

A SURVEY OF AFRICAN FEMALE WRITERS: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MARIAMA BÂ

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Abstract

The earlier African male literary tradition has not only presented the subordination of women in literature, but for a long time, the women writers were excluded from the literary tradition. The women writers in Africa are the other voice, the unheard voice. This ignoring of women writers has almost become an unhealthy tendency in Africa. Irrespective of the pressing conditions of the hostile forces against women, a few female writers made Herculean attempts to establish and assert feminine identity. They were joined by some male writers who tried to take cognizance of women writers. This is a development that shows a sense of improvement in the awareness of female writers. The female writers such as Bâ, Aidoo, and Nwapa have questioned some of the traditional attitudes to womanhood and woman's place in the society. They have raised their concerns about the issues like patriarchy, polygamy, female subordination and enslavement, particularly in the marital institution.

Keywords: literary tradition, unheard voice, patriarchy, polygamy, female subordination, enslavement etc.

The present research paper is an attempt to present the reality of the African literary tradition. The female writers like Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ unite their efforts for the struggle for women's rights. These writers have intrinsically linked women's subject-hood and sexuality with that of men. Alternatively, women writers like Aidoo, Sutherland and Nwapa have made distinctive contributions to the genres in which they work. They have evolved their themes in such a way that their chosen forms are inevitably inseparable from the manner in which they perceive women and understand the society in general. The women characters in their writings do not reject their commitments, but they exercise their choice in a way they wish to fulfill them. In this regard, Ghana's Ama Ata Aidoo's fictional world presents the women characters within the prescribed social norms. In *The Dilemma of Ghost* (1965) Aidoo explores the complex environment of the African family. The basic dilemma that Aidoo explores through this novel is: How do those who stayed behind explain African norms about family to those whose ancestors went away and become a part of western norms and values? The significant thing in the novel is

that Ghana in question is new to all the characters. It is in this new situation that everyone strives for harmony, full participation and recognition.

Aidoo's narrative vision brings the old and the new together in perfect harmony. However, the narrative insists on the fact that the new dispensation need not be a negative experience for Africans, especially women. Aidoo's narrative, therefore, uses female characters from both sides of the African experiences of enslavement and colonialism. Her narrative project forcefully asserts that the female principle can be used to heal the chasm between the old and the new, the educated elite of the new dispensation and the uneducated traditional leaders.

Nwapa's presentation of *Efuru* (1966), in her various roles and functions, epitomizes traditional narrative practices and modes. Initially, Efuru's role in the novel begins with that of a barren woman. As a childless woman, her character challenges the notion of Naneka – Mother-is-Supreme – a concept Achebe introduces in his exploration of Okonkwo's exile in Mbanta, his mother's home of birth. Nwapa appears to be in perfect agreement with Achebe's articulation of duality-in-existence: wherever something stands, some other thing will automatically stand beside it. Nwapa presents in her novel a character whose inability to be biologically productive poses a major social dilemma expressed by Naneka: what happens when the woman is without a child? Do women without children share in the power that motherhood endows on mothers in the society?

At end of the story, Nwapa solves the puzzle by presenting Ugwuta-Igbo in the form of Uhamiri, the woman of the lake, who aids Efuru as a redemptive character to overcome her childlessness. Nwapa's novel presents that Uhamiri's abundant wealth provides an opposite and necessary complement for the disabled condition of childlessness. Efuru's prosperity provides an alternate avenue to motherhood. She uses this new prosperity to take care of Ogea, her parents and others in the community who would otherwise have no access to the benevolent interventions associated with motherhood. Efuru emerges successful from this intricate web of relationships and assumes a new name of admiration, Nwaononaku (the one-who-dwells-in-wealth), a manifestation of an economically productive life. Efuru's effortless profits in the marketplace reflect an ideologically rich resource base which the community supports using the Uhamiri metaphor.

Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1994) traces gender inequality in the Igbo society as a hinge on the tenets of the gender socialization process, customary and traditional practices. Oshia, the son of Nnu Ego, refuses to fetch water for his step-mother, emphasizing that he is a boy: "why should I help in cooking? That is a woman's job". (154) In Oshia's society, it was customary for girls to be forced into early marriage and the bride price [dowry received] used in sending boys to school. This is aptly illustrated in the novel where Adankwo, the widow inherited by Nnaife, declares that the twins, upon reaching the age of puberty, will be forced into marriage so that the bride price obtained will be used in paying the fees of their brother.

