The Image of the Woman in Francophone African Fiction: Dignity or Subjugation?

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This study challenges the assertion by Kenneth Little[1] and some feminist critics that male francophone African writers routinely portray their female characters in the stereotype of an oppressed and subjugated wife who has little if any say in shaping her destiny or in changing the system that deprives and oppresses her. This study will instead show that, despite undeniable inherent cultural injustices, the African woman does possess authority and makes her own choices on how to live her life, overcome cultural limitations, and identify and possibly exploit men's vulnerabilities as well as loopholes in the culture. In short, the African woman can be independent, resourceful, and dynamic.

Feminist critics argue that male writers depict female characters as "defined by their relationships to men: someone's daughter or wife or mother, shadowy figures who hover on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking, plating their hair ... [they fall] into a specific category of female stereotypes of ... men appendages, and prostitutes, or courtesans."[2] Assuming however that the contention is valid—that images of women in male writing perfectly reflect the traditional stereotypes cited above—it should not be ignored that from the existential standpoint, those roles are mere situations, "individual and concrete situations of a woman just as there are among men, fathers, bureaucrats, professors, bachelors."[3] As is evidenced even by female writing, the problem of existence still lurks behind each role; a being has to distinguish itself by choosing to transcend its situation. Both male and female writers have depicted female characters who have eschewed social convention and determinism to redefine or remake themselves within a given situation. We are reminded of Ousmane Sembène's Penda (*Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, 1971), Ahmadou Kourouma's Matali (*Les soleils des indépendances*, 1970), Henri Lopès's Elise (*La Nouvelle romance*, 1976), Olympe Bhêly-Quenum's Séïtou (*Un piège sans fin*, 1960), and Ferdinand Oyono's Sophia (*Une Vie de Boy* 1956), among others. These characters are all fully actualized female prostitutes who were initially forced into the profession or who consciously embraced the trade as a form of self-expression/self-realization, revolt, or revenge, but whose choices have ensured for them individual liberation. Female writing is replete with characters who have overcome or transcended their stations in life. Mariama Bâ's Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou (*Une si longue lettre*, 1980) easily come to mind.

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[1] Kenneth Little, *The Sociology of Urban Women's Image in Africa Literature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980) 53.

[2] Katherine Frank, "Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa," in *Women in African Literature Today*, eds. Eldred Durosimi Jones et al. (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1987) 14-15.

[3] Helen Peter, *Existential Woman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991) 143.

It is therefore a distortion to insist that because of the putative late arrival of women in literature, "black male writers portray [women] as 'passive' mothers with neither personality nor character or problems, accepting their condition and thus exhibiting no spirit of revolt or freedom."[4] Although numerous critical works have highlighted images of strength and wisdom in works by female writers, few serious attempts have been made to correct the widely held view that male writers routinely portray "voiceless resigned and docile woman"[5], or to allude to the attributions of choice discernable in male depictions of female images. It will be clear from the selected texts in this study that male francophone African writers do not depict robotlike objects helplessly bowing to the forces of social determinism to which they are condemned, but for the most part portray palpable individuals equipped both psychologically and physically to make choices and accept and live with the consequences of their choices.[6]

The thesis for this study derives in part from Simone de Beauvoir's model which rejects the notion of "feminine nature" as against "feminine situation." Beauvoir's injunction that a woman "must escape, liberate herself, shape her own future, deny the myths that confine her"[7] clearly has an existentialist ring to it. When she urges that a woman "take her lot in her own hands instead of entrusting it to the man,"[8] she is alluding to what many African women do on a regular basis. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, It is through choice that we give sense to the situation in which we find ourselves.[9] The African situation may differ widely from the society Sartre contemplates, but choice and responsibility—key ingredients of the existentialist doctrine—are transparent in the depiction of female images in African literary works. To some degree, writers recognize that the female character who decides to make choices changes her life significantly, and, by extension, other's lives too. As Beauvoir writes, such a woman "creates a new situation which brings about consequences she must accept."[10] Although Sartre maintains that we have no choice but to make choices, making choices is not easy either for a man or a woman; it is doubly difficult for a woman given the handicaps the culture imposes. But as Sartre insists, finding oneself in a desperate situation is not as important as what one chooses to do with that situation: "I cannot be infirm without choosing to be infirm, that is choosing the way to handle my infirmity."[11] As this study will illustrate, female characters in fiction have demonstrated the talent to make choices and stick to the consequences. The characters who shrink from choices, in the words of Beauvoir, "must live with the feminine condition."[12]

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[4] Kembe Milolo, *L'Image de la femme chez les romancières de l'Afrique noire francophone* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg, 1986) 3; my translation.

