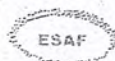


# WOMEN NOVELISTS IN FRANCOPHONE

— VIEWS, REVIEWS AND INTERVIEWS

Edited by:  
Eunice E. Omonzeije



EDITIONS SONOU D'AFRIQUE (ESAF)  
Porto- Novo, République du Bénin

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# 4

## MOTHERHOOD AND FAMILY POLITICS IN THE NOVELS OF ANGÈLE RAWIRI AND MARIAMA BÂ

Ramonu SANUSI

*"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".*

Julianah Nfah-Abbenyi (1997)

### Introduction

African women's arrival on the African literary scene (francophone divide) brought about a positive transformation of the subaltern female subject in fiction. Previously silenced in the majority of African texts, the African female subject finally finds a voice and rejects her mute status. She emerges from the shadows to defy patriarchy by breaking her silence and by taking active control of her own condition. 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. Bâ and Rawiri present a new worldview of women and educate readers about the changes occurring in the position of women.

In her short novel *Une si longue lettre*, Bâ presents Ramatoulaye, the main character who reviews the story of her life and that of her friend Aïssatou. Rawiri in her more voluminous writing *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, presents

Emilienne's ordeals in her matrimonial house. The protagonists of these two novels have many things in common: they are products of Western education; they are victims of cultural practices that impede women's emancipation and they have been deceived by their husbands. Both women though, dream of effecting changes in the societies in which they live through the application of Western education they received.

### Motherhood

Some Western feminist critics advocate the rejection of motherhood as a societal role that oppresses and exhausts women. In some African societies, 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 attempt to cure her sterility. 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.* (89)

*You must know that you will never be a complete woman unless you have children that you raise and that your entourage sees growing up.* (My translation)

The absence of children in marriage can have a negative effect on the peaceful coexistence of the couple. Filomina Steady observes that:

*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, recognizes 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 children. In a majority of traditional African societies, having numerous

children is considered synonymous with wealth because children's labor boosts the economic capability and status of the family. This assumption, however, needs to be reexamined 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 evidenced 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). [This woman has become useless] 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 valorization 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). [*Is it my sterility that chases him? Why can't*



....Mariama.Bâ

*he love me without children?]* 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 it is

beyond doubt that the woman is 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 her children with whom she decided to stay 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)*

*Instead of you having children like other women, you spend your time raising dogs and cats [...] It is better you spend all that money to cure your sick stomach. There are medical doctors for abnormal women like you, in case you don't know. (My translation)*

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 and Politics

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 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 "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) [I am married to a man and not to his family] 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 and 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 si longue lettre*, *Un chant écarlate* 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:



Angèle Rawiri

*“Que des femmes oeuvrent si activement contre l'intérêt d'autres femmes est assurément une question fondamentale que Mariama Bâ pose dans son roman” (312). [That women work against the interest of their colleagues is Mariama Bâ's concern in her novel].*

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 Ngolle 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. [...] 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)*

*Mina, in the near future, I would like you to watch your words while talking about Hadja. She did not give birth to me but it is the same. [...] Without her, I won't be here and you won't have Djibril as your husband, therefore, please watch your words while you are talking about her. (My translation)*

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) [What has my closeness to my family-in-law fetched me?]*

The Nigerian feminist writer Molara Ogundipe-Leslie 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-Leslie 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 fathers-in-law confirm her proper behavior: "Tu nous a vénérés. Tu sais que nous sommes le sang de Modou" (*Lettre* 57). [*You worshiped us. You know that Modou is our blood relation.*] In *Fureurs*, Joseph, in 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). [*You finally succumbed to my way of life. You have some qualities that I never found in any other woman. For instance, the way you raise my nephews.*]

Bâ and Rawiri in addition to denouncing certain masculine behaviors in their novels, also examine critically the roles of the extended family in a couple's life, revealing comportment that contributes to victimizing the wife. 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, molded in the traditional way, will be more tractable and that 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). [*I am getting old. I will turn this girl into another me.*] 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. 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 Nègresse connaît et accepte les droits de la belle-mère*" (110-111). [*A black woman knows and accepts the rights of the mother-in-law*] 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). [*I want your brother to marry his present mistress whom I know very well*] She does not hide her rejection of Emilienne: "*Tu n'épousera pas une fille de cette ethnie tant que je vivrai*" (14). [*You will never marry a woman of this ethnic group while I am alive*] Family relations, and especially mothers-in-law, clearly cause trouble for African wives.

In most sub-Saharan African societies, if women have 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 pretense 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.

Most African mothers-in-law live ignorantly in the dream that everything in the matrimonial houses of their sons belongs to those sons. This is how things used to be 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*" (34). [*My sisters-in-law very limited in their thinking, envied my comfort*] 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 sympathize 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.*" (60) [*Mum, abandon this man! He did*

not respect either of us] Similarly, Daba condemns the role played by Dame Belle-mère: "*Pendant cinq ans, tu as privé une mère et ses douze enfants de leur soutien*" (103). [*For five years, you denied support to a mother and her twelve children*]

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 her to understand the responsibilities of wives toward their husband's relatives in Africa.

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, comes to try 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 Aissatou, one also appreciates the support given to Emilienne by Antoinette and Eva and to Mireille by Rosaline.

### **Conclusion**

By addressing questions of motherhood and family ties and politics 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 by influencing it through writing. Their goal is to attempt to eradicate some of the most intractable sub-Saharan African customs and attitudes that subordinate women.



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