

**PORTRAYALS AND
GENDER PALAVER
IN
FRANCOPHONE
AFRICAN WRITINGS**



RAMONU SANUSI

Portrayals and Gender Palaver
In
Francophone African Writings

Ramonu Sanusi



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Agbowo, U.I.
Ibadan.

DEDICATION

In memoriam of my parents,
who have nurtured and cultured me.

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PREFACE

The late 1960s witnessed the emergence of African women writers on the African literary space earlier dominated by African men. African women's writings largely focus on deconstructing the patriarchal order, religious prescriptions and cultural mores in order to tear women's veil of invisibility. A number of traditional practices have contributed negatively and also impeded the progress of sub-Saharan African women to liberate themselves and to realise their full potentials and emancipation.

Portrayals and Gender Palaver in Francophone African Writings is a critical book, drafted and crafted for a wider readership. The topics treated are comprehensive and include among others:

- The Francophone African Novel: Origin and Evolution.
- Religious and cultural constructs of African women
- The poetic constructs of African women
- Fictional constructs of subaltern African women
- Marriage and the subordination of women
- Physical and sexual exploitation of women
- Women and Polygamy in men's fiction
- African women writers and the utilitarian function of their art
- Female protagonists in fiction by African women
- Discourse on the oppressors and the oppressed
- African feminism/Western feminism.

Regardless of its definition, the goal of feminism remains the same: to fight all forms of oppression of women and achieve equal distribution of socio-political and economic power between men and women in the society.

It is hoped that this scholarly piece will contribute to the on-going discourse on the burning issues on women's oppression/emancipation and open new ways for researchers within and without.

In the course of writing this critical book, I stood on the shoulders of seasoned scholars too numerous to mention, so that I can see far, some of whom are listed in my bibliography. I thank them all for nurturing and nourishing my thought and equally acknowledge the peer-reviewed journals/critical text listed hereunder in which some excerpts in this book have already been published.

Ibadan Journal of European Studies 5

Fatou Kéïta/Régina Yaou and the Re-definition of Ivorian Cultural and Patriarchal Ethos: *Rebelle* and *Le Prix de la révolte*, 2005: 81-99.

Dalhousie French Studies 78

The Metamorphosis of Female Personae in Sembène Ousmane's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, 2007: 129-138.

Nigeria and the Classics 24

From Moukoury, Bâ and Rawiri: Where are the essential husbands? 2008: 85-100.

Papers in English and Linguistics 11

African Feminism/Western Feminism: Contradictory or Complementary? 2010: 184-195.

Agora: Journal of Foreign Language Studies 4

The Francophone African Novel: Historical Perspective, 2010: 1-17.

Skase Journal of Literary Studies 3.1

Mongo Beti, Ahmadou Kourouma and Ibrahima Ly: How Feminists are they? 2011: 23-41

***Women Novelists in Francophone Black Africa-
Views, Reviews and Interviews***

Motherhood and Family Politics in the Novels of Angèle Rawiri and Mariama Bâ, in Eunice Omonzejie (Ed), *Women Novelists in francophone Black Africa – Views, Reviews and Interviews*, 2011: 48-6.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN NOVEL: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Over the last century Africa has experienced a great deal of turmoil, has heard many war-drums and seen lots of battles. Initially these were colonial conflicts; today they tend to be civil wars or struggles between unelected leaders and the peoples they misrule. The story of these turbulent years has not been an easy one to tell, but many writers have taken a stab at it, putting on record at least a small portion of Africa's contemporary history in fictional terms.

– Bernth Lindfors (1997: 3)

The development of novel-writing in Africa can be traced back to the historical situations created by colonisation. This imperial mission of the Europeans subordinated Africans to the colonisers' rule and imposed new ways of life on them. Colonialism established policies based on what Aduke Adebayo in *Critical Essays on the Novel in Francophone Africa* describes as “the prejudiced notion of the innate inferiority and deficiency of civilisation of the African” (2). The civilising and salvage mission advanced by the colonisers to justify their presence in Africa is a mere pretext. The colonisers' aim was to achieve their political and economic aggrandisement.

Before the colonisers' arrival, Africans had their ways of life and their established cultural traditions and literatures. A majority of African literary critics argue that literature long existed in Africa in form of oral tradition before it was essentially buried and forgotten by European invaders. Colonialism is generally viewed as an agent of destruction. There is no doubt, however, that the colonisation of the continent introduced written literature to Africa. This literature begun by the coloniser, was in his own language and the education of Africans continued in that Western language, which was eventually passed on to the colonised people. The result was that, after being armed with the colonisers' language, the African man appeared on the African literary scene to tell his own stories and attack erroneous colonial writings in a view to combatting arrogant views of the superiority of European culture. Thus, exposing the coloniser's misdeeds on the continent. Writers like Aimé Césaire, Walter Rodney, and Chinweizu among others, believe that colonialism undermined African development. They affirm that the imperial mission destroyed many African traditions and disrupted the once peaceful continent. Similarly, critics are conscious of the asymmetrical power relationship that arose from colonialism as Europe set out to establish its hegemony in Africa.

In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi vehemently opposes the claims of the coloniser who thinks that he alone is qualified to speak of or for the colony. Memmi thinks that the coloniser sees himself as civilised and the colonised as savage, hence the need for the coloniser to use his civilising experience to make Africans know about their continent from his perspective. The colonizer considers the colonised, an empty individual who does not know anything and has to learn much from him.

In his *Course on General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure argues that signs have meaning only through binary opposition to other signs. Bill Aschcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies* corroborate this thought and assert that "binary opposition is the most extreme form of difference possible" (23). The implications of these postulates

become important when we consider the discussions of imperialism, colonialism and feminism. In colonised lands, a majority of intractable binaries were created, which today largely determine modes of life in parts of Africa, Latin America and Asia. Similarly, Ascroft notes that “this pattern of structuration in European and many other languages, lies at the root of the ceaseless pattern of conquest and domination that has formed the fabric of our life” (28). The social cleavages that erupted as a result of colonial conquest had a serious consequence for Africa. First, the colonized people adjusted the way they lived to that of the colonizer. Second, the colonized depended on the colonizer for everything and turned his back on some of his habitual ways of life so that he could be accepted as civilized. The contact between the colonizer and the colonized created paradigms that are still noted today in the games of domination and subordination manifested in all aspects of such people’s socio-cultural or religious life. Ranu Samantrai in “Claiming the Burden: Naipul’s Africa,” notes that this teleology is

a strategy so common to the West’s thinking about the Rest that it is hardly possible to speak of relations between nations without drawing upon the adult-child paradigm. [...] Developed/developing, backward/advanced, First World/Third World: all suggest that if they are obedient and follow the leader of their parents, the Rest will grow up to become just like the West. (56)

As Samantrai asserts, it is common today to see colonised people trying to imitate the West by copying their patterns of life so that they can be seen as civilised. The sad aspect of it is that by trying to be like the other, Africans lost some of their cultural heritage, and yet, cannot fully imitate the western lifestyle.

Africa has witnessed many difficulties which were recorded at different stages of its evolution by Western and African writers.

A close examination of literary production in Francophone black Africa offers a series of narratives and counter-narratives by both colonial and African writers. African writers first attacked the colonial writers on issues of the mis-representation of African

facts. The theme of colonialism has been persistent in African literature. African writers denounced European writings on Africa and argued that Europeans' invasion of Africa disrupted the continent. Mineke Schipper corroborates this view:

La situation coloniale trouble les rapports humains entre les deux groupes. Les maîtres font tout pour maintenir leur position puissante et privilégiée. Coûte que coûte, il faut empêcher le Noir de revendiquer ses droits bafoués depuis l'arrivée des conquérants. (28)

The second oppositional stance taken by African writers was directed against the new African leaders who emerged after the colonialists left. These new leaders were not different from the colonisers. The majority of Africans, who dreamed of a better life after the colonisers left, were engulfed in despair and frustration created by the new leadership. The situation arose, in which a subalternized colonial subject emerges as a leader to become a dominant oppressor of the same group to which he formerly belonged.

In a third phase in the development of novel writing, the African female writer wrote in opposition to her African male counterpart on issues of the mis-representation of African women in fiction. The presence of African female writers on the African literary scene meant that one could begin "to look at (the)woman in African literature standing on her own rather than in the shadow of men" (viii), as Anne Adams Graves puts it.

Feminism as a post-colonial discourse in texts by African women is a response to historical conquest and hegemonic ideologies of the powerful colonial master passed down to the re-created African man. When the colonizer got to the continent, he assimilated the African man and later used him to propagate the subordination of his own people. He placed him in power as his stooge, in order to maintain his firm control over the continent. African chiefs recruited their subjects and sold them as slaves to the white men. Much later, some leaders of independent African countries managed the affairs of their nations in accordance with the white man's agenda. Therefore, the coloniser still controls the

country, howbeit indirectly, politically and economically. Significantly, this allows the same subordinating ideology to survive while a majority of Africans, particularly women, are nowhere to be found either politically or economically.

After independence, the conditions of African women did not change much because independence failed to recognise women as capable of contributing to nation building. In politics, women were not fully represented in some Islam-dominated areas of Africa where religion imposed strict codes of conduct on women and excluded them from public life. Needless to say, some patriarchal attitudes that favour the education of the male child over his female counterpart did not help matters but rather contributed to the subordination of women. African men have to recognise and accept the positive role that African women can play in the nation's development if the whole continent is to move forward.

One of the major functions of literature is to create awareness of societal issues and African literary texts have at various stages played this role, with writers acting as spokespersons for their communities.

The French Colonial Novel

The presence of the French was firmly established in Africa after the Berlin conference of 1884 when Africa was split up among the European powers. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, after the slave trade was abolished, there was a growing need for overseas markets, and many Europeans thus turned to Africa. Although European presence in Africa was frequently justified as a humanitarian mission, the truth was that these European nations were more interested in economic and territorial gains. During the height of the colonisation of Africa, European hegemony was firmly established and Africa became the scene where the continuing drama of imperialism was being staged.

A great number of French colonial writers ventured into the African continent during this same period of colonisation, to write fabulous things about Africa. French presence in Africa gave rise

to French colonial literature. European writers who wrote about Africa include Paul Adam, André Demaison, Jean d'Esmer, Hans Grimm, J. Francis-Boeuf, Maurice Delafosse, André Gide, Paul Vigné d'Octon, Les frères Tharaud and Pierre Loti. While some of their writings talked about love and exoticism, others pleaded the cause of imperialism.

By and large, majority of these writers intended to depict the African continent from the European point of view and show the world the great tasks accomplished by colonialists in Africa, while at the same time justifying the natural servitude of Africans. African critics view French colonial literature as the literature of officers, conquerors and administrators. Colonialism as a political and economic enterprise was to bring honour to France, and many writers took the opportunity to launch propaganda in favour of France by writing exotic literature about her colonial mission.

Pierre Loti's *Le roman d'un saphi* (1881) easily comes to mind as typical of this literature. Using exotic scenes, Loti depicts the enthusiasm of a French soldier who leaves France for Africa and later realises that he is far away from his motherland. Jean Peyral, the central figure of the novel, is seen suffering from nostalgia and solitude but consoles himself with the fact that he will be promoted in the military at the end of his mission. Paul Vigné d'Octon's *Au pays des fétiches* (1891) is similarly rich in exotic scenes. This novel reveals some of the problems of colonial conquest. The writer notes that the French living in the colonies suffer from nostalgia and are adversely affected by climatic conditions. Paul Adam's *La ville inconnue* (1911) is another striking colonial novel in which the author pleads the cause of France. Adam notes that colonial enterprises were occasioned by France's determination to liberate oppressed people of Africa from their tyrannical leaders.

Colonial writers took advantage of Africans' inability to read and write in European languages to produce fallacious stories about Africa which were sold in the European markets. As the

Nigerian critic, Cyril Nweze, in his *Africa in French and German Fiction*, notes:

If the colonial writer decides to falsify already false ideas, it is with the precise intention of adapting them to his purpose — notably, to make the black man a comic character for the amusement of his white readers on the one hand and, on the other, to enhance the prestige of the white hero who in the colonial novel pursues his civilizing mission among the *savage and comical* Africans. (7-8)

Colonial writers reproduced stereotyped views about Africa with conventional pictures of primitivism, savagery and the impenetrable forest, thus exacerbating erroneous concepts and prejudices about the black race simply to justify the need for the civilising mission of the white man. Nweze refers to the literary productions of the colonial writers as “alienated literature,” because it was written by foreigners and not by Africans.

These writers were very conscious of the fact that their European brothers in their homeland were ignorant of what was happening in the colonies. To them, it was an opportunity to feed propaganda to those who were thirsty for news about the ways of life of the so-called “savage people” of the colonies. Even the Tharaud brothers, who had never been to Africa, embarked upon writing imaginative stories about Africa after realising how appealing this material was to European readers.

Emergence of the French African Novel

The French African novel owes much to René Maran's *Batouala* (1921), considered by many as the first novel written by a black man representing African realities. Branded “*Le véritable roman nègre*,” *Batouala*, is an anti-colonial novel that earned Maran the anger of the French government. This black author of Martinican descent published his novel in response to colonial fiction and imperialist enterprises in Africa. Considered a groundbreaking work by many African novelists, it depicts the injustices of colonialism. As Aduke Adebayo remarks: “Some Negritude writers took over from where *Batouala* left off” (12).

Even though Maran did not advocate the end of colonialism, his book helped to prepare the ground for an anti-colonial revolt. African novelists consider *Batouala* as a turning point in the history of the Negritude movement. Soon after the publication of this work, many of the first generation of African authors born before 1920 launched serious attacks on the mis-representations of Africa and Africans by the colonial writers. Aduke Adebayo opines that Negritude is a rallying cry of revolt against the oppression and exploitation of Africans by European colonialists. African writers of the era channeled their grievances against the Europeans through this new movement to champion the cause of Africans. Their mission was not only to envision a new society but also to re-create the Africans who denounced continual subjection to imperial and colonial ideologies. Soon after its birth, the Francophone African novel, in Victor Aire's words,

was saddled with anti-racist battle because slavery and the racist prejudices which allowed it to endure for centuries had resulted in the institutionalized dehumanization of the Blackman. The anti-colonial battle was also imperative because, despite the official abolition of slavery, the colonialists continued to dehumanize the inhabitants of the colonies from where they derived enormous wealth. (153)

Léopold Sédar Senghor, Jean Malonga, Birago Diop, Bernard Dadié, Abdoulaye Sadjji, Camara Laye and Cheikh Anta Diop are among those who laid the foundations for Francophone African literature; their works brought colonialism and African culture to the attention of the outside world. The Negritude movement was their brainchild. Seminal works of these writers include Senghor's *Chants d'ombre* (1945) and *Hostie Noire* (1948), and Birago Diop's *Les contes d'Ahmadou Koumba* (1947). To provide an outlet for their literary productions, Alioune Diop founded *Présence Africaine* in 1947 which is considered a landmark in the Negritude movement. It is worth noting that some first-generation African writers are Negritude poets.

The second generation of African writers, who came into limelight between the two world wars, was also male. This is

understandable since only men benefited from the formal education fostered by the colonial institutions and colonial administrators. Among this second generation of writers are Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Sembène Ousmane and Ahmadou Kourouma to mention a few.

One common denominator that binds the two generations together, in addition to being male, is that their works were characterised by anti-colonialism. The attacks on French colonial policies in Africa were strongly echoed in Negritude and fictional writings. Moreover, the pre-occupation of these writers was to portray their deep love for Africa's rich cultural heritage, which was despised by the Europeans. While uplifting African cultural values, the African woman was depicted as subordinate and docile—attributes, some of these writers considered as good qualities.

African novels of the 1950s focused largely on the miseries of the time. Most African authors wrote to de-mystify and challenge the erroneous writings of the colonial fictions. These writers were animated with the desire to condemn the humiliations and deprivations imposed on Africans by Europeans, from slavery to the bastardisation of African cultures. Femi Ojo-Ade in *René Maran The Black Frenchman*, remarks that:

Born out of slavery, colonialism and human degradation, black literature has grown and persevered in the midst of oppression, first mired in self-denial, and self-hate and later awakened by the voices of self-affirmation and self-love [...] to fight feverishly against the dehumanization imposed upon the colonized by the perfidious colonizer, to reclaim the socio-political independence long denied the race by the so-called civilized dominators. (5)

A majority of literary critics later called the literature of this period a "protest literature" because of the militant tone and harsh condemnation of European deeds. Mongo Beti's *Ville cruelle* (1954) and *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956); Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux Nègre et la médaille* (1956) and *Une vie de boy* (1957); and Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960) give an account of

the coloniser's wrong doings in Africa. In their books, these authors criticise vehemently cultural imperialism and social injustices meted out on Africans by Europeans. These novels were later followed by transitional novels of the post-colonial period, characterised by the disenchantment of the African people deceived by their new leaders. Many Africans expected independence to bring fortune to their homes and farms and provide them with work and food. They had imagined that their sufferings would be over only to discover that nothing had really changed for the better. Soon, they were faced with the reality that the new leaders were more terrible than the colonisers. The disappointment and disillusionment of Africans after independence is summed up in the following words by a young character in Alioum Fantoure's *Le cercle des tropiques* (1972) during his conversation with Bohi Di, the novel's protagonist:

– Tu sais, dans nos villages, nous nous demandons ce qu'est l'indépendance. Notre vie n'a pas changé, nos récoltes sont toujours mauvaises, nous travaillons toujours durement comme avant. Les impôts ont augmenté, ce qui est pire qu'avant, et puis les délégués du Parti nous dépouillent lors de leurs tournées et ils en font plusieurs par mois; si ce n'est pas l'un c'est l'autre. Si c'est ça l'indépendance, mieux valait supporter les toubabs [les Blancs], car maintenant nous supportons et les toubabs et les chefs indigènes. (168)

The situation as described in Fantoure's novel, after the new African leaders took over power, is not particular to Guinea but to a majority of independent countries in Africa.

The writers were highly critical of these new leaders for their indifference to the endemic poverty of the masses. They denounced their corruption, their incompetence and their complicity with foreign powers. Political leaders were criticised for indulging in opulence. Kembe Milolo summarises the pre-occupations of those novels:

La dénonciation des nouveaux maîtres qui n'ont pensé qu'à régner et à tirer les avantages que leur conféraient leurs fonctions. Ils sont

devenus plus tyrans que les colons. D'où l'amertume de la population devant le manque d'organisation économique et politique dont ces nouveaux dirigeants d'Afrique sont les symboles. (10)

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* (1970) and Alioum Fantouré's *Le cercle des tropiques* (1972) are examples of novels that criticise the new African leaders and societies. These writers cast a dispassionate look at the moral, economic and political decay of newly independent African nations. This new literary tone paved the way for African literature that moved from solely attacking colonialism to focusing its critique on the new African leaders. Besides Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances*, other novels testifying to the African nightmare after independence include Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignées* (1972), Sembène Ousmane's *Xala*, Mongo Beti's *Perpetue* and *Remember Ruben* (1974), and most recently, his *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (1999) and *Branle-bas en blanc et noir* (2000). These novels portray African leaders as tyrants and show how Africans can be their own worst enemies as noted by the white man Sept-Saint Siss while talking to Dr Malekê, in *Le cercle des tropiques*:

– Docteur, il y a une chose que j'aurai apprise pendant mon séjour d'une trentaine d'années sous les tropiques. C'est que vous êtes plus cruels entre vous que ne le sera jamais un toubab à votre égard. Croyez-moi, le venin ne vient pas de l'extérieur. Vous secretez vous-même votre propre poison. (142)

It is an undeniable fact that Africans were the architects of their own downfall after the colonisers left. Problems that emerged after the independence of African nations were created by the irresponsible and insensitive attitudes of many leaders to the people they governed.

Emergence of Writing by Women

Another important and remarkable stage in the sub-Saharan Francophone African literary scene is marked by the arrival of African female writers. The Nigerian feminist critic, Chioma Opara

discusses Virginia Woolf's celebrated notion that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. Opara notes that at the time Woolf was making this exhortation in the 1920s, the African woman had neither a room of her own, nor the means to write. In fact, she was weighed down with illiteracy. Today, with the rapid trend in female literacy, African women do not only have a room of their own, but many rooms and pens of their own.

This is evident in the inclusion of their names in a number of critical anthologies. Indeed, sub-Saharan Francophone African women writers are today among the most audible voices in the social, economic, political and literary scenes of the continent.

Just as the first and second generations of African writers reacted to unsavoury events, this third generation of writers spoke out to condemn the role played by some of their African male predecessors in perpetuating the inferiority of African women in their novels. These women used their writings mostly to seek a redress of the situation by portraying a positive image of the African woman and challenging the domination of African life socially, politically and economically by African men. They hoped to bring about necessary changes in society through their works, thereby removing obstacles that had for so long silenced and dominated women. As Aduke Adebayo affirms:

Most African female writers create out of the necessity to tell their own stories in thinly-veiled fictional forms; seeing themselves as representatives of African women and correctors of certain well-worn prejudices concerning African women. In short, they tell it as it is. This explains the predominance of the semi-autobiographical mode and the sociological orientation of their writings. (39)

Through their works, African women writers destroy the culture of silence imposed on African women, a culture that is responsible for their lack of participation in literary and public domains.

The arrival of women on the African literary scene is aimed at de-constructing the patriarchal order. In attacking patriarchal

traditions and striving to create positive images for African women, these writers sought to bring women out of invisibility. They de-mystify African cultural as well as Christian and Islamic myths that emphasise the main roles of women in terms of maternity and domesticity.

Francophone women's writings of sub-Saharan Africa date back to the first known published literary piece written by Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, entitled *Rencontres essentielles* (1969). This novel laid the foundation for later women's writings. The year 1975 is, however, considered a landmark in African women's writings. Besides being the International Year of Women, it was marked by many publications. Aoua Kéita published *La vie d'Aoua Kéita par elle-même* (1975), Nafissatou Diallo wrote *De Tilène au plateau: une enfance dakaroise* (1976), Aminata Sow Fall authored *La grève des Battú* (1976) and Mariama Bâ published *Une si longue lettre* (1979). Mariama Bâ remains one of the most respected and influential Francophone female writers of that generation. The publication of *Une si longue lettre* brought particular attention to African women's texts.

Since the 1970s, the African literary scene has been flooded with works of fiction by women, including Aminata Ka Maiga's *La voie du salut suivi de le miroir de la vie* (1985), Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (1987) and Angèle Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes* (1989). In the 1990s, female literary production increased. Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle published *Sous la cendre le feu* (1990), Regina Yaou wrote *Le prix de la révolte* (1997), Fatou Kéita produced *Rebelle* (1998) and Abibatou Traoré published *Sidagamie* (1990).

These writers denounce the African woman's condition, her marginality, and address other customs and attitudes that are designed to keep women under men's control. Female protagonists play significant roles in the works of these writers for they convey the author's message to the public and aim at initiating societal change.

A number of female literary works that have been chosen in this book emphasize controversial African traditions such as

forced marriage, female circumcision and polygamy, traditions which seem to have impeded the progress toward the liberation of sub-Saharan African women. Ramatoulaye, Mireille and Emilienne, the protagonists of *Une si longue lettre*, *Un chant écarlate* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, struggled against traditions that oppress women but these women do not finally overcome all the obstacles. Malimouna and Affiba, protagonists of *Rebelle* and *Le prix de la révolte*, continue the struggle initiated by their predecessors and come out successfully in their quest to liberate women from their oppressive situations.

African women's writings have disrupted the traditional binary of male oppressor versus the oppressed woman as African women writers use literature as a weapon to challenge certain injustices done to women. The re-creation of women by Francophone African women writers of the last decades particularly, helps women to assert their own identity. Today, African women achieve visibility not only in literature, but also in the socio-political and economic terrain.

African Feminism/Western Feminism: Some Reflections

Feminism connotes different things to various people, societies, feminist writers, and critics. To the majority of people, feminism brings to mind the idea of challenging male supremacy.

Some critics link the origin of feminist movements to the United Kingdom with the publication of Marie Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), which was considered by many to be the first feminist book. In her work, Wollstonecraft argued for better educational opportunities for women. Others locate the roots of feminism in the 18th century movement led by Lady Amberly to demand British women's voting rights and career opportunities. Elizabeth Ogini on her part, traces feminism to the women's liberation or women's rights movements that became pronounced around 1800 in Europe and America. She further argues that women's rights were also a focus of abolitionist activities of Sara M. Grimke, the American anti-slavery leader

who wrote *Letter on Equality of Sex and the Condition of Women* in 1833. It should be noted, that M. Grimke presented a strong case against religious leaders who gave biblical support for the inferior position of women. Grimke is of the belief that men and women have complementary roles to play in the betterment of the society. Women's struggles for certain rights in Europe and America eventually paid off. As Elizabeth Oginini asserts: "from 1800 to 1900 a remarkable turning point in societal history manifested itself as feminism grew in power and won a good number of rights for women including legal and economic rights" (11). With the victories recorded by Western women in their liberation movements, changes in the status of women began to occur more frequently.

One can find the roots of feminist movements or modern feminisms in different parts of the world and at various historical moments. What all feminist movements have in common is their focus on issues of justice, equality and respect for women. Among the many tools such as rallies and demonstrations, that women have employed to advance the course of feminist movements, the literary approach has played an important role. Toril Moi argues in her *Sexual Textual Politics* that feminism appeared as a vital political tool in the 1960s. Mainstream Western feminism has on several occasions tried to project a universal definition of feminism. This universality of feminism, however, received an angry charge from feminists from the Third World especially from Africa.

In her introduction to *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Mohanty points out the complexity inherent in the definition of the term feminism. Feminism should bear in mind differences in socio-cultural contexts if the struggle to end women's subordination is to be successful. As Pierrette Herzberger notes, experiences are not the same for all feminists:

Le féminisme africain est né dans un autre cadre historique. Il inclut les expériences de l'éducation traditionnelle, de la colonisation, du développement du patriarcat souvent au détriment d'un matriarcat effectif, perceptible dans presque toutes les civilisations africaines

avec son pendant des coutumes aujourd'hui non appropriées telles que l'excision, et actuellement du poids de l'endettement et de la pauvreté de l'Afrique. (347)

Many African feminists think that the militant feminist posture of the West could be out of place in Africa where the resolution of male-female problems is approached through compromise. Within the African context, the term feminism is often controversial. Obioma Nnaemeka branded herself a *negofeminist*, since she believed that the term feminism, which was created, designed, and defined by white women, was exclusionary. Nnaemeka argues that black women were neither accepted nor invited into the movement defined by Western feminists. She stresses the need for African women to create a more feasible, workable terminology for themselves. This critic went further by concluding that long before the advent of Western feminism, black women were actively involved in social, economic and political functions in their societies.