Buchi Emecheta's fifth novel, *Double Yoke* (1982), is dedicated to an examination of the place of African women and, occasionally, of British women. Her novels make clear the fact that the failure to realize their true selves will be disadvantageous for them, however talented or ambitious they may be. Altogether, these novels furnish the most sustained and vigorous defense of the cause of women in African literature. Emecheta's voice is one of direct feminist protests aiming at an explicit confrontation with what she considers to be a male-oriented world. Her novels also provide an insight into those weaknesses and misconceptions in the women

themselves which tend to perpetuate their humiliation and state of subjugation. Commenting on this aspect of Emecheta's works, Lloyd W. Brown writes:

In Emecheta we detect ... an increasing emphasis on the woman's sense of self, as the writer has matured and as that maturity enables her to deal more and more adeptly and convincingly with the subtleties of characterization and private introspectiveness. With Emecheta the fervour and rhetoric of protest - that is, the explicit and unequivocal denunciation of the sexual status quo - have not diminished. If anything, she has become increasingly successful in blending the rhetoric of impassioned protest with her maturing talent for characterization. (1981: 36)

It is by way of addressing women's issues such as motherhood, marriage and polygamy, witchcraft and otherness, twentieth-century African women writers have not only created a room of their own, but more significantly have made forcible entry into writing, hitherto the preserve of men. The African women writers, who are doubly marginalized, recognize the power of writing as a negotiating tool in the struggle to dictate their own terms. This is precisely the case of

A well known scholar Sarvan argues that, "The new African women, the feminists that Bâ portrays are all influenced by European ideas; they are the members of the elites who have a formal education imported from Europe." (1988: 12) However, Sarvan misses the fact that Bâ presents the mixed picture of pre-colonial and colonial societies. Her novels at different phases of her experiences present the conflict between tradition and modernity. Though colonialism proved to be detrimental to the role and status of women in some respects, Bâ highlights the fact that industrial expansion and education proved to be beneficial for average African women. Bâ, therefore, takes a positive approach towards colonialism which, to a great extent, provided women an access to education. Bâ's novels highlight the fact that colonialism helped women to overcome the status quo and prove their own independent identity in the patriarchal society. In a broad perspective, colonialism does not take into account ethnicity, concept of ethnic purity, ethno religious aspects, cultural aspects and religion, which are basically defectors in determining non-European and American cultural values. Material progress is very inherent in the process of colonial impact. It is in this respect that Mariama Bâ looks at colonialism and its importance in the process of modernization, especially for women in Africa.

Miller is, however, skeptical about the significance Bâ attaches to literacy. According to Miller:

---[w]e should recognize that Bâ sees literacy as providing the means to overcome the marginalization that education might cause: once one reaches a certain level of education-and that is entire problem-books allow one to think one's way about the margins----still, the sociologists make one wonder how many African women find this helpful. (1990: 54)

Bâ's insistence on literacy, writing and feminism is not at all a naïve adaptation of or fascination with western culture and the glorification of individualism. But it is, first of all, the earnest realization that literacy, writing and the construction of a feminist discourse are essential tools for empowering women in the post-colonial Africa. It is precisely the exclusion from

education and discourse that has kept women in vulnerable and exploitative positions. In this connection, Clare Robertson remarks:

Women in sub-Saharan African cities work inside and outside the home in a variety of occupations, whatever the origins of women, the women's differential access to education and the constraints imposed by the sexual division of labour both colonialist and indigenous. Although African black nations have enacted laws that forbid discrimination on the basis of sex, only very few women have been able to overcome the socio-economic constraints which keep women illiterate, poorly paid or marginally self-employed. (1976:46)

It is education that provides women an opportunity to overcome the impositions laid down by the patriarchal society. The women who have received an access to education have played an active role in the social processes rather than being the passive recipients of change. This new attitude focuses on the way in which women have been active in attempting to establish their authority and independence.

This aspect has been highlighted by Mariama Bâ in her novels. Her novels present women to be the active agents of change in the society. Bâ's novels display a certain formal and thematic coherence. Marriage, motherhood, emotional and economic independence, women's education, their political and economic marginalization, their resistance to oppression and role in the nation are the recurrent themes in the novels of Mariama Bâ.

The central concern of Bâ' is the problem of a female writer coming to raise her voice. The present research thesis explicates Bâ's worldview as a writer. This world-view is located within the Wolof world view. It is in her novels that Bâ makes use of this world view-regarding the issues of caste, friendship, fate, and women's relations. This doctoral thesis, therefore, attempts to locate Bâ's works in the oral tradition of the Senegalese griot women, in particular, and Senegalese literature, in general. Bâ's biography is important in any sustained reading of her works.

