

AMINATA SOW FALL: THE AUTHOR, HER BACKGROUND AND HER LITERARY WORKS. A WOMANIST APPRAISAL.

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ABSTRACT

Aminata Sow Fall is a muslim Senegalese female novelist. Though a woman writer, her role model is Sembene Ousmane. Hence, if Sembene Ousmane is a post independence writer; on too is Aminata Sow Fall. If Sembene Ousmane is a Marxist realist and engage novelist, so too is Aminata Sow Fall. However, Aminata Sow Fall views the literary world of traditional, colonial and post-colonial African society, and believes that the ills of the post-colonial era could be corrected if Africa goes back to her roots and rediscovers those rare African cultural values. In carrying out her literary vision, Aminata Sow Fall spares nobody; male or female. She eulogizes the gem that is in the African cultural values and morals and satirizes the excesses that are being entrenched in the social fabric of the society.

INTRODUCTION

What one says about oneself is the most certain representation of the person in question. Briefly put, Aminata Sow Fall says that she is Wolof by tribe, and a Muslim by religion. Born at St. Louis in the Northern part of Senegal, she attended Primary and Secondary schools and later studied modern languages. (Pfaff:1985). When asked about her literary leaning, Sow Fall stated that "*she supports programmes aimed at the emancipation of women, but she has no political commitment in the sense that she is not an activist of any political party*" When she was accused of promoting outdated values, she replied that "*she is not a feminist in the general sense of the word. She is not a militant feminist and the 1975 Women's Conference had nothing to do with her starting to write. Writing is a form of witnessing, a way of filtering the social reality of the moment*". Samba Gadjigo (1996:28)

THE AUTHOR

Biography: Born is 1945 at Saint – Louis, Senegal, Sow Fall hails from a family that was not only influential in Saint Louis, but was also wealthy Sow Fall was privileged to have started schooling early in her life. After her primary education, she did her secondary education partly at Faidherbe and Van Vo. Her initial plan had been to train as an interpreter. In view of this, she proceeded to France where she got her first degree in

modern languages. She got married in 1963 and got back to Senegal where she took up a teaching job at the secondary school.

Aminata Sow Fall became a member of the National Commission of the Reform of French Education in Senegal. Later she was the Founder of the Koudia Publishing House, a subsidiary of the African Centre for Animation and Exchange of Writers' Liberties (BADLE) at Saint Louis. She has been honored by many tertiary institutions with honorary doctorate degrees.

Her social criticism and her womanism have been greatly influenced by her family background, family upbringing and her society as we could read in Kestlout Lilyan (2001:270):

Après les grandes, espérances de la négritude, romanciers... tant Anglophones que francophones avaient certes rapidement dénoncé les dérives des politiciens autochtones, les ridicules et la contradiction de la nouvelle bourgeoisie, les déceptions et difficultés des masses populaires dont la situation empirait. Mais il y restait toujours l'espoir. Saint Monsieur Baly de Williams Sassine, Xala de Sembène Ousmane ou la Grève des Battu d'Aminata Sow Fall, Le Pleurer-Rire, d'Henri Lopes, débauchaient sur une issue positive, après des situations d'affrontement.

After the great hopes of the Negritude, both Anglophone and francophone novelists were very quick in denouncing the drift of the local politicians. They frowned at the ridicules and contradictions of the new bourgeoisie, and the deception of the masses of the people whose conditions were getting worse. But there were always rays of hope. William sassine's saint monsieur Baly, Sembene Ousmane's Xala, or the Beggar's strike of Aminata Sow Fall and Le pleurer- Rire of Henri Lopes began on a positive note, after the era of confrontation.

Keesteloot goes further to state that Aminata Sow Fall took her impartial stand in Feminism because of her personal experiences as a woman. She came from a wealthy family and she did almost more studies nationally and internationally than her brothers. She was privileged to have an understanding, humorous and monogamous husband. In other words, she did not have the experience of sexism both within and outside her family:

Née dans une famille aisée de saint Louis, ayant pu faire des études autant ou plus que ses frères, épouse heureuse d'un home plein d'humour, sans complexe et monogame, mères de plusieurs enfants, enseignante, puis responsable d'un service culturel; enfin fondatrice de sa propre maison d'Édition, Aminata Sow Fall n'a pas de contentieux avec une tradition aux contraintes de laquelle elle a pu échapper sans même devoir la combattre. Ce n'est pas un cas unique au Sénégal ou souvent les intellectuelles d'aujourd'hui ont eu des pères médecins, avocats ou fonctionnaires.

