

Reverse Chauvinism: Women in M. Ba's *So Long a Letter* and O. Sembene's *XALA*

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Abstract:

Away from the dominant readings of these works, I trace and argue that Mariam Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Ousmane Sembene's *XALA* (1975) are reversing chauvinism. Male characters are represented as inherently sexual beasts which results in polygamy. Polygamy is represented as an outcome of men's weakness and incapability to control their genitals. Chauvinism is immensely furthered because even the National Bourgeoisie, Mawdo Fall and El Hadji mainly, are slaves to their sexual desires. They use tradition to reinforce polygamy while living a Francophone lifestyle. Women, on the other hand, are depicted as strong and powerful; they can speak against polygamy because they have control over their sexuality. Rama and Aissatou seem to be in both works the very incarnation of the independent strong woman who can move beyond polygamy. I reason that in both works a reverse chauvinism takes place: through essentializing men as overtly sexual, they are liberating the woman from the stereotypes and, simultaneously, responding to the colonial discourses of patriarchy reproduced via the National Bourgeoisie.

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Introduction

Colonialism stained certain people's memory, history, and identity. Europeans went on a quest of civilization, yet upon their arrival in African and West-Asian countries, their acts were not civilized. Lois Tyson argues that "colonialist ideology ... was based on the colonizers' assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded" (Tyson, 2006). Accordingly, they plundered 'other' people's lands, pillaged their resources, and looted their countries' riches to enrich themselves. Thus, their quest for civilization became one of exploitation and hegemony. The Europeans reasoned the colour of their skin, their whiteness, entitled them to be masters above all others and to conquer other 'inferior' races. The latter was described as savages, uncivilized, unhistorical, and barbaric; yet, these same peoples ignited the fire of resistance. The Europeans' reign in these countries came to an end while the Post-colonial subjects rose to dominance. This insinuates that colonialism in the post-colonial era is much more reflected upon and discussed as an era of racism and exploitation. By the 20th century, anti-colonialist, nationalist, and liberation movements occurred to break from the unruly colonialism. Crawford Young reasons that "Incorporating visions of liberation, transformation and uplift, the independent African state was a newborn polity. As 'new states', African polities appeared to shed the colonial chrysalis" (Young, 2004). One after

another, the colonies become no longer others, but selves; India gained independence in 1947, and the rest followed. Thus, a new era was dawning as the peoples with a history of colonization presented their history of civilization as a mean of decolonization.

Decolonization came not only because of politicians and fighters but also of writers although one does not undermine their efforts because of its enormous role. Hence, postcolonial literature and writers egressed to decolonize narratives, for their importance exceeds that of land. Edward W. Said says, "The power to narrate or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism" (Said, 1994). To have the ability to narrate is essentially the ability to undermine other narratives and reinforce one version of history. The colonizer has been engaged in the process of undermining the native narrative and, of course, valorizing the European narrative of superiority and dominance. With the beginning of the 1950s until 90s, the European version of history began to be subverted through the native's version of history.

Narrating the importance and valorization of their history has swept the world of letters by storm. Through this response, Post-colonialism in literature and cinema has emerged as a coherent field of research and study. Merete Falck Borch argued that "the constitutive problem of colonial discourse is the misrepresentation of 'othered' bodies deprived of a voice. And all forms of 'postcolonialism', constructive and destructive ... have been attempts to find ways out of this impasse" (Borch, 2008). Thus, Postcolonial literature has bloomed in drama, poetry, and primarily the novel. Through these literary forms, writers have subverted, reformulated and (re)conceptualized the gaze which had almost always represented them. Such a gaze is and would be easily dismissed especially that it became a part of the postcolonial society *per se*. Thus, the postcolonial writer deconstructs the imperial gaze and valorizes his own; he or she would write about one's own culture and customs rather than the west's 'ways of life'.

In the same vein, Third Cinema has emerged to counter the orientalizing and exoticizing of the former colonies and their people. Teshome Gabriel reasons that "Third Cinema includes an infinite variety of subjects and styles, as varied as the lives of the people it portrays" (Gabriel, 1982). As such, there is no one style of representing and answering back to the *misrepresentation* of the native from the perspective of the occident; rather, there are styles which flourished in every nation according to the particularity of their problems and policies. The images witnessed in western cinema have created and maintained a binary opposition that is important to exert their power: The European is the master; the native is the servant. Third cinema, hand in hand with the postcolonial literature, came forth to deconstruct and decolonize the native from this binary opposition. Valerie K. Orlando contends that "third cinema addresses questions of identity and community within the nation about which it speaks and, most important, seeks to reveal hidden struggles for women, impoverished classes, minority groups, and others who generally cannot speak for themselves or are not given a voice by dominant power structures" (Orlando, 2011). Accordingly, it counters the narrative but not that of words but of images which are more

subtle and lenient. The images which have deemed women and the native as servants were not direct but part of the background. