
WOMEN AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE: A CRITICAL INTERROGATION OF MARIAMA BÂ’S *UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE* AND SEMBÈNE OUSMANE’S *LES BOUTS DE BOIS DE DIEU*

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Abstract: *Since literature is believed to be a tool for social transformation, this study interrogates whether or not the efforts of militant women could demolish oppressive forces that have caused hunger and poverty in many African countries. The study aims at connecting literature with social realities in human society to strengthen its functionality. Postcolonial theory and Marxism set the premises for discussions in the study as theoretical framework while the French explication de texte is adopted as research methodology. Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* and Sembène Ousmane’s *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* are purposively selected for the study. The two novels are selected based on the inclination of the novelists towards denouncing social imbalances in African society. Finding from the study suggest that both collective and individual struggles or agitations against exploitative and oppressive tendencies are capable of bringing progressive social change to Africa. The study, therefore, concludes that whether old or new, literary texts remain relevant and significant in shaping human minds and guiding their operations now and forever.*

Keywords: *Africa, fiction, militant women, oppressive and exploitative forces*

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INTRODUCTION

Literature ; oral, written or digital, whether as prose, drama or poetry like other artistic works and performances are immortal. They will always be relevant irrespective of when, where, why and how they are made, produced or enacted. [...] reading the past serves something of the same purpose as mediation on the soul-destroying paradoxes of the modern experience as told by the descendants of those displaced by the violence of the century. They came of age to find the world they expected to inherit rent apart, turned nearly unrecognisable. For same, to move forward has required allowing



that ruptured, destroyed world to recede. For others like Taye Salih, **it has been a matter of survival to reenter the past and search its remains for the means to create a redemptive history through patterns of words, moods, and textures** (Marrouchi, 2008, p. 109) cited with the emphasis by (Ogwude, 2013, p. 174). Similarly, Literature, History and Philosophy will continue to serve and provide guidance for mankind from one generation to another. Literature reflects on happenings in a given society by expressing a people's traditions, cultural values and beliefs, experiences, imaginations, observations and predictions at a particular time in history. History which can be explained as “high story”, is simply an account of facts and figures relating to an individual, a people, a place, a belief or an event. It is not just a story because it is rooted on truth and that is why we see it as a high story. However, literature is a story because it contains both fictions and non-fictions. Fictions are the imaginative stories that mirror actions and events in various societies at different times while non-fictions are true life stories in form of autobiography, biography or memoirs (Ogundokun, 2021, p. 281). Philosophy is generally believed to be the study or the search for knowledge, wisdom and understanding of the universe. Knowledge could be acquired formally or informally and every human being is expected to be a lover of knowledge. Because it is required everywhere. People, society and development are the concerns of Literature, History and Philosophy. Literary writing in Africa is believed to be generally a male affair because it is tied to schooling and ability to read and write in an European language. Writing in Africa is inexorably linked to Western formal education which was first only thought fit for, and therefore, was exclusively embraced, by African male children (Ogwude, 2013, p. 177). The statement above is a fact. Meanwhile, as time went by, things started changing and some female African writers came on board. For example, we have the likes of Flora Nwapa, Aminata Sow-Fall, Mariama Bâ, Calixthe Beyala, Fatou Keita, Regina Yao only to mention a few. In this study, the novels of two Francophone African writers are examined namely: Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*. Bâ is a female African writer while Ousmane is a male writer. *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* was published in 1960 while *Une si longue lettre* was produced in 1979. The two novels present African experiences in a Muslim dominated society of the postcolonial period of African history. Postcolonial theory and Marxism are the premises for discussions in the study. Post-colonialism reviews and revises the cultural aspects of colonialism. To establish the deconstructive truth about gender, ethnicity and class, the cultural politics of difference proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is adopted. Spivak uses the term subaltern. She picks tent with Antonio Gramsci who is an Italian philosopher and political activist. This ideological stand point defends the downtrodden; the voiceless, colonized non-elite and the bottled individuals that cannot defend or speak for themselves and unfortunately cannot be protected by the so-called educated and influential people. However, since there is a clear tendency that the third world people are cowed and viewed as a sub-category or inferior, conscious African creative writers and critics attempt to suggest solutions to social injustices such as imperialism, oppression, physical and mental brutalities as well as other attendant sociopolitical and economic imbalances through their literary works. There is no doubt that the lived experience of the Africa self is closely linked with the geographical mass of the African nation which has been mutilated, scrambled and scarred in jostling, harsh realities of slavery, colonialism, Western imperialism and the current globalization trend (Opara, 2013, p.237). As a matter of fact, the sociopolitical and economic woes in Africa often remind the people of the colonial experiences and the neocolonialism which put Africans in perpetual danger of hunger and poverty. On the other hand, Marxism is concerned with class struggle that questions the existence of different social stratification in a given human society with a view to dislodging capitalism and replacing it with a new order. Marxist literature is that which portrays the relationship in society from the economic perspective. It



focuses on the materialist conditions that underlay the different classes in society and which breed conflict between them. In Marxist terminology, the bourgeois class own and control the means of production, while the proletariat class are the labourers who are put under demeaning working conditions by the former (Benjamin, 2013, p. 180/181). Marxist ideology embodies issues pertaining to the society, therefore, political and economic matters become very important because they are major determinants in shaping people's well-being. The issue now is the role of a Marxist critics. Marxist's critics examine literature from the point of view of the dominant elites and the rich. They consider how the dominant elites exploit subordinate groups and the bourgeois suppress the working class. The Marxist's critics see how literature can be used to promote some social and economic revolution, consciousness and awareness and a radical transformation of the society to bring social equilibrium and bridge the gaps in social class system (Agyekum, 2007, p. 129). There is no doubt about the takes of both Benjamin and Agyekum on the ideals of Marxism as a concept and a Marxist as a practitioner. Karl Marx, the originator of the principle, believes that the opposing situation between the rich and the poor brings about conflict and misunderstanding between the two classes, with the lower class triumphing over the upper class so that a new order (socialism) could replace the capitalism.

Analysis of Women as Agents of Social Change: A Critical Interrogation of Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*

Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*

On the cover page of Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*), there is a semiotic presentation of the African woman. The woman's hand is freed from the shackles of patriarchal mentality to attain her rightful status in societal affairs. Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* is practically a gender-based conversation between two female friends named Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou. Ramatoulaye is the writer of the letter in question while Aïssatou is the recipient. In the novel, Bâ exposes the hidden foundation of gender politics to bring about the desired social change. First, *Une si longue lettre* argues in favour of women who are cheated and neglected by their husbands in failed marriages. In the first half of the novel, Bâ reflects on the past and the present consciousnesses with regard to the fate of woman in a patriarchal society. The death of Modou Fall, the husband of Ramatoulaye (the heroine) in Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, shows that a woman is capable of taking care of herself and her children. Ramatoulaye is not found wanting in the payment of electricity and water bills as well as taking charge of other family demands financially and emotionally. Ramatoulaye remarks thus:

Je survivais. En plus de mes anciennes charges, j'assumais celles de Modou. L'achat des denrées alimentaires de base me mobilisait toutes les fins de mois; je me débrouillais pour n'être pas à court de tomates ou d'huile, de pommes de terre ou d'oignons aux périodes où ils se raréfiaient sur les marchés; j'emmagasinais des sacs de riz "siam" dont les Sénégalaises raffolent. Mon cerveau s'exerçait à une nouvelle gymnastique financière.

Les dates extrêmes de paiement des factures électricité ou d'eau sollicitaient mon attention. J'étais souvent la seule femme dans une file d'attente.

Remplacer serrures et loquets des portes détraquées, remplacer les vitres cassées était ennuyeux autant que la recherche d'un plombier pour secourir les lavabos bouchés (*Une si longue lettre*, p.99).



I was surviving. In addition to my old responsibilities, I was taking on Modou's. Buying basic groceries kept me busy at the end of each month; I managed to keep myself supplied with tomatoes or oil, potatoes or onions when they were scarce at the markets; I stocked up on bags of "siam" rice, which Senegalese women love. My brain was practicing new financial exercises.

Electricity or water bill payment deadlines demanded my attention. I was often the only woman in a queue.

