contest authority and catalyze moral reflection within communities structured to suppress dissent. In this way, Sembène restores the female voice, whether articulated or silent, as a central medium for ethical, social and spiritual reckoning.

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