

**NIGERIA
AND
THE CLASSICS**

Journal of the Department of Classics,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

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FROM MOUKOURY, BÂ AND RAWIRI: WHERE ARE THE ESSENTIAL HUSBANDS?

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Abstract

The entrance of Francophone African women writers into African literary field marks a new era. Kuoh Moukoury's *Rencontres essentielles* (1969) considered a ground breaking piece received applause in academic circle when it was published. This paper focuses on the mutation of initially loving and caring husbands of female personae of Kuoh Moukoury, Bâ and Rawiri's novels. The following question is central to this article: "Why did the husbands of the female protagonists of the selected texts turned into unfaithful husbands and why are these women treated as 'non-being' like Medea in *Euripides*," and "What led to the metamorphosis of especially female characters in Bâ and Rawiri's works?" Antonio Gramsci's theory on subalternity is adopted to analyze the texts and to see the evolution of the female protagonists who engage in struggle to destroy cultural and patriarchal ethos that enslave them.

Introduction

African written literature has traditionally been the preserve of male writers and critics. Today, however, accompanying an ever-growing corpus of literature by African women writers, a new generation of critics, most of them women, is impacting on this male-dominated area¹.

The coming into writing, although somewhat late, of Francophone African women received applause in academic circles. The first known published literary piece was written by Thérèse Kuoh Moukoury, and

¹ Carole Boyce Davies, *Agambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, p. 1

entitled *Rencontres essentielles* [Essential Encounters] published in (1969). The year 1975 is, however, considered a landmark in African women's writings. Aside from being the International Year of Women, it was marked by many publications. Aoua Kéïta published *La vie d'Aoua Kéïta par elle-même* [Life of Aoua Kéïta] (1975), Nafissatou Diallo wrote *De Tilène au plateau: une enfance dakaroise* [From Tilène to Plateau: A Dakaroise Childhood] (1976), Aminata Sow Fall authored *La grève des Battù* [Beggars' Strike] (1976) and Mariama Bâ published *Une si longue lettre* [So Long a Letter] (1979). Bâ is one of the most influential Francophone female writers of that generation. The publication of *Une si longue lettre* brought particular attention to African women's texts.

African literary scene has been flooded with works of fiction by women since the 1970s. Some of these works include Aminata Ka Maïga's *La voie du salut suivi de le miroir de la vie* [Way to Salute and The Mirror of Life] (1985), Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* [Your Name Shall Be Tanga] (1987) and Angèle Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes* [Furors and Cries of Women] (1989). In the 1990s, female literary production increased. Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle published *Sous la cendre le feu* [Under the Ash, Fire] (1990), Abibatou Traoré authored *Sidagamie* (1990), Regina Yaou wrote *Le prix de la révolte* [Price of Revolt] (1997) and Fatou Kéïta produced *Rebelle* [The Rebellious One] (1998), to mention a few for the number keeps on growing. Their entrance into the African literary scene marks the beginning of a new era. Their main goal is to denounce through their writings the oppression of women and they have greatly succeeded in making their words heard by finding male and female audiences within their worlds and beyond to sympathize with and champion their cause.

Western education has given African women writers the key to selfhood and to borrow Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist scholar's phrase, the education they received "raised their consciousness, and thus they acquired the necessary weapon for confronting the enemy effectively". Their ability to write allowed them to emerge from the shadow, to grab the pen and to tell their ordeals in their own words.

In this paper, we will focus on Kuoh-Moukoury, Bâ and Rawiri's novels while making references to similar works.

Where Are the Essential Husbands?