Mariama Bâ was born in an elite Dakar family in 1929. Unlike many young girls in Africa, she grew up in a family of educated, erudite people. Her paternal grandfather worked for the French colonial office in Saint Louis, Senegal as an interpreter. Her father was a politician and civil servant who became the first Senegalese Minister of Health in 1956, four years before Senegal gained independence from France. Mariama Bâ lost her mother at a very young age and was raised by her maternal grandparents who, at the insistence of her father, enrolled her in the colonial French school. She also received Koranic education in the true Senegalese Muslim tradition. In her biographical article, "Mariama Bâ: Pioneer Senegalese Woman," Cheryl Staunton (1994: 329-30) points out Bâ's early scholarly accomplishments: In 1943, she scored highest in the highly competitive entrance exam for the *École Normale*, a training institution for future teachers. Her grandparents, however, opposed her pursuit of this line of studies. Since her father was then working in Nigeria, her teacher had to intervene before her grandparents consented. In 1947, Mariama Bâ completed her studies at the *École Normale* and became a teacher. She taught till 1960 and later became an Inspector of Schools until 1979.

According to Staunton (Ibid 332), Mariama Bâ's contribution to her society transcended the classroom. She was active politically in several Senegalese women's movements and associations. As spokesperson for feminist movements in Dakar, she was even said to have delivered a speech to the then Prime Minister of Senegal, Abdou Diouf, in which she denounced the poor conditions of mothers and children in the country. Bâ felt the need for a woman writer's work to be published and, therefore, she quickly completed her first novel *So Long a Letter* (1979) and submitted it for publication. The book won the *Noma* Award in 1980, and thereby, she became a pioneer Senegalese woman writer. She died shortly after winning the award and her second Novel, *Scarlet Song* was published posthumously the same year.

Staunton's observations on Bâ's life and work clearly show Bâ's concerns with the European languages. Her works possess a sustained level of creativity and adaptability. Bâ has pointed out that European languages sometimes inadequately convey the thoughts and agonies of the African writer. This means that the African writer is often unable to use the written text as an instrument of mass education since most of his/her target audience is not versed in the borrowed language. Bâ believes that the power of writing as instrument of change has universal resonance. Bâ puts stress on the fact that the African writers should not look at these issues only from an African perspective, but universally, since the issues they write about deal with the human condition. Bâ through her works advocates solidarity with the plight of African women. Recent critical literature on Mariama Bâ's works has sought to explain her concerns for women's issues in feminist terms. The female characters in Bâ's writings redefine their place in the African society. In their redefinitions, the African woman, by and large, also seeks to change the image that non-Africans have of her. On a more philosophical level, Mariama Bâ's works bring into a sharper focus the clash between tradition and modernity, a clash which is at the very core of the postcolonial condition. Bâ's works not only portray the clash between indigenous African traditions and Eurocentric values of modernity, but they are also reconciliatory.

In her analysis of Bâ as a prominent woman writer, Stiga Fatima Jagne point out that Mariama Bâ emerged from the oral tradition of Senegalese griot women and writes a "speakerly text." The tradition of the griot women is important to Senegalese women; it is this tradition that helps the women to make themselves heard to the society at large. So, for the Senegalese women, writing in a speakerly text includes an added dimension.

Claims of universality can, thus, be appropriately made about Mariama Bâ's works. Mariama Bâ's own sense of this universality is reflected in her intellectual endeavors. But, at the same time, she understands the particularity of the Senegalese, particularly Wolof experience that she is writing about. She explains, "...there is a cry everywhere, everywhere in the world, a woman's cry is being uttered. The cry may be different, but there is still a certain unity." (Bond. 2003: 213) The statement makes clear Bâ's firsthand experience of the impact of Islamic Wolof society on the womankind. Therefore, the texts of Mariama Bâ are written in the context of Islamic Wolof society having an Islamic/Wolof worldview. It is, therefore, necessary to gain a general understanding of the Wolof background to appreciate Bâ's works.

Geographically, the Wolof¹ people are located in the Senegambia region on the Atlantic coast of Africa. As the majority of ethnic group in the region, they have a tendency to consider themselves more fundamentally Senegalese than others. The Wolof have had sustained contacts with foreign cultures for centuries and they mostly inhabit the urban area. These two factors have resulted in a feeling of superiority among the Wolof. This feeling of superiority has led the

Wolof to think of themselves as being capable of adapting and changing foreign cultures. However, one foreign culture that has nearly overpowered Wolof society is Islam. Islam, therefore, becomes an important force that informs the Wolof world view. The other ethnic groups around have described them as, “arrogant,” “haughty” and “think too highly of themselves.” These comments are based on the attitude the Wolof adopt regarding their unique culture.