Prior to the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa — that is, in pre-colonial Africa — some anthropologists and traditionalists believe that women played significant roles and were worshipped and respected by men in those societies. The Ghanaian feminist writer and critic, Ama Ata Aidoo corroborates this view, noting that:

In pre-colonial times, fighting women were part of most African armies, a well-known example being the all-female battalions of Dahomey (ancient Benin, early nineteenth century), who sought to protect their empire against invaders and internal treachery. [...] Yaa Ashantewaa, queen of the Asante (Ashanti, Ghana), led an insurrection against the British [...] True, all of these women were reigning monarchs who found it relatively easy to organize armies against foreign occupations. (40-41)

Similarly, there were many important goddesses among the Yorubas and Igbos of Nigeria and the Akans of Ghana. Historians assert that women were consulted before embarking on some landmark events in the society. In Yoruba culture for instance,

the goddess of the river and the goddess of thunder were important deities. Indeed, African feminists frequently cite the presence of powerful female divinities in pre-colonial African societies as evidence of the vital roles women played in the past. Diedre Badejo remarks that:

In the Yoruba example, Osun is the goddess of wealth, femininity, power and fecundity. [...] According to the mythology, she is the only woman present at the creation of the world [...] a woman of alluring beauty and the most powerful historical leader of Osogbo [...] As an African woman, Osun plays many roles that emanate from the central role as woman and mother. (96)

These assertions suggest that women held responsibilities that were as important as those of men in Africa for a long time before the arrival of the Europeans. Colonialism, Christianity, Islam and neo-colonialism played key roles in the oppression of African women. Indeed, colonialism was instrumental in shifting the balance, as the focus was on educating African men with regard to their assimilation into Western and Arab cultures. This ultimately led to the strengthening of the position of African men at the expense of women. In fact, this politics of assimilation destroyed many pre-colonial African cultures that once empowered women. Zulu Sofola remarks that:

Assailed by western and Arab cultures, she has been stripped bare of all that made her central and relevant in the traditional African socio-political domain [...] Europeans and Arabs with their philosophy of women's inferiority arrived on the scene and succeeded in institutionalizing the superiority of men. Chaos set in and women were made irrelevant, a fact that is now full-blown in today's European/ Arab systems of governance in contemporary Africa where our women have been rendered irrelevant, ineffective and completely de-womanized. (52-59)

The position of traditionalists who hold that African women played a significant role in pre-colonial Africa did not go unchallenged by Mineke Schipper. This Dutch Africanist critic in

“Mother Africa on a Pedestal,” reveals that the condition of the African woman in pre-colonial time was not as bright as the traditionalists put it. Maryse Conde in her *La parole des femmes*, however, argues that irrespective of the condition of African woman in the pre-colonial era, colonialism played a great role in subjugating and presenting her as inferior.

Feminism today, to borrow Elizabeth Ogini’s phrase, has gained acceptance in Africa “among the downtrodden and long abused African women and their sympathizers” (14). Feminist activities in both Anglophone and Francophone Africa are very significant. Crucial theoretical works of feminists from both regions have contributed a lot to fashioning socially and culturally appropriate African feminism. One distinguishing aspect of these African feminisms is their insistence upon the importance of responding to specifically African conditions. Many African feminists such as Molaria Ogundipe Leslie, and Buchi Emecheta, for instance, seek to identify themselves with African feminism by preaching the complementary role between men and women.

Diedre Badejo states that:

African feminism recognizes the inherent multiple roles of women and men in reproduction, production and the distribution of wealth, power and responsibility for sustaining human life...Mutual female-male independence, complementary and self-reliant roles contextualize the content and dominate the discussion of our victories and challenges. (94)

Similarly, Carole Boyce-Davies notes that “a genuine African feminism recognises a common struggle with the African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation which is not antagonistic to African men” (8-9). African feminism thus acknowledges its affinities with international feminism but delineates a specifically African feminism whose needs and goals arise out of the concrete realities of women’s lives in African societies. Molaria Ogundipe adopts the acronym “Stiwa” — “Social Transformation Including Women of Africa”— to define African feminism and her feminist agenda

for African women. She posits that the transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women.

Another important area of difference between African feminism and Western feminism lies in attitudes toward maternity. Many African feminists condemn what they view as attacks on maternity launched by some Western feminists. Feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett and Jeffner Allen offered critiques of motherhood as women's natural roles. The Cameroonian critic Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi, however, warns that:

The critique of motherhood (that views women as forced mothers) and heterosexuality (that views women as sexual slaves) [...] can be problematic to most African women simply because motherhood and family have historically represented different experiences and social practices to Western and African women. [...] Whereas many Western women may view multiple childbirths as both oppressive and restrictive [...] most African women find empowerment in their children and families. (24)

Many African feminists seem to be intolerant of Euro-American feminism. Calixthe Beyala, however, in her manifesto *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses soeurs occidentales*, advocates embracing Euro-American feminism. She is of the view that since the oppression of women is universal, it calls for a universal solution. Beyala's feminism, which she calls *féminitude*, rejects the complementary roles between men and women. She argues that Euro-American theories, struggles, and victories helped African women to liberate themselves. Attracted by Western feminist ideologies, Beyala's feminism appears largely antagonistic to African feminism's belief in complementary roles for men and women. This writer-critic says: "Seules les tricheuses rêvassent sur les nouvelles formes de relations homme-femme et parlent de complémentarité dans les couples. Je suis venue en Occident attirée par vos théories, vos combats, vos victoires" (10).

Works by African-American feminists such as Barbara Christian, Alice Walker and bell hooks, who operate under the

banner of Womanism to express the oppression of women of non-white descent, offer additional insight on the issues of feminist cultural differences. As Ogini affirms: "African women and African-American women seek to show the peculiarity of Black women's problems which are not experienced by White women" (16). One can argue that the discrimination of black women by their white counterparts led to the creation of African-American feminism tagged Womanism, because it was difficult for both white women and black women to bond together on equal terms and fight the common enemy- sexism. bell hooks in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, asserts that:

The condescension [white women] directed at black women was one of the means they employed to remind us that the women's movement was "theirs"- that we were able to participate because they allowed it; after all we were needed to legitimate the process. They did not treat us as equals. (11)

hooks and her African-American feminist colleagues criticize the aims and goals of feminism as conceived by white American women. Womanism recognizes that the needs of the black woman are not the same as those of the white woman. This movement gave nourishment to African feminists who thought that they were side-lined by their Western counterparts. African feminists closely identify with Womanism to draw a line between their own brand of feminism and Western feminism. Womanism, as adopted by African feminists, preaches the complementary roles between men and women. As Elizabeth Ogini asserts: "Womanism is a special culture that reminds men with special indication that without women's full involvement in the system, man is incomplete in action as well as in achievement and this is the implied preaching of Sembene Ousmane" (18).

Senegal ranks among the first countries to consider feminist issues seriously with the publication of its feminist magazine "Fippu" in 1987. The magazine's objective as spelt out by Marie-Angélique Savané was to think and act on situations of women in the present and in the future. The project of "Fippu" was to

involve all Senegalese women irrespective of their social class in ... The primary objective of their feminism was to wage war against all forms of women's oppression. Irène d'Almeida remarks that: "the Senegalese model shows that the women of the movement do place their struggle in a historical, political and ideological frame, but they are not interested in theoretical issues. They are engaged in what I would term a practical African feminism" (18). The feminist movement in Senegal is amplified by extensive literary production. In a similar vein, Cameroon contributes to a growing feminist movement with the activities of its women writers and theorists. Indeed, African feminist theorists and women writers have contributed immensely and positively to the evolution of feminism in Africa.

Critical works by prominent Francophone feminist and post-colonial theorists both from Africa (Pierrette Herzeberger, Irène d'Almeida, Awa Thiam, Calixthe Beyala, and Madeleine Borgomano) and from Western countries (Arlette Chemain-Degrange, Françoise Lionnet, Jean-Marie Volet) bring a feminist critique to some of the socio-cultural aspects of African societies. The works of these critics have shed light on issues such as marriage, domestic arrangements, maternity and female circumcision.

While appreciating the approaches of Western feminists, critics, and theorists on African literature, most African feminists, critics and theorists are of the opinion that researchers on African studies should pay some attention to the realities in Africa because of its peculiar social climate. In this respect, one can easily appreciate the position of the Nigerian writer and critic, Buchi Emecheta who sees herself as a feminist with a small "f" because of her tolerance for men. It is probably important to heed Obioma Nnaemeka's warning that any critic approaching African women's writing, should "pay less attention to Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and *écriture féminine* and listen more to the rhythm and heartbeat of Igboland" (84). Nnaemeka is of the belief that if African literature is to win anything, it has to win it on its own terms. Herzberger-Fofana also seems to share Nnaemeka's position while

she observes that: “La recherche d’un langage féminin comme le revendique les romancières linguistes européennes ne constitue pas l’un des objectifs des femmes-écrivains en Afrique” (24-25).

This is not, however, to say that Western approaches cannot yield productive results despite differences in cultural values. As Henri Lopes remarks:

La femme africaine n’est pas la femme européenne. Chacune porte en elle et transmet à la descendance dont elle a la charge, une civilisation et des traditions bien définies. Elles n’élèvent pas leurs enfants de la même façon. L’une les promène dans un landau, l’autre les porte sur le dos. Mais au-delà de ces singularités, quand elles font connaissance, elles en viennent vite à des dialogues dans lesquels on sent courir, dans les deux sens, un courant de compréhension. (12)

There is no doubt that women from First and Third Worlds meet in conferences and other forums where they dialogue to exchange ideas that are mutually beneficial to their work. The ideas of Western feminists are indeed relevant to the study of African women’s writings even though their work reflects a different context and different circumstances. One needs to recognise their contributions while keeping in mind the problems inherent in applying any external theory with its own biases. Even though some of the ideals of Western feminism meet with stiff resistance in the African terrain, it is not unlikely that Western feminist values could help address, analyse and correct some of the gender inequalities inherent in African societies.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONSTRUCTIONS OF SUBALTERN FEMALE PERSONAE IN AFRICAN MALE WRITINGS

African literature is a male-created, male-oriented, chauvinistic art. [...] Male is the master; male constitutes majority. The fact is well documented in our colonial history. The white civilizer, as cunning as ever, carefully chose his black counterparts to run the affairs of the 'Dark Continent'. Woman is considered to be a flower, not a worker. Woman is supposed to be relegated to the gilded cage; she is not the contributor to, the creator of, a civilization.

– Femi Ojo-Ade (1983: 158)

Religious and Cultural Constructs of African Women

The colonial experience, with the introduction of Christianity and Islam, did not only disorganise African societies by disregarding certain important African cultural values, it also introduced new practices to the colonised people. Christian missionaries forced Africans to embrace Christianity and made them turn their backs on their customs and former ways of life. European and Arab missionaries diligently propagated their religious beliefs, in this case, the negative image of women.

Colonialism masculinised any territory upon which it inflicted itself and dismantled the matriarchal system that co-existed with patriarchy in some pre-colonial African societies. Religion also played a central role in sustaining certain kinds of social structures for it provided an ideological framework for the social roles of women.

It is generally believed by a number of feminists that men interpreted both the Bible and the Koran to suit their agenda so that they could have control over women. Some make reference to the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden as critical because it was written that Eve seduced Adam into eating the forbidden fruit. Feminists believe that this alleged action, interpreted by generations of Bible readers as “sinful,” led to women being viewed by many as “sinners” or “evil.” Other feminists from the Muslim world trace the subordination of women to traditionalist/conservative interpretations of the Koran. Fatima Mernissi, for instance, focuses on the controversy between traditional and modern Muslims over the roles of women. In *Beyond the Veil*, she discusses how some Muslims use the Koran to support their belief in the relegation of women to the domestic sphere:

The desegregation of sexes violates Islam’s ideology on the woman’s position in the social order: the woman should be under the authority of fathers, brothers or husbands. Since she is considered by Allah to be a destructive element, she is to be spatially confined and excluded from matters other than those of the family. The woman’s access to non-domestic space is put under the control of males. (xv)

Mernissi also holds that European Christian societies came to the same conclusion as their Muslim counterpart in their belief that women are destructive to the social order. The effect of the interpretation of the Bible and the Koran to serve a specific male agenda relegated women to the background tending to deprive them of certain roles in the society, such as holding positions in mosques, churches, and public or government spheres. Both Christian and Islamic religious theories, as interpreted by men and social institutions, seem to have been designed to curb

women's power. Indeed, as Mernissi points out, Islamic doctrines do not explicitly claim the inferiority of women: "On the contrary, the whole system is based on the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation, etc.) can be perceived as a strategy for containing her power" (xvi). Since it was believed that woman was responsible for man's expulsion from the garden, she is not only regarded as having destroyed the peace of the paradise, but is feared for being powerful. Hence, the need to portray her as destructive and curtail her overwhelming power by various means.

Woman is further assumed to be inferior to man because it was written in the Bible that she was constructed from man's ribs. As Mineke Schipper notes, "the story of Genesis tells us in great detail how the first man was created and then woman, how she was taken from him and is thus part of him" (23). Schipper asserts as well that a similar patriarchal culture is to be found in the Koran: "Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that Allah has preferred in bounty one of them over the other" (*The Holy Koran*, Sura 4: 34). It can be argued that it is through Biblical and Koranic constructions of woman that her image in various societies has come to be negatively viewed. Many interpretations of the Bible and the Koran also stipulate that woman has to be submissive to her husband. The implication of these religious interpretations, which persist in many societies today, is that woman is reduced to a subordinate subject controlled by patriarchal powers. Such Biblical and Koranic representations of women have rendered African women inferior and subservient as evidenced in the writings of a majority of African authors. Molara Ogundipe notes: "African woman is discriminated against, excluded from real power, exploited at all levels and derided most of the time in the society. She is usually seen as the cause of whatever happens negatively in the country. The national scapegoat. The cause of the nation's decline" (67). It is sad to note, as Ogundipe observes, that in sub-Saharan African societies, women are often considered demonic and are blamed for

whatever goes wrong. This attitude toward women leads to their oppression which in turn, serves to render them irrelevant in the society. “Mother Goddess,” as Adrienne Rich puts it, is gradually devalued and rejected; the human woman finds her scope and dignity increasingly reduced” (120).

Any study on the subjugation of African women that ignores religious theories as propagated by preachers of these sacred books and their effects with regard to domination of women by men religiously, socially, economically and politically, is incomplete. In Adeola Jame’s *In Their Own Voices*, Buchi Emecheta asserts that African women suffered because they embraced Christianity and Islam, two religions that jeopardised their positions and helped to subordinate them. Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana concurs, noting the negative effects of Islam on the status of African women:

Introduite à partir du 10e siècle en Afrique, l’Islam a modifié le statut de la femme et donné la prééminence au système patriarcal. [...] Religion d’origine arabe, l’Islam se fondant avec les rites traditionnelles, a donné naissance à un culte spécifique: “l’Islam noir” qui s’est adapté aux réalités africaines, incorporant les pratiques animistes et les interférant au dogme religieux. (145-146)

Islam, as Herzberger remarks, was mixed with traditional African practices. This mixture gave birth to a new form of Islam that men firmly established in their traditional societies to relegate women who, in the words of Awa Thiam, “jadis ont eu leur mot à dire quand il fallait prendre des décisions de grande importance” (17). Furthermore, in certain societies in Africa today, customs, traditions and beliefs persist that keep women under subjugation and make them feel inferior to their male counterparts. Some of these institutions include customs associated with marriage (such as polygamy, bride price, arranged marriage, widowhood and female circumcision).

The Poetic Constructs of African Women

In the poetic works that have entered into the canon of African

literature, the topic of colonialism is conspicuous because the colonial experience played a critical role in shaping the identity of most African societies and ways of life. Soon after African men embraced Western education, a number of them who became writers were quick to realise how much their customs were swept under the carpet by the colonizers and decided to uplift African cultural values. Cyril Mokwenye in his "Senghor As Pre-Independence Negritude Poet," notes:

Africa, during the colonial era, was portrayed in very bad light especially from the cultural point of view. For the Negritude writers in general and for Senghor in particular therefore, literature was to serve as a weapon for the enlightenment of the white race concerning the blackman's culture and civilization. More than through any other genre, it was through the poetic genre that Negritude was to seek to accomplish this task. (7)

During this entire process of rehabilitating African customs however, Negritude writers particularly depicted African women in their poems as docile and passive and considered those attributes as good qualities. The textual representation of women by men in the early phase of written African literatures played an important role in the subordination of women. The construct of the subaltern female in African poems traces its roots to the attitudes and beliefs that European and Arab missionaries passed down to African men. The colonial administrators and Arab missionaries in most colonised lands of Africa carefully selected men to assist them in their duties and influenced them to work for and support their male-dominated agendas. African men thus came to play a central role in all aspects of the society while women were systematically excluded. Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana affirms that: "Seuls, les hommes qui constituaient la main d'oeuvre utile aux besoins du colonisateur percevaient un salaire – les femmes étant exclues de la vie économique – selon l'idéologie occidentale. Cette transposition d'idéologie a été fatale pour la gent féminine" (286).

Similarly on the educational scene, African men were given the unique privilege of benefiting from Western education as colonial schools were opened to men first in the name of the civilizing mission but eventually to suit a specific male-oriented colonial agenda. The privilege accorded to the African man through colonial education has considerable implications for African literature because most of the early texts were by African men. African literature became a male enterprise. As Carole Boyce Davies in *Ngambika*, observes, European colonialism, as well as traditional attitudes to women, combined very successfully to exclude African women from the educational processes that prepared one for the craft of writing.

Some of the African men educated by European and Arab institutions and who became authors assimilated the attitudes of foreign patriarchal cultures to depict the uneducated African women in very limited and traditional roles. They tended to glorify women in subaltern, domestic and maternal tasks. African male poets and writers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, David Diop, Camara Laye and Abdoulaye Sadjji glorified women and at the same time portrayed them often as mothers in terms of their nurturing capabilities. By doing so, women were put in an essentially powerless position. Senghor's "Femme Noire," for instance, portrays the idealized African woman thus:

Femme nue, femme noire

Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté!

J'ai grandi à ton ombre; la douceur de tes mains bandait mes yeux.

Femme nue, femme noire

Je chante ta beauté qui passe, forme que je fixe dans l'Éternel

Avant que le Destin jaloux ne te réduise en cendres pour

Nourrir les racines de ta vie. (*Oeuvres poétiques* 16-17).

Senghor in this poem, depicts the African woman as a mother whose sole role is to rear and nurture children. He glorifies her beauty and her maternal role. However, his portrayal objectifies

her and thus keeps her in a subaltern position.

The idealised representation of African woman by Senghor is also echoed in David Diop's poem "Afrique," dedicated to his mother:

"A ma mère"

Afrique mon Afrique

Je ne t'ai jamais connue

Mais mon regard est plein de ton sang

Ton beau sang noir à travers les champs répandu

Le sang de ta sueur

La sueur de ton travail

Le travail de l'esclavage

Esclavage de tes enfants. (*Coups de pilon* 23)

Africa is regarded as his mother destroyed by colonialism. The image of woman here is that of Africa humiliated and subjected to colonial domination. The poet who considers his mother as Africa therefore chants her suffering and victimization.

Similarly, the introductory poem "A ma mère" in Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir* has been described by Adebayo as a "maternal epic" (179). This nostalgic remembrance of his childhood beside his sweet mother focuses on the woman's patience and resignation:

Femme noire, femme africaine, ô toi ma mère
je pense à toi...

O Dâman, ô ma mère, toi qui me portas sur le dos, toi qui
m'allaitas, toi qui gouvernas mes premiers pas, toi qui la
première m'ouvris les yeux aux prodiges de la terre,
je pense à toi...

Femme des champs, femme des rivières, femme du
grand fleuve, ô toi, ma mère, je pense à toi...

O toi Dâman, ô ma mère, toi qui essayais mes larmes, toi
 qui me rejouissais le coeur, toi qui, patiemment supportais
 mes caprices, comme j'aimerais encore être près de
 toi, être enfant près de toi!

Femme simple, femme de la résignation, ô toi, ma mère,
 Je pense à toi... (*L'enfant noir* 7-8)

Not only did these African male poets and writers subalternize female subjects in their writings, they also defined women exclusively on the basis of their relationships to men and in terms of their maternal roles. Henri Lopes observes this in their works, with a critical tone:

La femme africaine n'est qu'un objet poétique. Elle est muse. C'est le lot de toutes les mères et nourrices qui avec les berceuses et les contes font déjà éclore la sensibilité et le goût du merveilleux chez ces bouts d'êtres qui aiment à s'endormir sur leur dos. (9)

Certainly, the African women depicted by the poets are valued, idealized and glorified as sweet mothers and as nurturers of children. Their depictions show the patience, resignation and suffering of African women, obviously considered positive values by the male authors. Nevertheless, these textual representations reflect social realities and are rooted and implicated in power inequalities in the societies that produced them. These patient women were also those who suffered domination from oppressive husbands. Buchi Emecheta states that: "the good woman in Achebe's portrayal, is the one who kneels down and drinks the dregs after her husband. [...] In his view that kind of subordinate woman is the good woman" (42). What Emecheta describes here is a situation where a woman accepts to eat the most worthless part of the food that remains after her husband has eaten the juicy part of it. This kind of submissive wife is considered as the perfect African woman.

The cause of African women has not been well served by the majority of African men in their writings. They treat issues that

deeply concern women such as childbearing, motherhood, the subordination of women to men inadequately and with bias. In Negritude literature, as Adebayo observes, “the mother is an object of reverence and symbol of patience, long suffering and fecundity, while Africa is conceived and eulogized sometimes in terms of a woman, a mother who is ravaged by years of colonial spoliation” (178-193). Adebayo’s remarks shed some light on the construct of the subaltern female personae. By chanting women’s beauty in their poems, the Negritude poets particularly Senghor, maintains that women are not in bondage and thus need not be liberated. In *La parole aux négresses*, Awa Thiam takes these writers to task, by saying that rare are those among them who talk with objectivity. Thiam states that they do not preoccupy themselves much with women and when they do, they only sing and glorify women’s femininity and their sufferings. Pierrette Herzberger-Pofana agrees with Thiam, asserting that:

Parmi les différentes images que le poète [Senghor] et ceux du même mouvement littéraire exaltent, l’image de la mère occupe une place prépondérante. Personnage mythique ou imaginaire, la mère devient symbole du royaume de l’enfance et du paradis perdu. Aux heures de détresse, d’amertume elle est celle qui efface la souffrance et redonne l’espoir à l’exilé. Cette idéalisation et mystification de la femme africaine caractérisent les poètes mais également les romanciers de la même période. Ainsi Abdoulaye Sadjji et Camara Laye offrent dans leurs romans un portrait semblable de la mère sublimée. (326)

Both Thiam and Herzberger argue that this glorification of African women as idealised mothers veils their submission and exploitation. They insist further that to African male writers, this image of the mother symbolizes tradition and an often idealized native land. Irène d’Almeida in *Francophone African Women Writers* lends her voice, noting that “when women were not flat, secondary characters, they were placed on a pedestal and idealised to such an extreme as to neutralize their existence as real people” (8).

African novelists inherited a subalternized and domesticated image of African women from both the colonial system and the

Négritude poets. A majority of African male texts depict women as inferior and subordinated to men so as to reveal the full authority that men have over women's lives. The power exercised over the subordinated African women was imposed on them and no room is left for them to partake in any decision that affects them. Thus, they are perpetually silenced. It should be equally borne in mind that even after independence, the condition of African women did not change much because independence failed to absorb, transform and accept women as individuals who might contribute to nation building. In politics, they are still not fully represented especially in societies where women are largely subjugated to Islamic dictates and Sharia laws. Religious rites confine them to housekeeping and most of the time, prevent them from playing active roles in societies. They are educationally handicapped and unlike their male counterparts, they are inequipped with Western education that can prepare them to participate in administrative jobs.

The Fictional Constructs of Subaltern African Women

Some writers who towed the line of Négritude poets portrayed women in subordinate conditions in their writings but with the difference that they denounced certain Islamic, Christian and African rites that facilitate the oppression of African women. The themes of the subalternity of the African female subject and of her oppression by patriarchal forces run through Abdoulaye Sadjì's *Maimouna*, Mongo Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956) and *Mission terminée* (1957), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* (1970) and Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignée* (1972). These novels depict the condition of traditional African women in Senegal, Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Mali. The female characters referred to in these novels are confronted with traditional attitudes and patriarchal ethos in their societies, which abuse and enslave women.

In *Mission terminée*, *Les soleils des indépendances* and *Toiles d'araignée*, the issue of bride price is central and puts Niam's wife,

Salimata and Mariama, the female characters of these novels, in a subaltern condition. It could be said that their parents “sold” them and that they came to be the “property” of their husbands and under their control. These women, though, attempted to free themselves. Niam’s wife abandoned Niam’s house and Salimata escaped from Tiemoko’s home. But, they were not really considered free even after separation from their husbands’ homes especially when the bride price was not returned. The brides’ families would be expected to repay the bride price if the bride left the husband.

Contrary to the idealised portrayals of African women by Negritude poets, Beti, Kourouma and Ly show pity for the condition of African female subjects in their texts. Referring to Kourouma, Arlette Chemain-Degrange observes that:

La remise en cause des coutumes connaît, avec Ahmadou Kourouma, puis avec Ouologuem, une acuité non encore atteinte auparavant. Excision, infabulation, viol rituel faisaient partie du domaine réservé à l’ethnographe, et Ahmadou Kourouma est le premier romancier négro-africain à avoir violé ces tabous. (342-343)

The novels of Beti, Kourouma and Ly specifically depict woman’s exploitation by man and her subordination to him in marriage, sex and domestic roles. Works by these authors also give an account of the harsh conditions that these female characters endure. Pierrette Herzberger remarks that:

Ces ouvrages reflètent certes la sensibilité artistique de l’auteur et la sympathie qu’il éprouve pour la femme africaine, mais donnent une vision imparfaite de la psyché féminine. Le rôle de la femme n’est défini qu’en fonction de celui qu’elle joue dans la vie de l’homme et non pour elle-même (20).