Peut-on attendre d'elle, l'agressivité existentielle des femmes qui ont vu leurs mères ou leurs sœurs broyées par le système? (p.288)

AMINATA SOW FALL'S SENEGALESE BACKGROUND

Aminata Sow Fall is a female Senegalese writer. For us to appreciate and appraise her and her works, we must first take a look into Senegal. The Republic of Senegal has a 'land mass of 75,750 sq. miles (196 700 sq. km). The country has a population of 7,953,000 inhabitants. With capital at Dakar, Senegal has French as its official language. There are five major ethnic nationalities who speak different languages and dialects: Wolof 44%, Tukolor 21% Serer 16%, Malinke 3%. There are however other minority groups that constitute 10% of the population. 92% of the populations are Sunni Muslims while Christians (2%) and indigenous group 6% share the remaining population. The Senegalese state which is the setting of our six novels has 38% literacy rate with 80 in 1000 infant mortality rate.

Senegal is a typical example of an African nation where women are torn between Islamic, Christian and African Traditional Religious Cultures. The meeting point of the three cultures as far as we are concerned is their sexism and patriarchy. Sexism is a practice where men assume superiority over women, while patriarchy is a system of linear descent through the male parent.

Senegal, with an intimidating 92% of the population being Muslims is surely home to religious mysticism and superstition. These beliefs reduce *women's condition* to mere domesticity. Women could only be formed and oriented towards such roles and responsibilities as mothers, house wives, mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, sisters-in-law cooks and nurses. The symbol of this *female condition* in Muslim Societies like Senegal is the Purdah. According to Badawi Gamal in "Women in Islam" in Ahmad, Khurshid (ed). *IslamL: Its Meaning and Message*. (1976):

A people will not prosper if they let a woman be their Head of State. The demanding position or any similar one, such as the commander of the Army, is generally inconsistent with the physiological and psychological make-up of women in general⁵ p. 131 – 145.

Everything about the European and Arabian incursion unto Senegal was not negative as far as women are concerned. The advent of the French Assimilation policy gave room for a number of Senegalese women amongst whom was Sow Fall to embrace Western Civilization and Education. In the words of Aduke Adebayo in *Critical Essays on the novel in Francophone Africa*, Vol. I (1995):

Senegal has also had a long history of contact with the French culture through the colonial system of assimilation which was put in force at the end of the nineteenth century. The Assimilationist policy was aimed at creating "black French men" in Senegal and making the country itself the appellation of Paris of Africa". Our writer(s) of predilection, late Mariama Ba and Aminata Sow Fall are of the first group of educated Senegalese

women of the Islamic faith and are thus very representative of the current yearnings of the modern Senegalese women. (p. 102)

This crop of educated Senegalese Muslim women writers used their writings to stand in solidarity, not only with the oppressed women population, but with the totality of the suffering masses whose high hopes and expectations after the Negritude and independence era were dashed to the ground. Sow Fall was indeed at the fire-front of women novelists who used their work to satirize both the non-womanists and the “enemies” of the ideals of the Negritude.

AMINATA SOW FALL’S LITERARY WORKS

Guided by her Islamic world-view, Aminata Sow Fall is first of all a social critic of the post-independence era. She spares no one, male or females. She has a good command and mastery of her contexts. Her novels are reflections of her role as a critical realist. She exploits the use of satire and characterization to highlight human efforts and weakness; the good side and the ugly side of the society. In this regard Emmanuel Obiedina (2000:265) notes that:

The imperfections of human nature are mirrored in the imperfections of society. That is why it is difficult to write a satisfactory novel glorifying a social system or idealizing characters.

Following this trend of thought, the publisher’s commentary on Aminata Sow Fall (1982) recognizes her as a born-novelist who does not “whisper confidential issues but creates a fictive world based on lived experiences of her milieu”:

Aminata Sow Fall est nue romancière née. Elle a le sens des situations et de la mise en scène. Elle ne chuchote pas des confidences personnelles mais construit un monde, représentatif à partir éléments du vécu de son milieu... (Ces) roman(s) suggèrent invinciblement les matériaux d’une vaste “Comédie humaine” ou nous voyons peu à peu s’élaborer le portrait du Sénégal de cette fin du siècle. Publisher’s Commentary, Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, Dakar, 1982.