[5] Milolo 4. Also see Wanjira G. Muthoni, "Women in Action: A Socio-economic Survey of Women as seen by Black Francophone Women Writers," *Journal of Eastern African Research & Development* 19 (1989): 172-73.

[6] See Irène Assiba d'Almeida, "The concept of choice in Mariama Bâ's fiction," in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, eds, Carole Boyce Davis and Anne Adams Graves (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986) 161-65.

[7] Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1949) 127-28; cf. Patricia Mayer Spack's summary of Beauvoir's position in *The Feminine imagination* (New York: Avon Books, 1976) 17.

[8] Beauvoir 127.

[9] Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Etre et le Néant* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1949) 3, 2, 1; my translation.

[10] Beauvoir 525.

[11] Sartre 3, 2, 1.

[12] Beauvoir 525.

To explore the question of choice, this study analyzes works written during the colonial era (*Doguicimi,* 1938) by Paul Hazoumé [Dahomey], works published after independence (*Les Bouts de bois de Dieu,* 1971) by Ousmane Sembène [Senegal], *Les soleils des indépendances,* 1970) by Ahmadou Kourouma [Côte d'Ivoire], and a more recent work (*Les nouvelles romances,* 1980) by Henri Lopès [The Congo}. The analysis will examine specific female protagonists who have not been shy to make choices and face the inevitable consequences of those choices. Starting with Paul Hazoumé's *Doguicimi* is appropriate because the work, published in 1938, treats events of the last century. The chief protagonist, Doguicimi, serves to illustrate that even in precolonial days, the culture provided an opportunity for a woman to "distinguish" herself, to separate herself from the others as a consequence of her disposition to assert her own individuality either independent of, or in relation to, a man.

Long before the portrayal of women characters in fiction became an issue in francophone African literature, Paul Hazoumé's Doguicimi emerged as a self-willed, courageous woman of dignity. Incensed that her husband was sent to an unjust war, and feeling a justified sense of outrage at how king Guézo of the old kingdom of Abomey (Dahomey) appears to discredit her missing husband, Doguicimi boldly challenges the king publicly. Her boldness is all the more significant given the deplorable condition of women in this kingdom.[13] By defying both tradition and protocol, she emerges as an independent woman who can make her own choices. Ironically, her courage and audacity parallel the ideals the king is striving to inculcate in his subjects; hence, his refusal to punish her. He explains: "Having Doguicimi [executed] would mean that my reign ignores the virtue dear to our ancestors.[14] Doguicimi thus becomes the conduit for the transmission of virtuous and revolutionary ideas to the people. Her courage naturally invites sexual advances, which she repulses because she would not do anything dishonorable. When she learns of her husband's death in captivity, she requests and gets the king's permission to be buried alive with the husband's skull.

Curiously enough, feminist critics rarely cite Doguicimi's heroism and courage, probably because of their claim that she is still tied by her apron strings to a man—her husband. But that assertion ignores the fact that an event normally triggers a reaction. Her husband's fate is the catalyst that unleashes her outbursts which in turn reveal her strengths, strengths that are by no means diminished by her marital status or loyalty to her husband. After all, in every culture, and probably more so in the African culture, loyalty is a virtue. For his part, Sembène uses a major event that again predates independence—the 1947 strike of the Dakar-Niger railway workers—to pursue the thesis that true liberation comes through acts of personal courage and sacrifice. The female protagonists in his *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*[15] play a major role in the great march from Thiers to Dakar, which was intended to secure fair wages and fringe benefits from the colonialists. Penda's role in particular is significant because as prostitute, she understands that making difficult choices requires freeing oneself from moral or religious qualms and constraints. Although she dies during the strike, her life offers yet another ex-

[13] See M.J. Herskovits, *Dahomey, An African Kingdom* (New York: J.J. August, 1939).

[14] Paul Hazoumé, *Doguicimi* (Paris: Editions Larose, 1938) 187-88; my translation.

[15] Sembène Ousmane, *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1971).

ample of how a cultural stereotype—in this case prostitution—can be transcended, and how conscious escape from myths and the social determinism can elevate an individual. Equally important is the character of Ramatouyé, who courageously defies the police and takes on the Iman as well as her relatives for selling out to the *toubas* (the French men).

Penda reminds us of Beauvoir's woman who in refusing to "confine herself to her female role," defies "established code and becomes a rebel."[16] Symbolizing a relentless pursuit for a cause, she clearly personifies the virtues Sembène wants to highlight. As Doguicimi incarnates the virtues king Guézo wants his people to possess if they hope to prosper, so does Penda embody the ideals her people must embrace to achieve true liberation. (Both are ultimately martyred.) At a slightly different level, Noumbé, the chief protagonist of "Ses Trois Jours" (in Sembène's *Voltaïque*, 1962) reclaims her autonomy by revolting against her husband's culturally sanctioned arrogance, thus demonstrating the importance of courage, even at the family level. Another writer whose female characters display a disposition for making choices is Henri Lopès. The title of his novel, *La Nouvelle Romance,* which is borrowed from Louis Aragon, reveals Lopès' intention: "The modern woman is born and it is to her that I am singing."[17] One of his chief protagonists—Wali, married to Bienvenu—finds herself virtually enacting the role of "a housemaid charged with taking care of offspring" (14). But for a lucid woman of Wali's sensitivity, this type of oppressive alliance is unacceptable. Wali's decision to accompany Bienvenu to a diplomatic job in Brussels opens her eyes wider to his insensitivity and recklessness. Refusing to return to Africa with Bienvenu, Wali chooses to remain in Europe to give herself an education. She renews contacts with her childhood friends —Awa, the intellectual school teacher now studying in Paris on a scholarship, and Elise, the seamstress—who help her to acquire a new perspective of Africa as well as the need to transform the society and liberate other women. She also manages to save money to pay for the treatment of her sterility, something her husband could not do for her. Wali's self-discovery makes her aware that marriage was after all an obstacle to her happiness. She confides in her friend: "I am opposed to my husband and through him perhaps, am already opposed to this society where he is regarded as a normal man, even a model" (191). Thanks to her existential awareness, she makes the transition from the traditional stereotype of a wife to the status of a teacher and an activist, thus affirming Beauvoir's contention that there is no such thing as a feminine nature, rather there is a feminine situation.

Although Lopés depicts the new women of Africa, he does not lose sight of the different orientations of his new women and how differently (at least initially) they see the world. Wali's non-aggressive personality keeps her down a long while until she rediscovers herself. Awa, her combative bosom friend, chooses a celibate life of independence and personal pursuit. For her part, Elise, the single mother, asserts her own autonomy by combining work as a seamstress with prostitution. During a conversation between the three friends on the subject of marriage, the lucid Wali admires the determined Elise for choosing an independent ca-

[16] Beauvoir 524-25.

[17] Henri Lopès, *La Nouvelle Romance* (Yaoundé: Clé, 1976) 5; my translation. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

reer but blames herself "for only one thing: not acting. Ideas are cheap, too cheap" (64-65). As Wali herself admits, before her existential awareness, her revolt was bereft of action. Real liberating revolt occurs only after she chooses to extricate herself from a suffocating marriage and elects to become a banner bearer for the transformation of society.

An important twist in the quest for self-actualization is Wali's decision to seek medical help for her sterility. Although feminist critics tend to criticize what they call "the traditional romanticization of motherhood" and the mythologizing of "the tedia involved in motherhood"[18], the importance of motherhood in both the liberated and nonliberated characters remains undisguised. Wali sees no conflict between her new role and a deep-seated desire to have children. Even the intellectual and independent-minded Awa recognizes the need for stability which women alone can provide. In reply to why an unjust relationship should be legitimized by marriage, Awa maintains that "a woman must liberate herself without creating chaos. Every society needs order" (65). The "order" to which Awa is alluding emanates from a woman's capacity to raise and nurture children. As Wali explains in her letter to a friend, "what I am preparing to do is not for me but for our country. Women [have] a special role to play in this matter" (65). The special role envisaged by Wali obviously includes assuring stability and social order. Liberation should not, as Awa warns, create chaos which negates the ennobling role women play—not just the role of nursemaid or housemaid but the pivotal role of assuring the very survival of the society. Another example is Salimata's quest in Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances*. Despite being dubbed a victim by critics, Salimata appears to be Awa's model of a woman who tries to realize herself without creating chaos. As the marabout once indicated, Salimata deserves the best from Allah because she is a very kindly woman.[19] Despite vicissitudes, she remains a quintessential "modern" woman who fully understands her existential situation and has the boldness to make choices—including risky ones—to change her circumstance. Salimata leaves the inhibiting village for the more liberating city. She shuns (and is violent with) aggressive men who remind her of her nightmare—Tiécoura, the fetishist who raped her. Despite repeated attempts, she refuses to have sexual relations with Baffi—her first (arranged) husband—and nearly kills him as she pulls his strangulated hernia: "They understood that they had to stop the ordeal so she does not kill him" (40).

Defying tradition and threats, Salimata persists in her refusal to marry her husband's brother after Baffi's death. Escaping from this ordeal, she meets Fama, who becomes her third husband. But despite the warning from the marabout that her husband "will not impregnate a woman. He is infertile like rock, like sand and harmattan" (77), she remains faithful to her principle not to have an illegitimate child and vigorously repulses unwanted sexual advances from those intent on exploiting her misfortune. Salimata willingly welcomes Mariam, her prolific co-wife in the household. However, when the co-habitation becomes suffocating, she angrily expresses her displeasure: "The creaking sound [when Fama makes love to Mariam] is driving me crazy! I am furious!" (158). She clearly demonstrates that

[18] Carole Boyce Davies, introduction, "Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism," in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* 6.

[19] Ahmadou Kourouma, *Le soleils des indépendances* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1971) 73; my translation. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

her personal convenience overrides any other consideration in the household. When it eventually dawns on her that she has no more future in Fama's life, she opts for a new life with another man.

Undeniably, a series of misfortunes dogs Salimata's every step. But what distinguishes and defines her is what she does with these misfortunes. As Sartre says, "I cannot be infirm without choosing how to handle my infirmity."[20] Clearly, Salimata handles her "infirmity" (misfortune) with courage and dignity. As noted, at every stage of her drama, Salimata tries to be the agent of her own life despite overwhelming odds. Like other female characters discussed in this study, Salimata is born into what Chemain-Degrange refers to as the traditional determinism which conditions women of her group.[21] Yet, she is a victim only to those intractable circumstances—excision, rape, arranged marriage, and robbery—beyond her control. Otherwise, she appears virtually in control of her life. Salimata's profile is that of a strong woman who walks away from a bad marriage, picks her own man, refuses to sleep with a man she despises, repulses unwarranted sexual advances, accepts and later rejects a co-wife, breaks up an unfulfilling marriage, and seeks out a relationship that promises better prospects. This is the profile of Salimata—a profile of dignity, not of subjugation. Salimata reminds us of the women Aminata Sow Fall says she frequently meets, "sturdy women"[22] like her character Salla Niang (*La Grève des battu*, 1979), who do not apologize for being who they are: "There are not women who carry placards to demand their freedom but women who exercise their strength in the society and in their entourage."[23]

As Kembe Milolo has remarked, "The question of the equality of men and women is discussed and debated continually."[24] Whatever the debate elsewhere in the world, it is clear that the depiction of female images in African works by male writers is not as one-sided as critics contend; in fact, it essentially mirrors the reality of the African experience.[25] That reality stresses that, despite stereotypes, African women are individuals before they are members of a group, and that an awareness of their existential situation is a first step in controlling events around them. The African woman realizes that she must confront obvious limitations like all women the world over. But despite patriarchy and unjust practices in the culture (which this study does not in any way justify or excuse), the Berber proverb that "man is the outer lamp; woman is the inner lamp"[26] seems to hold true. A woman knows that she has inner strengths; how the strengths are played is a matter of individual choice.

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[20] Sartre, *L'Etre et le Néant*.

[21] Arlette Chemain-Degrange, *Emancipation féminine et roman africain* (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1990) 324.

[22] See Marie Linton-Umeh, "The African Heroine," in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, eds. Roseann P. Bell et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1979) 39-51.

[23] Françoise Pfaff, interview, "Aminata Sow Fall: L'Ecriture au féminin," *Notre Librairie* 18 (octobre-décembre 1985): 137; my translation.

[24] Milolo, introduction, *L'image de la femme* 2.

[25] Karen Smyley Wallace, "Black Women in Black Francophone Literature: Comparisons of Male and Female Writers," *International Fiction Review* 11.2 (1984): 114.

[26] See Ramon Basagana and Ali Sayad, *Habitat traditionnel et structures familiales en Kabylie* (Algiers: CRAPE, 1974) 43; cf. Mildred Mortimer, "A Feminist Critique of the Algerian Novel of French Expression," in *Design and Intent in African Literature*, eds. David Dorsey et al. (Washington, D.C.: Three Continent Press, 1982) 31.