

WHAT CONSTITUTES AMINATA SOW FALL'S WOMANISM IN *LE JUJUBIER DU PATRIARCHE*

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Abstract

In its narrow sense Feminism means Writings by women with women's orientation. Aminata Sow Fall fits in perfectly well into the first criteria; she is inter alia a woman writer. As far as many feminist critics are concerned, Aminata Sow Fall's writing are full of masculine, rather than female orientation. She calls for outdated domestic and patriarchal values. Hence Authors like Nicki Hitchcott and Athleen Ellington see her novels as full of backward mentality. Feminism however has long crossed the threshold of "writings by women with women's orientation." Feminism, both in theory and praxis is ever-evolving. This is the era of Beyond Feminism. From its earliest Euro-American contexts, feminism has taken root in Africa as womanism, stiwanism and motherism. The African woman's yearning and consciousness are far removed from her Euro-American counterpart's female condition. The African woman is torn between her africaness and her femininity. Realistic answers to her problems are more likely to come from her dialogue with her roots. This is where Aminata Sow Fall's womanism is based.

Introduction

Truly Sow Fall in her novels has a preference for what has been termed the Post Independence question; namely the leaders' lack of care and concern for the impoverished masses as we could see in *La Grève des Battu*. Her novels centre on modern Senegalese society with its quest for modernity, loss of identity, ethnic and socio-political upheavals (*Le revenant, L'ex-père de la nation*). Infact for Aminata Sow Fall, the African novel should be a tool by which the Africans discover themselves. (*Hawkins: 1987*). Sow Fall uses orality to express what she observes and hears about the cupidity of some Senegalese on the one hand, the dishonesty of other Senegalese nay Africans on the other hand. (*Pfaff: 1989*). She eulogizes the rich Senegalese past and calls for a rediscovery of African roots. (*L'Appel des arènes, Le Jujubier du patriarche*). In the light of the above factors, Aminata Sow Fall's literary works have been subjected to much acerbic criticism by feminist literary critics like Nicki Hitchcott who argue that:

What black feminist critics are doing is pushing back the boundaries of so-called western feminism to encompass the multiplicity of the black women's experience... these writers may not be feminist... (Rauf Adebisi : 165):

Aminata Sow Fall is one of the African writers whose works are being used by critics to push back the boundaries of the so-called western feminism. This is because Sow Fall is notable for her exposition of the conduct of the contemporary Senegalese socio-political society and how this conduct has ushered into Senegal a total decline of private and public morality. Athleen Ellington undertook a study of Sow Fall's daughters in four of her novels: *Yama (Le Revenant)*, *Diattou (l'Appel)*, *Sine (La Grève)*, and *Yande (L'ex- Père)* and came to the following conclusions: that Sow Fall's novels are full of backward mentality. She stated clearly that Aminata Sow Fall, though a woman writer, projects masculine values. She does not propose any solution to the cultural conflict. Her works call for the search for ancient domestic and patriarchal values:

En tant qu'écrivain femme, Fall projette une voie masculine et des valeurs sociales et littéraires masculines. Elle ne propose aucune solution au conflit culturel à part une reprise rétrograde du voile. Son oeuvre préconise un retour aux valeurs domestiques et patriarcales d'un âge d'or précolonial idéalisé...Athleen Ellington (1990 –1992: 132 – 146).

On the other hand Aminata Sow Fall insists that she “*supports programmes aimed at the emancipation of women, but that she has no political commitment in the sense that she is not an activist of any political party.*” (Aminata Sow Fall. Interview in “*Le Rôle des Mendiants dans Xala et La Grève des Battu*” (Rauf Adebisi: 163). Sow Fall's insistence is based on the fact that feminism as a philosophy is ever evolving. It began as a movement in the late sixties aimed at the awareness of the injustice perpetrated by the patriarchal society and the urgent need for a change of the status quo. The feminist critique which began in the university is a socio –political and cultural theory which exposes oppressive and repressive patriarchal systems. As a literary critique, feminism analyses texts on the basis of Gender. It aims at politicizing literature with the goal of deconstructing patriarchal cultural hegemony (Carolyn J. Allen 1987: 278 -305). Feminism takes into account different cultural contexts as it goes about studying texts. This explains why feminist literary canon creates room for works from different regions of the planet. Samba Gadjigo in “*L'oeuvre littéraire d' Aminata Sow Fall face à la critique*” argues that the works of Sow Fall fit in perfectly well into the feminist canon” that is “*groupe de livres, reconnus d'inspiration divine*”. (1996: 24 – 28).