SOW FALL’S COMMITMENT TO SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

Her level of social commitment and solidarity with the suffering masses qualifies her as a disciple of Sembène Ousmane whom she takes as her role model. Sembene Ousmane is an engagé novelist with Marxist leaning. In his works, he shares the same militant postures with Aimé Césaire. The engagé writer sees herself as the mouth piece of the under trodden masses. In this way she places her literary work at the service of the cause or the ideologies that she represents. In this way she places her literary work at the service of the cause or the ideologies that she represents. In her novels: *Le revenant* and *l’Appel des arènes*, women were her primary target for her trenchant, acerbic and vitriolic satires and criticism.

Salla Niang and the beggars fight to be liberated from the socio-political injustice of the government in *La Grève des Battu* (1979). Nalla struggles to be free from the cultural

oppression of his mother, Diattou in *L'appel des arènes* (1982). Naarou in *Le Jujubier du Patriarche*, (1993) carries the burden of slavery imposed on her lineage by the descendants of Almamy Badar. Asta Diop suffers racism in her quest for greener pastures in France in *Douceurs du Bercaïl* (1998).

In all the above instances of oppression and injustice, Aminata Sow Fall stands in solidarity with the oppressed group. Sow fall empowered her characters to become the ultimate winners in their struggles and by so doing shows her disillusion and disenchantment with the oppressive class. Aminata Sow Fall's militancy and Marxism are so remarkable that most feminist critics like Lilyan Keesteloot (1986: 287 - 288) have denied her a place in feminist canons:

Une écrivaine connue et féconde comme Aminata Sow Fall n'est même pas féministe du tout! Ses romans de critique sociale (*le Revenant*, *La Grève des Battu*, *L'Appel des arènes*, *Le Jujubier du patriarche*, les *douceurs du bercaïl*) n'épargnent personne. Sont même ses cibles cette impartialité peut sembler suspecte et certain n'ont pas manqué de la considérer comme 'rétrograde'.

AMINATA SOW FALL'S NOVELS

Le revenant (Dakar: les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1976)

Published in 1976, the themes and trenchant satire of Aminata Sow Fall in *Le Revenant* are still relevant in our present African Society. *Le Revenant*, according to the dictionary has two understandings: the arrival of someone who has been absent for a very long time; the spirit or ghost of the deceased from the great beyond. (Apparitions). (*Le Petit Robert*., 1982). The second definition of the word *revenant* is more applicable in our context.

Bakar, the protagonist was initially naïf and allowed her sister Yama who was materialist to upstage him. Her vainglorious sister represented the average Senegalese who allowed vanity, namely the desire to compete or surpass another in the acquisition and show of wealth, to rule ones life. Yama's presents and gifts to the new born baby and her donation to Malobe, the praise-singer were instances of extravagance. (pp. 41 and 43). Such show of extravagance and vainglory was very obvious in the attire of women to ceremonies (p. 120). It was not enough that people were vainglorious; one could note that the means to the acquisition of wealth was morally deplorable (p. 44).

The hero of the novel Bakar came to his senses after his period of incarceration. Aminata Sow Fall using the interior monologue device exposes the flow of Bakar's thoughts as he re-discovered himself after his imprisonment and plans his revenge on his sister in particular and the society in general (p.128). Aminata Sow Fall studies a society that has abandoned the traditional African values of nobility, integrity and solidarity; and has gone ahead in an inordinate pursuit of ostentation and vainglory. Samba Gadjigo rightly notes:

Ce roman, qui n'est pas sans rappeler *Le Tartuffe* de Molière, présente au lecteur un monde qui, sous l'influence de l'économie de marche, sombre dans la cupidité, l'hypocrisie, les mensonges et les émotions feintes.

Sow Fall's novel *Le Revenant* has been referred to as a human comedy.

***La Grève des Battu* (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africains, 1979)**

So far, *La Grève des Battu*, Sow Fall's second novel is the only one that has been translated into English with the title *The Beggars' Strike* by Dorothy S. Blair and published by Longman in 198. *La Grève des Battu* has won the grand prix Award of black African literature. The principal character is Mour Ndiaye, the Director of the Environmental Sanitation. Mour Ndiaye sees it as his duty to keep the city clean. However the presence of crowds of beggars, for him constitutes a great obstacle to the realization of his goals. So the reader of the novel faces an immediate confrontation between an ambitious official of the government and a section of those at the margin of the society. Keba Dabo, Mour Ndiaye's deputy dutifully takes the orders of his boss to clear the beggars from the city. The beggars, under the leadership of Salla Niang stand their ground as they meet regularly at the house of Salla Niang.