Replacing locks and latches on broken doors, replacing broken windows, was as tedious as finding a plumber to fix clogged sinks (traduction)

As an educated woman who knows what she wants for herself, children and the society at large. Ramatoulaye rejects a marriage proposal from Tamsir, Modou's brother after the demise of the latter. She sees such a marriage arrangement as another form of slavery and unwanted. Ramatoulaye laments thus:

Tu oublies que j'ai un cœur, une raison, que je ne suis pas un objet que l'on se passe de main en main, tu ignores ce que se marier signifie pour moi : c'est un acte de foi et d'amour, un don total de soi à l'être que l'on a choisi et qui vous a choisi (*Une si longue lettre*, pp. 112/113).

You forget that I have a heart, a reason, that I am not an object that one passes from hand to hand, you ignore what getting married means to me: it is an act of faith and love, a total gift of oneself to the being that one has chosen and who has chosen you (traduction).

As an agent of social change, Ramatoulaye calls our attention to the sordid conditions of our hospitals and the inconducive environment of our schools as well as the imbalances in the ratio of women to men who occupy the various political offices (*Une si longue lettre*, p. 125). Bâ, through her major character, Ramatoulaye suggests a liberated mind and quality education for Africa. She remarks thus:

Nous sortir de l'enlissement des traditions, superstitions et mœurs; nous faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la nôtre; élever notre vision du monde, cultiver notre personnalité, renforcer nos qualités, mater nos défauts; faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle; voilà la tâche que s'était assignée admirable directrice (*Une si longue lettre*, p. 34)

To free us from the quagmire of traditions, superstitions and morals; to make us appreciate multiple civilizations without denying our own; to elevate our vision of the world, to cultivate our personality, to strengthen our qualities, to subdue our faults; to make the values of universal morality bear fruit in us; this is the task that this admirable director had set herself (traduction)

Bâ has indeed symbolically paints the picture of an emancipated woman marked by a beautiful, strong and informed personality . The said woman is lettered in gender politics in a perceived Muslim dominated country and within the Islamic context. (Okereke, 2013, p. 263) affirms thus:



The hand (on the front cover of Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*) suggests confidence, economic power, education- knowledge, the ability to inscribe words on paper. This knowledgeable hand on paper is symbolic of the woman writer's awareness of her position as creator, and of her right to re-inscribe the female and reconstruct her destiny... Woman's ability to write (in all suggestive meanings of the word) is not only a denial of female powerlessness but, very importantly, an enunciation of female power.

The fact that Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* is an individual struggle and a revolt led by Ramatoulaye against societal imbalances; the novel has inclination towards social transformation.

Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*

Sembène Ousmane, a male African writer of French expression, is one of the male creative writers who paint women as not only beautiful but also strong, resourceful and determined to bring about desired social change through good governance. These women take the front seat in the agitation for a progressive society rooted in egalitarian principles. (Nwapa ,2009, p. 528) remarks that:

The women presented in recent imaginative works were solid and superior women who held their own in society. They were not only wives and mothers but successful traders who took care of their children and their husbands as well. They were very much aware of their leadership roles in their families as well as in the churches and local government.

The picture of African women captured by Nwapa in the excerpt above matches the women characters in Sembène Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*. The women are strongly prepared to revolt against all the principalities that bedeviled them in different facets of their life. In the same vein, as regards the image of female characters in recent literary productions of African origin, Orji-Benjamin (2013, p. 180) adds thus:

Today, it is quite heart-warming to note that the writings about African women do not just stop at removing the impediments to their individual and corporate growth and development; they also assign more proactive and progressive roles to them. Beyond their homes and immediate society, the women portrayed in African literature have gone ahead to break new frontiers in politics, economy, education, and science and technology, at the local and global settings.

In real life situations across Africa, the womenfolk has become a gender to recognize with respect. Western formal education has helped in the production of high profile personalities such as ministers, senators, house of representative members, deputy governors, house of assembly members, Chairpersons of local governments, heads of higher institutions among other positions and appointments. In fact, countries like Liberia and Tanzania have experienced women presidents. Sembene Ousmane is known for his consistent condemnation of the dialectical materialism in Africa. Ousmane as a Marxist writer believes that the materialistic tendencies in Africa is orchestrated by the West through the colonial rule and the Neo-colonial order that favour capitalism. Hence, Ousmane's literary works are generally agitate for social revolution. For Ousmane, literature is perceived to be a tool for class struggle.