In *Mission terminée*, the female character around whom the plot revolves is caught in a quagmire of domination and subordination. After his wife leaves him, Niam demonstrates his masculine arrogance: “Moi, je suis le sol. Elle n’est qu’une feuille morte qui vient de se détacher de l’arbre. Elle a beau tournoyer,

elle a beau faire: elle ne peut éviter finalement de tomber sur le sol" (23). Niam's wife works as a house-wife and takes care of his farm as well. Her absence leaves his house in shambles and shows his inability to take care of himself. The author is nevertheless aware that the wife's role is more complex. This traditional portrayal of Niam's wife shows her as a servant good only for taking care of the house and farming. The narrator notes that:

Au bout de six mois de ce régime, Niam n'y tint plus. Il se rendit d'abord une nuit auprès de Bikokolo, le patriarche, le sage du village, à qui il avoua, non sans peine parce qu'il était un orgueilleux, qu'il désirait récupérer sa femme dont il avait grand besoin pour tenir sa maison. Au vrai, il était beaucoup plus intéressé que cela: il avait raté une saison d'arachides depuis le départ de sa femme, puisqu'il n'avait personne d'autre pour travailler dans son champs (23).

Niam considers his wife as just a piece of machinery, a function in his service. The subservient position of the wife is subtly critiqued in the way she is portrayed. It is obvious in the novels written by Beti and Kourouma, that most of the female characters are represented as secondary and defined in relation to male characters. Irène d'Almeida asserts that:

La femme est rarement un personnage principal aussi bien dans la trame narrative que dans la thématique où elle occupe une place tout-à-fait secondaire, se situe à l'arrière plan et ne se trouve définie que par rapport aux hommes. (137)

It is true that Niam's wife in *Mission terminée* and Salimata in *Les soleils* appear frequently in the novels but the principal characters of *Mission terminée* and *Les soleils* are male characters. Although the first part of *Les soleils* admittedly covers Salimata's life, Fama, her husband, is unquestionably the protagonist of the novel. The second part of the novel is devoted to Fama and the main focus is on his travaux in post-colonial Africa. Similarly, in *Mission terminée*, Niam's wife is omnipresent but Jean-Marie's adventure overrides other themes, and he is seen as the protagonist.

It is true that the plight of Niam's wife remains important to this literary piece but Jean-Marie Medza is the main character. Bicololo, the patriarch of the family, asked him to go to Kala to bring back the wife of his cousin Niam who had run away. The principal actors in *Mission terminée*, *Le pauvre Christ*, *Les soleil des indépendances* and *Toiles d'araignée* are male. The female characters only play secondary roles. Beti admits this during an interview with Kembe Milolo:

Enfin le personnage principal du *Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, c'est bien le prêtre, le missionnaire blanc. Et s'il faut absolument trouver un deuxième, un autre personnage central, ce serait plutôt le jeune garçon qui voit. Parce que tout est vu par le regard d'un enfant qui est l'enfant de chœur et qui sert de boy à ce missionnaire. Il est vrai que la femme occupe une place importante dans ce roman. Mais ce n'est pas la place principale. (276)

This remark by Mongo Beti is in line with the traditional portrayal of women as secondary characters in the society, a reality reflected in a majority of African male texts. Male characters are vocal and visible while the female characters remain silent and in the shadows.

Since some African traditions place an emphasis on male superiority, the wife is placed under the authority and will of her husband. In such arrangements, a woman is trained to obey and respect all members of her husband's family. On the contrary, the husband or the male child is trained to rule his household knowing quite well that when it comes to important decisions, his wishes prevail. By virtue of this societal arrangement, the husband-wife relationship is like a master-servant relationship. This norm of living gives women powerless status and they are frequently abused by their husbands as it is the case with Niam's wife:

Niam traitait une femme aussi travailleuse exactement comme si elle avait été une chienne! Et encore, une chienne, ça peut toujours faire des chiots, tandis que, elle qui n'avait pas d'enfant, était jugée bonne pour toutes les injures et tous les mépris. (21)

Some African traditions, generally speaking, vest much power in men while the place of women is understood in the context of man's identity. The mother rears the children while the husband contributes very little to their daily upbringing. Yet, when it comes to making major decisions on matters that affect children, the father does that alone. This custom, transmitted from generation to generation, supports the subordination of women for it is believed that no woman should have power over a man. Women are assigned domestic responsibilities such as cooking, washing and cleaning. It is not surprising that in most African societies, women play the roles of wives, mothers, sisters and daughters — roles named in definition to their positioning with men. The power of patriarchy is manifested in all aspects of life, for the husband makes the final decision in the house.

Medza, the protagonist of *Mission terminée*, testifies to that patriarchal power when he avers that: “[Ma mère] me supplia, en larmes, de m'éloigner, de ne pas offenser davantage mon père, de ne pas mériter sa malédiction” (246). Children are often trained to listen to their father in order not to incur his wrath for if a child disobeys his father, his mother is blamed for not rearing him well. The irony, however, is that the father and not the mother takes credit for his successful children. It is also assumed that the success of the child lies in the hands of his father and not those of his mother. For the child to be successful, the mother, as the tradition in some cases, has it, must be obedient, passive and submissive to her husband.

Similarly, in Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignée*, one notices how the power of patriarchy functions. The father, in this case, decides who marries his daughter, and his expectation is that the daughter will obey his orders and not question them: “Si j'entends de toi la plus petite objection, je te maudis, tu quitteras la maison et aucun de mes parents ne te recevra” (48). The narrator describes Mariama's dejection and decries her state:

Mariama est éperdue. Elle a le même réflexe que l'iule qui se love pour se protéger du danger, elle se contracte davantage et ferme les yeux. Ce barrage est rompu par le torrent qui bouillonne en elle. Des

larmes chaudes coulent de ses yeux, et comme dans un rêve ou les cauchemars abondent, elle voit défiler la chaîne des événements qui ont fait d'elle un ballon de chiffons sur lequel tapent non pas des enfants, mais des adultes; des êtres qu'elle craignait et vénérât. (37-38)

The author shows the inability of the young woman to help herself amidst the adult men who decide her fate. Mariama does not only respect them but she also fears them because she knows that once they take a decision, nobody can change it. The tears rolling down her cheeks are signs of her unhappiness and of her weakness to challenge the elders. This patriarchal attitude is also evident in many African novels where we frequently find ruthless husbands and authoritarian fathers lording it over docile, obedient mothers and helpless girls. Seydou Badian depicts this situation in *Sous l'orage* and shows how Kany, the female character around whom the story is centered, is victimized by her authoritarian father. S.M. Battestini in his *Seydou Badian écrivain malien* describes how Kany is faced with patriarchal domination:

Elle pleure beaucoup, ce qui n'est encore qu'une forme de soumission. Elle met peu de conviction à tenter de se défendre, de s'imposer; finalement de façon brutale, on peut déplorer qu'elle n'ait pas de caractère. Mais est-il aisé d'en avoir après des siècles de tradition où justement l'individu n'existe pas, mais ne fonctionne que par rapport au groupe? (33)

As Battestini observes, one can say that certain aspects of the traditions make it very difficult for individuals to be themselves and make their own decisions without any interference from the parents or the community. A similar trend is observed with Mariama, the female character in Ly's *Toiles d'araignée*, who tries to confront the patriarchy but suffers for her action. Her struggle is futile in a society that strongly believes in its entrenched patriarchal values.

Marriage and the Subordination of Women

It is commonly agreed that subordination can only be understood in a binary context of which the other is domination. Patriarchy is a relationship of domination and subordination imposed on women in marriage or otherwise in order to subjugate them. Adrienne Rich provides a useful definition of patriarchy:

The power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which female everywhere are subsumed under the male. (57)

Needless to say, men usually make important decisions that affect the family without consulting women. This implies that men are responsible for both their lives and those of their wives and children as well. This attitude appears in many Islamic societies where it is often said that a woman can only go to paradise through the mediation of her husband, hence she has to obey him and comport herself in such a way as to qualify for "eternal life" hereafter. In Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances*, the narrator notes: "Allah a dit que le paradis de la femme se gagnait dans la fumée de l'accomplissement du devoir de son mari. Alors Allah pouvait prévoir pour Salimata une place de repos dans son paradis éternel" (170). This religious doctrine is a vital tool in the construction of male hegemony and in the subalternization of woman.

Marriage in some African societies is considered sacred and a woman who is not married does not command any respect. In traditional society, marriage is often arranged and leaves the concerned young woman out of decision-making. In some cases, if the woman is lucky, her mother informs her about her father's choice of her husband prior to her marriage and her duty is to obey and not to challenge this decision. If she resists, she and her mother are punished. In *Toiles d'araignée*, Mariama's mother (Hawa) rebukes her daughter when Mariama objects to the marriage:

As-tu perdu la raison? Comment oses-tu parler ainsi devant moi? Comment oses-tu dire que tu ne l'aimes pas en ma présence? Serais-tu devenue folle? Aurais-tu perdu tout sens de la pudeur? Veux-tu faire de moi la plus misérable des mères, après avoir été la plus malheureuse des épouses? Je t'ai appelée pour t'informer. Penses-tu qu'on m'avait demandé si j'aimais ton père? (46)

A married woman has to be patient and submissive to the wills and dictates of her husband even when subjected to the most distasteful treatment. The narrator of *Les soleils des indépendances* summarizes the subordination of African women in an Islamic culture in the following words: "La soumission de la femme, sa servitude sont les commandements d'Allah, absolument essentiels" (45). Similarly, Beti depicts that subordination by portraying Niam's wife as family property when Bikokolo sends Jean-Marie Medza to bring her back. The whole community is agitated and this remains essentially the men's affair. Jean-Marie Medza relates how Niam succeeded in bringing other men to his side: "Niam avait tous les habitants mâles du village dans sa manche. J'ignore comment il s'y était pris. Ils manifestaient tous leur désir de me voir accepter d'aller là-bas faire peur aux beaux-parents de Niam" (26-27). When it comes to marital issues, men always come out en masse to help.

Niam himself, convinced by the rule of tradition, tells Jean Marie Medza that: "Cette affaire n'est pas seulement la mienne, c'est l'affaire de toute la tribu. Cette femme n'est pas seulement la mienne, c'est notre femme à tous. C'est donc nous tous que la situation actuelle affecte" (26). When Bikokolo the patriarch assigns this special mission, Medza dares not refuse. Besides, Medza speaks the white man's language and it is assumed that, as he is being sent to Kala, he will be able to intimidate Niam's wife's father so that the latter forces his daughter to return. Bernth Lindfors notes that "Medza's job is to present Niam's case to the errant girl's father and demand her return. In other words, he functions as an enforcer of traditional moral codes, an agent of social conformity" (23). Medza has no choice but to carry out the

assignment. The task of bringing back Niam's wife even involves the village's chief who lends his bicycle to Medza so that he can ride it to Kala to fetch back Niam's wife. Medza adds to his earlier statement: "Le chef de canton daigna consentir à apporter sa petite pierre à cet édifice national: la récupération de l'épouse Niam. Il me prêta son vélo" (34).

Niam's wife complains about a husband who always beats her. This compelled her to run off with a man from a neighbouring tribe. By running away, Niam's wife shows that she is not willing to be his property. However, her act indirectly defies the whole community. Arlette Chemain-Degrange observes that:

La conduite de l'épouse de Niam, la tante de Khris, constitue un défi à la soumission exigée des femmes. C'est elle qui a laissé le pauvre Niam désemparé devant son champ inculte. [...] Son attitude de paysanne émancipée ne correspond pas au portrait type cher aux premiers poètes. (199)

Chemain-Degrange views Niam's wife's decision to abandon her husband as an act that defies the patriarchal arrangement. Niam's wife's action can also be interpreted as a shrewd way of freeing herself from the oppressive men without necessarily having to confront them or engage them in a fight. Her departure from Niam not only created a vacuum in his house but also on his farm. Niam wants his wife back because of the work she does for him both in his house and on his farm.

In some African societies, when a married woman runs away from her husband's house, relatives of her husband go to look for her, especially when a bride price is paid to the woman's parents during her marriage. The bride price is a practice in which a bride's parents receive money and goods from the bridegroom in exchange for his right to marry their daughter. The woman is thereafter perceived to be the property of the man. If the woman decides to abandon an abusive husband, she often runs to another man whom she likes and who she thinks can pay back the bride price her parents received from her former husband. This is exactly what Niam's wife did when she left her husband.

The issue of bride price is complex and at times, it clearly amounts to the traffic in women between two men. The woman's freedom is crippled and that of her parents' especially if her parents do not have money to pay back the bride-price. Zambo, Medza's cousin who accompanies him to Niam's father-in-law, rebukes the father-in-law in the following terms: "Ainsi donc, fit observer durement Zambo, tu serais prêt à appuyer ta fille si elle voulait divorcer? C'est donc que tu te sens capable de rembourser sa dot?" (66). Even though Niam's father-in-law says that his daughter is free to do what she wants, the issue is not as simple as that. For the marriage to be dissolved locally, the father has to give back the bride price that he received from Niam because failure to do so would mean that his daughter would still remain Niam's legitimate wife. The question of bride price frequently appears in African texts. Indeed, it is a central theme in Ibrahima Ly's novel. Iman Ngondo notes that bride price and the notion of the woman as merely a pawn in an alliance between groups continue to dominate marriage practices. The obligation to refund a man's bride price in case of divorce originally represented an attempt to stabilize a marriage. When a bride price was paid, the woman was compelled to remain in her husband's house regardless of what she might be going through there. Ngondo argues, however, that it may have the opposite effect, pushing a woman who must endure an unfortunate marital situation to search for a suitable partner outside of marriage. This is the situation in which Niam's wife finds herself when she decides to run away with another man. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and Guillaume Oyono Mbia's *Trois prétendants un mari* also address this complex issue. Lauretta Ngecobo echoes that: "Sometimes, even the death of one partner does not invalidate the marriage itself. If it is the wife who dies, the husband may go back to his in-laws to ask for another wife for more or less the same dowry" (142). In such a case, the family may need to give another daughter without another bride price. A woman may also find another man who is ready to pay back her bride price to her husband, thus freeing her to re-marry. If not, the society and

most especially the parents of her husband still consider her to be his wife. Niam's wife is a victim of this traditional arrangement. It is this same practice that is being forced on Mariama of Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignée* when Bakary, the old man proposed to her by her father, distributes money to all:

On la conduisit chez Bakary avec la lâche complicité de l'ombre. Le mariage avait déjà été noué la veille. Le marché était déjà conclu: le fiancé donnait deux cent mille francs du Béléya à son beau père, douze vaches laitières à sa nouvelle épouse, une seule à sa belle-mère, un boubou à chaque frère ou cousin de Mariama, une robe à chaque soeur ou cousine. Il s'engageait à donner devant le témoin, les vingt mille francs de dot réglementaires, et qui devaient selon la loi couvrir l'ensemble des dépenses du mariage. De l'argent a été distribué jusqu'aux grand-parents de la jeune fille. (57)

Mariama's marriage can be likened to a product being sold, whereby all parties involved agree on a price. The woman was disposed of as an object of merchandise. With the payment of the bride price to his in-laws, Bakary has sealed his marital contract as required by the tradition.

Another disturbing issue besides selling off a woman into marriage is the negative image of divorced women in most African societies. Ngcobo argues that only rarely do divorcees earn the understanding of the community; maybe in cases where the woman has a clean reputation that contrasts sharply with her husband's maltreatment of her. Even proven cases of assault or abuse against the woman by her husband may not be enough to justify her abandoning her matrimonial home.

In *Les soleils des indépendances*, Salimata ran away from Tiémoko to marry Fama. Salimata made an independent choice for the first time by marrying Fama but she did not escape from the traditions that oppress women. Salimata still remains a subordinate woman in Fama's house as revealed in the subservient roles she plays.

From a feminist perspective, *Les soleils des indépendances* can be considered as an account of traditional Ivoirian society where

women are subjected to patriarchal rules encoded in Islamic and traditional rites. Salimata was first given in marriage to Baffi, immediately after her circumcision ceremony when she was still suffering the pains of her genital alteration. At the death of Baffi, as tradition dictates, Tiémoko stepped into his deceased brother's shoes and inherited Salimata as his wife. The poor treatment she received from Tiémoko forced her like Niam's wife in *Mission terminée*, to free herself from his violence by running away to marry Fama. Both novels depict the reality that women often run away from husbands imposed on them when they are treated poorly. This does not necessarily constitute liberation. Although Salimata chooses her husband, her problems are not over because as the narrator puts it, "la dot étant payée, le mariage célébré, Salimata vivra dans la cour de son mari comme une femme pour la cuisine, les lougans" (42). In addition, Salimata must also work hard to feed Fama: "Et c'est Salimata, l'épouse qui doit assurer le riz" (3). She must also take good care of her husband and make sure that he is well-fed and respected. Such treatment, which can be likened to the way the servant treats the king, gives women in typical traditional African societies, the qualities of a "good wife." "La bouillie avait cuit; elle réserva une assiettée bien sucrée à Fama. Avec les soins que la femme doit, quel qu'ait pu être le comportement de l'homme, quelle qu'ait pu être sa valeur, un époux restait souverain" (45). In contradiction with the expectations of the husband's roles in a traditional African society, Salimata is the provider of food and not Fama. Traditionally, for a man to be considered as a deserving husband, he should be the provider of food and shelter. Nevertheless, although Salimata is seen to feed her husband, this does not accord her a primary place in the house. The belief that the metaphysical essence of women is to be mothers and in the service of men continues to attribute power to men.

One notices that Niam's wife, Mariama and Salimata all have their roles defined by men and are still in the shadow of men (husbands or fathers) in most cases. Not one of the women is free from cultural bondage and masculine enslavement. Even

though they attempt to free themselves, the burden of tradition still weighs heavily on them. By and large, all of these female characters are depicted as victims of oppressive situations in their matrimonial homes.

In traditional societies, women are instructed by traditions to obey and comport themselves according to traditional or religious dictates. The patriarchal pedagogy they receive from infancy teaches them simply to obey. They are also educated to copy the docile and passive attitudes of their mothers in order to succeed as good wives later in life. These dictates leave no room for women to question the status-quo; they must accept things the way they are established. Any attempt to go against the constituted norms is rewarded with severe punishment as is the case in *Toiles d'araignée* where Salamanta rebukes Mariama in the following words:

Tu n'as pas voulu de ton mari parce qu'il est vieux. Jusqu'ici, je ne t'ai fait subir aucune violence. Nous avons simplement organisé pour toi une réception digne de ton rang. Tu méprises ce que notre société vénère. Tu paieras. A partir d'aujourd'hui, tous les soirs, tu seras enfermée avec Tiécoura dans la cellule. Tu seras la femme d'un lépreux. (191)

It is pertinent to note that the female characters have little or no voice in the texts that represent the first generation of post-Negritude male writers. Men are often seen deciding the fate or destiny of these female characters. Moreover, the reader gets to know these female characters only through the accounts of male characters who are either protagonists or narrators. In *Mission terminée*, Medza, the first-person narrator plays this role; in *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, Denis, also a first-person narrator, does this; in *Les soleils des indépendances* and *Toiles d'araignée*, an unidentified third-person male narrator plays this role. By and large, male characters interpret women through their own lenses.

Physical and Sexual Exploitation of Women

Beti, Kourouma and Ly's novels depict men sexually and physically exploiting women. Although the younger female characters in their novels are exploited, they become slowly conscious of the conditions and situations in which they live. This is not, however, true of the older generation of women in their texts. These women consider what they experience in their daily life as normal — it is all their cultural and religious practices have allowed them to know and expect. Molaria Ogundipe Leslie states that: "African women are more than wives. To understand their multi-faceted identities beyond wifehood, we must look for their roles and statuses in sites other than marriage" (13). What Ogundipe implies here is that women, besides accomplishing matrimonial responsibilities, also do a lot of other things in the society.

The village women in *Mission terminée*, for instance, accept their prescribed roles within domestic and agrarian domains. The same is true of Mariama's mother and other women of her generation in *Toiles d'araignée* and of several of the women in *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*. Reflecting on how Beti's novels depict the exploitation of women, Arlette Chemain-Degrange observes:

Le premier critère du choix d'une épouse est sa rentabilité à l'ouvrage. [...] Les romans de Mongo Beti confirment cette réalité: La femme est recherchée pour son travail. [...] Le rôle essentiel de la femme cultivatrice est mis en évidence par la leçon que l'épouse de Niam donne au village. [...] Niam contemple avec attendrissement "les femmes des autres courbées sur la terre," lui qui a perdu son ouvrière. Cette compassion pour les cultivatrices penchées sur la terre, et la reconnaissance du travail qu'elles fournissent remonte au deuxième roman de Mongo Beti: *Le pauvre christ de Bomba*. (178-179)

Awa Thiam corroborates Chemain-Degrange's view and states in her *La parole aux Negresses* that women in sub-Saharan Africa are saddled with domestic and tedious agrarian work by their husbands whom she calls "Dieu-son-mari" (22):

Elles remplissent les taches ménagères et agricoles [...] Ces travaux sont pénibles à exécuter. C'est le cas du pilage du mil, de la préparation du couscous à base de farine de mil, du ramassage du bois mort pour le feu, de la préparation des mets, de la lessive. [...] *La Négro-Africaine*

moyenne ne connaît ni la cuisinière, ni le réfrigérateur, ni les "Moulinex" et autres appareils ménagers. (21)

Most of the older female characters depicted by Beti, Kourouma and Ly are traditional women who do not attempt to liberate themselves from their suffering. These women are traditional in the sense that they accept their role as mothers and housewives. Domestic work ranges from cleaning the house, washing their husband's and their children's clothes to cooking huge meals for the large family. In most cases, they have to work on farms as well.

In *Mission terminée*, the author situates his scene in Kala, a typical village where women participate fully in farming activities. The narrator referring to Niam, says that: "Pendant ce temps, il errait à travers les champs comme un fantôme: il contemplait les femmes des autres, courbées sur la terre et remuant doucement le sol avec leur petite houe" (24-25.) Women, instead of men, are seen largely engaged in farming activities. In this particular scene, Niam does not have his wife to do similar work for him. Instead of Niam working on his farm, he spends his time contemplating other women working. His attitude shows that he needs his wife to do the physical work for him. She is exploited in this fashion. The narrator notes that: "Si cette femme n'a pas d'enfants, elle a au moins la force de travailler à la maison et aux champs" (47). Kembe Milolo affirms that specific roles are assigned to women in African societies. In her reading of Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, she asserts that: "Dans le pays de Mongo Beti (Cameroun), les travaux ménagers et agricoles et les soins des enfants prennent à la femme beaucoup de temps" (95). The narrator of *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* confirms this:

Ici, les mères de famille travaillent énormément malgré l'heure tardive, elles écrasaient des arachides sur la pierre ou elles hachaient de la viande ou elles faisaient des lavements à leurs enfants. Elles ne se fatiguent jamais. (91)

The narrator's observation clearly illustrates the physical exploitation of sub-Saharan African women. Similarly, in *Mission terminée*, the narrator's description of his uncle's wife testifies to her physical deterioration as a result of hard work and multiple childbirths:

Sa femme était presque aussi grande que lui. Jeune, elle avait dû être splendide; maintenant les maternités successives, les travaux des champs ou dans les plantations de cacao l'avaient fanée. Elle était douce, charmante, serviable, effacée comme une sainte. Elle ne parlait guère, probablement par ce phénomène de mimétisme qui, dit-on est courant dans les vieux ménages. (63-64)

In Beti's novels, women are frequently used by men for their own selfish ends. For instance, the Kala chief in *Mission terminée* gives his daughter Edima in marriage to Medza believing that Medza, an educated young man, will be well-disposed to represent his (the chief's) interests in town. We learn of this in a dialogue between Fils-de-Dieu and Zambo.

– Je parie que depuis l'arrivée de Jean-Marie à Kala, [le chef] n'avait songé qu'à une chose: comment coller sa fillette au petit. [...] Mais quel profit peut-il bien escompter de l'événement? C'est ce que je ne vois pas encore très bien.

– Tu parles, dis Zambo, il est certain d'avoir désormais quelqu'un à la ville pour l'aider plus efficacement dans ses sales combines. Et quelqu'un d'instruit s'il te plaît. (215)

This same commerce is noticed in Beti's *Le roi miraculé* whereby each clan in the village gives one of their daughters in marriage to Essomba, the village king, so as to receive certain privileges from him. This becomes more glaring when the king converts to Christianity and decides to repudiate his wives. In this situation, each clan struggles to have their daughter to be the king's sole choice as a bride in order to allow the clan to continue to benefit from the king's favor. This story clearly shows again,

how men use women for their own benefits; women here are instrumental in the negotiations of the community's interests.

