

EMERGENT WOMEN'S WRITING IN AFRICA: The Case of Aminata Sow Fall

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Aminata Sow Fall is, without any doubt, one of Africa's best known female writers in French. As a public servant, a mother of a large family and a creative writer, she is an admirable observer of the social, cultural and political landscape of Senegal, her country and source of literary inspiration.

This paper looks at some of Aminata Sow Fall's works in the light of her statements on literature and the role of the writer in African society. Asked how she manages to combine so successfully the demands of her various responsibilities and position, as wife, mother, public servant and writer, she replied: "I organize my work and my time. I do not dissipate my energies and my time. I do not have to be at all social gatherings, all parties and all receptions unless I am obliged to be there. I manage to play my role in each capacity².

Before she opted for the novel, Aminata Sow Fall had tried her hand at both poetry and drama. Although none of the projects of those early literary beginnings materialized into published work, they remain good pointers to the making of a great creative and productive literary mind.

The eventual choice of the novel as a medium for her literary expression was dictated, as she said, by the realization that the novel is a most appropriate genre for raising and dealing with social issues as well as for redirecting the focus and preoccupations of African literature. According to her, "...there are many social issues which one must talk about. And I think that the novel is the best medium for articulating those problems. That is why I chose the novel"³. In the same vein, she considers a redirection of attention as a necessary condition for a relevant and meaningful African literature in contemporary Africa. African writers of the preceding generation, she says, were entirely preoccupied with the business of rebuilding and restoring the image of the black man, which had been vilified and degraded, by slavery, colonialism and of course colonial literature. That is why, before independence, African literature appeared to be militant, on account of its preoccupation with racial issues and the need to assert the dignity of the black people and, in cases, to expose the moral torpidity, the lies and the crimes of the colonizing powers in Africa. As a teacher of literature in Senegalese schools, she became keenly aware of the fact that many of the old themes of African literature were no longer particularly meaningful to the new generation of post-independence African readers. "I asked myself, she said, whether at a certain point it would not be necessary to seek other roles for African literature which would not necessarily be a negation of the validity of the previous orientation of African literature"⁴. In answer to her searching question, Aminata Sow Fall came to the conclusion that it was time for African literature to abandon some of its old preoccupations with racial and

colonial issues in order to focus attention on more current issues of interest such as portraying and interpreting the people's way of life, their values and world view. Such literature, for her, should be a mirror of the cultural soul of the people, as well as a means of dealing with the various problems of our changing society. "Le rôle de l'écrivain est d'être l'homme de sa société et de son temps"⁵, she says. That social role may well explain why, according to Regin Lambrech, Aminata Sow Fall is one of the few female African writers who did not begin her writing career with an autobiography⁶. Her conviction that the writer should deal with the socio-cultural issues of his time and society, no doubt, dictates her choice of subjects and themes in her creative writings. She sees herself, therefore, as a socially committed writer, that is to say, a writer who is concerned with the problems of her society and her time and who tries to deal with them through the medium of literature. She admits, however, that it would be presumptuous of her to think that she could provide all the solutions to the problems she raises in her works. What I do, she says, is to try to draw attention to situations and practices which are detrimental to society in order to make the reader conscious of the possible conflicts and contradictions which they engender⁷. By so doing, she hopes to force the reader to reflect, even against his will, on the situation and their possible solutions.

Aminata Sow Fall, as a writer, assigns eminently social roles to African literature today. "The writer, she says, is the best defender and protector of the cultural identity of his society. He has, therefore, social as well as moral responsibilities because in Africa today, there are social and moral problems arising from conflicting and confusing foreign influences. The African writer should help to identify and define the ideals which should determine and govern African societal responses in the face of those foreign and oftentimes harmful influences. Literature must, therefore, become part of our national preoccupations"⁸ In this regard, Aminata Sow Fall considers literature to be as important to the moral life of a nation as food and air to the physical well being of the individual. "La littérature est aussi importante que le pain et l'oxygène"⁹, she says.

Although Aminata Sow Fall's novels are inspired by Senegalese social experiences, they are not intended for Senegalese or indeed, Africans alone. They do have a certain universal appeal and relevance. According to her, African writers should try to make African literature appreciated and enjoyed by people of other cultures. "We Africans appreciate and enjoy other literatures, be they French, Japanese or American. Through their literature, we enter into communion with those people; we try to understand their motivations, their society, their ways of life and their behaviour. Literature, for me, is the expression of the soul of a people; it reveals the life of a people. I think that if we wish to express ourselves through our literature, we can, at the same time, make ourselves, understood by others and obtain in return from them that same effort at understanding which we make to understand them through their literature. In that way, we can open up our soul to others as others open up their soul through their literature.

Aminata Sow Fall, as a woman and as a writer, is deeply interested in the social condition of women in Senegal and, indeed, in Africa. Her views on the condition and status of women in Africa are, however, far from the conventional views, especially in the West, that women in Africa are dominated and enslaved by male tyranny. As Aminata Sow Fall sees it, "Tradition does not keep the African woman in a situation of subservience. Of course, the position of women everywhere is below that of men. It is for the African woman to work hard to improve her social situation. This, she cannot do by copying the Western woman or by shouting slogans. The African woman has her traditional style of exerting influence discreetly. As Hampaté Bâ used to say, when a man says that he will 'listen to his ear' before taking an important decision, it is his way of saying that he will consult his wife. Therefore, generally, in Africa, behind every important decision taken by a man, there is the opinion of a woman. The African woman has, therefore, this style of indirect action to influence decisions discreetly and not to shout slogans. Women in Africa do, of course, have their problems, just like women elsewhere in the world. However, the problems of the African women cannot be solved in the same way as, for example, the problems of women in Europe. This is because there are different ways of looking at issues and problems in different cultures; there are different ways of reacting, according to different cultures, even to similar problems. In Europe, for instance, women adopt a militant stance; for them it is a struggle, a confrontation with the men. In Africa one must look for a different approach, an approach which is in consonance with the values and ideals of the people, their habits and general world view. One must, of course, insist on and demand the respect that is due to women; but one does not have to do it the European way¹⁰. Aminata Sow Fall's view on the situation of women in traditional African societies are neither an isolated individual opinion nor are they indeed new. Numerous African women intellectuals, scholars and writers, have risen to challenge and to correct the hitherto generally held view, especially in the West, that the traditional African society in general held women in a situation of utter subjugation, without a voice even in the home. Challenging such falsified assumptions, Professor Kamene Okonjo wrote "The African woman has not been inactive, irrelevant and silent. Rather African tradition has seen the wisdom of a healthy social organization where all its citizens are seen to be vital channels for a healthy and harmonious society. Hence the establishment of a dual-sex peer structure which is lacking in European and Arab cultures"¹¹.

In her book, *The African Women: Nigerian Perspectives*, (pp. 15-16). Professor Oriaku Nwosu, another distinguished African woman intellectual, reacting to the whole concept of *Women Liberation and Women Emancipation* as it applies to Africa, states that "some of the basic notions fundamental to such slogans as women emancipation and women liberation are ideological constructs that are not African in origin". She sees the so-called feminist movement as not only western-orientated but divisive as well as pitting women against men rather than fostering a culture of cooperation between the two sexes. This, she says, is not an African-derived solution to the problems confronting modern

African women. Oriaku Nwosu describes the whole idea of the domination and enslavement of women in traditional Africa as “distorted and biased information from uninformed, unscholarly, mythically-based falsehood with no bearing on properly researched, documented and historically-based findings”.

African women intellectuals and writer like Aminata Sow Fall are now engaged in restoring the authentic image of the African womanhood. Aminata Sow Fall sees education as the most effective means of raising the social status of women in Africa. This, she says, is because education enables people generally to acquire greater understanding and appreciation of their environment and society as well as of issues and problems. In a particular way, education enables women to have a higher sense of self worth and self-appreciation. It brings about in them a change of mentality and attitude such that the educated woman sees herself in a different light, no longer as an inferior to a man or as a dependent to be provided for by a man in exchange for her submission to his will. Education also liberates the mind; it brings the woman to the awareness that she has the same rights of citizenship as her male counterpart. It is this liberation of the mind, according to Aminata Sow Fall, which will make it possible for more African women to take to writing. As she sees it, the career of the writer is a daring one; and by her traditional upbringing, the African woman is not brought up to be daring; hence relatively few African women have become writers in spite of their abundance of talent and creativity.

As a writer, Aminata Sow Fall captures and depicts the malaise, the conflicts and the contradictions of the Senegalese society, a society in the process of change, a society in which modernity confronts tradition and new values challenge old habits. A somewhat amused and detached observer of the forces at play, the novelist portrays the new urban elite caught in the transition from the old order to the new, its egoism, small jealousies and ambitious, its vulgar exhibitionism of new acquired wealth, power and ridiculous social snobbism.

In her first novel, *Le Revenant*, the novelist satirizes the prevalent social practice among the *nouveaux riches* of urban dwellers making a show of their affluence, no matter how acquired. Such events as marriages, births, naming ceremonies and funerals are all good occasions to show off wealth and affluence and to make a bid for a higher social status and recognition. The trend is most noticeable among the women folk who will stop at nothing to show that they have socially “arrived”. They maneuver themselves into relationships and marriages with men of wealth and political power, establish connections with people of influence and people in high positions and take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that their new social status is well known and advertised.

The striking illustration of this intriguing new phenomenon is seen in the protagonist of Sow Fall’s first novel. Yama is an energetic and unscrupulous socialite whose driving passions are money and social recognition, Young, beautiful, and intelligent. Yama, who comes from a very poor family background, is determined to get out of the social class of the poor. Thanks to her physical charms and her wit, she

contrives to marry an affluent merchant of good social standing. Thus equipped with a rich and generous husband, Yama sets about creating for herself a new social identity by a calculated display of affluence. She is able to arrange a marriage between her brother Bakar, a mediocre employee posing as a well-to-do bachelor, with the daughter of a wealthy businessman. The naming ceremony of the first child of the marriage is the occasion for a vulgar display of affluence and for ridiculous rivalry between Yama and Adja Dado, Bakar's mother-in-law, as each woman tries to impress and out-do the other in prodigality and extravagance. Although Bakar had been advised to organize the naming ceremony of his daughter according to his modest means, he is brow beaten by the two women into arranging a grand and expensive reception, which he could ill-afford. In order to pay for the ceremony, Bakar has to dip his hands into the public coffers entrusted to him. His fraudulent practice not only costs him his modest job but also earns him five years of imprisonment.

Released from prison, Bakar is a discredited and ruined man. Yama, his sister, who cannot afford to be associated with a loser, turns her back on him. When, however, Bakar, with a grotesque sense of humour and revenge, circulates the news of his own death, Yama is quick to organize a colourful funeral ceremony, ostensibly to honour the memory of a dead brother, but, in reality, to make a demonstration of her affluence as well as to make some more fortune from expected gifts and donations from friends and sympathizers.

Lavish and extravagant ceremonies such as those portrayed in the novel are, in reality, a common feature of the social life of the *nouveaux riches* in contemporary Senegalese society. It is known that the government had, at one time, to enact a law against the rather outrageously extravagant nature of those occasions and ceremonies. According to the novelist, what is described is only a tip of the iceberg of the incredible nature of those wasteful occasions¹³.

Aminata Sow Fall has the ingenious technique of weaving several social issues around a central subject or theme. In her second novel, *La Grève des Battu (The Beggars Strike)*, for example, although the main theme might be considered as *the beggars in our midst*, the novelist uses the subject of beggars to evoke some ironical and, indeed, fundamental issues in Senegalese society. One such situation is the interdependence and mutual need of the beggars and the alms-givers in an Islamic society. The beggars are seen, on the one hand, as a social nuisance and an eye-sore and on the other hand as an indispensable factor for the Islamic religious obligation of almsgiving. Thus, Mour Ndiaye, the powerful director of Public Health who had to deal ruthlessly with the beggars and drive them out of the city, is later obliged to solicit their cooperation. He must have them back in their old positions from where they were driven out because, according to his marabout, he must give alms to beggars in the four corners of the city in order to achieve his ambition to become his country's vice-president. The beggars snub Mour Diaye, reject his gifts and turn him into the beggars' begger. We thus have a paradoxical situation in which beggars become choosers.

In the same vein, the writer evokes the paradox of the relationship between the marabout phenomenon and the new ruling class of intellectuals and urban elite. While the practice of consulting marabouts and diviners is considered as irrational and as belonging to a primitive past, it is, in reality, very much alive among the new ruling class, to the extent that sometimes decisions on important affairs of state are determined by the augury of diviners and the visions of marabouts.

The writer explains the growing importance of marabouts and diviners in a state that lays claim to modernity. The situation is ironical indeed. With the emergence of an intellectual elite, one would have expected the influence of the marabouts to be on the decline. The contrary is the case. This is so because, according to Aminata Sow Fall, there appears to be a certain belief among the ruling class and the new elite that human reasons alone cannot provide all the answers to all the human problems; hence the phenomenon of religious and spiritual revivalism of which the growing influence of the marabouts in part.¹⁴

The novelist mirrors in her work another form of malaise in contemporary Senegalese society. This is noticeable particularly in the up-bringing and education of children. The conflict is between the traditional and the western-inspired approaches. In the portrayal of this conflict, the writer's sympathy goes, without doubt, to the need to give the African child a solid foundation in his traditional culture and values. While admitting that the modern western-oriented education is indispensable in today's world, Aminata Sow Fall makes a case for the preservation and revalorization of the traditional values, which must not be sacrificed in favour of the new. This is the main issue raised in her third novel, *L'Appel des arènes*. Ndiogu and his wife Diattou had to leave their infant son, Nalla, in the care of their aged parents in order to be able to go to France for their studies. On their return after many years of absence, they discover, to their dismay, that their son has deeply imbibed the traditional values which they, themselves, have come to hold in contempt. The interests of the son are, therefore, at variance with the ambition and the plans of the parents for him. While the son wants to be a renowned wrestler and feels elated in the excitement of the wrestling arena, the parents want him to acquire western education and to adopt the snobbism of the westernized elite. This leads inevitably to conflict and misunderstanding between son and parents.

As a sign of their western education, the couple had decided to have only one child in order to have more time for themselves – a kind of egoist consideration western style. This decision later boomerangs and results in regrets and much unhappiness both for the only son who would have loved to have brothers and sisters like other children, and for the parents who have denied their only child the one joy he would have loved to possess. The solitude of the only son saddens the parents, but it is too late.

The westernized couple had ridiculed the traditional approaches to child up-bringing and decided they would not bring up their only son in that manner:

Our son, we shall not mould him according to the old way. There will be no "your grandfather used to do this

*or that", no "at your age, I was already this or that".
There will be no mystification. We shall bring him up
for the future, for the realities of the future¹⁵*

(translation mine)

The realities of the African milieu prove, however, to be rather different and too strong for the romantic project of the ill-digested foreign model which Ndiogu and his wife want to adopt. In the end, they are obliged to admit their mistake and the error of orientation in the education they wanted for their son. As Ndiogu later notes with manifest regret:

From the beginning, our fathers entrusted us with a mission in life: to represent the community with honour in the higher interests of the human condition. And for that, they offered us models. But what have we ever said to Nalla? We have brought him up according to abstract principles, hazy, vague ... I believe that we have failed in his education.¹⁶

(translation mine)

The failure of Ndiogu and his wife is the failure to adapt imported and foreign ideals and values to the African environment. All is not lost, however, for the disillusioned protagonists of western culture. A compromise is reached between father and son. Nalla, the son, agrees to go to school and to take his western-style education more seriously; on his part, Ndiogu, the father, agrees to allow his son to participate actively in traditional cultural activities and wrestling matches.

The novel raises the whole issue of child up-bringing among the new class of westernized Africans as well as the issues of parental authority and child freedom. In his dream to bring up his son in the modern way, Ndiogu fails to take into account his son's personal interests and what he really wants to be. Ndiogu does not stop to consider how the decision he has made and the options he has adopted for his son will affect the boy's emotional and spiritual development and general well-being. The author here makes a strong case for the child: children are full-fledged human beings; each child has his/her own individual personality and potentials. Parents should, therefore, allow their children appropriate liberty to develop according to their individual talents and interest, without obliging them to follow preconceived and pre-established parental patterns or models.

Aminata Sow Fall's fourth novel, *Experts de la nation* deals with a very pertinent issue of political power and psychopancy in Africa. A former Head of State, thrown into prison after his fall from power, reflects on the harm done to the man in power by those who surround him, the psychopants who blind him to the real problems and aspirations of the people and tell him only what they believe he would like to hear in order to protect and promote their selfish interests. This is a very well-known situation in the African political landscape. Unfortunately, in spite of the warnings of African writers and the sad

experiences of disgraced and deposed Heads of State, African political leaders have remained insensitive and deaf to the real aspirations of the people.

Unlike her fellow country woman, Mariam Bâ, in her *Une si longue lettre*, Aminata Sow Fall has not so far created a female protagonist of particularly outstanding presence or qualities. This might be explained by the fact that Aminata Sow Fall does not set out in her work to defend or champion the cause of women. For her, the primary dimension consideration is the social situation or issue to which she seeks to draw attention. It is this situation that determines the characters, their sex and their roles. Nevertheless, female characters do play significant roles in her works, in accordance, no doubt, with the undeniable influence of women as perceived by the novelist, in contemporary Senegalese society.

As a keen social observer of Senegalese society, Aminata Sow Fall captures, vividly, life in the contemporary Senegalese urban milieu which, like all African societies, is in a situation of flux. In depicting this vast social tableau, the writer analyses and xrays not only situations and issues, but the motivations of the observed human action and behaviour, as well as their possible affects on the life of the individual and the social group. Thus, Aminata Sow Fall's works have moral and social dimensions. It is these moral and social dimensions, which confer on her literary works their profound human and universal significance.

NOTES

- 1) Cf. I.T.K. Egonu, "Aminata Sow Fall: A New Generation Female Writer from Senegal" *Neophilologus*, 75 (1991) pp. 76-85.
- 2) Interview with Las Anyanwu; Dakar, September 1986 (in mimeograph)
- 3) *ibid*
- 4) Cf. Thomas N. Hammond, "Entretien avec Aminata Sow Fall, " *Présence Francophone*. No. 22, 1980, 9. 192
- 5) *ibid*
- 6) Regine Lambrech, "Three Black Women, Three autobiographers", *Presence Africaine*, No. 123, pp. 136-137.
- 7) Thomas N. Hammond, *loc. cit*, p. 194.
- 8) *Le Soleil*, 17 janvier 1985, p.9.
- 9) *ibid*
- 10) Thomas N. Hammond, *loc. cit*, p. 193.
- 11) Oriaku Nwosu, *The African Woman: Nigerian Perspective*, Lagos, Bima Publications Ltd, 1999, p.10.
- 12) Kamene Okonjo, "The dual-zex system in operation: Igbo women and community politics in Mid-Western Nigeria" in *Women in Africa*, Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 45.
- 13) Interview with Las Anyanem (in mimeograph)
- 14) *ibid*
- 15) *L'Appel des arènes*, Dakar, N.E.A., 1982 p.58.
- 16) *ibid*