The world history proves the fact that almost every society is based on caste and family names. Therefore, the biggest problem a particular society faces in modern times has been its inability to mediate between tradition and modernity. The caste system as archaic as it seems thrives today as much as it did in yesteryears. The reluctance of the upper caste to give up caste privileges is at the center of almost all ethnic issues. Caste, coupled with the discourse of fatalism, which comes through both Islam and traditional practices, results in the formation of different habits and customs. But the society has highlighted and incorporated only suitable practices from Islam into its way of life. In fact, Islam has no caste system; but from the Wolof world view there can be no society without caste. Speaking of this stratification in the Wolof society, Abdoulaye Bara Diop explains:

In the domain of secondary social stratification, the cast constitute, in the Wolof society, an important system from ancient times, but which is maintained with remarkable persistence. It continues to order groups, to determine their status, their functions and their comportment in reference to a social order-of old repute, but alive-through its origin is very remote within the passage of time. (Jagne, 2004.10)

The Wolof society has maintained the caste system even in post-colonial Africa. A vital aspect of this caste system is the ordering of groups. The status and function of a particular caste is determined according to the status of the group. This kind of ordering/othering is based upon the society’s biased, unfair views of inferiority and superiority. Though this caste system is not gender based, there is a problem regarding the way the different genders are viewed.

Women, on the whole, are generally viewed as an important part of society, and therefore, respected. Despite this respect, there are beliefs in the society that revolve around the evil and conniving nature of women, with sayings like, “Djiguene sopal wai bul wolu.” This kind of definition is a male understanding of womanhood. This woman is the epitome of Wolof womanhood and she exemplifies the concept of “gat lamagne, gatt tank.” It is a belief in the Wolof society that this type of woman is the best Jabar (wife) to have. The description of women as cheats, liars, or saints, feeds into a stereotyping of women in these categories. This type of stereotyping finally results in the oppression of women. However, these oppressed women accept these definitions and turn them around on other women. This interesting paradoxical relationship between oppressed women becomes a recurrent theme in Senegalese fiction. It is, of course, presented differently from different experiences.

Bâ’s theoretical and practical concerns lay in the subjectivity of the Senegalese woman under multiple layers of oppression, under the guise of tradition—tradition here denoting something static. The city of Dakar is economically, structurally and culturally changing persistently. So, to claim a static culture and tradition is pragmatically irrational. Mariama Bâ herself believes that the mission of a writer in Senegalese society is to write against, “the archaic

practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious heritage.” (Preface to *So Long a Letter*).

Bâ’s canvas covers the different women and their locations in the society. As a female writer, Bâ anticipates a world where women will have choices and where monogamy would be the order of the day. This world can only become a reality when women re-examine their relationships with each other and with that of their men. In her analysis of the novels of Mariama Bâ, Jagne points out:

The most important and successful aspect of her literary presentation is the use of language, especially Wolof. Bâ’s texts, though written in French, show evidence that her use of language is situated in the tradition of the tagg of the griot women. This poetic act of extolling virtues, takes the Wolof language to its highest forms. So when one reads Bâ’s texts, in essence, what one hears is this highly specialized poetics. The style in which both her letters and prose written is informed by this style of tagg. At the same time, within the tagg, she uses the xas style, a style that shows contempt for the person receiving the xas. The Wolof language and Wolof concepts, therefore, become central in locating Bâ’s work. (2004. 10-11)

In Bâ’s view, the literary genres should emphasize harmony and balance at the individual, family and societal levels. She points out that a stronger interrogation on the part of intellectuals is indispensable for the overall development of the human race. The problems that are considered detrimental to the development of human society include: widowhood, polygamy, succession rites, incest, tribal conflicts, discrimination against the girl child, forced marriages, illiteracy, occultism, etc. A great deal of involvement of the intellectuals in the affairs of the world will fill the missing links and gaps by re-situating the role of men and African woman in the African literary landscape. This position resonates forcefully in write-ups by contemporary African male and female writers.

In a nutshell, the survey of African literary tradition makes it clear that the African female writers bring a whole new way of looking at women and their concerns. The portrayal of this kind of new women, arriving with fresh insights and experiences, finally became a part of the landscape of Senegalese literature. The survey, thus, makes it explicitly clear that no other African writer is as poignant, touching, and relevant as Mariama Bâ in presenting the tensions inherent in the portrayal of young modern Senegalese women.

Notes:

- 1) The Wolof people are a West African Muslim ethnic group found in northwestern Senegal, The Gambia, and southwestern coastal Mauritania. In Senegal, the Wolof are the largest ethnic group (~ 39%), and their combined population exceeds 6 million. The Wolof people, like other West African ethnic groups, have historically maintained a rigid, endogamous social stratification that included nobility, clerics, castes and slaves. The Wolof caste system has existed at least since the 15th-century.

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