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In Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, women condemn the hunger in the land which is caused by the conflict between the railway workers and their employers. The strike action declared by the said workers brings serious economic hardship on the families of the striking workers. The workers embark on an indefinite industrial action as a result of poor pay. Their pay does not match the economic realities of the time as the wages cannot get them basic needs let alone talking about other expenses such as medical bills. Women led by Ramatoulaye, one of the prominent female character in the novel displays her anger by pointing fingers at the real cause of their hardship and hunger. She exclaims that:

Le véritable malheur ne consiste pas seulement à avoir faim et soif ; il s'agit de savoir qu'il y a des gens qui veulent que vous ayez faim et soif – et c'est ainsi pour nous (*Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, p. 73)

Real misfortune is not just a matter of being hungry and thirsty; it is a matter of knowing that there are people who want you to be hungry and thirsty - and that is the way it is with us (translation).

The implication of the situation captured in the excerpt above is that the women are conscious of the cause of their hunger. To them, the hunger is inflicted on the poor masses by the management of the railway corporation who decides the fate of their husbands by paying them peanuts as wages. It is sufficed to say that the capitalists impose the hardship on the poor. As a matter of fact, this denial of food makes the women in the novel to come together and prepare fully to fight to a standstill those who are responsible for their misfortune.

Ramatoulaye intensifies her rejection of exploitative and oppressive forces of those who are responsible for the pain in the society by killing Vendredi, El Haji Mabigue's ram and share the meat with other women. Justifying her action, she reiterates that:

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. Plus ça va, plus les temps deviennent durs. Si Vendredi n'avait pas anéanti notre espoir de la journée, il serait encore vivant! Et s'il m'avait encornée, vous auriez versé des larmes, vous auriez même oublié votre faim... pour la journée! Ah oui, Dieu sait que les temps sont durs! (*Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, p. 117).

When you know that the lives and courage of others depend on yours, you no longer have the right to be afraid... Even if you're very afraid! Ah! We're living through cruel times, we're forced to toughen up, to steel ourselves. The longer it goes on, the harder times become. If Friday hadn't dashed our hope for the day, he'd still be alive! And if he'd gored me, you would have shed tears, you would even have forgotten your hunger... for the day! Oh yes, God knows times are hard! (translation).

Besides Ramatoulaye, another prominent female character in Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* is Penda. She actively partake in the struggle to displace the anti-socialist tendencies in the story. She pays the ultimate price during the match to Dakar to protest the perceived social injustice in her country.



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The progressive forces of labour tactically supported by the coming together of their wives and children confront successfully the exploitative and oppressive posture of the owners of the Railway company that Ousmane enacted in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*. The Chief Imam, the French expatriates, the police, and El Haji Mabigue are the symbols of exploitative forces. The ability of the women fighters to subdue and defeat all the oppressors is a mark of success through collective effort.

The militancy created in Ousmane's characters, whether male or female, is to dismantle the seemingly capitalist tendencies in Africa between workers and their employers.



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CONCLUSION

The study shows that there will always be agitations for better living conditions in any society where there is obvious social imbalances. Oppression and exploitation often create poverty, hunger, insecurity and conflicts between the rich and the poor. The study also demonstrates that self awareness is a major guiding principle to making meaningful choices in agitating for one's fundamental human rights. Bâ and Ousmane equip their female characters with outstanding traits such as courage, resilience and spirit of togetherness that paves the way for unity and team work. And these qualities help them in achieving success during their trying time. Those qualities stand out as key factors that led to the women's attainment of their self assertion and liberation in the selected novels for this study. For any progressive social change in any human society, there are prices to be paid. For instance, there is usually violent protest as the major corrective measure to suppress the oppressors. However, the masses always have their way. The governments at various levels, office holders, political gladiators, politicians, and the elite class should always be made accountable to their people.



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