However in Muslim societies, people are exhorted to donate to the beggars. Unfortunately the impasse between Mour Ndiaye and the beggars made it impossible for people to carry out the above Islamic injunction. Mour who gets promoted for his good services as chevalier de l'ordre des meritants, justifies the saying that human needs are insatiable' by targeting the post of the vice-president. This ambition pushes him into all sorts of superstitious practices like the consultation of marabouts. His search for personal grandeur and his wife's quest to become wife of the president at the detriment of the marginalized, make them to follow the prescriptions of one of the marabouts by name Kifi Bokoul. Part of the keys to his success is the distribution of meat to the beggars. The beggars however have been evacuated from the city, and in anger they refused to partake of his largesse.

Sow fall's novel, *The Beggars' Strike*, is a post-colonial francophone novel with all its characteristics. The novel dwells on the social condition question of a populace that is experiencing dehumanization and disillusion in the hands of a crop of politicians who have taken over power from the colonialists. Aliom Fantouré, *Le Cercle des tropiques* and Sembène Ousmane's *Le dernière de l'empire* fall within this sphere. Though geographically anonymous, instances drawn from the predominant religion-Islam, the local words and items of clothing show that Senegal is the country in question as far as *La Grève des Battu* is concerned.

The themes of beggary, corruption and mal-administration coupled with the problem of alienation are very conspicuous in the novel. Sow fall presents to the reader a society that is torn apart by her double allegiance to the foreign model of development and her cultural heritage. Samba Gadjigo (1996: 27) underscores this point when she notes:

Aminata Sow Fall explore à un niveau plus profond la duplicité d'une société prise entre les exigences d'un modèle de développement imposé é de l'extérieur et les contraintes de son héritage culturel.

Nevertheless Sow Fall does not lose sight of stressing the woman consciousness and the female condition within the novel as one reads of such courageous female leaders as Nalla Niang in whose house the beggars pitched their tent.

L'appel des Arènes (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1982)

This novel builds its plot around the family of Ndiogou Bari (father of the house), Diattou Bari (mother of the house), Nalla (the only son of the family) and his tutor Niang in *L'appel des Arènes*, Aminata Sow Fall's third novel explores the conflict between the parents, Ndiogou and Diattou and their son, Nalla as a result of the system of education imparted on the child which does not take into consideration the cultural values of the pupil. Nalla was brought up by his grand mother Mame Fari in the typical traditional African setting while his parents were abroad doing their studies. On arrival home from Europe, the parents of Nalla got so immersed in the civilization of Europe that they almost lost all their African cultural roots. Ndiogou and Diattou tried at the same time to impart the European system of education and culture on their son Nalla. They tried to distance Nalla from his people, in the belief that they were local, unkempt, and illiterate people. The more they forced this foreign ideology on Nalla, the more Nalla revolted. Beverly and Volet (1994: 135) note in this regard that:

Nalla dépérit mais retrouve une raison de vivre lorsqu'il découvre petit à petit le monde d'où ses parents avaient tenté de l'exclure ... l'univers de la lute lui donne l'occasion de renouer avec la tradition ...

Nalla's rejection of the mother and preference for the grand mother symbolize the boy's rejection of the European cultural values in preference for the African tradition values (p.82). Diattou's rigidity in fencing-off friends and relations including her own mother from her home and from her son runs contrary to the ideals of Womanist's freedom of choice and that of the Fundamental Human Rights. Her arrogance, rigidity and burden of alienation broke her down. Diattou cannot therefore be regarded as a heroic female character.

L'ex-père de la Nation (Paris: L'harmattan, 1987)

L'ex-père is a typical post independent novel. It is a novel that has as its hero Madiama. Madiama was raised by a fisherman father, and a mother, who was a perfect mother, farmer and house-wife. After the death of Madiama's father, his mother struggled to make his husband's vision for Madiama to come through. Madiama's father had wished that he should become a doctor. Later Madiama took to trade unionism and got into politics. With an overwhelming majority he won the election as the president of his country.

