

Edited by  
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Gender Discourse  
and the Construction  
of Identity

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Discourse is a place of construction of identity. If identity discourses sometimes offend social morality and posit the speaker as abject or social pariah, they nevertheless partake in the construction of communities. This book examines gender discourse and the construction of identity from two axes. The first one, "literary discourses", explores literary works from different geographical, cultural, and political areas to show how discourse helps construct identity and the "universality" of the main theme of this book. The second axis, "discourses from elsewhere", deals with law and cinema, insisting on how the legal framework of a society and the scenarios of films can help produce discourses and subsequent identities.

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**Unleashing Voices: Female  
Empowerment in *Things Fall Apart*,  
*God's Bits Of Woods*, *So Long a Letter*,  
and *Women at Point Zero***

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Early modern African literature shows some blatant absence of women writings even though themes about women abound in male-authored works. The vacuum left by the female absence in the anti-imperialist works is filled by the characterization of female that some critics may judge too romanticized. Actual voice is not given to female characters. They are silenced, spoken for, and are used thematically to show the beauty of an unstained or idealized pre-colonial Africa. A prime instance of such a glamorized portrayal of women is the theme of Negritude writers like Senghor, David Diop, among others, who take women as the symbol of the Earth, the community and of Africa, thus the "Mother Africa" trope. The portrayal of female

characters in the post-colonial male authored works has yet to be brighter. Female protagonists are painted as ancillary to their male counterparts; they are used to somewhat explain the male protagonists' achievements in social life. The trope of motherhood and wifehood roles is still prominent. While undoing the civilized/savage binaries some male writers developed the proclivity to either consciously or unconsciously build another one: male/female or subject/object. By and large, this state of affairs legitimizes the opinion indicating that modern African literature was predominantly andocentric, and a replication of phallocratic and patriarchal division of some traditional African societies.

This study surveys a wide range of works mapping out the gendered space of African literature. Not only does this study include both female and male-authored texts, but it also covers works by women across the vast geography of Africa, and more importantly the male-authored works here are known for being highly inclusive of female preoccupations in African literature. Iconic and pioneering author Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Woods*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Nawal el Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* are the focus here.<sup>1</sup> They will be approached first in order to reveal or infirm the correctness of the claims of patriarchy and mysogeny in works by male writers. Also, the study of these works aims at unearthing instances of self-devaluation and

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<sup>1</sup> In order to avoid excessive notes, henceforth, *Things Fall Apart*, *God's Bits of Wood*, *So Long a Letter*, *Changes: A Love Story* and *Woman at Point Zero* will be respectively abbreviated TFA, GBW, SLL, CLS and WPZ, in the body of the text.

contradictions in writings by women seeking to re-equilibrate the gendered structure of the fictional world in order to hopefully impact actual life experience of Africans reading their texts.

## I

African Literature emerged as an implement to debunk the die-hard paradigm that posited African people as others thereby fit for the self-appointed salvaging mission undertaken by certain Western powers through explorations before 1888 when the Berlin conference officially opened the door for the colonization of far-flung lands in Africa. This accounts, very plausibly so, for the colonizer/colonized dichotomy. Literature in Africa has been, and still is, a negation of the statement that Africans' land being a No Man's Land, a continent without history and/or civilization. The ridiculousness of such a line of thinking explains why Chinua Achebe offers this rebuttal: "Africans did not hear the word history from the West. African societies were not mindless, they had their philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, they had poetry and above all they had dignity." (Egejuru, 1980, 3)

It is exactly the task of showing the "great depth and value and beauty" of Africa that pioneers of early modern African literature undertook. To disprove the colonialist discourse and to expose the African's dignity the Western educated Africans committed to novelizing the traditional and cultural values of their motherland. In some cases, they used poetry, which of itself was no alien to them as oral poetry was already in millennial use among their people. Theirs was an enterprise of reclaiming a voice susceptible to allow for a self-representation as opposed to being

portrayed by others whose objectivity was clouded by stereotypes, prejudice and bias. Depending on the form of colonial system in which some African people were "groomed", the educated had themes of engaged writing that evoked the extent of the colonial damage on their cultures and personality. For instance, while the Anglophones were focused on political issues of self-determination and independence, Francophone students from French colonies were committed to extolling their denigrated heritage. The coining of the "negritude" by Leopold Sedar Senghor and his cohorts in 1932 is testimony to such an agenda. Senghor as "the sum total of the cultural values of Black Africa." (Egejuru, 1980, 3)

The movement materializing this goal of self-representation (Negritude) is of the three stages in the development of literature in Africa. The advocates of African personality sought to prod Africans on the continent as well as abroad (those of the Diaspora) to rally around their cause, and to view their cultural heritage and their black skin as sources of pride and identity. The second stage consists of texts that delve into the colonial experience thereby laying bare the injustices and humiliations suffered African people under the different colonial rules. Such works as *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe, *L'Aventure Ambigüe* (*The Ambiguous Adventure*) by Cheick Hamidou Kane, *Une Vie de Boy* (*The House Boy*) by Ferdinand Oyono, among others, not only recount the bitter encounter of Africa with the West, but also stand as archeological and sociological documents that helped disallow the civilized/savage dichotomy constructed by colonialist discourse. The third stage of the growth of African literature comprises texts that denounce the management of the newly independent

African nations by rather corrupt, bloodthirsty and self-centered leaders who downplay the needs of their people. Their rule even surpassed the duress that colonial regimes opposed to people.

## II

Achebe teaches us that “whenever something stands, something else will stand beside it.”<sup>2</sup> The Igbo proverb alludes to the variety of points of view one can have about the same thing, and it can explain the emergence of female writing in Africa. The emergence of women’s writings in Africa means to counteract the patriarchalist and paternalistic depiction of women in works of art and literature, to erase the myths and stereotypes held about women. Phaniel Egejuru sees feminist elements and an agenda behind women’s writings. Egejuru is of the opinion that African feminists work “towards a demystification of certain male stereotypes of African women as goddess, as Supreme Mother, self-sacrificing and suffering willingly and silently. ‘A woman has no mouth’ is a phrase found in different African traditions, a serious statement in terms of African woman breaking that imposed silence. Women writers demystify accepted and oppressive aspects of ‘cultural tradition’ that legitimize certain cruel practices.” (Egejuru, 1997, 10) This statement has a twofold power. On the one hand, the voice of women rises against not only certain aspects of African traditions that devalue women, but also certain cultural constructs that “otherize” them and raise the man to the term of the self, thereby placing him at the center by which every being and

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<sup>2</sup> Here, Bill Moyers interviews Chinua Achebe. This fragment of the interview is quoted by Simon Gikandi in *Reading the African Novel*. See p. 3.

action is to be measured. On the other hand, this voice is intent on making a breakthrough into the "male-hijacked" African literature. Male-authored writings seemed not to ascribe a place of pride to woman characters. Besides, males used to pilot literary criticism, which patronized female writings. Most importantly, in order to show how important and almost all-encompassing their prose is, some female writers do not intend to leave out the critique of imperialism and neo-colonialism. Perhaps the following lines appropriately encapsulate the objectives pursued by African women writers:

**One day**, we shall rescue our lives from peripheral hanging on and assume the center of historical action. We shall explore every avenue that runs through our lives and create life roads that know no dead ends, extending them to the limits of human destination. We shall put an angry full stop to the negation of our human rights.

.....  
**One day**, we shall explode the negative silences and paralyzing terror imposed upon us by the tyranny of dominating cultures and their languages of conquest. We shall discover the authentic voices of our self-naming and renaming, reclaiming our roles as composers, speakers for ourselves, because we too have tongues, you know. (Podis, 57-8)

It is clear that the question here is that of voice in an environment where the female gender is muted, and claiming voice is evocative of the will to power, the power to represent oneself rather than being represented by a patriarchally and imperialistically biased voice of "outsiders."

### III

The issue of representation and self-representation, or in short the discourse of power, is handled by both male and female African writers, and chiefly how some women writers subvert the self/other and center/periphery paradigm, and thereby empowers itself. *Things Fall Apart* is, and such is no secret, is a work that deals with the contact of Africa with the West in the nexus of the traditional life of the Igbo people where the man rules. Along with his predecessors i.e., the forefathers of African literature, Achebe undertakes the task of smashing the vilifying and dehumanizing images and stereotypes the West, especially British imperialists, utilized to depict Africans as "stagnated in primitive savagery with no sense of order, no sense of ethics, no principles of conducts-attitudes which became the justification for the conquest and exploitation" of the African continent (Wart Lott et al, 337). The story of Umuofia, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, winds up with the reading a Westerner makes of Africa. As he is humiliated by the invaders and tries to resist, Okonkwo chops down a messenger and hangs himself. The District Commissioner tries to make a subject-matter out of this scene that marks the success of the pacification and civilizing mission of the West in Africa. Here is the reaction of the Commissioner:

The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading in the book he would write on bringing civilization to Africa. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. He had already chosen the title

of book, after much thought: *The pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (TFA, 191)

Achebe's oeuvre positions itself as a breaker of such stereotypes as Africa is the land of savages or people lacking social, economic and political organization. Although the character of Okonkwo overshadows the story, *Things Fall Apart* is in actuality the story of a people, the Igbo, a community, which lives by a set of rules, traditions and beliefs – yardstick to measure the degree of social order and organization. The characterization of Okonkwo as brave, powerful, blindly heroic, uncompromising and yet, a man only guided by his self-realization over and against his community, shows the collectivistic character of some African communities. Thus, when Okwonko alienates himself from the community, this action precipitates his downfall. His *chi* abandons him and he ends up hanging himself. The community is so central in the life of the individual that it appears to be imposing its will on him or her, thereby eating at his or her liberties by means of control. Controlling the individual might be construed as someone that poses a threat to the community, and therefore needs to be checked constantly. Yet, the individual is so much important that he or she is assigned a distinct and creative agency but within the confines of his community. "The uniqueness and importance of the individual is limited by the will of the community," Achebe comments (Egejuru, 1980, 123).

The same sense of community is celebrated by Ousmane Sembene when he shows the plight of those who decide to estrange themselves from the mass. Though *God's Bits of Wood* is a novel of another kind, i.e. a Marxist and

revolutionary portraiture of group struggle against colonial power and therefore ideologically different from *Things Fall Apart*, Sembene's work shows the preeminence of the group over the individual.

In the trainmen's struggle for the betterment of their working condition, every individual plays his or her part in such a way that such leaders as Bakayoko and the other members of the workers' union rely on the dynamics of the community and cannot be singled out as the heroes of the struggle. Sembene celebrates both the individual and the community at the same time. And yet, the individual realizes himself or herself within the community. Those who disassociate from the struggle or the community's will pay for their choice. Thus, Diarra, who tries to break the strike, is beaten by young men of almost the same age as his son, humiliated publicly so as to discourage any one who would like to follow in his footsteps. Estranging from the power and will of his community can even bring about death sentence. Sounkare, the watchman, does not join hands with the strikers. By preferring to retreat into absolute solitude he signs his death warrant. He is left alone as he chooses it and dies in his cabin half-eaten by rats.

The invasion of Africa by the imperialist West cannot be accounted for in terms of Africa being a No Man's Land. Instead, it is explained by the materialistic and mercantilist drives of the West and the use of force upon the weak – technologically and militarily speaking – by them when they pretended to teach lessons of good conduct, ethics and civilization. By dramatizing the lot of his people and celebrating their ways of life, Achebe causes the civilized/savage hierarchy to collapse.

However challenging his *œuvre* may be Achebe's

portrayal of his characters – especially the female ones – raises an uproar among the female writers and critics, who perceive a great deal of patriarchy and sexism in *Things Fall Apart*. While counteracting the colonialist discourse, which hierarchizes Africans as the lowest terms of dichotomies, he constructs another hierarchy male/female. The author empowers the male gender at the detriment of the female, whom he silences. He follows into the footsteps of those who romanticize and idealize woman i.e., the woman's voice is taken away and muted, and the writer accords them symbolic powers.

The way Okonkwo is characterized celebrates the power of men in a traditional setting where men achieve their fame and social success through the victimization of the opposite sex. The personality and the role of Okonkwo are described in terms of violence or any item capable of attracting into violence. He is said to “be a tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look.” (*TFA*, 3-4) He “was a man of action, a man of war... In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head,” (10) and “he ruled his household with a heavy hand.” (13) “He never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength.” (28) In the village he earns the nickname of the “Roaring Flame”. He realizes himself through violence and looks down on the others and calls effeminate those who can achieve his kind of success. Being a man, according to Okonkwo, equals violence.

The female character is derided, for instance, when Okonkwo feels some remorse after killing his stepson Ikemefuna as dictated by the oracle, he scolds himself:

“When did you become a shivering old woman... you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.” (65)

Besides, after scolding himself, Okonkwo regains a certain peace of mind and walks to his friend Obierika's. To Obierika, Okonkwo mouths his worries about the “womanliness” of Nwoye who very much takes after Unoka – Okonkwo's father – whose image still haunts him. He wishes son would grow like a man, strong and hard like himself. Thus, he wonders why Ezinma has been a girl. Had she been a boy, Okonkwo “would have been happier. She has the right spirit.” (66)

The gender division is also seen through the marginalization of the female character, who is given actually a symbolic and nominal power. Ikemefuna is handed to Umuofia so as to atone for the murder of one of her daughter. It is the Okonkwo house that is in charge of hosting the lad until his execution. He does not consult his wives or even inform them of the presence of the young boy in their home, and when his eldest wife makes the error to inquire he angrily says: “Do what you are told, woman... when did you become one of *ndichie* of Umuofia?” (14) There seems not to be a relationship of wife and husband between him and his wives, but a relation of master and slave. Furthermore, when Okonkwo inadvertently kills the twins, the murder is called a “female *ochu*”; a lesser crime, which is propitiated by a seven-year exile and he goes to his motherland. The portrayal of the gender relation in *Things Fall Apart* then makes such female critic as Chioma Opara view Achebe as a sexist. She believes that “Achebe makes no

bones about delineating a woman as a slave rather than a spouse" his 'authorial voice seems to condone such sexist mores." (Podis, 114)

If Achebe is sexist when handling his female characters, he seems to redeem himself by bestowing divine power upon female characters like Chielo. She is "the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves." (*TFA*, 49) In Igbo culture Agbala with lowercase "a" refers to a woman. Unoka was derogatorily called so because all his lifetime he could not prove himself to be a man in the sense of his son and his fellow villagers. However, Chielo was given the Agbala title and as a woman it does not deride or devalue her; it rather empowers her. The real balance Achebe establishes between male and female is the flaw he has the major character commit by breaking the law during the Week of Peace. Ezeani the priest of Ani the goddess of earth rebukes him. "Take away your kola nuts. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors." (30)

Besides, when Uzowulu beats up his wife the village council convenes to redress the wrong he has done to her. Not only does the sacred mask of Umuofia appear for the case, but the defendant is also warned against repeating his reprehensible act in these terms: "if he ever beats her again we shall cut off his genitals for him." (92) No doubt, the fear of being castrated i.e., being deprived of his symbol of power, will bring him to reason and force him to respect his wife. There is therefore a will on part of Achebe to empower the female characters, and to balance the gender relation in the novel.

The empowerment of women is clearly discussed in such male-authored works as Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*. Not only does the author attempt to expose

the evils of French colonialism in Senegal, and by the same token in the whole of Africa, but it also does a great deal in showing the worth of women in liberation struggle. Like Achebe, who challenges colonialist discourse, Sembene sets out to subvert three hierarchies at the same time, which are the colonizer/colonized; the employer/employee; and male/female. The two first dichotomies can be boiled down into one: oppressor/oppressed insofar as they operate simultaneously in the story and the terms of the two binaries are interchangeable. The colonizer is the employer and the colonized the employee or simply the colonizer/employer is the oppressor, and the colonized/employee the oppressed.

The story of the trainmen in *God's Bits of Wood* is the fictionalization of a historical fact, namely the strike of the railway workers of the Dakar-Niger line in 1938 and 1947-48 in the heat of colonization. Sembene re-appropriates history and Marxism to denounce colonialism as an aspect of imperialism-the highest stage of capitalism in Africa. In order to make clear his concerns, he depicts the railway line as a symbol of industrial capital and of the antagonism between workers and employers.

The movement of the workers arises from the need to improve their working conditions and eventually to shake down the colonial yoke. The workers in the story are shown almost as slaves of white man's technology: "Every inhabitant of Thiès, no matter who he was depended on the railroad, and on the traffic between Koulikoro and Dakar." (13-14) They abandon any other occupational activity on behalf of the train, and though they are on strike they miss the "smoke of the savanna", "an intangible sense of loss weighed on everyone: the loss of the machine." (76) The dependence on the machine and the lack of any other

option to eke out their existence explain why the workers remain determined to wage the fight against the colonialist employer, who relies on violence to maintain his stranglehold on the exploited workers. Consequently, when they gather in their headquarters the workers are routed and beaten hollow by the militiamen and the police. The author shows the brutality and barbarism of the "civilized" white man when he graphically depicts the workers' heroic fight against the armed militiamen and the police.

The death of Maimouna's baby, the breaking of the neck of Houdia M'Baye, the massacre of poor and defenseless Penda, Old Niakoro and Samba N'Doulougou conjure the magnitude of violence the colonizer uses to silence freedom fighters. Yet, the unflinching determination of the striking workers pays off inasmuch as the grievances will be redressed. Most importantly, the colonizer bends to the will of the colonized. Dejean and Isnard leave the colony, and that decision foreshadows the downfall and the end of colonization. There seems to be a dialogue between workers and their employers. However, in this dialogue the workers, who symbolize the African masses, are in a position of force. For instance, at the close of the story, Lahbib talks to the director very much like equal:

'So!' he began angrily. 'This is the way your union operates! I am told that the workers are doing nothing! They've got to work now-work hard! You don't think you're going to be paid for doing nothing!

*'Monsieur le directeur, you know the conditions of the agreement. We know that you are going to leave, but Isnard must go too. As long as he is here, the men will be at their jobs, but they will not work. (244)*

The answer of Lahbib to Dejean shows somebody who seems to be invested with power and responsibility, and resolved not to yield to the oppressor anymore. This dialogue therefore reads as the empowerment of the voiceless and oppressed.

Sembene provides a portrayal that establishes a balance between the sexes (men and women). He gives voice to figures who are usually left out, the physically impaired and women. Critic Chidi Amuta writes: "the all-inclusive collectivistic nature of characterization in *God's Bits of Wood* raises the question of the relationship between the individual and collective wills in the historical process. As much as possible, Sembene avoids the lure of individuation of the heroic function but instead democratizes the heroic responsibility among his numerous characters." (Amuta, 141)

Maimouna the blind woman is as committed to the struggle as anybody else. Neither her blindness nor her loss deters Maimouna's determination to the cause of the strikers. She encourages the fighters with a traditional song, the Legend of Goumba in which she recalls the valor and power of a female warrior "who had measured against that of men." (*GBW*, 16) Isn't this legend of Goumba re-actualized by the female characters in the novel? The voice of the blind woman closes the novel with her wisdom. "But happy is a man who does battle without hatred." (248) Like Maimouna, Bakary, a tuberculosis-struck, acts as the spokesperson for the worker's pensions at the rally.

In terms of female empowerment, instances abound in the text. In the beginning of the narrative, most of the power is in the hands of the direction of the railroad and smoothly shifts from its hands to the trainmen, and at last the whole struggle seems to be conducted by women. The author

destroys the myth that women are only fit for the kitchen and for reproduction. Gender relations are balanced so much so that in the end the reader believes that the female characters are the true heroes of the novel. Characters like Ramatoulaye, Mame Sofi, Houdia M'baye, Penda, among others, wield the reality of power during the strike of railroad workers. The wives of the railroad workers filled in the void left by their powerless husbands. Their men were not only persecuted by the militia of the colonial regime, but they were also without pay hungry. They were literally emasculated. The wives and women braved the anti-demonstration decrees issued by the colonial authorities and dissuaded some men from going back to work. Better still, they occupied the forefront of the battle, which is an act of courage worthy of being called power.

Ramatoulaye's role among women counterbalances that of Bakayoko, the one almost unseen in the story, but whose image hovers over everything in the trainmen's struggle. She is the stepmother of all, both men and women. Her preoccupation with the well-being of those in her care leads her to slay Vendredi, the ram of her conniving brother, Mabigué, to feed the starving people. In a confession she explains why she is so active in the struggle as follows: "When you know that the life and the spirit of other depend on your life and spirit, you have no right to be afraid – even when you are terribly afraid. In the cruel times we are living through we must find our own strength, somehow, and force ourselves to be hard." (69)

The most interesting case of empowerment is that of Penda, the prostitute. She is marginalized because of her way of life, and yet she takes the lead among the women. At the start they resent her presence (among themselves). But

she is the key to success in that she leads the march to Dakar, a march that actually publicizes the cause of the trainmen and has their voices heard by the railroad management.

Were it not for the presence of female figures, the strikers would have yielded. The involvement of women infuses energy into the strikers. Some of them are so committed that they threaten and warn their husbands against going back to work. For instance, Alioune reports to Deune that his wife threatens to castrate him: "Do you know what your wife told me yesterday - If you go back to work before the others, I'll cut off your things... she is capable of it." (39)

Sembène's last gesture towards balancing gender is the case of little Adjibdji. She represents the future African woman, one that is western-educated and yet cognizant of the value of her cultural identity. She strongly believes in the words of her father who tells her that someday men and women will be on the same footing. The teachings she receives from Bakayoko do not interfere with those of Old Niakoro. The old lady warns her granddaughter against losing her sense of who self is. Old Niakoro may be reactionary and blind to the movement of history, i.e. inevitable changes that occur in the life of a given community by the encounter with another. However, her points are valid when she rails against western education. When she says: "I have never heard of a white man who had learned to speak Bambara, or any other language of this country. But you rootless people think only of learning his, while our language dies" she performs her part of the struggle against cultural domination and/or imperialism. For, she knows that the real subjugation of a people passes by depriving it of its cultural identity. By characterizing Old

Niakoro as the custodian of traditional and cultural values, Sembene believes that these values are fundamental and instrumental in the struggle against foreign domination.

The preeminence of culture as Sembene shows it through Niakoro, is summarized by Amilcar Cabral who maintains that

the value of culture as an element of resistance lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated. Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history, by the positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationship between man and his environment, among men or groups of men within a society, as well as among different societies. Ignorance of this fact may explain the failure of several attempts at foreign domination as well as the failure of some international liberation movements." (Cabral, 41)

Besides, the message of the wise woman targets people like N'Dèye Touti, who has no knowledge of her history and people. Meanwhile she goes to colonial school where they teach her about the whole world excluding the life of her people. Importantly, she resents being identified with her people. She is disillusioned when she realizes that her education does not raise her to the same pedestal as the white. In the words of the white men she comes across, she learns that she is as savage as all her people. She becomes an asset for her community and commits herself to the struggle.

Sembene succeeds in challenging the colonial

hegemony. At the same time, he challenges the cultural constructs that disempower women in Africa. By putting men and women on the same footing, he makes the claim that the time has come when men should come to the realization that they cannot do without their wives. And "the men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were bringing a new breed of women." (GBW, 138-48) Isn't that new breed of women that some African female writers describe in their works?

#### IV

As we have seen earlier, female writing emerged out of the need for women to speak up for themselves, to have a voice, to counteract the idealization and romanticization of the African woman in male-authored works in African literature on the one hand. On the other hand, their works are intent on subverting the patriarchal and socio-cultural constructs that reduce the African woman to motherhood and wifehood. In order to reverse the trends i.e., to bring women to the center from the periphery they seem to be forced in, Mariama Bâ believes in the power of books because they "are a weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps, but they are a weapon." (Muchi et al, *Gender*, 148) Bâ considered writing as a weapon during his lifetime, she did the weapon of writing before her death to break the silence that was imposed on some African women in general, and the Senegalese in particular.

The novel is about a Senegalese woman – Ramatoulaye – who has been widowed. In her letter to her childhood friend Aissatou, she recounts how she succeeds to survive emotionally, socially and economically after Modou –

her husband marries Binetou. She chooses Aissatou as the addressee of the letter because the latter has gone through the same pains. Then, the letter focuses on the marginalization of African women who reject polygamy in a predominantly Islamic society as Senegal. On the whole, the letter of Ramatoulaye, which never reaches its destination, reads as the voice of woman never heard of in a patriarchal society.

Bâ uses Ramatoulaye to put her points forth; women should have a voice and the power to choose the way they deem right to live their life. She has Ramatoulaye question the marital practices in some African societies, which objectify and devalue the female gender. Ramatoulaye stands against polygamy and though she is not vocal about it, when she is given the opportunity, she crudely tells what she has on her heart for a long time. For instance, after the Muslim rituals that follow the death of her husband, Ramatoulaye receives a visit from Tamsir, Mawdo and the Imam. Tamsir, the brother of the departed, should marry Ramatoulaye in accordance with the tradition. She refuses the proposition of marriage, because marriage to her is a question of love and she is not an object to be passed from one hand to another. She vehemently reasons and scolds Tamsir and company. She has gained the voice and articulation she could not afford because of the place of women in Senegalese society. She writes: "This time I shall speak out... My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous." (*SLL*, 57-8)

Also important in this novel is the idea of individual choice that Mariama Bâ shows to those whose right to choice is denied. Ramatoulaye decides to stay in her marriage with Modou although he has left the conjugal

home for Binetou. Unlike Rama, Aissatou leaves her husband Mawdo and eventually succeeds to have a job at the Senegalese embassy in Washington. Right away, Aissatou starts her protest against what she deems unacceptable for a liberated woman. Ramatoulaye stays in Modou's house because as she says, she is "one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple." She adds: "even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of the liberated woman, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage." (55-6)

Ramatoulaye's choice denotes the fact that the African woman, in general, and the Senegalese woman in particular, is caught between African traditions and the imperatives of modernism. It is true that the African woman is drowning in "the bog of tradition, superstition and custom" and yet, she acknowledges the necessity of her traditions, which are to be coupled with the values of modernity. For Mariama Bâ, changes in the predicament of women will occur over time, or progressively. That's why she lays a strong emphasis on education for women and the necessity to partake in the body politic. Ramatoulaye compensates her mishap in marital life for dedicating her every effort to the education of her children, for she believes education to one of the surest ways to claw women out of the "bog." For instance, she gives a liberal education to her children and Daba, her eldest daughter stands as the prototype of the liberated African woman, one that is placed on the same footing as man. She and her husband, Abou, share the domestic responsibilities equally and Abou believes that Daba is but his wife, "she is not my slave, nor my servant." (73) They stand for the ideal couple of African man and

woman. Yet, the other question that the liberated woman raises is how to balance the individualism apparent in the way Daba does her things and the communal character of some African societies.<sup>3</sup>

Bâ was charged with not being enough vocal against those who oppress women and some female critic consider her not to be a real advocate of women's liberation from the yoke of men. In comparing Ramatoulaye, who look very much like Bâ in many (and who is sometimes seen as the persona of the author) and Aissatou, a more progressive and independent Senegalese woman, some critics believe that Bâ was not addressing the predicament of women in Africa with realism and engagement. For instance, Irène Assiba d'Almeida accuses her of dancing tango, a forward-backward movement: "when she makes two steps forward, she almost immediately makes one step backward." (Davies et al, 167-8) Bâ should have developed more female characters like Aissatou to face men like the husband of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's own ex-husband.

The realism of Bâ, however, stems from her careful handling of the gender issue in an Africa that remains fundamentally attached to traditions and customs, and above all, in an Islamic society in which it is said that women

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<sup>3</sup> I want to keep away from sweeping generalizations. Some African societies were (and still are) oriented toward communalism. Others, chiefly those that were organized in a vertical way, showed clear signs of individualism as everything was organized according to the needs and wants of the social, economic and political "classes" these societies were made of. I have in minds the West African Kingdoms of Mali, Songhay, Abomey, and Oyo, to name but a few. These societies were pyramidally structured, and such a structuration of a given society is symptomatic of what Marxist thinkers call class struggle, although in the case of these kingdoms, enough leverage was not apportioned to the lower classes of societies.

have no mouth at all. She believes that things will improve for the African woman sooner or latter. The question of power or voice for women is discussed by Ba but not so boldly as Ama Ata Aidoo and Nawal el Saadawi do.

In *Changes*, Aidoo portrays a young Akan woman who is self-assured and an independent-minded. Esi is the example the author sets for the African woman. The protagonist is a master's degree holder and works in the Urban Bureau of the Department of Statistics. She is strongly preoccupied with her job and career at the detriment of her husband Oko with whom she has a daughter. She believes that Oko is too demanding: he wants to have control over her body, he wants to have more than one child and most preferably a son, and he requires more attention from her. Oko resents his wife's stubborn professionalism. For, her work takes precedence over her marital obligations as they are traditionally understood in some African communities, i.e. cooking for the husband, sharing the bed and taking care of the husband and the household as well. Esi respects none of these obligations. She is reported to be "a great cook who complained endlessly anytime she had to enter the kitchen." (CLS, 8) She has one child and is "one those dreadful birth control things: pills, loops or whatever. She had gone on them soon after the child was born, and no amount of reasoning and pleading had persuaded her to go off them." (Ibid) She leaves the house for her job from sunrise to sundown and brings home some work to do. Oko is frustrated with her and eventually assaults her. Esi names her husband's act a "marital rape," which in most African cultures may be called all the names except for rape. She divorces Oko as a consequence of her being raped.

Aidoo features a new type of African woman, one who transgresses and subverts the way things are constructed in African culture and traditions. Esi's naming of Oko's assault on her, not only questions the patriarchal logic in which marriage in some African communities is embedded. But it also conjures the resolve of some African women to affirm their power over their body. The female body, which is the "object" of contention, is indeed a source of power, for it unsettles man. Oko cannot resist his naked wife, and consequently he does what he thinks is the right thing to do when she is not receptive to his idea of having sex. He forces her to have sex with him. The fact that Esi considers herself not "fresh or clean" after the intercourse can be construed as questioning the institution of marriage on the one hand, and on the other hand, it reads, not only as the dismantling of patriarchal power, but also as the affirmation of the suppressed female voice. The "marital rape" leads to their divorce, which drives Oko out of his mind. The naming of the rape also bestows the power of decision making upon Esi.

The refusal of Esi, the main protagonist, to participate in a marriage controlled only by the man is undoubtedly Aidoo's effort to redefine female identity in African literature. She seems to claim that the curtain is closed on the era when African women were given peripheral roles, and characterized as powerless, subservient and docile. In this perspective of Aidoo's women in Africa should be responsible and attempt to change the order of things. Most importantly, the author does not bother to graphically describe every step of sexual intercourse in the novel. Perhaps, such vivid and graphic descriptions are meant to expose male brutality and by the same token, the coming of

age of a new breed of African women, those who resist their male oppressors. That's why Aidoo's courage in *Changes* represents a leap forward in African literature. For, generally, in describing love-making scenes, male writers use enough subtlety and leave the reader to puzzle out the message they try to convey.

Esi contrasts with her friend Apokuya. The latter is shown as the mother of four children, she also "mothers" her husband and usually comes to an agreement with him when there exists a problem in the family. She knows that marriage is a matter of two persons and that its success hinges upon mutual understanding and agreement. Though she is portrayed as the kind of woman feminists resent, she cannot, for instance, understand why Esi decides to marry Ali. The contradiction in Esi emerges from her acceptance of polygamy. Whereas she displays hints of the liberated woman in thought and action, she falls in love with an already married man, thereby sanctioning that which cannot go unchallenged in the feminist discourse. The re-entry of Esi into marriage and, above all, polygamy weakens a substantial part of the author's message.

Admittedly, in terms of subverting the male/female hierarchy, Aidoo succeeds perfectly insofar as she gives a strong voice to an old woman who symbolizes traditional wisdom, and in some way, appears to be a sort of prop for the patriarchal hierarchization of African societies. Some women, and mostly elderly ones in some parts of Africa in olden days, were in charge of brainwashing the wives-to-be into submissiveness and docility because on these qualities the success of their marriage used to depend. Unlike the usual traditional woman, Nana pillories and demonizes men in her ironic pronouncements. As Esi seeks for her

advice before marrying Ali, Old Nana goes to the genesis of male domination; she characterizes men as the “first gods in the universe, and they were devouring gods. The only way they could yield their best – and sometimes their worst too – was if their egos were sacrificed to: regularly. The bloodier the sacrifice the better.” (110) For the old lady, the best husband a woman can ever have is one who encroaches upon his wife’s freedom and other rights, a husband “who demands all of you and all of your time.” (109) Paradoxically, the irony conforms Esi’s destiny. In search for equality, freedom and more space, she lands in a situation worse than her former marriage. As the Malinke in West Africa say, by running away from death, she hides in a tomb. The marriage with Ali does not prove any better than the one with Oko. She sinks into desolation and loneliness, she is almost on the brink of depression as she confesses it to her doctor. Worst of all, she alienates herself not only from her daughter and her mothers but also from society as a whole. Her daughter in the end does not express the need to be with her at any cost, Ali spends most of his time either with Fusena and their children or in his office, and ultimately her mothers do not see any difference between her marriage to Oko and her new marriage.

Esi’s polygamous marriage shows that marriage is and remains fundamental in the life of women in some parts of Africa, notwithstanding the feminist discourse, which seeks to redefine it or simply dismiss it. As she parts with Oko, unquestionably, she fulfills herself professionally, which appears an important detail in the story according to Tuzyline Jita Allan. In the Afterword to *Changes*, she states: “Some readers will likely rally around the opinion that Esi’s embrace of polygamy wrecks the liberated self she projects

at the beginning of the novel. Her hasty re-entry into a sexual relationship after the rape, which was intended to control her, may cause additional wariness about her feminist capability. Such views, however, would fail to consider an important narrative detail: Esi's consuming desire for a self-fulfilling career." (183) The truth that lays bare is the fact that she comes to the realization that she cannot live by herself; she needs some male company, even if this necessitates polygamy. Does her divorce from Oko whose financial condition leaves a lot to be desired – Esi earns more money, and Oko is just a schoolteacher – means that she is only guided by financial well-being? Is the liberated African woman one who wreaks havoc on another woman marriage, since Esi's remarriage led to Fusena's pain?

All the same, Esi does challenge the power of man by establishing a new kind of marriage relation in which the female has a voice and lets it be heard. Yet, the story of Esi ends with the same implication as in *So Long a Letter*; that is, happiness cannot be conceived out of the confines of marriage, and things will only change progressively. The ending lines of *Changes*: "yes, maybe, 'one day, one day' as the Highlife singer had sung on an unusually warm and not-so-dark night" attest to that view (CLS, 166). That's why, some readers, myself included, tend to believe that the story of Esi does not reflect the title of the novel: "Changes" Such a title better applies to the story of Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* of Nawal el Saadawi.

El Saadawi, in her works in general, and in *Women at Point Zero* particularly, takes the responsibility to subvert the patriarchal authority and power that govern her society by creating a new breed of woman, one who no more

accepts to be crushed in the name of traditions and Islam. She rails against the institution of marriage, the Muslim women's wearing of the veil and female circumcision, which for her are related to class domination, slavery and patriarchy. Her goal is to rehabilitate women, to give them a voice because as she says, they are "buried in the name of good manners, and I try to pull them out of that grave" (Roth, 47) El Saadawi's *œuvre* describes the different ladders that Firdaus, the protagonist, soars to attain her freedom and her self-realization by means of violence. The story traces the life of Firdaus, from her youth in rural Egypt – the brutality of her father and by the same token all the patriarchal society condoning the father's behavior, her clitoridectomy, her education – to her realization of the power of money, the power of her body and her rediscovery.

Firdaus is from a poor rural family; she is exploited and mistreated by her father. She works as a slave and ultimately asks whether the man who mistreats her is actually her father. She is so confused that she no more recognizes her father "sometimes I could not distinguish which one was my father. He resembled them so closely that it was difficult to tell," she says. Her questioning of the "authority" of the father (and all fathers in general) leads to her circumcision. As she persistently bothers her mother with questions about her father, the mother calls for an old woman to "cut off a piece of flesh from [her] thighs." (13) From there, starts her trauma and confusion. The recurrent references to eyes following her, wherever she goes, speak to the oppressive and constraining social structures that condition and regulate Firdaus' life. The eyes of her mother, who sided with her father by mutilating her, follow and haunt her wherever she goes. She says: "they were eyes that watched

me. Even if I disappeared from their view, they could see me, and follow me wherever I went, so that if I faltered while learning to walk they would hold me up." (16-17) The childhood experience of Firdaus creates in her feelings of hatred and self-hatred. She hates mother – she has very ambivalent feelings about her mother – and her father, by the same token, all men supporting what the father does. She is alienated from herself, hates herself and she refuses to confront the reality, the reality of who she is. For instance, when she moves to the city with her uncle to pursue her studies, she has a room for her own with a mirror to watch herself. As she watches herself in the mirror, the images of his father and mother still haunt her and consequently, she develops a "deep hatred for the mirror. From that moment I never looked into it again." (21) Firdaus' estrangement from herself is evocative of her will to do away with the past and create a new self. She rejects her past on behalf of the future, for as she says "there was nothing in my past, or my childhood, to talk about and no love or anything of the sort in the present. If I had something to say, therefore it could only concern the future. For the future was still mine to paint in the colours I desired. Still mine to decide about freely, and change as I saw fit." (25)

The movement from the rural area to the city opens a new perspective for her. At least, she begins to sense what freedom is. She starts having a kind of discriminative power and articulation. As she walks in the streets, she discovers a new world, a world that was unknown to her. The streets symbolize her way towards fulfillment. "When I looked at the streets" she says, "it was as though I was seeing it for the first time. A new world was opening up in front of my eyes, a world which for me had not existed before. Maybe it had

always been there, always existed, but I had never seen it, never realized it had been there all the time. How was it that I had been blind to its existence all these years? Now it seemed as if a third eye had suddenly been slit open in my head.” (40) The streets that open her eyes and raise her to a higher level of perception become her only resort and means to uplift her status. The street liberates her from the domination of men. Whenever she faces some oppression she runs out “for the street had become the only safe place in which [she] could seek refuge, and into which [she] could escape with [her] whole being.” (51)

It is after she has escaped Bayoumi’s brutality that she runs to the street where she meets Shariffa. Obviously, Shariffa is not much better than her husband Mahmoud, Bayoumi or her uncle, for she also takes advantage of her. However, she learns how to value herself by co-modifying her body. The life of prostitute gives her the courage to look at herself and to appreciate her worth. As she looks at herself in the mirror she comes to the realization that she is reborn “with a new body, smooth and tender as a rose petal.” (52) Saadawi uses prostitution to empower her character because it is the most contested way of life, and it stands as the most efficient tool to challenge the traditional and religious views that have a stronghold on the female body. By using her body as a source of revenue, Firdaus achieves little by little her freedom. She becomes self-reliant and the eyes that unflinchingly follow her ultimately cease to haunt her. For instance, the money she earns after the “pass” with an unnamed man, gives her the power of choice; she chooses what and to eat for at Sheikh Mahmoud’s – her husband – she could not eat without him watching over her. Most importantly, it surrenders the waiter to her; for he

dares not stare at her and “that movement of his eyes as they avoided [her] plate cut like a knife through the veil hung over [her] eyes.” (66)

Although Firdaus makes use of her secondary school certificate to find a job after Di’aa hurts her self-pride – “You are not a respectable woman,” he says – she relapses into her former life, prostitution, because her job appears to be another form of exploitation. She prefers her trade because it gives her freedom and power over men; it dignifies her. The return to her former life empowers Firdaus furthermore. Unlike other prostitutes she charges high for her body as her “teacher” Shariffa told her: “Neither Bayoumi, nor any of his cronies realized your worth, because you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man does not know a woman’s value... She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realize what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay with all the means at your disposal. And if he has no means, he will steal from someone else to give you what you demand.” (54) Not only does she value herself, but also she begins to say “NO” and she includes in her repertoire the word “impossible,” which Marzouk the pimp abhors. For him, “the word impossible does not exist” (Ibid, 54) and yet, it does exist for Firdaus. Her voice confounds and subdues the pimp; she reverses the trends, she becomes the master and he the slave. It is the protection of her voice over and against any expropriation that prompts Firdaus to use a stronger form of resistance, murder.

The murder that Firdaus commits propels her to the rank of “a princess, or a queen, or a goddess” and restores to her the confidence and pride she could not afford. Although the hero of the story will die, she manages to

destroy the subject of her oppression, her exploitation and humiliation. The silence that she imposes on the issue which is in actuality the reason why she is executed speaks tons of things about the success of her mission; the objectification of man. For her refusal to recount the story of the murder means that she has done the right thing, and if need be, she will do it again. Her story reads as a harbinger for the liberation of woman by any means whatsoever. Although she is hanged, she kills first and exudes some pride and inner peace after her acts.

There is a question that needs to be asked: is such violence needed to reverse the trends, to empower the female gender in reality? Isn't murder too dehumanizing a method for women more than the oppression by men that some female critics rail against? Can such a revolution along gender line take place in the Arab world as el Saadawi proposes?

In the novels reviewed here, the empowerment of women appears progressively. In the male-authored works, the female characters are given either a symbolic voice or some kind of power, which almost puts them on the same footing as men. The empowerment of women is hidden in a work such as Achebe's. It is too harsh to accuse Achebe of masochism and sexism. One needs to see the context from which the work emerged. *Things Fall Apart* appeared in a context when gender relations among Africans were not the concern. The concern was to write back to the West, even though in writing back authors should have extensively investigated the intricacies of power relations: relations between the colonized and the colonizer, and the power relation between the African man and the woman. The main goal of Achebe was rather to affirm the voice of Africa

against those who denied it, and placed it at the periphery.

In *God's Bits of Wood* the equalization of the roles men and women play, is an exposition of the author's socialist or communist views in terms of the liberation struggle where the smallest has his or her words to speak. His work empowers the voiceless women because it shows the indispensability of women in what was initially the trainmen's struggle.

As far as the female-authored works are concerned, they do not reflect the vigor and the subversive character of the African "feminist" discourse. *So Long a Letter* and *Changes* are aborted attempts at subverting the male/female dichotomy. The former does not embark on a feminist discourse that bashes men, the battle for equality between men and women, but it exposes gender struggle as one that will fought by the next generation. It is gradualist. The latter, likewise, fails to deliver on its promise of women's liberation, for it winds up condoning that which it cries out against, polygamy. Although marriage is not the main concern of Aidoo here, polygamy is no less central in her work. It appears to be Esi's ultimate matrimonial option. And yet, the same polygamy is the root of some rivalries that wind up wreaking families.

The subversion in Nawal el Saadawi's work is different and pronounced. Voiceless at the beginning of the story, Firdaus reaches her self-realization. She regains power and inner peace by killing a man who stands for the deterministic forces that bar her every movement towards freedom. Firdaus's story is specific insofar as she makes an existentialist move towards self-fulfillment. She had her back on the wall and had to choose between life and death. If is hanged in the end (which shows powerful her society is

in dealing with resistance), she no less gained a sense of relief, self-pride and self-knowledge after she had killed Marzouk. She has paved the way for a way to follow: robust action against men. Women's liberation from the constraining social structures passes through any means necessary, which is close to rare in most African female writings.

## V

It must be retained that although male writers are criticized for not allowing some dignifying place and a realistic representation of women African literature, Achebe and Sembene, to varying degrees, show that women must be, and have been, empowered. In their works, they give women a place of pride, which at times competes with successfully, or outdo the portrayal of women by their kindred in African literature. In using the Ibo people and their culture as a backdrop for his critic of both the obscurantist part of African ways and colonialism, Achebe shows that traditional Africa, at least the Ibo used to hold women in a respectable place. They had some "power" even though that power looked somewhat ancillary and nominal. By the same token, the Nigerian author, by showing certain sexist and masochistic aspects of the Ibo through the protagonist of his *œuvre*, militates for reversing the tables of laws too favorable to men in Africa. Is it erroneous to construe the death of Okonkwo as the beginning of the end of sexism?

As for the Senegalese author, his *œuvre* is very definitely one that empowers women. One can even reasonably state that if it were not for such figures as Penda, Ramatoulaye, and other notable women, the strike of

railroad workers would have been a total failure. These ladies are the "real men of the story," to use this still current oxymoron among some communities in West Africa. The revolutionary tone of the author vindicates those who in real life believe that women have their share of responsibility in history: social change is the matter of both sexes. By giving the upper hand to women, Sembene makes them the heart of the success against colonial forces in Africa. Like the Aba women who, in 1928-30, fought against British taxation in colonial Nigeria, and the Ivorian women led by Marie-Coree who marched on Bingerville in 1948 against colonial tides and winds to free their husbands from French prison cells, the women of the strikers are the backbone of the anti-colonial struggle in Sembene's fictional Mali-Senegal.

Where do female authors and their representations stand on the issue of the voice and power denied to their kindred in a literature that is predominantly male? Some female authors have demonstrated that in order for women to have a voice and power in an Africa where they are relegated to a second zone, with a firm grip they have to seize the weapons that words constitute. In order to be heard, they have to speak up for themselves. *Changes*, *So Long a Letter* and *Women at Point Zero* are works that made such an attempt although unlike El Saadawi, Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Bâ seem to be somewhat ambiguous and less bold in their approach to reclaiming voice. Boldness of means and approach (Firdaus in *Women at Point Zero* has recourse to violence when necessary) and clarity of objective (unlike Esi who marries an already married man while pretending to be emancipated, or Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* who champions woman's

freedom and yet is less committed to that cause) are the key to setting loose their voice in such an andocentric or male-dominated sphere as African literature.

The period ranging from the mid-1980's and from the 1990's to the present has witnessed some female-authored works of literature that make show of undeterred courage and resolve to reclaim the century-old confiscated voice of women. Mariétou Mbaye Biléoma (Ken Bugul), Calixthe Beyala, and Fatou Kéïta of Cote d'Ivoire (with her book *Rebelle* published in 1998), among many others, attack and very frontally so, issues that affect their lives and the life of their African sisters. They do so upon the realization that if one does not speak up against one's (supposed) oppressor, he or she will proceed oppressing, because silence is consent. Thus, with unwavering determination to speak and with a very bold approach, Calixthe Beyala, the Franco-Cameroonian writer, manages to establish a not-easy-to-shake foundation in African literature.<sup>4</sup> Among many other

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<sup>4</sup> Without necessarily downplaying the efforts of Mariama Bâ, Ama Atta Aidoo and others, I am simply saying that the clarity of one's purpose and the approach used to achieve such a purpose matter very much in a literature that is known to be "engaged", that is, functional in that it is committing and committed itself to a collective cause. Beyala makes a constant show of such a determination by being a prolific writer who authors a book every year, or every other since 1987. On that date she wrote *C'est le Soleil qui m'a brûlée*, a work criticized for its author's very daring approach to sexuality and her propensity to bash males. In *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée*, she combines eroticism with physical violence to counter patriarchalism and sexism in Africa. See *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* pp. 151-52. Ever since, Beyala wrote *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (1988); *Seul le diable le savait* (1990); *Le petit prince de Belleville* (1992); *Maman a un amant* (1993); *Assèze africaine* (1994); *Lettre d'une africaine à ses sœurs occidentales* (1995); *Les honneurs perdus* (1996); *La petite fille du réverbère* (1998); *Amour sauvage* (1999); *Lettre d'une Afro-française à*

prizes, she is laureate of the *Grand prix littéraire de l'Afrique noire* (1993), the *Prix François Mauriac de l'Académie française* (1994), and the prestigious *Prix du roman de l'Académie française* (1996). The examples of fully engaged and bold authors like El Saadawi and Beyala, to name but these two, need to be followed and expanded, for only this way can help women secure voice, and thereby a place of power in their societies thought of as the citadels of men.

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