As earlier stated the Cameroonian novelist Kuoh Moukoury's *Rencontres essentielles* [Essential Encounters] (1969) was the first Francophone African women's novels. Commenting on this novel, P. Pérez

¹ Antonio Gramsci *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 20

notes:

La publication en 1969 de Rencontres essentielles, fut un acte d'exception dans l'histoire de la littérature romanesque de l'Afrique noire francophone où seuls les hommes avaient su s'illustrer. A la liste de romanciers tels que Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, Sembène Ousmane, Bernard Dadié, Belly Quénoum, Badiane Kouyaté, Francis Bebey, Yambo Ouologuem, etc., venait s'ajouter un nom de femme: Thérèse Kuoh Moukoury. (p. 5)

The publication in 1969 of Rencontres essentiels was an exceptional act in the Francophone black Africa's literary history where only men knew how to illustrate themselves. To the list of novelists such as Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, Sembène Ousmane, Bernard Dadié, Belly Quénoum, Badiane Kouyaté, Francis Bebey, Yambo Ouologuem, etc., was added that of a woman: Thérèse Kuoh Moukoury. [My translation]

This novel, contrary to the expectations of some African male authors and critics, did not deal with problems of colonialism or post-independence Africa, but instead recounted the sorrow of Flo, a young Cameroonian woman. *Rencontres essentielles* tells the story of Flo, the female protagonist, who marries Joel whom she considers the man of her life, her 'essential husband'. Unfortunately Joel later abandons Flo because she fails to have children for him and takes up with Doris, Flo's bosom friend. Even though Flo is omnipresent in the novel as a woman conscious of her subaltern condition / situation, she lacks the courage to take her destiny in her own hands. She fails to reject the husband who humiliates her by marrying her close friend. Here is what Flo says:

Mais comment puis-je divorcer, que vont dire mes amis, ma famille, la société toute entière. Chez qui vais-je entrer, démunie? Une vie à reconstituer, des amis, des relations à refaire! Suis-je réellement capable de tout cela. (p. 84)

But how can I divorce, what will my friends, my family and the whole society say? Who should I go to? Restart a new life, friends and relatives! Am I really capable of all that? [My translation]

From Flo's remark, one begins to understand how many women remain and suffer in their matrimonial homes because they fear the judgment that will be passed on them by their society should they abandon their

husband. Like Flo in *Rencontres essentielles*, protagonists such as Mama Ida in Philomène Bassek's *La tache de sang* [The Spot of Blood] and Rokhaya and Rabiadou in Aminata Ka Maiga's *La voie du salut suivi de Le Miroir de la vie* keep their sorrows to themselves and suffer silently. In *La voie du salut suivi de Le Miroir de la vie*, Rokhaya and Rabiadou are both betrayed by their dishonest husbands whom initially they considered as their 'essential husbands'. If Rokhaya, the mother, is a woman who lives by tradition, her daughter Rabiadou is a modern woman who rejects tradition. The irony however is that both mother and daughter share the same fate.

Female protagonists in *Rencontres essentielles*, *La tache de sang* and *La voie du salut suivi de Le miroir de la vie* lack the courage to challenge masculine ethos and to come out of their subaltern condition. Gramsci notes that it is only when the subaltern is conscious of his oppressed condition that he rises up to fight back. In the novels hereunder despite the fact that female protagonists of *Rencontres essentielles*, *La tache de sang* and *La voie du salut suivi de Le miroir de la vie* are conscious of their state of being oppressed, they lack courage to fight back. Hence, they are dominated by patriarchal ethos and masculine powers. They all endure oppression in their matrimonial homes and sacrifice their lives for their husbands. Euripides' Medea is somewhat right when she avers that:

Of all things which are living and can form a judgment, we women are the most unfortunate creatures, firstly, with an excess of wealth it is required for us to buy a husband and take for our bodies a master; for not to take one is even worse. And now the question is serious whether we take a good or bad one; for there is no easy escape for a woman, nor can she say no to her marriage. She arrives among new modes of behaviour and manners³.

Women in the above stated novels view submissiveness to their husbands as something admirable. The "essential husbands" they initially got married to, turn into unfaithful husbands and they (wives) fall prey to the patriarchal system. The women come to realize that the educated husbands are not different from uneducated ones their mothers got married to.