In an attempt to expose patriarchal attitudes in missionary practices in Cameroon, Mongo Beti's *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, reveals not only the failure of Reverend-Father Drumont, the overseer of Bomba's Catholic Church, but also deplores the misery, exploitation and oppression of the young women caged in the "sixa." Catherine, Monique, Margu rite Anaba and many other female characters in the story are presented as prostitutes, mercilessly exploited by the Europeans and their African male agents. The depiction of female characters as prostitutes is common in Beti's novels. In Beti's *Perpetue*, a mediocre civil servant makes his wife a prostitute to a higher officer in order to be promoted at work. It is also noticeable in *Mission termin e* where the narrator says:

Ma m re me donna beaucoup plus tard sa version de la brouille [de] l' poux Niam. Selon elle, madame avait eu des relations scandaleuses avec un petit voyou de la ville, market-boy de sa profession, lequel lui offrait des cotonnades et d'autres choses agr ables   voir et propres   s duire une jeune femme. (21)

Similarly, in *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, women of the "sixa" are all depicted as prostitutes because they are compelled by the system set up by Drumont to sell their bodies cheaply in exchange for food. This attracts them to Zacharie, the RPS's cook:

Les femmes qui couraient apr s Zacharie, peut  tre qu'elles n'ont m me pas regard  sa haute taille, ni ses chaussures de cuir; peut  tre qu'elles viennent seulement pour des choses enfantines: une miche de pain, une bo te de conserve, sachant que Zacharie est cuisinier. Mon p re dit souvent que les femmes ressemblent aux enfants par leurs d sirs. (28-29)

Female characters who dwell in the "sixa" are symbols of exploited women through the missionaries' religious practices because not only are they used in construction works but they are also unpaid for the work they do. The Christian religion brought

by Drumont, for example, was a means to exploit women and not to liberate them. Throughout the novel, one notices the subaltern roles of women. They clean churches, carry luggage to the church and are used as laborers in erecting church buildings. Drumont himself recognizes that he exploits these women when he says:

La femme indigène, la petite femme noire si docile, quelle machine idéale! [...] Nous nous amenons, nous, les chrétiens, nous, les messagers du Christ, nous, les civilisateurs. Et qu'est-ce que vous croyez que nous faisons? Que nous rendons à la femme sa dignité? Oh! surtout pas, mon Père. Ah, non! Nous la maintenons dans sa servitude. Mais, cette fois, à notre profit. (327)

This remark from Drumont shows us once again how Christianity oppressed women through its machinery. Similarly, the “sixa” that Drumont erected in Bomba claimed to prepare young women for marriage, but in reality it designated what their roles were to be as wives. They were there to receive domestic education. Perfect wives, according to Drumont’s religious ideology, were the ones molded to be obedient and docile. They were also to play traditional roles as mothers rearing and educating children. By and large, the female characters that Beti features in *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* are oppressed women whose roles in this novel are fashioned by Christian religious practices implanted by missionaries in Southern Cameroon. Mongo Beti asserts that:

Le problème féminin est posé, mais d’une façon accessoire, d’une façon assez parallèle et simplement par le biais d’une institution catholique (la Sixa) qui est typiquement sud-camerounaise et qui appartient à l’époque missionnaire au Sud du Cameroun où les missionnaires profitaient du rôle qu’ils jouaient pour faire croire aux femmes que pour avoir un mariage qui soit vraiment valable, il fallait qu’elles fassent d’abord un séjour à la mission catholique. Et pendant ce séjour, naturellement, la mission utilisait cette main d’oeuvre gratuite. (276-277)

Mongo Beti's critical portrayal of missionary practices reveals to what extent Christianity did harm to women. Raphael, the catechist vested with the responsibility of taking care of the "sixa," makes love with the women and spreads his syphilis. Raphael also offers these young women as prostitutes to his friends. The young women prefer this to the hard labor he would assign to them if they refused his advances. It is clear that these young women of the "sixa" are forced into prostitution through economic dependency, which Raphael guarantees in exchange for sex. Gerald Moore describes this situation in the following terms: "Raphael, the catechist-director of the "sixa," has been systematically debauching the girls in his charge and infecting them with syphilis [...] the girls are cruelly overworked and constantly intimidated by the catechists" (79).

One wonders why Raphael's role was not given to a woman. It is true that Reverend-Father Drumont did not know about the sexual exploitation of the women in the "sixa." However, he was largely responsible for what happened to them because this terrible institution is at the root of the prostitution and victimization of women. When Drumont came back from his tour of Tala village and heard about the scandal at the "sixa," he conducted a medical inquiry and this revealed the harm done to these young women. They had essentially become inmates of this institution, living in poor conditions in unhealthy dormitories. To worsen the already bad situation, Drumont proceeded to inflict inhumane punishment on these women. It is only during Reverend-Father Drumont's robust interrogation that we see the women of the "sixa" speaking for themselves. After these poor girls were forced to confess their sexual lives, they were brought, one after the other to be beaten by Anatole at the order of the Reverend-Father Drumont. Reverend-Father Drumont himself failed to discipline his male workers who turned these young women into sexual slaves. Rather, he blamed what happened on the innocent women. As is commonly the case in patriarchal societies, these women were the scapegoats, held responsible for whatever went wrong

in the society. The unpaid labour at the “sixa,” furthermore, revealed the exploitation to which these young women were subjected.

Women as Scapegoats of Sterility

Female circumcision practices are partly responsible for women’s sterility in many African societies. Kourouma’s *Les soleils des indépendances* comes to mind here. Salimata is a traditional woman who suffers the atrocities of female mutilation and carries this unfortunate experience with her throughout her life. In a series of flashbacks, Kourouma evokes her memories of circumcision, rape and sterility. Chemain-Degrangé views Salimata’s sterility in light of the female circumcision that she endured and avers that: “Il faut saisir le destin de Salimata dans son ensemble pour comprendre la portée de ce premier élément du récit: l’initiation. La conséquence en est le maléfice de la stérilité, véritable obsession pour la généreuse épouse” (325). The circumcision operation has a devastating effect on Salimata’s life.

Kourouma criticises traditions by exposing the problems Salimata is going through, especially sterility. Female circumcision often damages women’s reproductive organs and consequently results in women’s sterility. The issue of sterility is handled with seriousness in most African societies for women are valued first as mothers. A number of African male writers and poets exalt women in their maternal roles and consider sterility as a negative thing that can happen to a woman. Herzberger-Fofana corroborates this view: “La plupart des écrivains africains exaltent les fonctions maternelles de leurs héroïnes et considèrent la stérilité comme une malédiction divine qu’il convient de conjurer” (229). A barren woman is an isolated woman because children are viewed in many African societies as inheritance. In most cases, when a woman is unable to have a child, she harnesses every possible means to remedy the situation. She visits village spiritualists to ask for help. Kourouma describes the travails of Salimata in her efforts to become pregnant: “Et que n’a-t-elle pas éprouvé! Le sorcier, le marabout, les sacrifices et les médicaments, tout [...] Rien n’en sortira”(27). *By doing all*

this, Salimata was attempting to appease the spirits and God in order to have a child; thereby becoming fully integrated into her husband's family.

The norm is that a sterile woman is a nonentity, and the family of the husband encourages him to take another wife. Fama, being from a royal family, has an enormous weight on his shoulders if he is to remain with a woman who cannot give him a child. The narrator remarks: "Au village, on avait médité Fama: un légitime, un fils de chef qui courbait la tête sous les ailes d'une femme stérile" (93). Fama had affairs with younger women in his desperate effort to have children and even inherited Mariam, his cousin's wife. Still, no children resulted from these liaisons. The reality is that Fama is as infertile as Salimata. But women are usually blamed for sterility, not men. The narrator puts it in the following words: "La femme est l'arbre de vie; elle seule peut être accusée de stérilité, car on n'attribue jamais cette responsabilité au mari. Aucune femme mariée ne demeure volontairement sans enfant et la stérilité totale est la pire des malheurs qui puisse lui arriver" (30).

Women found to be barren are often treated with disrespect to the extent that they must abandon their matrimonial homes. In *Mission terminée*, Niam's wife is held responsible for the couple's inability to have children and is insulted by the society and ill-treated by her husband. The narrator remarks that:

C'est le sort commun chez nous à toutes les épouses sans enfants d'être en butte à un étrange anathème dont il faut chercher l'origine chez nos frères bantous. Une épouse mère, elle, se voit pardonner toutes les infidélités, tous ses caprices. Mais vous devez savoir tout cela. Bref, la femme Niam était parée. [...] C'est toujours ainsi qu'elles partent, du reste: de nuit. Et c'est pour cette raison qu'on les appelle les enfants de la nuit. (22)

Commenting on the poor treatment of women considered as barren in traditional African societies, Bernth Lindfors argues that Niam's wife was considered a disappointment to her husband as a wife. What Lindfors implies here is that by failing to have

children, Niam's wife had not lived up to her side of the marriage contract. This ultimately won her the contempt of the entire adult community. It therefore did not come as a surprise when she sought release from the miseries of her home life by involving herself in a romantic affair with a stranger. The supposed sterility of Niam's wife in a way liberated her because she was able to leave her husband's home for a while and avoid his beatings.

The subjugation of the African woman makes her the victim in many situations. Even if she is not responsible, she is always blamed for what goes wrong. This attitude might be in line with men's belief that woman is "evil." Nothing however proves that Niam's wife is the cause of their childlessness; this assumption is simply due to the fact that the society at large attributes this failure to women. Jean-Marie Medza, the narrator in *Mission terminée*, says the following about Tante Amou who cannot have any children: "Je suis convaincu aujourd'hui que Tante Amou faisait un complexe parce qu'elle n'avait jamais pu avoir d'enfant" (21). Barren women have complexes not only in their matrimonial homes but also among their fellow women who have children and in the society at large.

Kourouma is from a Muslim background and his representation of woman in his novels reflects both an indigenous and Muslim point of view. His handling of sterility in his novel is to criticize traditional attitudes toward women. Salimata, like Niam's wife, is perceived as a barren woman by her society. The childless woman in some traditional societies is considered as a devilish creature and regarded as a useless woman in the house. She seeks desperately to quit this pitiful condition by opting for various sacrifices recommended by village or Islamic spiritualists whom she visits for help. Kourouma's *Les Soleils des indépendances* reveals the multiple sacrifices made by Salimata in order to have children. This issue most of the time is of more concern to women than to their husbands because the women are desperate to keep their marriages from collapsing. They will run to perform rituals in order to have children. In *Les soleils des indépendances*, the narrator tells us about this ritual.

Le sacrifice protège contre le mauvais sort, appelle la santé, la fécondité, le bonheur et la paix. Et le premier sacrifice, c'est d'offrir; offrir ouvre tous les cœurs. Et sait-on jamais en offrant qui est le secouru, le vis-à-vis? Peut-être un grand sorcier, un élu et aimé d'Allah dont un petit mot suffirait pour féconder la plus déshéritée des femmes. (61)

A childless woman finds herself in such a difficult situation that she is willing to give whatever she has for a child in order for her place in the marriage to be secure. At times, women who find themselves in these situations try to mother other children by adopting a relative's child with the permission of their husband. This is not, however, to say that these women abandon their struggle to have their own children for their husbands. Children in most African families are a must because a majority of communities need them to help with their farming activities. When a family has many children, it means such a family can accomplish much work on the farm, thus ensuring huge economic revenue. Beti and Ly place much emphasis on farming activities and show how women and children labour to increase the family's productivity.

Women and Polygamy in Men's Fiction

Beti, Kourouma and Ly all describe polygamous settings in their depictions of everyday life for African women. Women in their texts do very little to oppose or reject polygamy; even if they are not happy about it, they end up accepting it. One notices particularly that women of the older generations keep quiet in order not to provoke the wrath of their husbands or their communities. Some women who are unable to conceive or who have only female children, even seem to embrace their husband's decision to go into polygamy. Salimata hypocritically welcomes her husband's new wife. The narrator says: "Salimata avait salué avec joie la coépouse et expliqué avec grand cœur et esprit qu'une famille avec une seule femme était comme un escabeau à un pied, ou un homme à une jambe; ça ne tient qu'en s'appuyant

sur un étranger” (157). Salimata’s kindness to her co-wife, however, ends up being a mere pretence as she later fights Mariam whom she had greeted with enthusiasm on the first day of her arrival. The narrator throws some light on this:

Salimata devint jalouse, puis folle et un matin elle explosa, injuria. Les deux co-épouses comme deux poules s’assaillirent, s’agrippèrent l’une au pagne de l’autre. Mariam voulait coûte que coûte tomber le pagne de Salimata afin que chacun vît “la matrice ratatinée d’une stérile,” et Salimata dévêtir Mariam afin que tout le monde reconnût “la chose pourrie et incommensurable d’une putain.” (152)

One remarkable thing here, is that Salimata stopped respecting her husband after he married a new wife. Arlette Chemain-Degrange corroborates this view: “Salimata ne se sent plus d’obligations envers l’époux qu’elle vénérât auparavant. Plus de tendresse. Elle refuse à faire bouillir sa marmite avec le produit de son propre travail” (284). With the arrival of Mariama, Salimata has learned that her sacrifice for her husband has to stop; she has also decided to abandon her unreserved subordination to him.

Beti’s *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* shows his male characters as being very reluctant to abandon polygamy which they claimed, was passed down to them by their ancestors. Issues related to polygamy in Africa today are variously interpreted by a majority of African feminist critics. Buchi Emecheta for example believes that polygamy empowers the African woman. She argues in her article “Feminism with a Small ‘f!’” that:

In many cases, polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her, especially if she is educated. The husband has no reason to stop her from attending international conferences like this one [...] Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside for her family and friends. It gives her freedom from having to worry about her husband most of the time. (178-179)

The issue of polygamy in Africa has to be properly addressed, because the majority of African women, those who are the most

affected, are illiterate and very different from the few educated ones whom Emecheta thinks that polygamy can liberate. Education being a powerful tool for the liberation of women, Buchi Emecheta might be correct in her analysis. She has to remember though that feminism is out to correct all forms of domination to which the generality of women are subjected. Emecheta's postulate is very limited. Polygamy does not do any good to women in African societies; ultimately it does not even benefit educated women because they also suffer subordination. Fatima Mernissi decries polygamy and asserts that: "Polygamy entitles the male not simply to satisfy his sexuality, but to indulge it to saturation without taking into consideration the woman's needs, the woman being considered a simple "agent" in the process" (16).

Beti's *Mission terminée*, *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* and *Le roi miraculé* are all written before independence and depict the subaltern role of uneducated women. Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* and Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignée* are written after independence but the condition of women in these novels by men remains fairly unchanged. Independence, as portrayed by these authors, failed to alleviate the sufferings of women as their status remained subaltern. It is nevertheless pertinent to recognise and applaud the attacks launched by these authors on certain Christian, Islamic and traditional African practices that subjugate sub-Saharan African women, even though the authors still depict their female characters as subaltern. Their criticisms of the religious and traditional rites that plague women portray women differently from the Negritude poets and from writers who glorify the subaltern roles of African women.

CHAPTER THREE

READING SEMBENE OUSMANE AND THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE FEMALE PERSONAE IN MALE FICTION

Ousmane, perhaps more than any other African novelist, gives a privileged and dynamic role to women. The most striking example in this respect is provided by *God's Bits of Woods* in which women constitute a catalytic element and take an active part in the demonstrations of the rail workers during the strike.

– Martin Bestman (1975: 143)

Ousmane and the Rehabilitation of African Women

Sembène Ousmane, whose feminism Martin Bestman captures in our epigraph, deserves to be studied by scholars of African literature. Besides, his feminist posture, Ousmane remains one of the most accomplished African writers of the pré and post-independence periods. Born in 1923 in Ziguinchor, Senegal, Ousmane worked variously as a soldier, a docker, a bricklayer, a mechanic and a trade-union leader before becoming a writer and filmmaker. This novelist belongs to the second generation of African writers. As a witness of colonial atrocities in Senegal, he vehemently criticised the colonial enterprise in Africa; specifically,

the wrongs done to Africans. Ousmane does not, however, limit his writings to the condemnation of colonial practices; he also attacks the political and religious practices as well as leaders of post-independence Africa. This prolific writer denounces the subordination of Senegalese women in his texts mainly through his condemnation of polygamy. He fights for the liberation of African women in his writings and is committed to their cultural, political, economic and social emancipation.

Ousmane is a self-taught writer. He published, among other works, *Le Docker noir* (1956), *Ô pays mon beau peuple* (1957), *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960), *Voltaïque* (1961), *L'Harmattan* (1963), *Le Mandat suivi de Véhi-Ciosane* (1964), *Xala* (1973) and *Niiwam* (1999). He has also produced several films that have won prizes. By filming a number of his novels, Ousmane adds cinema to literature as a catalyst of social change. Realising during his writing career that many Africans are still illiterate, he believes that the film medium can be an effective means of getting his message across. His, is a quest for an equitable society in which women can be treated equally with men and work as partners in nation-building.

Ousmane, like, many African writers of his generation, features in his first novels a principal protagonist on whom the plot of his novel centers. *Le docker noir*, *Ô pays mon beau peuple* and *Le mandat* are concrete examples. Martin Bestman corroborates this view:

On notera avec intérêt que le récit des deux premiers romans est centré d'emblée sur un héros, un personnage autour de qui convergent les événements et dont le romancier raconte l'aventure singulière, plus ou moins individuelle, si l'on peut dire. Mais à partir des *Bouts de bois de Dieu*, l'on s'aperçoit que l'auteur se dégage de cette voie-là; il s'éloigne d'une intrigue simple pour faire vivre toute une foule de personnages, ce qui donne une ampleur nouvelle au dessein du romancier. (395-396)

Le docker noir and *Ô pays mon beau peuple* are characterised by an individual's revolt. Ousmane's novels have a revolutionary

tone and this perhaps, makes his novels different from those of his contemporaries. In *Xala*, *La noire de...* and most especially in his masterpiece, *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, one can clearly discern Ousmane's revolutionary posture against all forms of oppression. This novel reveals Ousmane's artistic response to the radical social changes taking place to overthrow the unjust and oppressive white apparatus. The novel is based on the Dakar-Bamako railway strike of October 1947 to March 1948 when workers agitated for better working conditions. Ousmane is devoted to people's causes; his works show a social commitment to transform the society. A committed writer such as Ousmane uses his texts not solely to inform, but also to evoke an individual's social, economic and political awareness.

Ousmane closely observes Senegalese society and in his fiction, he attacks the injustices suffered by the people. He is very suspicious of bourgeois African intellectuals who put themselves at a distance from the masses. *Le mandat* and *Xala*, works in which he attacks post-independence Senegal, come to mind here. In *Le mandat*, he criticises in particular, the administrative system of independent Senegalese society, class divisions, religion, and the oppression of women. According to Frederik Ivor Case, Ousmane

é debate devant nous la misère et la décadence d'un état, d'une société et d'une religion qui vivent en porte-à-faux avec les principes moraux fondamentaux de la culture du peuple. L'égoïsme qui caractérise ceux qui ont l'autorité bureaucratique et le pouvoir économique influe sur toutes les couches de la population et détruit systématiquement la dignité humaine de tous. (42-43)

Dieng is the protagonist of *Le mandat*. Even though he is illiterate and unemployed, he has two wives — Mety and Aram — whose presence is felt throughout the novel despite their subordination to Dieng's authority. These women are passively submissive to their husband and live as traditional women under his roof. Surprisingly, these women are more courageous than their husband in confronting outsiders who cause him problems.

Dieng is very weak outside his matrimonial home, and his wives are the ones who rescue him from his troubles.

In the stories in *Voltaïque* (1961), the author exposes the institution of polygamy and shows the weakness of this practice when women come out gradually from their docility to rebuke the male oppressor. In "Ses trois jours," Noubé suffers enormously because Moustaphe, her polygamous husband neglects her. Moustaphe is always absent and unable to meet the requirement prescribed by polygamy that says that the husband should sexually satisfy his wives and love them equally. The narrator describes Moustaphe's failure to meet this expectation:

La nouvelle se propagea dans la maison: que Moustaphe avait découché, alors que c'était les "trois jours" de Noubé. Les ménagères la plaignaient. Ce n'était pas la règle du jeu, que Moustaphe découcha. La polygamie avait des lois, qu'il sied de respecter. (58)

Despite all the preparations Noubé makes to receive her husband, including going into debt and depriving her children of the food she cooked to please Moustaphe during his supposed three-day visit, the latter at first failed to show up. When he finally appears, Noubé shows him through her cold reception of him and his two friends that she is not to be treated as a nonentity. Noubé's attitude makes one of Moustaphe's friends observe that: "Notre épouse n'est pas très éloquente aujourd'hui [...] Moustaphe, nous allons partir, déclara encore l'homme sentant la froideur de Noubé" (69). The narrator gives us more details about the event. "Moustaphe comprenait bien que Noubé se moquait de lui et cherchait à l'humilier devant ses pairs" (69). Notably, Noubé, who initially submitted herself to masculine domination metamorphoses into an individual who effectively rejects polygamy by ignoring her three nights with her husband. The dialogue between Moustaphe and Noubé throws more light on the unfolding plot and shows how Noubé moves from a passive acceptance of polygamy to an active struggle against it.

- Tu aimes vraiment plaisanter. Ne sais-tu pas que ce sont tes “trois jours”?
- Oncle!... Je te demande pardon. J'avais complètement oublié cela...Me voici épouse indigne, (lançait-elle, toujours assise, regardant droit sur Moustaphe.)
- Vraiment tu te fous de moi!
- Oncle! comment oserais-je...Moi?...Et qui m'aiderait à entrer au paradis?...Sinon mon digne époux. Jamais, je ne me moquerais de toi ni dans ce monde ni dans l'autre.
- On le dirait.
- Qui? demanda-t-elle.
- Tu aurais pu te lever à mon arrivée pour commencer...
- Oh!...mon oncle, pardonne à ton épouse égarée, éblouie par la joie de te revoir. Si ma maison s'égare, qui en est le responsable, Oh! Oncle?
- Au juste que contiennent ces trois plats? demanda Moustaphe vexé.
- Ces trois plats!... (Elle regarda le mari...un sourire malicieux au coin de l'oeil.) Rien... Si plutôt “mes trois jours”. Rien de ce qui t'intéresse... Y a-t-il quelque chose qui t'intéresse ici...oncle?... (69-70)

In the above dialogue, Noubé summons the courage to confront Moustaphe for the first time since her marriage to him. She heatedly makes him realise the problems inherent in a polygamous marriage. To make the situation worse for Moustaphe, Noubé deliberately breaks the three plates containing the food she had prepared to welcome her husband: “Exprès Noubé renversa le premier plat [...] Elle cassa les deux autres plats” (70). Female protagonists in three of Ousmane's other stories attack polygamy and masculine dominance: the mother in “La mère;” Nafi in “Lettre de France;” and Yacine in “Souleymane.” In “La mère,” for instance, the courage of the mother is notable. She confronts and challenges the king, who sleeps with every woman and abuses his royal status by reducing

every woman to his sexual property. The mother ridicules the king and plots to overthrow him. The narrator's commentary interspersed throughout the dialogue reveals what happens to the king after the mother defies him.

- Sire, dit-elle, à te voir, on dirait que tu n'as pas de mère... De ta naissance à ce jour, tu n'as combattu que la femme, parce qu'elle est faible.
 - Tuez-la, hurla le roi.
- L'assistance n'obéit pas. Les paroles avaient touché. Le roi, beuglant, hurlant de colère, injectait son amer fiel dans un langage vulgaire. La mère sans orgueil ni fierté, reprit:
- Vous fûtes témoins quand il se servit de vos soeurs, sur ses ordres vos pères furent assassinés. Et maintenant il s'en prend à vos mères et vos soeurs... A vous voir, tous, on dirait que vous ne possédez plus de dignité...

De plus en plus furieux, le roi se leva brusquement, d'un revers de main, il envoya la vieille sur le sol. Mais ce geste ne fut pas renouvelé. Le roi se sentit saisi par les poignets, soulevé. Pour la première fois, les sujets armés de courage se révoltèrent et leur roi fut destitué.... (40-42)

The mother's courage liberates all; her words are like a piercing sword and a catalyst of consciousness to others who rally round her to dethrone the oppressive and womanising king. One may wonder why Ousmane first presents female characters in his novels as docile before they confront the men in the stories. This trend is noticeable in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* where the women in the text are first depicted as submissive but later, they emerge as strong and active women during the strike. By portraying women as subservient, Ousmane opens up an avenue for them to become conscious of their condition and it is this "prise de conscience" that pushes them to act. Brenda Berrian, when referring to some of the women in *Voltaïque*, suggests that:

Sembène opens up opportunities for African women to develop a more positive self-awareness and to draw upon capabilities that have laid dormant within themselves. In order for Senegalese women to move forward, they must cast off outdated ideas and modes of behavior and view their plight realistically. In short, they must place themselves on the outside in order to look in. By doing so, they may begin to take steps to eliminate ignorance and mass illiteracy and improve their status in the twentieth century. All four women — Yacine, the mother, Noubé, and Nafi — challenge the traditional order, which condemned them to a secondary role. (203)

More than any other woman portrayed in Ousmane's short stories, the mother in "La mère" demonstrates exemplary courage and can be regarded as a liberator of her people. Not only did she defy a man being a woman, as did Yacine and Noubé, but she also defied a powerful, tyrannical man who was the decider of the people's fate, a man who was venerated and feared by all.

It is ironic that in many Islamic countries such as Senegal, men are allowed to have as many wives as they wish while women may only have one husband. Women who are caught engaging in adultery are severely punished. Brenda Berrian argues that in Muslim societies, attitudes toward adultery are one-sided. Some married men engage in extra-marital affairs and are not regarded as committing adultery. It is believed that only women can be adulterers. The Senegalese community is based on a patriarchal system governed by Islamic codes of conduct. The consequences of masculine-controlled religious practices are noticeable in some of the judgements passed on women. The people who pass judgement on women are most often men, and in the male-dominated society, the woman is always the victim.

Ousmane's radicalism is aimed at reconstructing Senegalese society. In his universe, men, women and children are all victims, and all must fight to free themselves from oppression. To put it in Marxian terms, as Adebayo noted in her *Critical Essays on the Novel in Francophone Africa*, by uniting in order "to confront their bosses, the workers have nothing but their chains to lose" (89).

This is particularly true for the women whose roles were redefined at the end of the strike.

In *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Ousmane first depicts the social condition of African women and then shows how the women participate and struggle in the strike of the railway workers. Through the strike, it was possible for the women to change the conditions in which they were living by removing some of the previous restrictions imposed on them by religious or traditional rules.