Once on the throne, all his good manifestoes came crashing. He became a despot, ruling a beggar and bankrupt nation. Even where he had good intentions to do things better, his lieutenants were more interested in lining their own pockets than in the interest of the suffering masses. He was surrounded by people who flattered him leaving him with symbolic power while they themselves were the real powerful and corrupt leaders. The

novel could be divided into three parts: the rise of Madiama, the zenith of his reign and his fall. In these three parts, one could see the efforts of Sow Fall in laying bare the tragedy of the African political life, the incompetence of the political class who were mere stooges in the hands of the former colonial masters.

***Le Jjubier du Patriarche*, (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1993)**

While bemoaning the tragedies of the glorious past of Africa, Sow Fall points to a new direction in *Le Jjubier du Patriarche*. In this novel she believes that the dawn of a new era rooted in the heritage of an epic traditional Africa is at the corner. The plot of *Le Jjubier* centres around the family of Yelli and Tacko and their royal, noble and legendary hereditary. These great ancestors are Yellimane, the hero of Natangué, Gueladio, the great hunter, Sarebibi l'Amamy, the son of Almamy Badar the Patriarch and Dioumana, the great adventurer. Warèle was placed under the tutelage and maternal care of Thioro, the mother of Almamy Sarebibi. In this way her descendants became the slaves in what later developed as the caste system of the free born and the slaves. Such a rich ancestry made Yelli to disobey his father by refusing to study medicine in preference for history.

The novel opens with the altercation between Yelli and his wife Tacko. Tacko has become a nagging house-wife now that Yelli is not only retired but has got to vacate his posh villa for a low quality residence. He needed to get enough income to take care of his numerous children, who have been abandoned by his numerous ex-wives and concubines. Yelli had these women when he was wealthy. Among those who took to their heels when Yelli became bankrupt were the beneficiaries and the praise-singers; though with the exception of Naani the praise-singer. Penda and her daughter Naarou also did not desert Yelli. Penda was a slave girl to Yelli's mother while Naarou was equally a slave girl to Tacko.

Bouri, of all the children of Yelli and Tacko was given special mention because of her turbulent history of stubbornness and disobedience. Her failed marriage with Goudi on account of sterility was later restored and she later got a baby to the delight of her parents. The pains of failing health, the quarrels and enmity in and around Yelli and Tacko's family got some healing with the great preparations for the pilgrimage to the ancient village of Baby selli in search of the rejuvenated stock of the miraculous tree on the tomb of the Patriarch (p.85,91). In *Le Jjubier du Patriarche*, the author exposes the wealth of African poetry and orality and uses both to highlight the depth and the nostalgia of the past African aristocracy. She burns with the zeal of Africa's national and cultural revival.

***Douceurs du Bercaïl*, (Abidjan, Nouvelles Editions Ivoiriennes, 1998)**

Douceurs du Bercaïl means the joys and sweet nostalgia for the motherland. Asta Diop was the heroine of the novel. She was forty-five years old divorcee and a mother of three children: two daughters; Miriam, and Sira; and one son. At the instance of her company,

she was seconded to do a press coverage in France. On arrival at the airport, everything turned sour.

Both the immigrations and the police were very hostile to her and to other Africans who alighted from the plane. After searching them in a very humiliating and abusive manner, they were all locked up in a detention cell at the airport. They were later deported after a long period of mental trauma and physical torture. Once back they were paraded before the press as illegal aliens. Asta's experience made her to renew her life in a total and more definitive manner. She updates herself academically, gets herself back to job and ties the nuptial knot with another man. In this way she renews her life and got herself reintegrated into the society. Her case becomes an example to those who think that Europe is paradise. She proves that Europe is after all not a paradise. Sow Fall criticizes those who are prepared to lose their African roots in preference for Europe. This is what she does through the character of Asta Diop and her compatriots.

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CONCLUSION

The African novel has three worlds and eras namely the traditional, the colonial and the post-independence. Sow Fall tends to operate within the traditional and the post-colonial spheres. The problems and the glories associated with these eras could be studied from a feminist point of view. The literary exercise of "the lost golden age" we observe in Sow Fall is contradicted by "the sinister and miserable past" in Flora Nwapa, Bushi Emecheata and Mariama Ba. So far, Aminata Sow Fall has no answer to the confrontation between Africanness and femininity which is engulfing her daughters. Never the less her realist and peculiar portrayal of the uncomfortable conditions of women in a patriarchal and post colonial society help to create more awareness of the unjust status quo and the need for reform.

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