Rencontres essentielles's protagonist failed to achieve Gramscian's "permanent victory" because Kuoh-Moukoury cannot in her writing envision a protagonist who has the courage to break away from her male oppressor / oppressive situation or achieve what Paulo Freire on the

³ David Greene and Richard Lattimore (Ed) *The Complete Greek Tragedies Volume I* Euripides I p.79

other hand called “permanent liberation”. Kuoh-Moukoury nevertheless in her autobiographical writing launches a first step towards liberation. Her *Rencontres essentielles* is an important foundational novel. Although it narrated the struggles of a helpless female protagonist who made no attempt to fight the traditional masculine institutions that oppressed her, it nevertheless prepared the ground for a later generation of African women writers.

The women novelists who followed Kuoh Moukoury created female protagonists who spoke against injustice and attacked ancestral traditions. In a more radical way than their predecessor Bâ and Rawiri defied “taboos” and challenged masculine powers and traditional rites that impede women’s progress. African women of this later generation used writing as a medium to liberate and to champion the cause of women / new society. Bâ and Rawiri’s *Une si longue lettre* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes* like Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, to paraphrase Folake Onayemi⁴, give women a new hope, a new vision and a new situation in which they force men to listen to them.

Bâ and Rawiri tear the veil of patriarchy and challenge sub-Saharan African traditions. In their novels these two authors introduce a new dimension by presenting female protagonists who are very conscious of their subaltern condition and who resolve to break their silence. In Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are childhood friends and sisters in the African sense. Both of them are Senegalese Muslim women married to Senegalese Muslim men and their marital lives have become nightmares after their treacherous husbands take younger women as second wives. Another important figure in the novel is Jacqueline, an Ivoirian Christian woman also married to a Senegalese Muslim man. Jacqueline had disobeyed her parents and decided on her own to marry Samba Diak in Abidjan and go back with him to Dakar, his homeland. Jacqueline, as a foreigner in Dakar and a Christian in a Muslim world, becomes disoriented and confused. When the truth dawns on her that she is not accepted there, she becomes frustrated by the hostility of the Senegalese Muslim environment. In addition to the hostility with which Jacqueline is confronted, she is also deceived by her unfaithful husband, “qui passait ses loisirs à pourchasser les Sénégalaises ‘fines’ et ne prenait pas la peine de cacher ses aventures” (p. 64) [who spent his time running after young Senegalese women without even hiding his adventures] (My translation).

⁴ Folake Onayemi. “Women, Sex and Power in Classical and Nigerian Drama: *Lysistrata* and *Morountodun*,” p. 44 For more details see *Women and Culture of Violence in Traditional Africa*, (ed) Akintunde and Labedan

In Bâ's *Un chant écarlate* [Scarlet Song], Mireille is a white French woman who grows up in Senegal with her parents and eventually marries a Senegalese Muslim man. The opposition to this marriage by both sets of parents on racial grounds does not stop the couple. Bâ presents the problems inherent in inter-racial marriage in this novel. It is also an avenue for Bâ to testify to the fact that even interracial marriage does not stop polygamy in a Senegalese Muslim society. Ousmane, Mireille's husband, marries another woman and thus joins the polygamous company of Modou, Ramatoulaye's husband, Diak, Jaqueline's husband and Mawdo, Aïssatou's husband. Bâ's novels portray polygamous husbands as unfaithful womanizers. She describes these men in very negative terms and presents their attitudes and behaviours in ways that clearly justify the rebellions of female protagonists.

Modou Fall in *Une si longue lettre* is a happily married man for twenty-five years, but his appetite for a younger woman pushes him to Binetou, a teenage girl of the same age as his daughter, Daba. He deceives his wife of many years by secretly taking up with Binetou, and eventually abandons the original matrimonial home after marrying her. His friend, Mawdo Bâ, follows in his footsteps and marries young Nabou after a long and successful marriage with Aïssatou. Samba Diak, on his return to Dakar with his Christian Ivoirian wife, also runs after young Senegalese girls.