Ousmane portrays women's roles differently from Senghor, Diop, Beti, Kourouma and Ly by transforming women considered as objects into women of will. Many traditional women in his *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* renounce some of their traditional roles and engage in the struggles first for national freedom and second for themselves. With their experiences and roles in the strike, they take on new responsibilities. Ousmane believes that no society can develop effectively if it undermines the roles of its women. He steadfastly engages in the fight for women's liberation from the traditions that enslave them. He admires the roles played by women during the struggle against foreign invasions and always campaigns for recognising women's contributions and giving them a place in society. In an interview with Kembe Milolo, Ousmane stated:

Il m'est difficile de séparer l'homme de la femme dans ma tête, dans ma vie privée. Je ne les prends pas séparément. Je refuse de tomber dans cette catégorisation où la femme est ici et l'homme est là. Mais pour le mouvement auquel nous avons participé dans les années 40-60, les femmes ont pris leur part. Et lorsqu'on retrace honnêtement ce mouvement, on doit rendre à la femme sa place. (299)

In moving female characters in his novels from a secondary role to a stage in which they reject their subaltern condition, Ousmane is without doubt, a pioneer African writer. His works show that women are relegated to the bottom of the ladder in some traditional societies and in those societies where Islamic culture has left its imprint. Ousmane is a staunch advocate of

women's freedom; his respect for women is communicated to us by the narrator of "La mère":

Respecte la femme, pas pour ses cheveux blancs, pour ta mère d'abord, puis pour la femme elle-même. C'est d'elle, la femme, que découle toute grandeur, celle du maître, du brave, du lâche, du griot, du musicien... Dans un coeur de mère, l'enfant est roi.... (41)

The feminist perspective of Ousmane's work and especially of *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* is quite striking. Ousmane shows the political force and capabilities of women, most of them traditional women who do not know how to read and write. There is no single individual working alone in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*; people function as a collective, including female characters who come together to participate alongside the men in the strike action. The strike becomes an eye-opening experience for women as it raises their level of consciousness and for men as well because they realise the capabilities of the women. The consciousness is therefore from both sides leading to changes in the society concerning the way things are perceived.

Categorising Women in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*

African society is anchored on family ties and relationships. In the traditional African case, however, it is mostly polygamous. *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* clearly testifies to a hierarchical order where men are on the top and women are at the bottom and serve the men. The different categories of women present in the novel include the traditional women (Niakoro, Assitan, Fatoumata, Ramatoulaye, and Mame Sofi, to mention a few). These traditional women, moulded by traditions, are very submissive to their husbands prior to the strike. The most senior of them is the old mother, Niakoro, who symbolises old traditions. By virtue of her life experiences, ranging from domestic affairs to the various strike actions which she has witnessed, she warns her granddaughter:

Tu n'as jamais vu une grève, toi! Ton petit père en a vu une lui, et il était encore jeune. Des soldats vont venir. Ils tireront. Et toi, au milieu des hommes, tu seras comme une chèvre au milieu de chameaux en débandade. Tu n'as donc pas peur? (LBBD 19)

Assitan was a traditional woman prior to the strike, “une parfaite épouse selon les anciennes traditions africaines: docile, soumise, travailleuse, elle ne disait jamais un mot plus haut que l'autre” (LBBD 170-171). According to custom, she was married off without considering her feelings for her first husband, and at his death, she was remarried to Bakayoko, her deceased husband's brother. She obeyed the traditions blindly after she was led into this second marriage without being consulted.

Neuf ans auparavant on l'avait mariée à l'aîné des Bakayoko. Sans même la consulter, ses parents s'étaient occupés de tout. Un soir, son père lui apprit que son mari se nommait Sadikou Bakayoko et deux mois après on la livrait à un homme qu'elle n'avait jamais vu [...] De nouveau, l'antique coutume disposa de sa vie: Elle fut aussi soumise à Ibrahima qu'elle l'avait été à son frère. (LBBD 170-171)

Assitan is not the only female character in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* subjected to masculine or cultural domination. Fatoumata respected her husband like a “demi-god.” “Fatoumata s'installa derrière son mari et resta ainsi durant tout le repas en signe de politesse” (LBBD 29). Ramatoulaye, Awa and Dieynaba were also faithful and obedient wives. Before the strike, these women were apparently happy in their roles as mothers and housewives and accepted their situation as normal. Unconscious of their subaltern condition, they were content to live under their husbands' dominance in the name of tradition or religion. Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos corroborates this view:

Avant la grève, la plupart des femmes trouvaient leur condition normale, elles ne se posaient pas trop de questions. La tradition avait créée la condition féminine telle qu'elle était, la colonisation s'en accommodait, la routine la maintenait tant bien que mal et chacun acceptait la division sexuelle du travail telle qu'elle était établie. (135)

The second category is the westernised woman (represented by N'Deye Touti). N'Deye Touti was moulded in a Western way and therefore accepted the status quo for different reasons. She saw everything in the colonial system as good. Both patriarchal and foreign hegemony over women faded away with the advent of the strike. Patriarchal power was overthrown because the economic power that sustained it was destabilised with the strike. The colonial institutions that helped enforce patriarchal power were equally attacked. Foreign hegemonic ideology and patriarchal arrangements that once combined to subdue women were contested. Western values and education that were tailored to perpetuate European hegemony and which condemned any form of revolt crumbled. N'Deye Touti, enjoying the privileges of Western education and an elitist status, rejected the idea of women taking part in the strike because the Western education she had received had taught her not to rebel against any constituted authority.

C'était N'Deye Touti qui répondait. [...] Elle n'avait pas pris part à l'échauffourée et désapprouvait la conduite des femmes, y compris celle de sa tante Ramatoulaye. On lui avait appris à l'école qu'il y avait des lois et que nul n'avait le droit de se faire justice lui-même. Pour elle, tout ce qui venait de l'école ne pouvait être mis en question. (LBBB 177-178)

N'Deye Touti did not know much about her own society. She lived in a world of fantasy dreaming of Europe with all its beautiful things. She did not care to know about her home country because her life was totally focused on the West. The Europe that she knew through her books and education represented the better world. She, therefore, defied the striking women and condemned their activities.

– Parce que vous n'avez pas le droit de faire ce que vous avez fait. Lorsque les alcatis sont venus, ils ont demandé Ramatoulaye et vous leur êtes toutes tombées dessus. D'après la loi, c'est un délit! (LBBB 178)

Though humiliated by the same authority that she had refused to defy at the beginning of the strike, N'Deye Touti later changed her opinion and ended up challenging the oppressors.

Ad'jibid'ji the little girl, represents the third category and a new generation of the African woman. Very courageous and talented, this young girl insists on playing a role in the strike. Similarly, Ousmane's portrayal of Ad'jibid'ji, who speaks up to the astonishment of her grandmother, embodies the redefined status of the Senegalese woman. Both the young girl and her grandmother, irrespective of their age differences, play significant roles in the strike. It is as if the young girl pushes her grandmother Niakoro to metamorphose into a strong woman before her death. Ad'jibid'ji incarnates the changes taking place when, at her tender age, she talks confidently with Niakoro about the strike, a colossal issue that even scares adults.

- Mais tu ne sais donc pas qu'aujourd'hui ils tiennent un grand palabre, sur la grève? [...] Et toi, au milieu des hommes, tu seras comme une chèvre au milieu de chameaux en débandade. Tu n'as donc pas peur?
- De quoi, mama?
- De quoi? Tu me demandes de quoi? Mais qu'est-ce que tu as dans la tête?
- Du cerveau, mama, rien que du cerveau, repliqua Ad'jibid'ji. (LBBD 19)

Ousmane is an exception among writers of his generation considering the way he gives an active role to women in his novels. He represents women positively and he vigorously attacks patriarchal powers that lord it over Senegalese women. As David Murphy asserts, Ousmane's representations of African women, "manage at least to open the terrain and give voice to a wider range of concerns than was treated by the preceding generation of African writers" (141). For instance, as Nigerian critic Martin Bestman observes, Ousmane depicts women's revolt against their parents revealed through the differences of opinion these younger

women hold as regards marital, religious and political ideology. Many of Ousmane's female characters who live in the shadows and are defined solely by their relationships to their husbands, emerge from their confined spaces to affirm their existence as individuals by rebelling against men's domination. The metamorphoses of Ousmane's women testify to the author's dream for the progress he wants for Senegalese women in particular, and for African women as a whole. As the Dutch Africanist critic Mineke Schipper notes:

Sembène Ousmane, se chargeant de la défense des faibles dans tous ses romans, plaide aussi pour le progrès de la femme africaine et l'égalité des sexes. Souvent il peint l'état de soumission qui caractérise la plupart des femmes sous-développées, tout en indiquant les moyens et les possibilités pour en sortir. (88)

The militant tone of Ousmane's novels is an indication of his determination to change society drastically by bringing a Marxist perspective to issues such as politics, economics, culture and gender. Ousmane's revolutionary writing does not exclude women because the author adapts his Marxist posture to the idea that men and women are equally engaged in the class struggle. Pioneer Marxists tend to look at the problems of oppressed people from a male perspective. Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukacs were mainly interested in analysing the means by which the bourgeoisie sought to establish its hegemony over the rest of society. Ousmane's Marxism, focuses not only on leveling society by fighting for the oppressed men of the proletariat; he also directs his attack on institutions such as polygamy that are used as a weapon by men to oppress women.

Ousmane integrates women into his vision of a Marxist revolution as part of the *collectivity* that must rise up together to confront their oppressors. To Ousmane, the whole community suffers from oppression: the workers, the students, men, women and children of the social strata. The only ones exempt from the suffering are the privileged few of the ruling class, the employers who run the system. It is not surprising, therefore, that the strike

action is the affair of the masses, all of the subalterns who have been exploited in one way or another by the authority of the railways. Adebayo in *Critical Essays on the Novel in Francophone Africa*, analyzes this class struggle in Ousmane's novel:

In the spirit of Marxist ideology, it is by massing together that the working class can achieve victory over the bourgeoisie. Industrialization, in this case the railway, provides the necessary conditions for this massing together of workers in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*. This is why the bourgeois class has been described as its own grave-digger since it uses its capital to create the favorable condition for the germination of a working class consciousness. (90)

Bakayoko, the male leader and organiser of the revolution, is not presented as the novel's *hero*. As Ousmane shows, working-class men and women alike stood together in the struggle against the colonisers and their African collaborators. The chapter of the novel entitled "La marche des femmes" gives kudos to these women warriors. The long march from Thiès to Dakar demonstrated that the strike was also their concern, and they were ready to participate fully with whatever means were at their disposal to support their men. Thus, they walked the fifty kilometres between the two cities. Ousmane makes the women *collectively* "heroic." As Minyono-Nkodo observes:

Ces cinquante kilomètres à pied de Thiès à Dakar sont l'aventure héroïque accomplie par les femmes de Thiès, malgré une multitude d'obstacles, de lourdes fatigues et des privations de toutes sortes. Liées entre elles par une franche solidarité, elles s'entraident durant ce long parcours. L'accueil que leur réservent les habitants de Sébikoutane ranime celles qui sont sur le point d'abandonner. (51)

Ousmane's image of African women reveals the capacities of women in the society. Indeed, *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* reflects Ousmane's belief that Africa can only be liberated if women are included in the national struggle. Women play a significant role in this novel because the author is of the firm belief that gender equality can be achieved only if women are fully involved in the

class struggle. To this author, a free Africa is the Africa that strives to reject Western capitalism, feudalism, and patriarchal domination and enslavement.

Metamorphosis in the Roles of Women during the Strike

In *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, women who were at first docile and submissive to their husbands metamorphose and rise above their traditional status to fight along with men. Dieynaba becomes a doctor who treats victims of police brutality during the strike. Likewise Ramatoulaye, who was a quiet and traditional woman before the strike, becomes a butcher of sheep. In traditional African societies of the sub-Sahara, in accordance with cultural prescription, men are the butchers of sheep. During the strike, Ramatoulaye's potential for playing a larger role in society emerged as she struggled with the sheep named Vendredi, which she finally overpowered and slaughtered. The narrator describes the scene as follows:

Vendredi gratta le sol de ses sabots, puis, tête baissée, il fonça et l'on eût dit qu'il rentrerait dans Ramatoulaye [...] Par trois fois, elle enfonça la lame dans le cou de l'animal; le sang gicla à nouveau [...] Ramatoulaye essuya son arme en la passant sur l'épaisse toison, puis elle se redressa. (LBBB 114-115)

In this violent, bloody scene, Ramatoulaye is not playing the traditional "feminine" role. With the practical necessities brought on by the strike, men had to turn over some of their responsibilities to women. In addition to slaughtering the sheep, Ramatoulaye plays a significant and active role in the strike itself, helping to defeat the policemen.

Ramatoulaye avança encore d'un pas [...] Autour d'elle, on commençait à brandir des bouteilles, des taparquats, des pilons, des morceaux de bois ramassés ça et là. Les policiers se virent rapidement encerclés. L'auxiliaire voulut dire quelque chose. Ramatoulaye lui coupa la

parole: "Toi, je n'ai plus rien à te dire. Si tu es encore debout, c'est grâce à ce toubab!" (LBBB 124-125)

Mame Sofi on her part turns into a fighter and displays the courage that had lain dormant in her for several years living under her husband's roof. She threatens him: "Si tu reprends le travail avant les autres, je te coupe ce qui fait de toi un homme" (LBBB 87). When the police come, she chases them away.

Mame Sofi qui avait repéré près de la cabane un policier de petite taille l'assomma d'un seul coup de ses bouteilles de sable, puis, comme une furie, elle se rua sur l'auxiliaire et lui envoya la seconde bouteille en plein visage. (LBBB 125)

Georg Lukacs remarks that the working class movement "in plucking men from the unconscious dullness of their lives and turning them into conscious fighters for the emancipation of mankind transforms them into harmonious, contented happy beings in spite of the hard fate which they have to bear as individuals" (237). In Gramsci's and Lukacs' writings the subaltern person is always male, but in the context of Ousmane's novel she is a woman. Ramatoulaye plays a significant role in the revolution. In addition to the collective heroism noted in the novel, there is a depiction of how an individual develops ideologically. As Lukacs asserts, people grow more human via the social process of the struggle for freedom. It is not a surprise that, when the strike becomes unbearable, Ramatoulaye is radically transformed from a gossipy housewife into a fearless and dynamic woman. Her leadership qualities are manifested in her firmness, resourcefulness and sense of responsibility for others. Ramatoulaye affirms her leadership role:

Quand on sait que la vie et le courage des autres dépendent de votre vie et de votre courage, on n'a plus le droit d'avoir peur ... Même si on a très peur! Ah! Nous vivons des instants cruels, nous sommes obligés de nous forger une dureté, de nous raidir. (LBBB 117)

Ousmane's 'prise de position' is a positive march toward the evolution of the subaltern African female subject in male fiction. For the social, economic and political condition of African women to change for the better, African men have to recognise the essential roles played by women in transforming the society. The strike which is the central theme of *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* serves as a catalyst, prompting women to realise their potential to free themselves from domination. Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos asserts:

Le hic, c'est que lorsque les femmes, que ce soient celles qui, comme Assitan, subissent le joug strict des anciennes lois africaines, ou que ce soit celles qui, comme N'Deye Touti, subissent l'attraction éblouissante des valeurs coloniales, décident d'être elles-mêmes et de prendre en mains leur destin, elles retrouvent automatiquement contre elles l'effort conjugué de la colère des féodaux et des colons qui sentent leurs intérêts menacés. (126)

N'Deye Touti's transformation is perhaps particularly significant in this regard. Although she is a learned person, unlike Ramatoulaye and most of the other women, she does not know much about her own society; the Western education she received focused mainly on Europe. Nevertheless, she learns from her hard experiences and eventually changes her worldview. As Edward Said (1994) notes in "Identity, Authority and Freedom," the curriculum designed for colonised countries was a mirror of that used in the colonisers' society. It was not an education that took into account the cultural values of the colonised people and it did not teach subjects that were relevant to them. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ndeye Touti knows a great deal about Europe and nothing about her own society. Simon Gikandi points out that she has a lot to learn from the strike. She had totally yielded to the hegemonic colonial culture, at first disapproving of the strike and the other women's actions against the colonial machine. But when she is humiliated by the colonial masters who consider her just as savage as the rest, she undergoes a transformation. After being abused by the system she believed in so much, she comes

out of her shell and joins in the strike action. As the truth dawns on her and she faces the reality of her subaltern status, she, too, decides to confront the system which she had initially defended.

Thus, it is clear that *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* not only exposes the institutions of polygamy and patriarchy, but also projects sub-Saharan African women beyond the confines of subordination. Ousmane depicts the society as he perceives it, but he also points to the way he believes it should be. In telling the story of how subordinate women act to escape their inferior position, he imagines a different future for sub-Saharan African women. As Gikandi notes: "the greatest transmutation in the strikers' community is in the status of women" (122).

Among the many women who changed their traditionally accepted roles during the strike, it is perhaps Penda the prostitute who most eloquently testifies to the positive transformation of the African woman in Ousmane's fiction. Penda does not live according to accepted Senegalese ways of life; she is an independent woman, a prostitute rejected by her society, a libertine who does not care about what the society says about the life she has chosen to live. To the people, she incarnates a "devil" because Islam considers prostitutes as agents of Satan. On the walls of her room, one finds photos of movie stars and singers such as Clark Gable, Tino Rossi, Fernandel, as well as of half-naked white women. This is an indication that she has alienated herself from her community to live in a world of film stars and pop singers. Yet, Penda also embodies the new African woman, for she is both articulate and increasingly politically conscious with the advent of the strike. Penda reveals herself to be a fearless individual, ready to participate courageously in public and social life. Even though no one wants to recognize her at first, her eventual role in the strike dignifies her and elevates her to glory. Penda's involvement in the strike revolutionizes many things. She intimidates everyone she encounters, especially the men. She motivates men, women and children to fight. Finding an all-engaging role in the strike, she becomes a formidable force. She sees the strike as a catalyst for change so that men, women and children may have good

living conditions. She says: "Pour nous, cette grève, c'est la possibilité d'une vie meilleure [...] Nous nous devons de garder la tête haute et ne pas céder" (LBBDD 10). Among women in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Penda's courage is exceptional. Lahbib, one of the strike leaders who had hired her, recognises Penda's leadership qualities:

Par la suite, Lahbib se félicita souvent d'avoir embauché Penda. Elle tenait tête aux femmes et se faisait respecter des hommes. Un jour qu'au syndicat où elle venait assez souvent et se rendait utile, un ouvrier lui avait maladroitement touché les fesses, elle le gifla publiquement ce qui ne s'était jamais vu dans le pays. (LBBDD 224)

The respect she later commanded came from the courage she displayed in the strike. Indeed, Penda is an adept organizer and an effective strategist throughout the strike. In the midst of men, Penda gives a speech signaling the beginning of a rupture from traditions and the celebration of a radical new role for women. Even after her death, she is considered a martyr and her name is constantly evoked. Her memory serves as a motivating force to those still fighting.

Minyono-Nkodo notes that:

Penda apparaît fréquemment, dans le roman, d'une part parce qu'elle intervient directement en de nombreuses circonstances et d'autre part parce qu'on évoque volontiers son souvenir lorsqu'elle est absente ou que la mort l'a fauchée. (52)

Penda dies serving the cause of her people. According to Adebayo, her courage, like that of Ramatoulaye,

serves as a leaven to the spirit of other rail-workers' wives who abandon the hearth-place and march on the railway masters who are exploiting and oppressing their husbands. Their march to Thiès leads to the subsequent surrender of the employers who accede to the workers' demand, thus putting an end to a long, crippling rail strike. (183-184)

If the strike succeeded, it was mainly because women decided to actively support the actions taken by their men. Men agitated for change but women's actions were pivotal to the realisation of the social, economic and political reforms that occurred at the end of the strike.

In much of his work, Ousmane portrays women transforming their societies. In a passage in his short story "La mère," the narrator praises the heroism of women universally and lauds the courage of wives, mothers, widows and girls.

Gloire à ceux et à celles qui ont eu le courage de braver les calomnies.
Soyez louées femmes sources intarissables;
vous qui êtes plus fortes que la mort...
Gloire à vous, coolies de la vieille
Chine, tagalacoye du plateau du Niger!
Gloire à vous, femmes de marins, dans
l'éternel deuil! Gloire à toi, petite,
Petite enfant, mais jouant déjà à la mère.
L'immensité des océans n'est rien à côté de
L'immensité de la tendresse d'une mère. (*Voltaire* 42)

Such passages might be describing the strength and courage of the women in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Niakoro, Penda, Ramatoulaye, Mame Sofi, Ad'jibid'ji as well all the women and mothers who died in the strike. But, as the citation from "La mère" reveals, Ousmane's feminism is universal: he lauds not only the courage of Senegalese or African women but also the efforts of women worldwide.

It is perhaps telling that the critic Minyono-Nkodo, whose brilliant analysis of Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* points out women's important roles in the book, nevertheless attacks the author's feminism:

Mais que penser du féminisme de Sembène Ousmane? Le romancier n'est-il pas un peu abusif, complaisant, en peignant l'homme comme le "suiveur" de la femme dans la marche évolutive de l'histoire? (53)

Writing in 1979, almost two decades after the novel's publication, Minyono-Nkodo nevertheless failed to embrace Ousmane's progressive vision, clinging instead to the patriarchal status quo.

The Lessons from the Strike

The strike brought about noticeable changes in the way women perceived life after the strike. Similarly, a reversal of gender roles occurred as men began to engage in certain activities which before the strike had been exclusively reserved for women. Old traditions and customs gradually changed. For example, one read of fathers and husbands in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* going to fetch water. The narrator notes:

Alioune avait réussi à persuader un bon nombre d'hommes que les vieilles coutumes féodales n'étaient plus de mise. On voyait maintenant des maris, des fils, des pères même, partir à la corvée d'eau et revenir le soir dans les concessions poussant des barriques ou portant des bouteilles. (LBBB 317-318)

It is obvious that the strike brought about a radical transformation, according women an important place in the society and suppressing some of the old customs that had formerly restrained them. Women's successful participation in the strike action led progressively to their emancipation. Niakoro-la-vieille's words at the beginning of the strike had anticipated these new developments: "Demain, femmes et hommes seront tous pareils" (LBBB 36). And indeed, after the strike, the appearance of women in public places was no longer taboo. As a result of their successful participation in the strike, women were invited to witness a man's trial. During Diara's trial for betraying his colleagues and violation

of women's rights, various women were invited to testify against him. That was the first time women were permitted to attend the trial of a man.

Lorsqu'on jugea Diara au siège du syndicat, la salle de réunion était archicomble et avait perdu son apparence coutumière. On remarquait des présences féminines, ce qui était du nouveauté. (LBBB 131)

This is a new development in Senegalese society (and in African society in general where women tend to be excluded from men's gatherings). Women had never before been present at men's trials and had never been given audience. The narrator notes that:

C'était la première fois que [Hadia Dia] prenait la parole dans une assemblée d'hommes. Une autre femme, plus âgée celle-là, monta à son tour sur l'estrade, elle parlait vite et d'un ton rassuré. On l'appelait la Sira. [...] Il y eut encore deux femmes qui vinrent raconter des histoires assez semblables à celles des premières, après quoi il se fit un long silence, chacun était troublé en lui-même de cette nouveauté: des femmes qui venaient de prendre la parole au milieu des hommes. Les regards allaient du président à Diara puis à Sadio toujours prostrés. [...] [Diara], tu mouchardes nos femmes, celles qui, nous le disons sans honte, nous nourrissent. (LBBB 151-152)

In line with the changes taking place, women also began to take on other roles traditionally played by men, such as that of provider. It had always been man's duty to feed their wives but after the strike, everything was different:

Un matin, une femme se leva, elle serra fortement son pagne autour de sa taille et dit: Aujourd'hui, je vous apporterai à manger. Et les hommes comprirent que ce temps, s'il enfantait d'autres hommes, enfantait aussi d'autres femmes. (LBBB 65)

This woman's statement is a warning to men that what men can do women can do even better.

The author further suggests that women will now have greater economic independence, some of them henceforth managing their husbands' money. Politically, Senegalese women have greater access to public speech, since Penda, by defying men and speaking out in public, opened this door that has been locked for so long. Mame Sofi, optimistic about all these changes, is confident that men will consult women next time there is another strike: "[À] la prochaine grève, les hommes nous consulteront. Avant ils étaient tout fiers de nous nourrir, maintenant c'est nous les femmes qui les nourrissons" (LBBD 87).

The Bourgeois African Man and Polygamy in *Xala*

The main theme in *Xala* is the attitude of the new African leaders who, after ascending to power, forget the promises they made to the masses. Rather, they begin to live a flamboyant life after emptying the coffers of their country. El-Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, the protagonist of *Xala*, is representative of this class. To display his wealth and to show that he is successful, he marries more than one wife, as is the custom in many African societies. As the narrator puts it: "cette troisième union le hissait au rang de la nobilité traditionnelle" (8). In *Xala*, his condemnation of the betrayal of the masses includes his depiction of women as victims of the institution of polygamy.

As we have already noted, Ousmane presents a strong critique of the damaging effects of polygamy on Senegalese society and he calls for the liberation of women from this oppressive system. Depicting the contentious issues surrounding polygamy, *Xala* plots the protagonist's failure. During a meeting of businessmen, Beye, the president of the chamber of commerce, announces that he will marry N'Gone. The news of his third marriage is received with applause from his business colleagues and other Senegalese people, except for Laye who questions this marriage: "Re-remarié, combien de fois?" (*Xala* 6). This third marriage, however, rocks the boat of polygamy.

The protagonist's failure can be summarised as follows: first, he is unable to share his love equally among his wives as Islam,

which sanctions polygamy, requires from a Muslim; second, he has no time for his wives and children; third, he ruins the business empire with which he is entrusted because of his third marriage and particularly the extravagant spending in which he engages. He keeps his wives in separate houses which means giving to each woman the money she needs for food and all her other needs. *Xala* depicts the Senegalese bourgeoisie after independence. In this novel, Ousmane criticises the new African leaders who live in opulence while the majority of the people are wallowing in poverty. Ousmane invites the ruling class to become conscious, because if the struggle for independence is to bring hope to the people, the ruling class must show leadership. It is through Beye's saga that Ousmane plots the failure of polygamy, making this protagonist's ordeal symbolise the failure of Senegalese society. It is ironic that the same people who approved of Beye's third marriage recommended his expulsion from his job after his expensive marriage brought the company to bankruptcy. Unlike Dieng in *Le mandat*, who lives under the same roof with his two wives, Beye provided a separate apartment for each of his wives. This polygamous arrangement plants the seeds of unhappiness in Beye's household; more specifically, his wives suffer from solitude and abandonment. One cannot ignore the rivalry and jealousy among the wives. Oumi shows her hatred for Adja and distances herself, only to move close to Adja again when she realises that Beye is preparing to take another wife. Both women manifest hostility to N'Gone, the third wife, on the day of her marriage to their husband Beye.

