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Screening Journal

Faat Kiné and the Power of the African Woman Character in Film

The Senegalese film *Faat Kiné* is centered around Kiné, a successful gas station owner and mother. Her children's upcoming graduation from high school leads to a series of events that bring Kiné's struggled past back to life, changing the way everyone involved comes to see her and their own selves. Kiné is a character who is successful, willful and caring despite being unaligned with the traditional ideas of African womanhood. Film is a medium in which representation can shift the ideas of the audience, and *Faat Kiné* is an example of how that power can be wielded. She exercises her agency proudly and with integrity, which stirs the strong-held values of her Muslim Senegalese society and forces the audience to reconsider their beliefs surrounding gender roles in Africa.

Faat Kiné is an independent woman who has gained success in a largely patriarchal society. While her agency is realized, those around her are either affirmed by it or angered by it, affecting the way she moves and is perceived in society. Her character is an example of how women hold up societies in Africa and often do not receive credit for it. Men are not encouraged to take responsibility for their wrongdoings. Their agency as men is fully realized, and often they do not face consequences for violent, abusive or neglectful acts. M. Gaye even feels comfortable to pursue Kiné as a second wife, an example of the entitlement that is normalized. Her success was unlikely as a scorned African woman with two children, yet she was able to succeed by maintaining connections and establishing her position in the gasoline business. Lacking a college

degree, she can attain financial freedom independently. This angers male and female characters in the cast and men attempt to curtail Kiné's sense of agency by questioning her audacity to be a self-sufficient, actualized woman. At lunch, when Kiné's friend accuses her of being jealous of her toxic relationship with her remarried husband, we see that her assertion that women should protect themselves financially, physically and emotionally from the destructive will of men is indicative of a woman with wicked intentions. Eventually, Kiné, her family and her friends acknowledge and embody the idea that women can have control of their lives in all aspects without being considered treacherous. Kiné and Uncle Jean's love scene at the end of the film signifies a shift in Kiné's agency. Her open and receiving posture when she is beckoning Jean signifies a resolution of all the restrictive pressures she had been facing throughout the film. She is exercising her agency by making herself available on her own terms and calling Jean to her, as opposed to being pursued by him. Ultimately, Kiné can truly recognize her agency as an African woman as a result of this transition.

Faat Kiné's role as a strong female character in the film despite her disparaging upbringing challenges the traditional ideals of middle-class Senegalese society and empowers her children, family and friends to reimagine their roles in their lives and their senses of right and wrong. She embodies the idea that women characters do not need to be strictly masculine to succeed and can exert both femininity and masculinity. Women are central to the film, their characters major players in their destinies as well as others, both positively and negatively. The shots where Kiné is negotiating the price of gasoline with various bankers and businessmen show her as an African woman commanding her rightful spot among the economic elite of their community. The framing of these images pushes against the assumption that African women are most successful in the domestic sphere or operating under the leadership of a

man. Kiné's display of self-assertiveness and ambition affect the people around her. The character of Djib is the most powerful display of the transformative power of Fat Kiné and what she represents in the shift of modern-day African values. Djib's public denial of his father shows that Kiné's choices as a Muslim African woman to support her children with integrity and hold their fathers accountable for their transgressions profoundly affects his value system. In the changing Senegalese landscape, traditionalist and modern ideals exist in growing tension. The traditional expectation that Djib accept his father's abandonment does not align with his belief in the future of Africa. His mother and grandmother's resilience in the face of influences that encourage their demise makes Djib realize that there needs to be a shift in the way power is distributed in Senegal and beyond, Africa. We see the transformative power of representation through Fat Kiné's characterization in the film and how it affects the way the characters and audience understand African women and how they are changing the continent.

Faat Kiné is a film that utilizes character development and shot framing to express the central themes of agency and the transformative power of representation. Sembene is a director that made clear political statements that challenged the existing ideals of various African societies. He creates characters in his films who are both progressive and stagnant, highlighting the complex, constantly evolving role of African women in society and their importance to the sustained future of Africa.