The story in Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes* is not different; Emilienne, the protagonist of the novel, is a Gabonese woman married to a Gabonese man, Joseph, who comes from a different village. Like the husbands of Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou and Mireille, Emilienne's husband secretly married another wife, Dominique. Ironically, Dominique is Emilienne's office secretary, and she succeeds in hiding what is going on with her boss's husband from this woman she considers as a friend. With the complicity of Eyang, Joseph's mother, Dominique quietly snatches Emilienne's husband from her. Dominique even goes to the extent of giving malicious advice to Emilienne when Emilienne tells her naively about the difficulties she is going through with Joseph and his mother in her home. By marrying Joseph, Dominique satisfies the societal expectation of women (which is for them to be married) and by having children for him, she fulfils the other side of the marriage as expected of women in African societies. Dominique, however, later engages Emilienne in a lesbian relationship as a way of sympathizing with her boss who suffers in her marriage.

These protagonists refuse to lament or to swallow painfully, alone in their rooms, the attitudes and traditional behaviours of their husbands

who subjugate women by not giving them any say in matters affecting them. In *Rencontres essentielles* Kuoh Moukoury depicts Flo's anguish in her matrimonial home, while Bâ in *Une si longue lettre* presents Ramatoulaye, the novel's main character who reviews the story of her life and that of her friend Aïssatou. Rawiri on the other hand, presents Emilienne's ordeals in her matrimonial house.

These protagonists have many things in common: they are products of Western education; they are victims of cultural practices that impede women's emancipation and above all, they have been deceived by their husbands. These women dream of effecting changes in the societies in which they live through an application of the education they received:

[Elles étaient] de véritables soeurs destinées à la mission émancipatrice. [Se] sortir de l'enlissement des traditions, superstitions et moeurs; [se] faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de [la] leur; élever [leur] vision du monde, cultiver [leur] personnalité, renforcer [leurs] qualités, mater [leurs] défauts; faire fructifier en [elles] les valeurs de la morale universelle. (Lettre 27-28)

[They were] true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation. To lift [themselves] out of the flog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make [themselves] appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing [their] own, to raise [their] vision of the world, cultivate [their] personalities, strengthen [their] qualities, to make up for [their] inadequacies, to develop universal moral values. (15)

Despite the goals these women set while attending Western schools, not to tolerate any nonsense yet, they still found themselves frustrated by traditional rites deeply rooted in their different milieu. They are sometimes subject to humiliation and confrontation by the patriarchal structures that surround them.

It is pertinent to note though that Bâ and Rawiri and some women writers who followed them, demonstrate their bitterness against the traditions that oppress women. The words of an anonymous male character to his friend in Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes* touch on some of these traditional attitudes that denigrate African women:

Sais-tu que mes soeurs et mes cousines trouvent ma concubine arrogante? Et tu sais pourquoi? Tout simplement parce qu'elle dirige de main de maître notre maison, mes petits frères y compris. Ces messieurs, qui se considèrent comme des gens précieux, ne veulent pas s'abaisser à

accomplir les tâches ménagères. Comme le veut la coutume, ils considèrent ma femme comme la leur et exigent d'être servis comme des maris. (p. 63-64)

Do you know that my sisters and cousins find my concubine arrogant? And do you know why? Simply for running our house and dictating to my younger brothers as if she was the boss. Those men, who consider themselves as precious beings, do not want to help with domestic work. As the custom wants, they consider my wife as theirs and they insist on being served as husbands too.

It is common in a majority of sub-Saharan African societies that every member of the husband's family wants to be treated with the same deference the wife shows her husband. Family members of the husband consider anything that falls short of this treatment as being rude.

Francophone African women writers of the generation of Bâ and Rawiri criticised such attitudes and behaviours in their texts. Not surprisingly their protagonists wage serious battles against patriarchal hegemony – and in particular against the traditional and religious rites that enslave women.

Moukoury's *Rencontres essentielles*, Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and *Un chant écarlate*, and Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes* have generally been considered among the most important feminist texts that expose the conditions of Cameroonian, Senegalese and Gabonese women. These novels also reveal the pattern of patriarchal indoctrination that characterizes a number of African societies, whereby elders pass on the rules that govern ways of life in a society where men take decisions while women and children are simply taught to obey. Mina, the protagonist of Cameroonian Evelyne Ngolle Mpoudi's *Sous la cendre le feu* says it well:

Toute l'éducation d'un enfant chez nous est construite sur la base qui fait l'homme le maître, et de la femme l'être créé pour servir celui-ci. Ce fait n'est pas particulier au Cameroun, me dira-t-on. [...] Mes parents ont fait de moi une petite fille obéissante et réservée, qui ne doit élever le ton devant les garçons- fussent-ils plus jeunes que moi. (p. 8)

Child education in our land is tailored in a way that man is the boss and the woman is created to serve him. You cannot tell me that this is particular to Cameroon...My parents turned me into a reserved and obedient little girl, who should not raise her voice before boys even if they are younger than me.

Mina's remark might as easily apply generally to certain traditions in Senegal, Ivory Coast and Gabon. Indeed, a close examination of *Rencontres essentielles*, *Une si longue lettre* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes* reveals that these novels are not only about the subaltern condition of women in Cameroon, Senegal or Gabon, but more broadly also the critique of traditions. These novels cry out against the general condition of African women even as they launch their particular attacks against conditions in a predominantly Islamic society like Senegal or a traditional male-oriented society like Cameroon and Gabon. Similarly, Madeleine Borgomano argues that even though Mireille in *Un chant* is French, one should see Mireille's condition as that of an African woman because Mireille faces the same problems:

Les problèmes de Mireille sont donc ceux soulevés par les mariages mixtes. Mais Mireille est devenue sinon africaine du moins sénégalaise par son mariage et les questions qui se posent à travers elle n'ont rien à voir avec la couleur de la peau ou la nationalité française. [...] Ainsi estimons-nous tout à fait d'englober le cas de Mireille dans celui des femmes africaines. (p. 91-92)

Mireille's problems are those found in interracial marriages. But Mireille has become African or better put Senegalese by virtue of her marriage and the problems she encounters have nothing to do with the color of her skin or French nationality... We will thus classify Mireille's case among those of African women.

The three novels all show how the protagonists confront the traditional rites and patriarchal powers that subdue them. Patriarchal traditions and Islamic religious codes constitute the socio-cultural fabric of these narratives. For the first time in African women's writings, one witnesses a severe criticism of the attitudes of the elders, masculine powers and traditions. Women writers' arrival on the African literary scene brought about a positive transformation of the subaltern female subject in fiction. The African female subject now rejects her mute status. She emerges from the shadows to defy patriarchy by breaking her silence and by taking active control of her own condition. The female protagonists of these novels initially were happily married to loving and understanding husbands. Their marriages were not prearranged like those of Niam's wife in *Mission terminée* [Mission to Kala], Salimata's first marriage in *Les soleils des indépendances* [The Suns of Independences], Mariama in *Toiles d'araignée* [Spider Curbs] or Rokheya in *La voie du salut suivi de Le miroir de la vie*. Flo, Ramatoulaye, Mireille and Emilienne had modern

marriages in the sense that they had made their own free choices. These protagonists alas, live in a highly patriarchal society, a society that sees nothing wrong with polygamy. "Essential husbands" succumb easily to their mothers' encouragements or to their personal lusts and end up rejecting the marital vows that they made with their first wives.

These female protagonists and wives are, alas, confronted with ruthless mothers-in-law who cause trouble in their marriages. These dangerous mothers-in-law always see themselves in competition with their sons' chosen wives because they are insecure. Even though the wives fight back against their mothers-in-law who desire other women for their sons, these wives suffer for their actions. It is assumed in rigidly traditional milieu such as Cameroon, Senegal and Gabon that wives cannot change the order of things, but these women despite all odds challenge traditional norms. Their painful experiences symbolize the anguish of women who find themselves caught in a quagmire of domination and oppression. The modern female characters of *Une si longue lettre*, *Un Chant* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes* emerge from the shadows after years of silence to defy authority. If these women keep silent about everything that had previously been done to them, the arrival of another woman in their matrimonial life breaks their passivity. Their patience is exhausted and they decide to reject their subaltern condition. Faced with humiliation, Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou, Mireille, and Emilienne show their unfaithful husbands that they are capable of taking decisions about issues which affect them. Emilienne in *Fureurs et cris de femmes* states:

J'ai avalé toutes les couleuvres que tu as voulu brandir devant moi. C'en est assez. Je te demande de choisir à cet instant précis entre ta maîtresse, tes enfants et moi. Retiens qu'il est hors de question que tes rejetons viennent habiter cette maison. (p. 157)

I swallowed all the vipers you put before me. It is enough. I am asking you to choose right now between your mistress, children and me. I want you to know that your extra-marital children cannot come and live in this house.

Emilienne's passivity is over; her transmutation from passive acceptance of her subaltern condition to rejecting it is necessary if her freedom is to be achieved. Ramatoulaye's revolt comes when she is told that she is to marry Tamsir at a time when she is still mourning her late husband. Only a few days after her husband's death, Tamsir made this declaration. In accordance with Islamic rite, the wife is to be inherited

by the brother of the departed. In her letter to Aïssatou, the narrator gives us more details on this event:

Après les actes de piété, Tamsir est venu s'asseoir dans ma chambre dans le fauteuil bleu où tu te plaisais. En penchant sa tête au dehors, il a fait signe à Mawdo; il a aussi fait signe à l'Imam de la mosquée de son quartier. [...] Tamsir parle cette fois plein d'assurance [...] "Après ta sortie (Sous-entendu du deuil), je t'épouse. Tu me conviens comme femme et puis, tu continueras à habiter ici comme si Modou n'était pas mort." (p. 84)

After going through the motions of piety, Tamsir came and sat in my bedroom in the blue armchair that used to be your favorite. Sticking his head outside, he signaled to Mawdo; he also signaled to the Imam from the mosque of his area...Tamsir speaks with great insurance "When you have "come out" (that is to say mourning), I shall marry you. You suit me as a wife, and further, you will continue to live here, just as if Modou were not dead. (p. 57)

Boiling with anger after digesting Tamsir's words, Ramatoulaye renounces her silence and chides Tamsir in the presence of the elders assembled to support him in his proposition:

Je regarde Mawdo. Je regarde l'Imam. Je serre mon châle noir. J'égrenne mon chapelet. Cette fois, je parlerai. Ma voix connaît trente années de silence, trente années de brimades. Elle éclate, violente, tantôt sarcastique, tantôt méprisante. "As-tu jamais eu de l'affection pour ton frère? Tu veux déjà construire un foyer neuf sur un cadavre chaud. Alors que l'on prie pour Modou, tu penses à de futures noces." (p. 85)

I look at Mawdo. I look at the Imam. I draw my black shawl closer. I tell my beads. This time I shall speak out. My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It burst out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous. Did you ever have any affection for your brother? Already you want to build a new home for yourself over a body that is still warm. While we are praying for Modou, you are thinking of future wedding festivities. (p. 58)

Ramatoulaye's breaking of silence here is a complete rejection of her passivity. In Ramatoulaye's long letter to Aïssatou, who now lives in New York after leaving her husband, Ramatoulaye informs her friend of what

she is going through. Ramatoulaye's letter is a river of revelation on the travails of womanhood and the ugliness of manhood. It is through Ramatoulaye, the narrator that we know of all the events taking place in the novel. It is through her that we come to know the other characters. Some of the women are, like her, victims of unfaithful husbands and are going through ordeals in their matrimonial homes. Aïssatou, frustrated by her husband's second marriage, decides to abandon him and breaks her silence in a letter to him. Aïssatou forwards a copy of this letter to Ramatoulaye, and here is what part of the letter to her husband says:

Si tu peux procréer sans aimer, rien que pour assouvir l'orgueil d'une mère déclinante, je te trouve vil. Dès lors tu degingoles de l'échelon supérieur, de la responsabilité où je t'ai toujours hissé... Mawdo, l'homme est un; grandeur et animalité confondues. Aucun geste de sa part n'est de pur idéal. Aucun geste de sa part n'est de pure bestialité. Je me dépouille de ton amour, de ton nom. Vêtue d'un seul habit valable de la dignité, je poursuis ma route. (p. 50)

If you can procreate without loving, merely to satisfy the pride of your declining mother, then I find you despicable. At that moment you tumbled from the highest rung of respect on which I have always placed you. Mawdo, man is one: greatness and animal fused together. None of his acts is pure charity. None is pure bestiality. I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way. (p. 32)

Aïssatou informs her husband in her letter that she has abandoned him for her own good and rejects her marital name and status in order to pursue her own life. The consciousness of their victimization leads these women courageously to defy their oppressors. By letting out their pains in words these protagonists find some relief. As Borgomano notes:

La parole, ici, sert de consolidation et de thérapeutique. Elle aide l'éveil et la naissance d'une personne existant à part entière, selon l'exemple jadis donné par Aïssatou. Refusant de se voir réduite au rang de toutes ces femmes "méprisées, reléguées ou échangées, dont on se sépare comme un boubou usé ou déchiré," Ramatoulaye, malgré son âge, ses trentes années de mariage et ses douze enfants, refuse d'être un "non-être." Elle prend la parole. [...] Cette transgression du rôle de muette que lui assigne le système social lui donne de l'assurance et lui permet de revivre. [...] Il est beau de voir émerger ainsi peu à peu la voix des femmes et de se lézarder la règle du silence. (p. 104)

Speech, here, serves as consolation and therapeutic. It helps the birth and rise of a person living on the side, according to the example once given by Aïssatou. Refusing to see herself reduced to the level of those women "hated, relegated or exchanged, thrown away like a worn out garment, Ramatoulaye, despite her age, her thirty years of marriage and her twelve children, refuses to be a "non-being." [My translation]

This 'prise de position' [taking of position] of the women protagonists described by Borgomano constitutes an important step toward their liberation from terms of oppression. To borrow a phrase from Gramsci: "to know oneself, to be master of oneself, to distinguish oneself, to free oneself from a state of chaos"⁵. African women writers, through their texts, disrupt the traditional binary opposition of male-oppressor versus female-oppressed. Rawiri's Emilienne, as a woman who believes in complimentary roles of men and women, dreams of a peaceful coexistence with her husband and his relatives, but she finally rises up and rebels after being frustrated despite all her efforts and sacrifices to keep her marriage going. Her reaction to frustration is to show the world that the time has come for women not to accept nonsense from either their husbands or their relatives. Emilienne summons her courage and asks both her husband and his mother to leave her home, completely and dramatically breaking her silence after tolerating their attitudes for many years:

J'ai suivi avec grand intérêt une bonne partie de votre conversation ... j'ignore quelle décision aurait pris ton fils à la suite de tes menaces et de toute façon cela n'a plus d'importance. Je te demande de l'emmener avec toi où tu voudras dès ce soir... Je veux trouver la maison vide quand je reviendrai, c'est à dire dans une heure. (p. 174)

I followed with a great interest a good part of your discussion... I doubt what decision your son will take after your threat and in any case that has no importance anymore. I am asking you to take him with you wherever you want to this evening... I want to see the house empty when I come back, that is in an hour's time. (My translation)

Emilienne, like Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou and Mireille, finally speaks out about her family situation; she comes out of the shadows and discloses that the house belongs to her. The breaking of silence by the protagonists

⁵Antonio Gramsci, op cit p 95

is a means through which Bâ and Rawiri not only criticize polygamy but advocate the pursuit of happiness in marriage. Furthermore, these writers advocate women's right to live their lives the way they want and not the way the society wants them to live.

Conclusion

African women authors reject silence and begin effectively using their writings to tell the stories of African women. Much more than African men writers, they tap into the utilitarian function of their art. Bâ and Rawiri's protagonists are torn between tradition and modernity as their husbands' sexual escapades drive them into episode of frustration and depression reminiscent of those of Flo in Kuoh-Moukoury's *Rencontres essentielles*. None of the novels could boast of parading 'essential husbands' who are loyal and totally devoted to their wives from the beginning to the end. Women protagonists of these novels lost their husbands to either young women or friends because of their husband's greed or the complicity of their mothers-in-law.

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