David Murphy observes that "the main prism through which Sembène looks at the status of women within African society is that of the institution of polygamy" (141). Polygamy reduces the African woman to the status of a 'second class citizen,' an inferior person in the household of her husband and someone whom the husband sees as an object that he can toy with. For instance, Adja Awa, Beye's first wife, suffers when her husband takes Oumi as his second wife. She decides to stay, however, because of her children. This is what she tells them: "Si je quittais votre père [...]"

et si je trouvais un mari, je serais la troisième ou quatrième. Et vous, qu'est-ce que vous deviendriez?" (*Xala* 38). Likewise, Oumi who was happy to be the second wife in a polygamous marriage opposes her husband's third marriage, fearing that she will now suffer from abandonment as Adja did. It is clear that women are treated as replaceable and they feel they have no choices. Ousmane reveals that some men in African societies opt for polygamy to retain their 'privileged position' as the boss of the house and they use the institution to exploit and control women. By fighting Islamic and traditional rites that encourage polygamy, Ousmane hopes to free his Senegalese sisters from the weight of Islamic religious practices that place women in the shadows. Minyono-Nkodo shows how this is an integral part of Ousmane's Marxist agenda:

Quand on se rappelle que Sembène Ousmane est marxiste, on ne s'étonne pas d'entendre proclamer que la religion est considérée ici comme néfaste. Comment accepter une religion qui ne traduit que le pouvoir de domination d'une classe ou d'un peuple? (46).

The author empowers some of his female characters to expose dramatically the institution of polygamy in *Xala* and plot its failure. Ousmane uses N'gone to depict Beye's downfall for it is after his third marriage that everything goes awry economically in his household and in the company he manages. Furthermore, it is on the eve of his third marriage to N'Gone that Beye suddenly has "xala," a Senegalese word for impotence. The impotent Beye, alas, will not be able to satisfy his new wife sexually, much less the two other wives as well. His fear of impotence is increased by the fact that the husband in a polygamous society is expected to sexually satisfy his wives equally as dictated by Islamic law, and to spend three days with each of them in turn.

Beye's inability to meet his conjugal obligations, symbolises the failure of polygamy. Furthermore, the author uses this example as a way to translate the failure of the bourgeoisie. Wealth is the tool used by many African men and particularly Senegalese men to acquire many wives but in this scenario, wealth has failed. In

sub-Saharan Africa, men typically display their wealth by acquiring numerous wives, as does the protagonist of *Xala*. But El-Hadji Kader Beye amassed his wealth by acquiring people's lands fraudulently and to avenge themselves, the exploited people cursed Beye by giving him *xala*.

The radicalism which characterizes the female characters in Ousmane's other novels is evident in this novel as well. Rama, who is portrayed as emancipated and revolutionary, defies her father in these terms: "Je suis contre ce mariage, un polygame n'est pas un homme franc" (*Xala* 19). She is very firm and does not even hide her opposition to polygamy from her fiancé, when she tells him frankly: "Sache que je suis contre la polygamie" (*Xala* 77). She becomes the liberator of women, for she understands the difference between traditionalism and modernism. She never fails to voice out, what she thinks: "Je suis contre la polygamie [...] mais les personnes que j'ai rencontrées l'approuvaient" (*Xala* 18).

Ousmane's works often focus on radical young women such as Ad'jibid'ji in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Tioumbe in *L'Harmattan* and Rama in *Xala*. Rama is a university student, a modern young woman who becomes conscious of the condition of women and decides to fight those forces that oppress them. She is the author's spokesperson in his denunciation of polygamy; she blames her father's downfall on polygamy and at the same time criticises her mother for accepting to live under the roof of a polygamous husband. Both Rama and Ad'jibid'ji are courageous and militant young women. They have other things in common as well. Rama rides a motorcycle while Ad'jibid'ji dreams of taking after her father and driving a train.

Ousmane seems to use these young women in his novels to testify to his vision of a bright future for the African woman. As David Murphy notes, "rather than representations of some idealized form of African femininity, Sembène's young women represent the possibilities open to African women in the future." (137)

It is, however, sad to note that N'Gone, who is also well-educated and who is the same age as Rama, fails to share Rama's opposition to polygamy. Even though the third marriage was arranged by N'Gone's mother because of her own hidden agenda, N'Gone could have rejected Beye. One might expect that N'Gone as a modern woman would recognise the dangers inherent in polygamy. But, she does not because she allows herself to fall prey to her avaricious mother Yay Bineta (La Badiene), who pushes her on El-Hadji Beye for her own selfish ends. Beye is rich and Yay Bineta wants her share of his wealth. As the narrator says: "[Yay Bineta est une] termites qui ravage sa victime [...] El-Hadji est mur, La Badiene allait le cueillir" (15).

In Ousmane's novels the quest for freedom, equality and emancipation on the part of oppressed women is remarkable. As we have noted, the author particularly denounces polygamy, criticising the Senegalese interpretation of Islam, which gives more rights to men than to women. Ousmane's perspective is that Islam is a barrier to the political and economic emancipation of women. By exposing the problems of polygamy in his novels, Ousmane takes a position unlike that of many of his contemporaries. Female characters in his novels triumph, no matter how small the victory is. The author's realistic and positive portrayal of African women and his criticism of polygamy and other religious and traditional practices that enslave African women in his novels, made an immense contribution to the struggle that was later carried on by African women writers. Ousmane's unquestionable feminism served as an inspiration to African women writers and critics of later generations.

**OUT OF THE SHADOWS: THE FEMALE
WRITER AND THE BREAKING OF SILENCE
BY FEMALE PERSONAE IN FICTION**

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 area.

— *Carole Boyce Davies (1986: 1)*

**African Women Writers and the Utilitarian
Function of their Art**

The entrance into the African literary scene marks the beginning of a new era for African women. As Pierrette Herzberger affirms: “Le but principal de toutes les femmes-écrivaines est d’abord de prendre la parole soit pour dénoncer une situation oppressive, soit pour s’élever contre les formes patriarcales qui régissent la plupart des communautés africaines” (24). Francophone African women have greatly succeeded in making their words heard by finding male and female audiences within their worlds and beyond to sympathise with and champion

their cause. Western education has given them the key to selfhood. To borrow Antonio Gramsci's phrase, the education they received "raised their consciousness, and thus they acquired the necessary weapon for confronting the enemy effectively" (20). Literacy brought about their emergence from the shadows, to grab the pen and tell their ordeals. Thérèse Kuoh Moukoury's *Rencontres essentielles* (1969) was one of the first Francophone African women's novels. P. Pérez remarks that:

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 Quénum, Badiane Kouyaté, Francis Bebey, Yambo Ouologuem, etc., venait s'ajouter un nom de femme: Thérèse Kuoh Moukoury. Ouvrage qui n'avait rien de magistral, reçut cependant un accueil favorable sans pour autant accéder à un grand public. (5)

This novel, contrary to the expectations of some African male authors and critics, did not deal with problems of colonialism or post-independence Africa. Rather, it recounted the sorrow of 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. 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 situation, she lacks the courage to take her destiny in her own hands. She fails to reject the husband who humiliated her by marrying her close friend. Here is what Flo, the protagonist of the novel 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? (84)

From Flo's remark, one begins to understand how many women remain and suffer in their matrimonial homes because they fear the judgement that will be passed on them by their entourage should they abandon their husband. Like Flo in *Rencontres essentielles*, Mama Ida in Philomene Bassek's *La tâche de sang* and Rokhaya and Rabiadou in Aminata Ka Maiga's *La voie du salut* keep their sorrows to themselves and suffer silently. In *La voie du salut*, Rokhaya and Rabiadou are both betrayed by their dishonest husbands. If Rokhaya, the mother, is a woman who lives by tradition, her daughter Rabiadou is a modern woman who rejects tradition. The irony is that they share the same fate. Female protagonists in *Rencontres essentielles*, *La tâche de sang* and *La voie du salut* lack the courage to challenge masculine ethos and come out of their subaltern condition. They all endure oppression in their matrimonial homes and sacrifice their lives for their husbands. These women view submissiveness to their husbands as something admirable.

Having been kept in silence for long, African women of the late 60s rediscovered their voices and decided to transmit their experiences directly to the public in the form of autobiographies and autobiographical fictions. This is the case in *Rencontres essentielles* and many other novels written by Francophone sub-Saharan African women writers. Even if these women authors cannot envision protagonists in their writings who have the courage to break away from their oppressive situations, their autobiographical writings still represent a first step towards liberation. Madeleine Borgomano, in her *Voix et visages de femmes*, remarks that:

Ainsi pourrait-on penser que quand une femme écrit son autobiographie, elle se livre, ou paraît se livrer, directement au lecteur; elle semble au moins prendre la parole sans intermédiaire et pour parler d'elle-même.

(5)

Kuoh Moukoury's *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 tougher female protagonists and wrote stories that carried their struggles farther. In a more radical way than their predecessors, they defied the “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 African women and a new society. Their aim was to eliminate the injustices imposed on them and fight systems that oppressed them.

Women writers’ arrival on the African literary scene brought about a positive transformation of the subaltern female subject in fiction. Previously silenced in the majority of African texts, the African female subject now rejects her mute status. She emerges from the shadows to defy patriarchy by breaking her silence and taking active control of her own condition. Benoîte Groult poses the question very well and also gives the answer at the same time to how women can free themselves from subordination: “Comment agir? Eh bien, par l’information précisément. Mais c’est des femmes elles-mêmes qu’elle doit venir. C’est à elles de rompre cette malédiction du silence” (6). Thus, African women authors reject silence and begin effectively to use their writings to tell the stories of African women. Much more than African men writers, they tap into the utilitarian function of their art.

In this period, the Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ and her Gabonese sister in writing, Angèle 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 condition and who resolve to break their silence. 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. Bâ and Rawiri present a new world-view of women and educate readers about the changes occurring in the position of

women. In her short novel, Bâ presents Ramatoulaye, the main character who reviews the story of her life and that of her friend Aissatou. Rawiri imitates Bâ in her more voluminous novel, presenting Emilienne's ordeals in her matrimonial house. These two protagonists have many things in common: they are victims of cultural practices that impede women's emancipation; they have been deceived by their husbands; and they are products of Western education. Both 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*)

With the goals they set for themselves while attending Western schools, Ramatoulaye and Emilienne were not ready to tolerate any nonsense. Even though they fought the powers that oppressed them, they still found themselves frustrated by traditional rites deeply rooted in their different milieux. They were sometimes subject to humiliation and confrontation by the patriarchal structures that surrounded them.

Bâ and Rawiri, like other women writers who followed them, demonstrate their bitterness vis-à-vis 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 ravage African women like a plague:

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. (63-64)

It is common in the majority of sub-Saharan African societies for every member of the husband's family to expect 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 to be rude. Francophone African women writers of the generation of Bâ and Rawiri begin attacking such attitudes and behaviors 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. 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 to expose the conditions of Senegalese and Gabonese women. These novels also reveal the pattern of patriarchal indoctrination that characterises 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 author 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.
(8)

Mina's remark might be easily applied to certain traditions in Senegal, Ivory Coast and Gabon. Indeed, a close examination of *Une si longue lettre* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes* reveals that these novels are not only about the subaltern condition of women in Senegal or Gabon, but also the critique of traditions. These novels cry out against the general condition of African women even as they launch particular attacks against conditions in a

predominantly Islamic society like Senegal or a traditional male-oriented society like 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. (91-92)

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.

Female Protagonists in Fiction by African Women

The advent of African women writers on the African literary scene introduced a change in the roles played by female characters in novels. With the notable exception of Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de dieu*, in a majority of texts by African men writers, women were not seen as protagonists. They were presented as secondary characters, defined only in connection with their husbands. Most often in men's writings, women were given traditional roles, such as caring for homes, rearing children, working on the farm, or doing light trades. Never were their voices heard and their stories were only recounted from the point of view of the male protagonists. Similarly, while lauding Arlette Chemain-Degrange's study of *Emancipation féminine et roman africain*, Madeleine Borgomano did not fail to point out that in written texts by African men, the voices of women were neutralized. She says: "Cette étude thématique est très

intéressante, mais aucune voix féminine ne s'y fait entendre puisqu'elle ne traite que des personnages féminins produits par des écrivains masculins" (6).

In written texts by African women during the last two and a half decades, not only have female characters emerged as protagonists, women are also, often first-person narrators. Another remarkable thing in texts by African women is that women protagonists, whether narrating their own stories or presented by other narrators, tend to be educated women. For the most part, these protagonists work in government establishments or live in cities where they earn good salaries. Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou and Jacqueline (*Lettre*), for instance, live in Dakar and work as teachers. Emilienne (*Fureurs*) lives in Libreville, the capital of Gabon, and is a top government officer. These women also lead modern lives with all the technological advantages, including television, washing machines and ovens. Sometimes, they even have cooks who help them at home with their domestic work.

While Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and *Un chant écarlate* appeared in 1979 and 1981 respectively, it took more than a decade after Bâ's first novel before Angèle Rawiri's *Cris et fureurs de femme* (1989) arrived on the African literary scene. Their different dates of publication notwithstanding, these novels explore common themes. All three novels not only offer depictions of women, but more importantly they present female protagonists fighting courageously to liberate themselves from the chains of patriarchal traditions. Similarly these novels develop themes of the struggle, anguish and frustration of women in sub-Saharan African marriages. In all of these novels, one witnesses emancipated protagonists frustrated by traditions, women who, in the words of Femi Ojo-Ade, are "tracing their life in a society caught between the established order of the past and the exigencies of the present" (73). Their objective in attending a Western school is to free themselves from the weight of traditions. They reject the traditional pedagogy designed to prepare women to live

successfully with their husbands and in-laws, such as those lessons given to Emilienne by her sister prior to her marriage:

Quelles que soient tes raisons, n'essaie jamais d'affronter ta belle-famille. Même si ton époux se range de ton côté. Très rapidement, tu te trouveras isolée si celle-ci est assez aimable pour ne pas provoquer ton divorce. Tu ferais mieux crois-moi, de te débarrasser de tes principes de femme émancipée. (39)

The modern women in these novels are no longer willing to conform to the demands of the traditional patriarchal system. Their education has taught them the principle of monogamous marriage and their eyes have been opened to the dangers of polygamy. Having been passive and mute observers for so long, they confront the system that subjects them and defy it by breaking the silence. The lessons they learned from the experiences of women like Flo, Rokheya, Rabiadou and Mama Ida have made them realise that silence will not solve their problems; the sacrifices women made to retain their husbands only served to keep them enslaved.

The modern women in Bâ and Rawiri's novels are economically independent and do not rely on their husbands for their survival or the provision of basic necessities. This characteristic differentiates them from the traditional women depicted by some African male writers in whose novels the husbands are the breadwinners of the family and therefore the alpha and the omega in their wives' lives. Complete economic power in the hands of the husband empowers him to relegate his wife to the bottom of the ladder. Frederic Engels noted that when a man has economic power over his wife, he is in a position to become an oppressor. In societies where cultural norms establish the husband as the provider, if a woman hopes to receive financial help or support from him, she has to obey and serve him. Engels' assertion may be true but it does not tell the whole story. The female protagonists in these novels are self-reliant and economically independent and need no financial assistance from their husbands, but they are still oppressed. A better financial

status by the man may contribute to the woman being oppressed but even financially independent women may find themselves in a subaltern position. One can deduce from this argument that patriarchal ethos and certain traditional or religious rites are primarily responsible for the subjugation of women.

Breaking of Silence: The Subaltern Can Talk

Francophone African women writers challenge the modalities through which masculine power lords it over women in their writings. The breaking of silence by protagonists of their novels occurred as a result of many factors, chief among which was the disloyalty of their husbands.

In Mariama 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" (*Lettre* 64).

In Bâ's *Un chant écarlate*, Mireille is a white French woman who grew up in Senegal with her parents and eventually married a Senegalese Muslim man. The opposition to this marriage by both sets of parents on racial grounds did not stop the couple. Bâ presents the problems inherent in interracial marriage in this novel. It is also an avenue for Bâ to testify to the fact that even

interracial marriage does not hinder the man from going into polygamy in a Senegalese Muslim society. Ousmane, Mireille's husband, marries another woman and thus joins the polygamous company of Modou, Ramatoulaye's husband, and Mawdo, Aïssatou's husband.

Bâ's novels portray polygamous husbands as unfaithful womanisers. 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 his 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 Dominique naively about the difficulties she is going through with Joseph and his mother in her home. By marrying Joseph, Dominique satisfies the societal expectations of women and by having children for him, she fulfills 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 sympathising with her boss who suffers in her marriage.

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*, Salimata (her first marriage) in *Les soleils des indépendances*, Mariama in *Toiles d'araignée* or Rokheya in *La voie du salut*. Ramatoulaye, Mireille and Emilienne had modern marriages in the sense that they had made their own free choices. Unfortunately, these protagonists live in a highly patriarchal society, a society that sees nothing wrong with polygamy. Sons succumb easily to their mothers' encouragements or to their personal lusts. The sons, now husbands, reject 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. 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 milieux such as Senegal and Gabon that wives cannot change the order of things. Still, these women, despite all odds challenge traditional norms. Their painful experiences symbolise the anguish of women who find themselves caught in a quagmire of domination and oppression. The modern female characters of *Lettre*, *Chant* and *Fureurs* emerge from the shadows after years of silence to defy authority. If these women had initially kept mute 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. They take their destiny into their own hands. Faced with this final humiliation, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Mireille, and Emilienne show their unfaithful husbands that 'enough is enough'. 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 rejets viennent habiter cette maison. (157)

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 rites, the wife becomes the inheritance of the deceased brother. 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." (84)

Boiling with anger after digesting Tamsir's words, Ramatoulaye renounces her long silence by blasting 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." (85)

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, had decided to abandon him and break 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 dégringoles 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. (50)

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 victimisation leads these women to courageously defy their oppressors. By letting out their sorrows or 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 trente 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. (104)

This "prise de 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 means to be oneself, to be master of oneself, to distinguish oneself, to free oneself from a state of chaos” (95). 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 the complementary roles of men and women, dreams of a peaceful co-existence 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 up 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. (174)

Emilienne, like Ramatoulaye, Aissatou 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 is a means through which Bâ and Rawiri not only criticise 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.

Motherhood

Some Western feminist critics advocate the rejection of motherhood as a societal role that oppresses and exhausts women. In some African society, however, motherhood plays a different

role. The importance of motherhood in some African societies cannot go unexamined. Motherhood is considered sacred and rituals are often performed in order to appease the gods so that women may be fertile and conceive. In Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, the writer sheds light on the importance of pregnancy by showing how Eva took her sister Emilienne to a witch doctor to perform fertility rituals. Emilienne later drops the idea of visiting the witch doctor but still sees a gynecologist in order to find a solution to the problem. Before finding herself in her current situation, Emilienne had a female child (Rékia) who was murdered. Even though her visits to the gynecologist do not result in pregnancy, she struggles to conceive before finally giving up hope.

In many societies, motherhood is crucial to a woman's status. Motherhood is considered central to women's life and there is intense pressure to become mothers. Women who do not have children are defined as defective. Eva confronts her sister Emilienne with the following words:

Tu dois savoir que tu ne seras jamais une femme à part entière tant que tu n'auras pas des enfants que tu élèveras et que ton entourage verra grandir. Je vais te blesser sans doute en disant que ton enfant qui est mort ne compte plus, et dans quelques années on aura oublié que tu as été mère comme toutes les femmes normales. Rassure-toi, ce que je dis là ne s'applique pas à nous, ta famille. Je veux parler de ta belle-mère et de la société entière. (89)

The absence of children in marriage will have a negative effect on the peaceful co-existence of the couple. Filomina Steady observes:

The most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role as a whole. Even in strict patrilineal societies, women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of the husband's lineage, and it is because of women that men can have a patrilineage at all. The importance of motherhood, and the evaluation of the childbearing capacity by African women, is probably the most fundamental difference between African woman and her Western counterpart. (29)

Steady, as an African, recognises the importance of motherhood in African societies as do the women writers of fiction who constantly address this issue in their novels. Mariama Bâ is well aware of the importance of motherhood and informs the reader about Ramatoulaye's childbearing capacity. The protagonist has twelve children from her marriage with Modou. The writer thus reveals the importance that Senegalese society accords to having children. In a majority of traditional African societies, having numerous children is considered synonymous with wealth because children's labour boosts the economic capability and status of the family. This assumption, however, needs to be re-examined because there are cases in which parents are unable to meet the basic needs of their children or send them to school. Sending female children especially to school can empower women by giving the next generation different choices and different ways of boosting the family's economy. Furthermore, having fewer children can be beneficial to women's health and can give them time to do other things outside their homes to boost the economic status of the family.

Certainly the absence of children can have a devastating effect on a marriage, as depicted in some African male novels. African women writers similarly show how childlessness may affect a marriage. In Angèle Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, one notes the sadism of Eyang, Emilienne's mother-in-law, who openly ridicules the sterility of her daughter-in-law: "Cette femme est devenue inutile" (48). A number of African novels describe the ordeals of barren women and as Carole Boyce Davies notes:

[The] preoccupation with motherhood is evident in almost all modern African fiction. At the same point, almost every novel dramatizes a woman's struggle to conceive: her fear of being replaced, the consequent happiness at conception and delivery or agony at the denial of motherhood, various attempts to appease the Gods and hasten pregnancy, followed by the joys and/or pains of motherhood. (243)

In many quarters, the desire to have children eclipses everything else in African marriages. The South African critic,

Lauretta Ngcobo recognizes this desire, noting that in Africa, people preserve a special place of honor for motherhood. On a similar note, Pius Adesanmi asserts that: "Motherism is an African variant of feminism that predicates the emancipation of African women on the valorisation of their metaphysical essence as mothers and rejects the anti-mother posture of Western feminism, which sees motherhood as a burden" (218).

Western critics of motherhood like Jeffner Allen, Simone de Beauvoir and Shulamith Firestone who believe that motherhood wears women out and thus contributes to their oppression, might need to make an extra effort to convince some African women that living without children in their matrimonial homes need not threaten their marriage. Emilienne poses the question very well: "Est-ce ma stérilité qui le fait fuir? Pourquoi ne peut-il pas m'aimer sans enfants?" (81). Emilienne's view of motherhood does not work in Africa; her husband cannot love her unless she gives him children. The truth of the matter is that most African men do not want to live with women who cannot have children for them. If they do, it is because they have someone outside the marriage, frequently unknown to their wives, who fulfills that missing part of life for them. This is especially true of couples where the woman is, beyond doubt, the one suffering from sterility. Thus Joseph, Emilienne's husband, secretly marries Dominique and has children with her without his wife knowing of it for many years.

It is clear that the presence of children is a blessing and an empowerment to the sub-Saharan African woman. Ramatoulaye might be devastated by the attitude of her husband, Modou, who left her for Binetou, but she took pride in the decision to stay with her children when Modou went to live with his new wife. In *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, Eyang's ridicule of Emilienne's sterility clearly underlines the importance of having children in Africa:

Au lieu de faire des enfants comme toutes les femmes, tu élèves des chiens et des chats [...] Tu ferais mieux d'utiliser tout cet argent pour soigner ton ventre malade. Il existe des médecins pour des femmes anormales comme toi, au cas où tu l'aurais oublié! (59)

A number of African feminists, who appreciate the importance of childbearing in many marriages in African regions, condemn the attacks launched on maternity by certain Western feminists. The Cameroonian writer and feminist critic, Julianah Nfah-Abbenyi affirms that: "the critique of motherhood [...] can be problematic to most African women simply because motherhood and family have historically represented different experiences to Western and African women" (24). Also one major difference between Western and African women is that Western women pursue birth control much more vigorously than African women do.

Family Ties

In most African societies, a man, his wife and children do not constitute a family. The family is defined as an extended family: grandparents, fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters, in-laws and even family friends, who work as a collective. Family ties define roles in the society. This notion of African family leaves practically no room for a married woman to operate as an individual entity. African women writers and feminists are not arguing for women's autonomy but rather for their equality within the family structure. As Laurie Edson states in her article on "Mariama Bâ and the Politics of the Family," "what Bâ [and Rawiri] do criticize, is the fact that the wife has lower status than members of the husband's family and must cater to them" (24).

Emilienne's philosophy that "Je compte me marier à un homme et non avec une famille" (18) does not fit in the sub-Saharan African context. The nuclear family as understood in Western societies is unknown and/or unaccepted in many African societies. Extended family ties play crucial roles in people's day-to-day activities, especially in the life of married women, who sometimes find themselves frustrated by the attitudes of their husbands' families.

Both perfidious and sympathetic roles are played out within the family entourage. While some characters support female protagonists, many others militate against their struggles. One striking aspect recorded in *Une lettre*, *Un chant* and *Fureurs et cris*

de femmes is that a majority of women work against the protagonists. Indeed, some of the most devastating attitudes are those of some of the other women in the family — mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, co-wives, or concubines — who work against their fellow women by undermining their marriages. Reflecting on this issue, Médoune Gueye posits that: “Que des femmes oeuvrent si activement contre l’intérêt d’autres femmes est assurément une question fondamentale que M. Bâ pose dans son roman” (312).

Lauretta Ngcobo, in her article “African Motherhood—Myth and Reality,” notes that the arrival of the daughter-in-law introduces an added strain and a triangular relationship between the mother, the son and his wife and even some of the husband’s relatives. In Evelyne Ngollé Mpoudi’s *Sous la cendre le feu*, Djibril reminds Mina, his wife that she needs to respect his female relatives:

Mina, mais à l’avenir j’aimerais que tu choisisses tes mots en parlant de Hadja. Elle ne m’a pas mise au monde, mais c’est tout comme. [...] J’ai tété le sein de Hadja en même temps que son fils qui n’a vécu que quelques mois. Sans elle, je ne serais pas là, tu n’aurais pas Djibril comme mari, alors s’il te plaît mesure tes mots quand il s’agit d’elle. (121)

Emilienne, in *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, wonders: “A quoi ma disponibilité vis-à-vis de ma belle-famille m’a-t-elle servie?” (39). Pierre Fandio, in his article “Mariama Bâ et Angèle Rawiri: une autre vérité de la femme,” suggests an answer to Emilienne’s question regarding the function of these established family ties:

Incompétente secrétaire [Dominique] s’y prend bien plus basement pour “arracher l’époux” de sa patronne. Longtemps maîtresse de Joseph à l’insu d’Emilienne, la prétendue “cousine” se rapproche perfidement de la femme cocue dont elle tire des confidences qu’elle utilise plus tard pour obliger son amant à quitter sa compagne légitime. Elle sera tout comme Ouleymatou [*Un chant*], servie par les manoeuvres de sa belle-mère qui subordonne toute pérennité du mariage de son fils avec Emilienne à la naissance d’un garçon dans le foyer. (172)

The Nigerian feminist writer, Molaria Ogundipe argues that African women are more than wives. She asserts that to understand their multifaceted identities beyond wifedom, one must look for their roles and status in sites other than marriage. By this, Ogundipe seems to be deploring the pressure exerted on women to make them into “good wives.” She questions women’s efforts to accommodate, accept, and treat with deference and submission every member of their husband’s family. There are examples in literature of these “good wives.” In *Une si longue lettre*, Ramatoulaye’s father-in-law confirm her proper behavior: “Tu nous a vénérés. Tu sais que nous sommes le sang de Modou” (*Lettre* 57). In *Fureurs*, Joseph, talking to his wife Emilienne, says: “Tu as fini par te plier à ma manière de vivre. Par ailleurs, tu as des qualités que je n’ai retrouvées chez aucune femme. Tiens, par exemple, ta manière d’élever mes neveux” (156).