Aminata Sow Fall has her own peculiarity in addressing the problem of women of African extraction. This peculiarity which is anchored on a purely African Islamic setting has a lot to tell us about the experience of women in contemporary Africa. Her own version of woman's world has its peculiar way of presenting the female condition as mothers, women and cultural education, women and cultural Nationalism, women and marriage and women in politics and unionism.

Aminata Sow Fall's daughters in *Le Jjubier du Patriarche*

In *Le Jjubier du patriarche*, Aminata Sow Fall devoted much time and space in creating male and female characters who are committed to the search and appreciation of their past history and roots. The female characters collaborated with their male counterparts in not only relishing the good old days but also in retracing and preserving their history, souvenirs and orality. (LJDP p.103). The genealogy of those who owed their ancestry to Emperor Almany Sarebibi featured great women like Dioumana, Almany's wife; Biti, the Wife of Massiga who disguised and participated in the ritual dance that was meant for men; Warèle, the elderly slave woman who took charge of Yellimani and Biti, the daughter of Banne. In the epic of the ancestors of Babyselli, Biti, the grand daughter of Warele is said to be endowed with rare human qualities: tenacity, agility and intelligence. (LJDP p. 101). The actual documentation and public radio account of the genesis of the Epic of Foudjallon was rendered by Magatte, the praise singer (LJDP p. 92).

Sow Fall's Daughters in the Matrimonial Home

Tacko. Tacko was presented to the reader as a civil servant who served as a Secretary in one of the parastatals. Before her marriage, she had frankly told Yelli that she could not go into wedlock without first completing her education and getting her own job. (LJDP p.54-55). As a mother and a disciplinarian, she was exceptional as we could glean from the novel (LJDP p.42-43, 53). In these pages of the novel, Sow Fall presented her character as a woman worthy of emulation in the upbringing of girl children and young women. Everybody who attended Naarou's wedding, especially Penda, paid tribute to Tacko for the proper way she brought up Naarou as though Naarou was her child. When however Naarou, who used to be Tacko's slave-girl tapped the resources of Tacko's training to become successful in life, Tacko became jealous of, and hostile to her. She called Naarou names and banned her from frequenting her home. (LJDP, p 42, 68). Such a posture runs contrary to the womanist philosophy of a mature woman. Tacko had strong attachment to the traditional norms and practices. When her daughter informed her that she would seek for divorce at the court, barely one year eight months after her marriage, Tacko vehemently objected to this line of action; and her reasons were rooted in customs and tradition. She noted that Bouri, by so doing, would be creating scandal. Moreover she was the person who made the choice of her marriage partner by her self:

Quoi ! Bouri, écoute –moi bien : une enfant de bonne famille ne crée pas le scandale. Déjà ton père et moi avons eu d'énormes problèmes avec ton mariage... Nous ne lui connaissons ni parents ni alliances. Tu t'es entêtée et aujourd'hui, même pas vingt mois de mariage, et tu parles de divorcer ! As –tu jamais vu ça dans la famille? (p.31)

Tacko was a strong willed and courageous woman. While her husband was after women and concubines, she stood firm and made sure that none of these women

would brake up her marriage (LJDP p.13). When however these marriages and alliances failed, the women left the way they came, leaving behind hordes of children for Tacko to cater for. (LJDP p.14). Tacko was a happy and a nice woman when her husband Yelli was rich and very comfortable; but as soon as the financial condition of the family became worse, Tacko became a quarrelsome, impatient and a nagging woman. This is contrary to the ideals of Womanism which calls for gender complimentarity in marriage. Yelli frowned at Tacko's conduct thus:

*Il ne comprenait pas pourquoi, de jour en jour,
elle devenait plus amer., L' âge peut-être... (p. 11).*

However, Tacko's bitter complaint that Yelli only contributed for the settlement of water and electricity bills while she was left to carry the rest of the responsibility with her meagre salary as a secretary, was understandable:

*Quand tu as fini de payer l'eau et l'électricité, tu
capitule.
A moi seule, le combat de tous les jours..... (p.11)*

Tacko rarely laughs; she maintains an unusual silence. This could be attributed to her failing health. (p.30). Tacko exploited the gentility of her husband to do things to excess. She went out of control in abusing Naarou after the sad news of the divorce of her daughter, Bouri. (p.46). Yelli had namely made it a matter of principle never to raise his voice or hand against a woman. As a panacea to Tacko's difficulties, Yelli would make for the public park each time Tacko's mood changed (p.12). Furthermore if Tacko had any reservation in her life at all, the decision of Yelli to vacate his family Villa for a lowly accommodation due to his changing fortunes and the failed marriage of Bouri exposed her traits (p. 14, 45, 46) Before the pilgrimages to Babyselli however Tacko was able to reconcile with her estranged daughter and slave daughter. In spite of her weakness Tacko complemented the efforts of her husband to carry their extended family responsibilities. She qualifies as a heroic female character and as a womanist,

Penda. Penda hails from the genealogy of slaves. She owes her ancestry to Warè, the ancestor of the slave caste who was placed under the tutelage of Thioro, the mother of Almamy Sarebibi (LJDP.p 17-18). Her birth came from the illegal and unexpected amorous union between Waly, a prince and Sadaga a slave. As tradition would have it, she was placed under the custody of Diaal, the deceased mother of Yelli. (LJDP p.18). Penda got married to a Dioula at the age of sixteen years old. Both transferred their residence to Cameroon. With the sudden demise of her husband she was left alone to cater for their three children Maram, Soogui and Idy. Her in-laws meted out all sorts of injustice and deprivation on her. In spite of her misery, she was not overwhelmed. Her singular panacea being her integrity, strong will and resilience. She engaged in retail trade and made some savings. With her savings, she

relocated to Zaire where she tried her hand on fish retailing and cafeteria. Unexpectedly she was again attacked, humiliated and deported from Zaire by soldiers who took her and one thousand, one hundred and ninety nine other compatriots as illegal aliens (LJDP p.19). Back home, Penda would prefer avoiding the home of Macodou and Sekka, her stepfather and step aunt due to the latter's wickedness. She called first at the home of Yelli and Tacko. In her usual resilient nature, she succeeded in rehabilitating herself and was able to get another baby, Naarou.

Contrary to the vision of Aminata Sow Fall in *Le Jujubier du Patriarche* as regards the appreciation of the past, Penda believes that nostalgia for the past is false:

*Il faut construire, l'avenir;
l'histoire ne fait pas vivre p.24.*

Yet Penda encourages the past history of subordination and slave caste system, (pp.29-30) by making her six years old daughter, Naarou to pass through the same experience she herself had passed through. Though she meant well for her little daughter's upbringing and education (p.26). Penda is also very courageous and frank. She cautioned Yelli against disobedience. Yelli had actually disobeyed his father by studying history instead of medicine (p.25). Eventually it was Fama, her younger sister who studied medicine and in this way was able to nurse Yelli when later in his life his health began to fail. Penda had her own ways of assuaging and soothing her mind as she went through her chequered history. She would sing and sing to her heart's delight. (p.24). Penda was a good counsellor and peace maker. She counselled Yelli on how to succeed in life (p.25). She prayed for the success of Yelli and Fama in their studies. She initiated the process of reconciliation between the feuding daughters – Tacko, Bouri and Naarou. Penda's generosity was immeasurable as she lavished gifts and pieces of advice on Yelli (p.26). Through the creation of characters like Tacko and Penda amongst others Sow Fall tries to prove that she is not only a social critic of the post colonial era; she is deeply concerned about the female's condition and the efforts that women make to ameliorate their conditions.

Naarou. Naarou was entrusted into Yelli's and Tacko's hands after the latter's marriage. Naarou was then barely six years old. Her greatest attraction to Yelli's home was the regular visit and recitation of Naani, the praise singer. This may have contributed to his love for poems later in life (p.69). Naarou was a good house –maid and house –keeper. Her good care of Bouri made Bouri to develop such a strong love for her that Bouri would prefer to abandon her mother's home for Naarou's house after she was expelled from her matrimonial home. Such a step taken by Bouri confirmed in a definitive way the enmity between Tacko and the two ladies (p.77)

Naarou was very intelligent. She was still very young when she was married to Amsata, a school teacher. She was very friendly, and she was a good wife (p 42 - 43). Her good character was outlined on Page forty-two of the novel:

... *Le respect qu'elle vouit à ses parents, pour son ardeur au travail, pour sa gentillesse, bref, pour sa bonne éducation.*

Naarou was a successful woman but she was always saddened by her ancestry each time Tacko used her slave caste background to abuse her. Naarou was namely of the Warèle lineage, a slavery ancestry. Boys and girls of this lineage were usually placed in the custody of the descendants of the Damels. Such tradition of tutelage was traced back to Warèle who served Thioro mother of Almany Sarebibi (p.17).

Finally Naarou did not allow her background to overwhelm her. Her success in life brought her the envy of Tacko who earlier ridiculed her.

Bouri. Bouri was the second daughter of Yelli and Tacko. The first child died at infancy. Contrary to the wish of her parents, she stubbornly insisted to be married to Goudi. (p.31). Barely a year and eight months after their marriage, Bouri began to complain about her husband:

Je préfère l'enfer à Goudi! J'ai déposé au tribunal une demande de divorce. (p.31)

Though her parents got a lot of gifts from Goudi (p.35-36); this was not their reason for objecting to the request for divorce. They considered more the cultural implications of a case of divorce initiated by the wife, barely two years after marriage Tacko insisted:

*Pense à ceux qui nous regardent !
As tu jamais vu ça dans la famille?(p.31)*

On her part, Bouri complained of Goudi's sterility and uncontrolled language. She had gone for medical test to prove that she was fit. Unfortunately she was swimming against the cultural current that insisted that the wife was always the cause of barrenness. (p.39) Sow Fall tries to prove this cultural stand by creating Goudi who would never tolerate a wife that attributed the cause of barrenness to the man. He divorced Bouri using the Muslim formula of formal divorce as soon as he heard the accusation of male sterility from Bouri.

*Tu n'es même pas un homme.
Tu n'est pas capable de faire des enfants ! p.37 –38.*

Bouri was a stubborn child and this stubbornness continued into her matrimonial home. Her insults against her husband so infuriated Goudi, that he would have beaten her up. However Bouri rehabilitated herself by getting reconciled with her husband who contrary to her accusations of sterility, assisted as a husband in the birth of Ndeye (p. 90).

CONCLUSION

Aminata Sow Fall spares no one in her social criticism. She criticizes both males and females in her trenchant satires. However a closer study of her daughters

could assist one in finding out what actually constitutes her womanism. Sow Falls daughters are chiefly those women who showcase female heroic characteristics in the Foundjallon genealogy and its oral tradition. They are those women who played complementary roles with the men as mothers, praise –singers, public workers and peace-makers to better the female condition in particular and the society in general. These women are the archetype of the African female experience and consciousness in the novel - *le Jjubier du Patriarche* of Sow Fall. These female characters showcase images of womanhood such as childless wife, (Bouri), Slave girl (Narrou), the evil and wicked woman (Sekka), (LJDP pp. 23 and 43), the mature woman (Penda) and the self assertive and nagging woman (Tacko).

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