Bâ and Rawiri in addition to denouncing certain masculine behaviours in their novels, also examine critically the roles of the extended family in a couple’s life, revealing comportment that contributes to victimising the wife. Médoune Guèye notes that:

En traitant de la polygamie, Bâ montre aussi l’hypocrisie sociale et la perfidie de certaines femmes, qu’elles soient coépouses ou belles-mères. [...] En effet, de la même manière que Mariama Bâ a su créer des personnages égoïstes, Modou, Mawdo ou Ousmane, et en faire des types incarnant l’instinct polygame, elle a aussi réussi à camper les personnages féminins égoïstes, qui sont à leur tour des types incarnant l’exploitation de la femme par la femme. Alors que chez les hommes, il s’agit du mari, chez les femmes, il s’agit souvent de la mère du mari, de la coépouse elle-même, ou de sa propre mère, voire encore d’une parente proche de ces dernières. (309)

In *Une si longue lettre*, Aunt Nabou makes great sacrifices to educate her young niece Nabou in order to give the niece in marriage to her son Mawdo, who is already Aïssatou’s husband. Unable to control the westernized wife, Aïssatou, Aunt Nabou thinks that the docile young Nabou, moulded in the traditional way, will be more tractable. Besides, with this innocent young

lady at Mawdo's side, Aunt Nabou's interests will be better protected. She wants a passive and submissive daughter-in-law who will venerate her and treat her like a queen. In this way, Aunt Nabou will have the upper hand in the matrimonial home of her son. Aunt Nabou is presented as a woman who works against another woman to achieve her selfish interests. Her words say it all: "Je vieillis. Je ferai cette enfant une autre moi-même. La maison est vide depuis que les miens se sont mariés" (45-46). Femi Ojo-Ade observes that:

Mawdo falls prey to his mother's jealousy and vengeful sentiments. [...] The vengeance came in the form of a girl, the niece of aunt Nabou, Mawdo's mother. She goes to her brother and brings back the young girl to live with Mawdo. Duty towards mother calls for devotion. Devotion to duty is concretely expressed in desire of the flesh. (74-75)

In a similar way, Dame Belle-mère plays the role of husband-snatcher, by pushing her daughter Binetou to marry Modou, Ramatoulaye's husband, solely for her own personal gains. Binetou, like the young Nabou, is merely a victim of her selfish mother. The narrator explains it: "Binetou est un agneau immolé comme beaucoup d'autres sur l'autel du matériel" (60). These traditional mothers act in the name of family ties to destroy other mothers whom they consider too sophisticated for their liking, and in the process, they end up ruining their sons' or daughters' matrimonial homes. Another concrete example can be drawn from *Un chant écarlate* where Yaye Khady reminds us of Aunt Nabou and Dame Belle-mère. She is not happy with her son's marriage to Mireille because in her opinion, this foreigner will not be able to satisfy her wishes: "Une Négrresse connaît et accepte les droits de la belle mère" (110-111). Yaye Khady therefore plots to secure Ouleymatou for her son Ousmane.

In Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, one again witnesses a situation in which the family entourage of the couple plays a mostly negative role. Eyang, Joseph's mother, acts only in her own interest by preferring a woman of her choice for her son: "Je veux que ton frère épouse sa maîtresse actuelle que je connais

bien" (53). She does not hide her rejection of Emilienne: "Tu n'épousera pas une fille de cette ethnie tant que je vivrai" (14). Family relations, and especially mothers-in-law, clearly cause trouble for African wives. Ramatoulaye in *Une lettre si longue lettre* describes her mother-in-law's behaviour in the following words:

Sa mère [la mère de Modou] passait et repassait, au gré de ses courses, toujours flanquée d'amies différentes pour leur montrer la réussite sociale de son fils et surtout, leur faire toucher du doigt sa suprémacie dans cette belle maison qu'elle n'habitait pas. Je la recevais avec tous les égards dus à une reine. (33)

In most sub-Saharan African societies, if women have the means, they contribute to buying the houses that they share with their husbands. Some who are richer than their husbands may buy the house but often live under the pretence that the house was bought by the husband. This is done to protect the marriage for if family members or outsiders were to learn that the house belongs to the wife, it might ruin the relationship. The husband could feel humiliated in public and might be regarded as a failure for not meeting his marital obligations. In most sub-Saharan African societies, the husband is presumed to be the provider of food, shelter and other amenities necessary for the running of the household. Even if the wife provides most of the belongings, it is always assumed that the husband has procured them because it is very shameful for a man if people know that he is housed and fed by his wife. Little does Eyang in *Fureurs et cris de femmes* know that the house does not belong to her son Joseph. She had no idea that Emilienne paid for almost everything in the house, and that she was even the one who footed the medical bills of her mother-in-law, Eyang. Jean-Marie Volet remarks that:

Emilienne est arrivée au faite de sa carrière professionnelle. Elle fait partie de l'intelligentsia de son pays de plein droit. Sa nomination au poste de directrice de la Société Nationale d'Entretien des Bâtiments Administratifs a été signée de la main même du Président. [...] Si l'on

considère le pouvoir d'Emilienne en termes d'espèces sonnantes et trébuchantes, de voitures, de résidence de service, de cuisinier et de gens de maison, elle n'a rien à envier à ses confrères masculins. (132-133)

Most African mothers-in-law live ignorantly in the dream that everything in the matrimonial houses of their sons belongs to those sons. This was the norm when the mothers were young. It is only when things fall apart as a result of the negative roles some mothers-in-law play in the marital life of their sons that wives emerge from the passive acceptance of their subaltern condition to defy the oppressors. Some sisters-in-law also take part in the power struggle. Ramatoulaye says: "Mes belles-soeurs, limitées dans leurs réflexions, enviaient mon confort et mon pouvoir d'achat. [...] Elles oublièrent la source de cette aisance" (34). Despite the fact that Ramatoulaye purchased many of the properties in the house, her family-in-law ransacks her home after her husband dies.

It is interesting to note that while relatives of the husband and especially female relations may act to destroy his matrimonial home, other women sympathise and stand by the wife to protect her psychologically from this trauma. In *Une si longue lettre*, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou support each other psychologically through their correspondence. In addition, Daba, Ramatoulaye's daughter, offers her mother crucial support, including asking her to leave her father: "Romps, Maman! Chasse cet homme. Il ne nous a pas respectées, ni toi, ni moi. Fais comme Tata Aïssatou, romps. Dis-moi que tu rompras. Je ne te vois pas te disputant un homme avec une fille de mon âge" (60). Similarly, Daba condemns the negative role played by Dame Belle-mère: "Pendant cinq ans, tu as privé une mère et ses douze enfants de leur soutien. Souviens-toi, ma mère a tellement souffert. Comment une femme peut-elle saper le bonheur d'une autre femme?" (103).

In *Un chant écarlate*, Mireille enjoys the comradeship of Rosalie, her Senegalese friend and Soukeyna, her husband's sister, both of whom help her understand Senegalese society and culture. Rosalie initiates her into Senegalese ways of life, helping this stranger

understand the responsibilities of wives toward their husband's relatives in Africa:

Rosalie est une véritable femme. Et Rosalie, en véritable femme, initiait Mireille au savoir-vivre sénégalais. Elle éclairait pour elle les rapports belle-famille et épouse. (148)

In *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, Antoinette and Eva support Emilienne both morally and psychologically when she is oppressed by her mother-in-law. Eva takes her sister Emilienne to the traditional doctor because she wants to help her overcome the problem of her sterility. Antoinette, the sister-in-law, tries to persuade her mother Eyang to shelve her plan to eject Emilienne from her son's "house." As one celebrates the friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou, one also appreciates the support given to Emilienne by Antoinette and Eva and to Mireille by Rosaline.

By addressing questions of motherhood and family ties in their novels, both Mariama Bâ and Angèle Rawiri reflect on key issues in the lives of sub-Saharan African women. Their works, in addition to criticizing patriarchy and denouncing polygamy, also aim at removing the weight of tradition from women's backs including the ways in which women have been programmed to undermine other women. Their literary mission is to engage and support women's struggle for better conditions through their writings. Their goal is to attempt to eradicate some of the most intractable sub-Saharan African customs and attitudes that subordinate women.

A Critique of Patriarchal Traditions

Bâ places her struggle and her critique within the Islamic context and this is not surprising since 98% of Senegalese are Muslims. The characters of her novels around whom the plot centers are all Muslims (Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou) or became Muslims through conversion (Jacqueline and Mireille). Bâ's works condemn the conditions under which Senegalese women live in a Muslim Senegalese society. Rawiri places her struggle within

the context of traditional African mores. The common denominator in Bâ and Rawiri's novels is that at the zenith of Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou, Mireille or Emilienne's troubles with their husbands, they have to take some decisions and act.

Ramatoulaye decides to stay with her co-wife as many sub-Saharan African women would choose to do, especially for the sake of their children whom they think might be treated poorly by their co-wife in their absence. Ramatoulaye's decision to resign herself to the role of co-wife by staying perpetuates polygamy. One might, however, want to define Ramatoulaye's action as feminist with a small "f"—based on a belief in the importance of reasonable compromise between men and women as preached by Buchi Emecheta. Aïssatou leaves her husband and moves to New York. Her attitude is not typically African but one might see Aïssatou as a new woman. Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou thus portray different brands of feminism. The characters of Ramatoulaye and Emilienne represent the kind of African feminism that Bâ preaches. Aïssatou's feminism might be regarded as a feminism which spells itself with a capital 'F' that is to say, a Western brand of feminism.

It seems evident that in their works, Bâ and Rawiri primarily believe in complementary roles between women and men. These writers do not fail, however, to reflect on how some traditions act as obstacles to the emancipation of women. As part of these writers' mission to liberate African women, they create women in their novels who are very different from those so negatively portrayed in most of the male fiction. This re-creation of the subaltern subject motivates these women writers in their "prise d'écriture." Bâ and Rawiri provide a truthful assessment of the realities of African women's lives, demonstrating the specific choices that women have to make. They also point out the fact that it is only in opposing the patriarchal system that the freedom of African women may be achieved. The dignity and courage of these protagonists emphasise the fact that times are changing: rigid African traditions are collapsing and men are no longer in sole and total control.

By launching a bold attack on tradition, Bâ and Rawiri mark a new era in African literature. The protagonists in *Une si longue lettre*, *Un chant écarlate* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes* go through difficulties but at the same time, refuse to be dominated. Their resistance to oppression shows that they have what it takes to fight masculine attitudes. The manner in which these novelists present their protagonists reveals their belief that women have to carry on their struggle in an aggressive way if their dream of an egalitarian society for both men and women is to be achieved in Africa. The African female in these novels no longer dwells in silence. However, despite all their dreams and efforts to transform society by daring to break the silence, these protagonists still fail to achieve Gramsci's "permanent victory." Their significant accomplishment lies at the level of consciousness and awareness. Bâ and Rawiri initiate the fight by speaking out against the oppression of women, through the breaking of silence—their own and that of their female protagonists. But it will take a later generation of women writers to carry on that fight.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FEMALE WRITER AND THE EMERGENCE OF POSITIVE FEMALE HEROINES IN FICTION

In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.

– Paulo Freire (1970: 34)

Oppressed and Oppressors

The oppressed are those who suffer domination at the hands of oppressors. There is no record in history that the oppressors have willingly yielded freedom to the oppressed. For the oppressed to gain complete freedom, as Paulo Freire opines, there must necessarily be first a will to free themselves, and second, a mindfulness of a way out. Since majority of women in most sub-Saharan African societies are oppressed by traditional rites and patriarchal attitudes, the coming together of women as a group is critical. By having a common agenda, women can successfully carry out their struggle to destabilise completely the system that oppresses them. By coming together, the oppressed can successfully destroy the tools of domination used by the oppressors.

In some African societies, religious, cultural and patriarchal ethos are used to subjugate women. It is only if these institutions are redefined that women in Africa can dream of an egalitarian position with men.

In the analysis of African women's texts in the previous chapter, Ramatoulaye, Mireille and Emilienne willingly challenged patriarchal power and fought to eradicate archaic African customs. Even though these women failed to transform their societies completely, they exposed the world of oppression and confronted their oppressors boldly. The total transformation of the society, however, can only be achieved if women continue to take part actively in an unrelenting struggle for their own freedom by fighting to destroy forms of power that enslave them. Paulo Freire asserts: "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly" (31). Although an individual's fight can sometimes guarantee the freedom of a single subaltern woman, as is the case with Affiba in Regina Yaou's *Le prix de la révolte* (1997), the group's fight can more effectively sustain the results achieved, particularly if the group struggles together to fight common enemies. The yearning for freedom can be transformed into reality only when the same yearning is aroused in the oppressed as a group. Malimouna, the protagonist of Fatou Kéita's *Rebelle* (1998), demonstrates this attitude by fighting for freedom from cultural and patriarchal oppression along with her colleagues. Malimouna is a good example of the principle of collective action as she mobilises women to struggle alongside her to achieve what Freire refers to as "a permanent liberation through the expulsion of the myths created and developed in the older order"(40). Malimouna understands that only the destruction of the old structures designed to maintain power imbalance and subjugate women can guarantee women everlasting freedom. Malimouna realises that seeking compromise has failed to resolve issues.

Kéita's *Rebelle* and Yaou's *Le prix de la révolte* are recent works in which the authors portray the determination of female

protagonists who refuse to negotiate their subaltern status with men. Instead, the protagonists prefer to fight to the end to eliminate the subordination of women and free themselves from masculine powers and traditional domination. The protagonists of the novels engage in social transformation through the demolition of established institutions that negate women's progress economically, politically and culturally. Their struggle is to recover their lost humanity; they do not hesitate to oppose injustice, exploitation, oppression and the violence of the oppressors. Malimouna and Affiba, hence, continue the struggle initiated by Ramatoulaye (*Une si longue lettre*), and Emilienne (*Fureurs et cris de femmes*) and carry their struggle to victory. Kéita and Yaou are well aware of the successes and failures recorded by their colleagues who first broke through the silence. Thus, they arm their protagonists with experiences so as not to fail. Gramsci's idea of "permanent victory" can only be attained in a dual process involving the re-creation of the oppressed subject and the transformation of the socio-cultural context in which the oppressed (in this context, the oppressed woman) finds herself. Affiba and Malimouna persevere in their struggle and carry the struggle far enough to destroy some of the patriarchal structures used to subordinate African women.

The Subaltern Woman Can Act

The subaltern person, generally speaking, when fighting to overthrow the system that oppresses him or her, functions within a group with which he/she is affiliated. It is generally assumed that it is after the subaltern becomes conscious of his or her condition that he or she seeks a change of situation by attacking the oppressors.

In *Le prix de la révolte*, Affiba stands alone to confront the oppressors, but she admits that women's struggle should be fought by women, together. In *Rebelle*, Malimouna starts her struggle alone by opposing the rule of traditions imposed on her and other women through female genital mutilation and forced marriage but later realises that women have to fight together to achieve

victory. As a result, she launches her campaign with other women against all forms of women's oppression. The success of this novel lies in Kéïta's transformation of Malimouna's struggle into a collective one.

Rebelle recounts the story of Malimouna, an Ivoirian woman, who at a young age escaped female circumcision but kept this secret to herself because it would be an abomination for the people of her village to know that she was not circumcised. She was also forced into an arranged marriage with an old man (Sando) in her village, though she succeeds in running away. She then settles down in a town called Salouma where she works as a maid for a white couple before eventually moving to Paris with them. While in Paris, she faces a difficult life, but she has a mind, made up to overcome the challenges. She befriends Fanta, a Malian woman who had just arrived in Paris, and learns about Fanta's multiple childbirths and the life she lives under the roof of Barou, her Malian husband:

Fanta passait le plus clair de son temps entre les couches, les tétées, la vaisselle, la cuisine et la lessive... La nuit, elle était constamment réveillée par les pleurs des bébés. Fanta avait les yeux cernés et maigrissait à vue d'œil. Elle avait besoin d'aide. (93)

After Malimouna watches Fanta closely, she realises how much this woman needs help and she decides to assist her. Without Barou's knowledge, Malimouna introduces Fanta to the world of contraceptives to prevent her from having other children:

Prétextant qu'elles allaient faire des courses, les deux amies se rendirent un après-midi chez un gynécologue. Fanta portait le bébé sur son dos et poussait les jumeaux dans leur double poussette, tandis que Malimouna tenait Noura par la main. Malimouna avait accepté de garder les pilules et, tous les jours, Fanta venait frapper à sa porte pour recevoir son comprimé. (94)

Fanta's condition is an eye-opener for Malimouna. From that time on, she resolves to follow a course that will allow her to help women confront their problems. Malimouna's aim is to return to

Africa and carry out the struggle to destroy patriarchal and traditional practices that subordinate women to men's domination, practices such as female circumcision and forced marriage.

Le prix de la révolte, on the other hand, narrates the ordeals of Affiba, another Ivoirian woman. Affiba loses her husband and must fight with her parents-in-law to prevent them from inheriting all of her husband's property. Affiba and her husband Koffi had worked hard together to buy a house and other properties before he died. After the death of Koffi, Affiba's parents-in-law demand to take over the house and other properties in the house, as is their traditional right. However, since they show no concern for the fate and the well-being of the children and the wife left behind by their deceased son, Affiba decides to resist her parents-in-law's demand and fights to the end to keep the possessions for her children despite all odds. She confronts the most ruthless patriarchal fight of her life but in the end, she emerges victorious in her struggle.

In *Le prix de la révolte* and *Rebelle*, patriarchal authority collapses. Before this time, fathers and husbands were the ones who always decided and had the final say in the home. We see this situation in many of the works discussed earlier such as *Toiles d'araignée*, *Sous l'orage*, *Rencontres essentielles* and *La voie du salut*. With the radical behavior and transformational spirit of Malimouna and Affiba in their attacks on traditional masculine privilege, it is obvious that the sun is rising over a new Africa. As Affiba's father notes:

J'ai donné à Affiba l'éducation que reçoivent presque toutes les filles des temps modernes. Elle m'a obéi; mais l'obéissance des enfants d'aujourd'hui n'est plus cette soumission totale aux décisions des parents comme c'était autrefois. (25)

Malimouna and Affiba work hard to correct old prejudices against African women in order to raise the status of women beyond the traditional confines of silence and domination that were practised in earlier times. Malimouna and Affiba attack

social institutions and thus blur the boundaries between the sexes in a radical way. Their resistance addresses a number of different cultural practices as revealed by the following analysis.

(a) Forced Marriage

In a forced marriage, a young woman is given in marriage to a man without her consent. By running away from the husband chosen for her, Malimouna rejects the societal expectation of a daughter's blind devotion to her father. She has come to believe that obeying one's parents in order to satisfy their personal goals frequently results in unhappy marriages. Forced marriage is often catastrophic because of the difficulties that young women go through in those situations including beatings by their parents to force them to accede to their fathers' demand and difficulties during childbirth. The age of young girls who are victims of forced marriage ranges between 14 and 16 years; they are usually emotionally and physically immature and not ready biologically to produce and care for a family. Besides, the marriage which is not built on love often collapses and ends in divorce. As Awa Thiam in her *La parole aux négresses* observes:

Le mariage forcé est considéré comme "catastrophique" par les femmes interviewées. Subi très tôt par les femmes peu instruites, imposé parfois aussi à des lycéennes, il débouche sur le divorce ou sur des situations désastreuses pour les femmes. (38)

Most disturbing is the age at which young girls are forcibly married. Parents often do not send daughters to school, or even when they do, they do not hesitate to withdraw them from school in order to marry them off. Fathers often negotiate this marriage, as we see in *Rebelle*. The fourteen-year-old Malimouna frowns at the conditions that pave the way for men to buy women away from their families and effectively render them captives. Kéita advocates that a woman should be allowed to marry a man she loves and not the man imposed on her. By rejecting her arranged marriage, Malimouna radically challenges the matchmaking of

fathers. Malimouna proves to her parents, and in particular her father, that she is not a possession. She is an independent being capable of loving and marrying a husband of her choice. Women seeking control of their lives as Malimouna does question the traditional organisation, and establish a new place of dignity for women in the family and in society.

Ly's *Toiles d'araignée*, Badian's *Sous l'orage* and Maiga's *La voie du salut* also treat the thorny issue of forced marriage. In these works, however, the female victims suffer in their quest to liberate themselves. A ruthless father in each of these three novels offers his daughter to an elderly man for some material gain. These coerced marriages leave the daughter in a helpless situation. When grooms pay for them or parents receive a bride price, this indemnity strips wives of their rights to the properties of their new families. Young women who object to marrying men their parents choose for them are severely punished. They are considered by society as not having received a good moral education. In addition, they are viewed as being disrespectful to their parents and to their community at large.

In some cases, young women are well aware of the consequences if they defy their fathers. So, they decide to go through the marriage ceremonies only to run away from their husbands' homes afterwards, in order to live far from their original communities. In *Rebelle*, Malimouna leaves Sando's house to study in France and only after finishing her studies is she strong enough to launch a fight against her forced marriage. In a situation where a woman forced into marriage decides to run away from her husband, the family of her husband usually goes after her. Beti points this out in *Mission terminée* where Medza was sent to Kala to bring back his cousin's wife who ran away from his home. A wife who leaves her husband is almost always pursued and brought back home. If attempts to locate her fail, her own parents automatically disown her; in that circumstance, she must fend for herself and nobody in her family or community will sympathise with her.

Malimouna radically opposes her forced marriage and looks for a man of her choice with whom she hopes to co-exist more equitably so that she can achieve her dream which is to combat women's oppression. She challenges not only the traditional practices of female mutilation and forced marriage, but also works against the patriarchal cultural system that firmly established gender subordination. In this novel, the author pleads eloquently for the right of women to choose their own husbands and she militates strongly against forced marriage as dehumanising to women. Kéita rejects its acceptability through the act of her protagonist who fights back. "[Malimouna] bondit sur [le vieux Sando], la statuette au poing. Elle frappa une seule fois de toutes ses forces. Il s'écroula sans un cris" (39-40). Malimouna's humiliation of Sando is in sharp contrast to society's will. The author's political action is her writing, her imagining of a character like Malimouna who breaks the bonds of forced marriage.

(b) Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation is practised in many sub-Saharan African countries including Ivory Coast, Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo and Nigeria. The exact origin of female genital mutilation is unclear; some hold that it has been in existence in traditional African societies for a very long time while others hold that it was introduced during the incursions into the region by Arab missionaries. By and large, most people who practise female genital mutilation inherited it as an established tradition and simply perpetuate it. It is considered part of one's cultural heritage and celebrated as a festival. Young women who successfully make it through are applauded for their courage. In *Les soleils des indépendances*, for instance, young women who by sheer luck were not as traumatised as Salimata after the female circumcision rite were applauded for being courageous women.

The female circumcision rites actually consist of cutting out the clitoris with blades, knives, scissors or pieces of glass. Female circumcision involves anything from the removal of the clitoris,

to the removal of outer labia, to sewing the vagina closed only leaving a small opening for urine and menstrual blood. Beyond the pain of the operation, complications include genital malformation, damage of the birth canal and sexual frigidity. Consequences also often include infections that are sometimes fatal.

Different societies and traditions in sub-Saharan Africa have various reasons for the practice of female circumcision. Some say that a woman who is not circumcised is “unclean” and therefore cannot find a husband or have children. Others simply see this as an ancestral practice that must be respected. Even the ritual practitioners are largely ignorant of the risks involved and are often motivated to do the procedure simply because of the financial rewards. One traditional belief is that female genital mutilation prevents young women from being “loose” (sexually immoral) and keeps them faithful to their husbands. Traditional belief also holds that it increases women’s fecundity. Benoîte Groult in her preface to *La parole aux négresses* corroborates this view:

[o]n leur présente [cette mutilation] comme indispensable pour “parfaire leur féminité en supprimant un reliquant inutile du phallus,” et leur permettre de devenir ainsi des épouses plus dociles et des mères plus fécondes. (3)

This potentially dangerous and painful rite is still practised in some African villages which is why Kéita makes circumcision a central issue in her novel. Having herself escaped from female circumcision, Malimouna firmly opposes the rite and works to eradicate it. She forms “l’Association d’Aide à la Femme en Difficulté” (AAFD) and is very active in it because she believes that there is no justification for women’s mutilation and that the practice is a violation of women’s rights. She realises that the most effective way to end this practice is through mass mobilization and the formation of an association that will enlighten women about its dangers. As the narrator remarks:

Le dernier défi que Malimouna s'était lancé était de mettre sur pied un programme d'alphabétisation des ménagères [...] Le nom de Malimouna apparaissait dans les journaux, on la voyait à la télévision, martelant à tous vents qu'il fallait que cessent les violences faites aux femmes. Violences qui, disait-elle, portaient de l'excision, en passant par le mariage forcé de très jeunes filles, l'étouffement de celles-ci dans leur foyer et les brutalités domestiques qui s'ensuivaient souvent. (183-189)

As an educated woman after her training in Social-studies at the Institut Social de Paris, Malimouna understands quite well the dangers inherent in female circumcision; she enjoins women to work with her and her friend Laura to combat the practice of female circumcision. She also campaigns through her organisation against all violence against women.

Malimouna understands that no individual, acting on her own, can succeed in dismantling the social structures that relegate women in general to a subordinate status. She devotes her entire life to the association she creates to fight female circumcision in order to transform the society. She launches a massive campaign against "les dangers de l'excision" (194). Numerous women come out to support her cause and to reveal how they have lost their daughters as a result of the female circumcision practice. For the first time, Malimouna herself speaks out openly about how she escaped from being circumcised and was able to have children anyway, thus contradicting one of the major reasons advanced by some for the need for female circumcision.

Témoigner de mon histoire, du viol dont j'ai été victime, du mariage forcé, du fait que je ne sois pas excisée, et que je me suis mariée et que j'ai eu des enfants. (198)

Malimouna sets out to educate her audience. She gathers groups of uneducated women and asks them to abandon the practice of female circumcision. She organises public rallies and encourages women to think about the future of their daughters. Her personal testimony regarding this practice boosts her credibility and the morale of her audience.

Kéita in her novel strongly condemns the practice of female circumcision and advocates for its end because to her, this rite causes harm to women and has no reasonable justification to be carried out on them any longer.

(c) *Widowhood and the Inheritance of Property*

In most traditional African societies, women do not possess any property because they themselves are considered property in their husband's house. In most cases, upon the death of their husbands, they automatically become part of the inheritance and therefore the property of the brothers or other male relatives of the deceased husband, who succeed the husband as the owners of his properties.

In *Les soleils des indépendances*, when Salimata's first husband died, his brother Tiémoko married her. Similarly, when Mariama's husband died, his cousin Fama inherited her. In the same way, in *Une si longue lettre*, Tamsir wanted to inherit Ramatoulaye after the death of his brother. In Affiba's case (*Le prix de la révolte*), however, the protagonist faces another challenge — her parents-in-law do not propose to remarry her off within the family, but they do want to inherit the properties of her deceased husband which Affiba believes are hers. Affiba resolves not to yield to her in-laws' demands. Ama, a radical university student, condemns her grandfather Mensa who is Affiba's father-in-law: "[V]ous avez traité Affiba de tous les noms, vous lui avez porté mille coups bas, elle a résisté" (189).

Although the avaricious relatives of Affiba's husband descend on her to deprive her of her inheritance, she stands up to them and refuses to hand over the key to the house. The narrator tells us how Mensah is only interested in the properties his son left. He only wants to "réclamer l'héritage de Koffi" (9). Affiba's behaviour astonishes her parents-in-law who assert that: "Affiba détient arbitrairement les biens du défunt. Cela ne s'est jamais vu" (25). Affiba admits that tradition forbids her to inherit the property, but she says that times have changed and that she is not ready to relinquish her right to this inheritance:

Conformément aux pratiques coutumières de chez moi, je devrais quitter cette maison et remettre à ma belle-famille, tout ce qui appartenait à mon mari. Or aujourd'hui, mes enfants et moi-même avons droit à ce qu' a laissé le défunt; d'abord parce que la loi m'y autorise, ensuite parce que tout ce qu'ils réclament a été acquis par notre travail commun! [...] Ou alors faut-il jeter dehors la veuve, qui autrefois, aida son mari à acquérir ces biens tant convoités? Faut-il nier aux enfants, pour qui leurs parents se privaient, tout droit de regard sur ce que laisse le défunt? Non plus. (183)

Affiba here throws some light on this disturbing issue of inheritance in Ivoirian society. Ivoirian tradition holds that the wife does not belong to the family of her husband, and as a result of this, she has no rights to the goods of her deceased husband. Iman Ngondo in his "Marriage Law in Sub-Saharan Africa," corroborates this:

[T]he fate of a woman after the death of her partner with respect to remarriage and rights to the husband's property constitutes a vital element of family law. [...] Concerning inheritance, the wife is regarded as having had no other property such as furniture, and buildings are presumed to have belonged to the husband. (124-125)

Yaou's novel thus offers an accurate depiction of laws of succession in Ivory Coast whereby when a woman loses her husband, the deceased's parents may come to claim all of the deceased's properties. At times, nobody seems to care about the wife left behind, but only about the deceased's properties. As Affiba says: "[V]ous n'avez que faire de mes enfants, seul l'héritage vous intéresse? Quelle erreur! Vous n'aurez rien, rien" (53). Affiba's message might be considered rude in the African context, but she audaciously opposes old habits for she is very concerned with transforming the social rights of women.

Mensah's family has a serious concern because Affiba is a modern woman who does not yield to the pressure mounted against her. Affiba's western lifestyle poses a difficult problem to her family-in-law. She does not see herself as the family's wife but only Koffi's. Yaou's creation of a modern heroine in her novel

testifies to the changes taking place in Ivory Coast and portrays the courage of modern women in defying patriarchal authority.

Heroism and Social Transformation

Malimouna and Affiba contribute to a re-definition of Ivoirian culture by opening the doors of their societies to the world in appreciation of other traditions. Their acts show that the improvement of women's status is fundamental to national development. These protagonists successfully re-create themselves, subverting male dominance, insisting on dignity and equality for both sexes. Kéita and Yaou use these heroines to denounce the tyranny against women promoted by the patriarchal cultural system and certain traditional values. The successes of the heroines of their novels suggest the possibilities of redefining societal hierarchies and structures.

Malimouna goes beyond simply breaking the silence, that first step taken by the protagonists of the novels examined in Chapter Four. Moving beyond cultural boundaries, she has not just defied patriarchy but she was beginning to effect real change. Malimouna's actions reveal a positive transformation of the subaltern subject in her march toward freedom. Kéita's novel gives a vivid account of today's modern African woman. Malimouna's struggle is to free her African sisters from oppressive cultural norms: "Lutter pour aider [mes] soeurs" (95). To achieve her dream, she has to embark on a long and difficult journey to become educated and learn to think for herself. When she lives with the Calmard family, she is exposed to writing and reading by children. The education she receives from the Calmard family lays the foundation for what later becomes her career in France and the actualisation of her dream to study Social-studies at the Institut d'Etudes Sociales. Her return to her homeland after her years in France is marked with a sincerity of purpose as she embarks on a life devoted to fighting destructive traditions and winning the support of her African sisters in her crusade. Having willingly abandoned her interracial marriage with Philip, the French director of her institute in France, she returns to her home country

and settles down with Karim, an Ivoirian man whom she loves. This marriage, however, allows the author to expose the ills of polygamy. It offers the author an opportunity to show that African society, although resentful about changes, can be positively transformed. Malimouna is a strong-willed woman whose husband Karim has an inferiority complex. When he realises that his colleagues call him “Mr. Malimouna”, he becomes irrational and opts for taking another wife: “Tu penses que tu as tous les droits [...] Bon et bien moi, j’en ai marre de m’entendre appeler Monsieur Malimouna.” (187-198) An initially loving, understanding and supportive husband thus falls prey to his friends’ mockery and to societal pressure and becomes an intolerable and violent husband. As a staunch advocate of non-violence towards women, Malimouna soon became fed up with Karim’s insecure behavior and acts of violence. She abandons him with these words: “Je ne reviendrai pas à la maison [...] je ne retournerai pas! C’est fini!” (209).

Kéita’s novel is challenging the norms set out by ancestors and passed down from one generation to the other, exposing the customs that make it difficult to attain a free and egalitarian society. After leaving Karim, Malimouna devotes her time to women’s causes and launches a massive campaign against all forms of violence, especially those against women. This campaign rocks the established order as many women turn out to support Malimouna.

In Malimouna, Kéita portrays a new and strong woman who acts like a man in the African context. Thus, she demythologises the superiority of man over woman. Malimouna’s strong personality fetches her the nickname of “femme-garçon” (222) among many people of her society. It is a common practice in African societies to call a woman who does not submit to men’s domination by such a name. Women with such attributes are respected by some in the society whereas others consider them bad women. Gramsci notes that if the subaltern fails to achieve a “permanent victory” in his struggle, he will continue to suffer oppression at the hands of the oppressors. The re-creation of the

subaltern woman as a powerful and assertive woman is essential for her to achieve such a “permanent victory.”

Yaou, the author of *Le prix de la révolte*, is inspired by the Gramscian idea of permanent victory in her work as well. Affiba, her female protagonist, fights a successful war to break the chains of traditions that halt the progress of the African woman. For a woman to fight a successful war against patriarchy in African society, she has to be reborn, rejecting her submissive female identity and putting on the male cloak of authority. Like Malimouna, her comrade in the struggle for the transformation of the society, Affiba is given the attribute of “femme-garçon.” Manza, Affiba’s father, says this in a proud way: “Affiba est tout simplement ce qu’on appelle communément chez nous une “femme-garçon” et ça on n’aime pas beaucoup. Affiba est comme un fils premier-né pour moi” (121). Affiba confronts and combats all the problems her family-in-law gives her after the death of her husband and wins successfully the war she wages to liberate herself permanently.

Both protagonists re-create themselves, and this marks an important step in the ongoing struggle of the subaltern female subject in sub-Saharan African Francophone fiction. The subordinated female subject has moved from being a voiceless victim to breaking her silence and finally to achieving permanent liberation.

At times, disturbing issues can be resolved through dialogue, but when dialogues fail, people resort to rebellious acts. Malimouna first engaged in dialogue to bring the relatives of Sando and the elders to reason. She engaged in heated argument and struggled not only for herself but also for the muted, exploited, and subordinated females in her society. The author retains the reader’s attention with the following conversation between Malimouna and the village’s elders, which reveals the protagonist’s ability to move from words to action:

Le conseil du village: Avant de te marier à ton mari actuel, tu étais d'abord la femme de Sando. Donc, ta famille est ici avant tout.

Malimouna: A l'époque j'étais une enfant! On m'a obligée à me marier et la loi condamne ce genre de pratiques!

Le conseil de village: La loi? Quelle loi? Insolente! Est-ce que le gouvernement ne connaît pas nos coutumes? Jamais personne n'a été puni pour cela! C'est notre vie, c'est nous que ça regarde!

Malimouna: Vous irez tous en prison si vous me touchez! (228)

Kéita uses this heated debate between Malimouna and the village's elders to show the failure of certain African traditional practices. It is the tradition that when a woman is brought to answer charges against her, she is to remain silent throughout the proceedings and simply obey. This is not the case with Malimouna; besides breaking her silence like Ramatoulaye and Emilienne in *Une si longue Lettre* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, she threatens to send the elders to jail if they dare touch her. Typically, whenever the council of elders makes a decision, it is binding because of the power vested in the council as the highest decision-making body in the community. Most of the conflicts in the society are settled by the council of elders. Malimouna is well aware of this practice, but she boldly rejects the decision of the council and criticizes its authority as incompetent and irrelevant.

Malimouna's victory symbolizes victory for Ivorian women in particular, and for African women in general. Malimouna overrides the council of elders' ruling and eventually calls the police, who arrest all the elders. Succinctly, her victory is celebrated thus:

Après avoir pris quelques renseignements auprès de Malimouna, le commissaire décida d'embarquer les deux frères du vieux Sando pour le commissariat le plus proche. Malimouna monta dans la voiture de Laura sous l'oeil vigilant de ses amies, après quoi, celles-ci regagnèrent leur car. Le convoi s'ébranla. Alors, les femmes laissèrent éclater leur joie. Des commentaires ponctués de rires allèrent bon train. (231-232)

Modernity brings awareness that leads people to know their rights and to pursue them vigorously to achieve their dreams. Malimouna asserts her right and knows where to take her struggle to achieve her goal. In modern society, if issues cannot be resolved within the family or by traditional means, they may be resolved in a police station or a court of law. That is why Malimouna carries the matter to the police to seek redress for the situation.

In *Le prix de la révolte*, Yaou, like Kéita, lends her voice to the radical transformation of the African woman. The novel gives a critical account of the tyranny of parents-in-law and the threats parents-in-law often pose in the marital lives of couples in Africa. Such contentious problems were encountered in the works by Bâ and Rawiri as discussed in the previous chapter. However, protagonists of those novels paid a huge price for their rebellion. In contrast, Affiba, the protagonist of *Le prix de la révolte*, successfully wins the battle. Affiba vows to her mother not to acquiesce to traditions that give away her property to a deceased's husband's parents instead of to his wife and her children: "Je n'ai pas l'intention de céder à leurs pressions" (10). Her determination not to give up the fight and to confront the betrayers of the well-being of her children and herself pays off in the end.

Affiba appeals to all women to join hands to fight because she believes women's victory over patriarchy and other forms of oppression can only be achieved if women come together. "Qui donc soutiendrait les femmes dans une lutte pour les femmes, si les femmes elles-mêmes n'étaient plus solidaires les unes les autres?" (14). Yaou is conscious of the fact that sometimes, women themselves play negative roles in the matrimonial life of a couple or enforce ancestral traditions to impede women's struggle toward freedom. For example, Yaou points out how Effoua, Koffi's sister, teams up with her father, Mensah, to verbally attack Affiba in the following terms:

L'école dénature nos filles: elles deviennent effrontées, peu soucieuses des parents, parlent d'égal à égal avec leur mari, se permettant de limiter le nombre de leurs enfants comme si elles en avaient le droit. C'est terrible! (20)

Both men and women who are reluctant to change and adapt to modernity often think that educated women are a threat to the society. This is one of the challenges faced by women seeking broad changes in the society.

For African societies to develop and adapt to the modern world, people need to accept that certain regressive attitudes about women must change.

In Yaou's novel, Effoua's remark does not pass without consequence, for Affiba reacts instantly by slapping her sister-in-law:

La main d'Affiba partit. La belle soeur reçoit quatre gifles magistrales. Lorsque Effoua voulut riposter, Affiba la plaqua contre le mur et lui mit les deux mains sur la gorge (52).

In sub-Saharan African societies, it is considered highly disrespectful for a married woman to dare raise her hand to any member of her husband's family, irrespective of what is done or said to her. The protagonist's mother feels very uncomfortable with her daughter's act and notes: "Affiba nous entraîne dans la boue" (55). Affiba's act is nevertheless necessary if she is to be liberated. Her act translates both her courage and the failure of some abusive traditions. Affiba is confronted by her father-in-law, who is surrounded by almost all the members of his family. Mensah, the patriarch, gracefully thanks his relatives for supporting him and following him to resolve the issue of the inheritance, very dear to all of them:

Mes frères, ma soeur unique, mes enfants, je suis content que vous soyez venus pour m'accompagner sur la tombe de mon fils hier et m'aider à résoudre ce problème d'héritage qui vous touche tous. (16)

Yaou, however, shows her protagonist's courage and zeal to eliminate the culture of inheritance that gives property to the family of a deceased's husband. Affiba engages Mensah in a fierce verbal battle and triumphs. Affiba's victory symbolizes the failure of the pernicious African tradition when it is confronted with modern thinking.

Mensah, un père et chef de famille, un chef de lignage, ridiculisé, baffoué, dans son droit par une petite fille comme Affiba! C'était presque un crime de lèse-majesté à leurs yeux. (15)

Affiba is a modern African woman, ready to give up her life for her liberation and that of her Ivoirian sisters. She is determined to fight to the end and is not deterred by the pressure her parents-in-law are putting on her. The dialogue between Affiba and Gnamkè, her mother, shows Affiba's uncompromising stand and readiness to carry her struggle to the end:

Gnamkè: Pourquoi alors aller demander des comptes à ta belle-soeur?

Affiba: Manza t'a bien raconté l'histoire, non? Tu aurais voulu que je passe sous silence la violence exercée par Effoua sur mon enfant? [...] Qu'est-ce que tu espères, maman? Que je vais baisser les bras et réduire à néant tout ce que j'ai fait jusqu'à présent? J'espère que non?

Gnamkè: Tôt ou tard, il te faudra t'y résoudre ou y laisser ta vie. Tu ne pourras pas triompher de tous ces gens!

Affiba: Alors, j'y laisserai ma vie! (56)

Affiba successfully extinguishes the fire of patriarchy this time when she finally encounters Mensah. She explicitly lectures the old man on his ignorance by telling him that times have changed and that one should live within his times. It is an opportunity for Affiba to express herself frankly and bitterly:

Bien sûr, dit Affiba les yeux flamboyants, nous les femmes, nous serons toujours celles qui travaillent dans l'anonymat et pour rien. Que la femme sue sang et eau pour aider l'homme à réaliser ce qu'il veut, jamais elle n'en sera remerciée comme il se doit. Les femmes de ce pays ont marché sur Bassam pour que leurs maris soient libérés des chaînes du colonisateur, mais combien d'années se sont écoulées avant que d'autres femmes participent à la vie politique du pays en tant que ministres, députés ou maires? (159)

Affiba believes there is a need to remind men that women indeed helped to liberate the African continent. She reminds men to look back and appreciate women's efforts and judge them as partners in progress. Yaou's work shows how much African society is changing. The protagonist's victory represents the freedom of African women. Victory is expressed in tears of joy by Affiba in the following terms: "Oui, je pleure encore. Et alors ne vois-tu pas que c'est parce que je suis heureuse?" (239). Yaou ends her novel with these lines to testify to that victory: "Affiba, enfin libérée, leva les bras vers le ciel étoilé; pour en recevoir un prix, le prix de la révolte qui faillit lui coûter la vie" (239).

Both Yaou and Kéita show the capability of their protagonists to change the world. The permanent victory achieved by Affiba and Malimouna is laudable. When the discourse of persuasion and compromise is tried and fails, Affiba and Malimouna reject negotiation as a tool to realise their dreams. They realize that although the Ivoirian women have always been key actors in the country's struggle for development, they are neglected and besieged by poverty, malnutrition, and illness. They occupy the lowest place in the society. Kéita and Yaou's texts proclaim women as dynamic individuals capable of action. Despite the enormous social problems that Kéita and Yaou's protagonists encounter, they strive to offer a working model for African women. Their protagonists demonstrate that through women's awareness and with the support of fellow women, resistance to subordination can be sustained.

The struggles of African women and the arrival of Francophone African women writers on the African literary scene led to the upsetting of the unilateral portrayal of women in literature. Bâ, Rawiri, Kéita and Yaou propose a realistic assessment of African women who move from passivity and subordination—traits noticeable in a number of earlier African writings—to agency and action. In particular, Kéita and Yaou's works take women beyond the boundaries of confinement and move them as strong women into the modern world. These writers' works could be rightly viewed as displaying the continuous dynamics

taking place among African women socially, culturally, economically and politically on the continent. Their texts can well qualify as narratives of women's struggle for permanent liberation.

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CHAPTER SIX

THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM MUST CONTINUE

Majority of African writers in French inherited the domesticated and subordinated image of African women from their colonial masters and the Négritude poets. Representative works of literature of the last three decades have, however, revealed a lot about changing *representations* of the roles of women (moving from subaltern status to autonomy and agency). There is an emergence of female protagonists in literature who have broken the silence to speak out for themselves and for women's equality and rights. These representations accurately reflect the world that is changing as men and women have struggled and continue to struggle to change women's subordinate roles. These literary representations serve two purposes; not only do they chronicle and reveal what is happening in the world, they also *act upon* the world.

It must be borne in mind that the disadvantaged position in which African women find themselves pushed them to rebel against centuries of patriarchal, cultural, traditional, colonial and religious oppression. These authors have contributed to changing the world by virtue of inventing *heroines* who can serve as models, women who radically challenge patriarchal hegemony and traditional patterns and structures. They have invented stories

that also model changes that they might want to see in their societies. Their challenge to the unquestioning acceptance of traditional prescriptions prepared the ground for their struggle. By breaking women's silence themselves through their writing (in which they evoke female characters who also break their silences)—they are part of a general movement of women who are speaking out—knowing that this is a necessary first step in women taking responsibility for their own lives.

Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* marked a decisive moment in the struggle for women's liberation as her female characters rejected silence and attacked the system that oppressed them. Similarly, Rawiri and Evelyne Ngollé Mpoudi's texts offered a strong critique of male behaviors and sought to re-define certain cultural norms such as the traditional expectation of women's complete obedience. Finally, recent works by Kéita and Yaou demonstrate a more radical approach to the struggle. The protagonists of their novels clearly reject the discourse of persuasion and negotiation, and embark on a mission to completely destroy the patriarchal and cultural structures and institutions that enslave women. These women fight unyieldingly to eradicate male dominance in their societies. In Kéita and Yaou's novels, the African feminism based on compromise that informs the writings of Bâ, Emecheta and Nnaemeka, gives way to a more radical brand of feminism. Their heroines, realising their frustrations in negotiating, decide to opt for a more radical change. Malimouna and Affiba's actions are those of a new generation of African women who set out to transform their societies. The success of their actions reveals that for women to make progress in African societies, they have to work in solidarity with one another, waging a progressive struggle against social backwardness and fighting for women's emancipation. The struggle of African women should be a collective one rather than an individual effort. Educated women should work with uneducated ones so that their fight can have meaningful social impact in terms of changing men's perceptions of women.

In the continuing quest for women's freedom and women's rights to choose, there is also depicted an emergence of a lesbian relationship in *Fureurs et cris de femmes*. This is an entirely new discourse in Africa and in African literature by women. Some of Calixthe Beyala's works also come to mind here. Perhaps, the culture is gradually moving towards greater tolerance towards lesbianism.

One issue that pits African critics against their Western counterparts is that of reductive theorising. African writings, as generally agreed, can best be read within African socio-cultural contexts. Yet, it can be argued that one can also approach these writings productively by also drawing on insights from other colonized lands' theories. The application of subaltern theories drawn from the writings of Subaltern Studies contribute enormously to the analysis of African writings. African nations share an historical past similar to those of other colonised Third World countries. The history of oppression is not a new concept in Africa anymore than it is in other colonised lands. As the history of colonialism links most of the people of the Third World, it is only natural that any study of African literature draws insights from Subaltern Studies. Such theoretical articulations may be capable of transforming societies in order to establish equal rights for men and women. Listening to the voices of the oppressed can immensely help in identifying the problems of subalterns in Africa. In particular, one can use the concept of subalternity to recognise and decode the voices of African women that have been neutralised over the years by the interplay of colonialism, religion and traditions.

In addition, one cannot ignore the impact of Western influence on the African continent with regard to the re-definition of certain African patriarchal mores. The Western influence on African women's texts particularly contributed to the fire-spitting nature of their works, which were able to incinerate centuries of oppression. Worldwide campaigns against the oppression of women and the influence of Western feminism in the writings of

African men and women have both played a major role in questioning some traditional African practices.

African feminists have realised to some extent the contributions of Western feminist ideologies, and have incorporated them into their own thought without entirely rejecting African cultural values. African women writers and critics are today launching successful campaigns against women's oppression. Prominent issues referred to and condemned in their writings include the practice of genital mutilation, forced marriage and masculine attitudes. The struggles of these women writers have contributed largely to openly addressing issues affecting women. Of particular relevance is their literary critique of women's servitude in marriages, sexual arrangements, and domestic and agrarian works.

In contemporary African societies, subaltern women are beginning to realise that they must defeat not only colonialism, but also the patriarchal cultural system that establishes and supports gender subordination. By and large, they succeed in rejecting their subaltern status by becoming women politicians, ministers, directors, lawyers, engineers, university teachers and writers. It is often said that when one educates a man, one educates a family, but when one educates a woman, one educates the whole society. Contemporary African women have contributed socially, politically, economically, culturally and intellectually to the development of the continent. Furthermore, alongside men, they continue to champion the cause for a free and equal society.

Some decades ago, writings by women were generally ignored and one could hardly find a single African female author's name in the critical anthologies. Today, not only do their names abound in anthologies, women's texts are also widely read and appreciated in academic circles. They play a critical role in modern-day academic discourses. Both literary writings and social and political campaigns have had a decisive impact on people's lives and it is fair to say that African women have achieved unprecedented visibility. African women militate against all forms of women's oppression in society. Women in many African nations

are now organised in support of efforts to educate and enlighten women on different issues. Indeed, African women today are among the most audible voices in social, political and economic spheres.

Fighting for the cause of women is no longer women's concern alone. Men have begun to show more interest in women's contributions and also consider them important players in the development of the nation. Some African men are now joining hands with their sisters in fighting male oppression and men and women's efforts to transform the society for the benefit of both sexes and all social classes are significant. Many women realise that it is only by inviting men into the struggle that women may hope to achieve total eradication of the social rites that subordinate them. While the majority of the texts worked upon portrayed men in the role of oppressors, many recent African men's works portray women who are no longer subjected to men. Sony Labou Tansi, for instance, shows the strength of African women in the way he portrays Yealdara in his novel *Lanté-peuple* (1989). Yealdara is one of the ringleaders of the revolution that brought an end to the dictatorial rule in Congo. Similarly, Mongo Beti's *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (1999) and *Branle-bas en noir et blanc* (2000) portray Elizabeth, a central female character, as a strong woman who brings the most influential men in Cameroonian society to their knees.

In a somewhat radical and fanciful gesture, Bolya Baenga's *La polyandre* (1998) gives us a female protagonist, Oulématou, who is in fact portrayed as the oppressor of the men around her by virtue of her cultural heritage. As a princess, the Congolese tradition accords her the right to choose her husbands. Oulématou chooses her husbands by herself and decides who does what and with whom she goes to bed. Baenga gives us another assessment of African women who use the power of polyandry to supercede the patriarchy that once subordinated women.

A great deal of literary criticism in Africa today accords importance to women writers. Abibatou Traore and Nathalie Etoke belong to a new generation of African women writers

born in the 1970s and who continue the struggle for women's freedom.

Without doubt, globalisation and resulting changes at the grassroots level will lead Africa to a new understanding of how certain practices in African societies impede women's progress, emancipation, and the realisation of their dreams and potential.

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PORTRAYALS AND GENDER PALAVER IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN WRITINGS

In this fascinating scholarly piece, the author reveals a lot about the changing representations of the roles of women, moving from subaltern status to autonomy. The book depicts, in very lucid terms, the contributions of Western feminist ideologies incorporated into African thought without entirely rejecting African values. In contemporary African societies, women are beginning to realise that they must defeat not only colonialism/Neo-colonialism, but also the patriarchal and cultural ethos that establish and support gender subordination.

A number of African women writers, including Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, Mariama Bâ, Angèle Rawiri, Calixthe Beyala, Fatou Kéïta, Régina Yaou, treated in this book, show the capabilities of their protagonists, who move from docility, a trait noticeable in earlier African writings, to action.

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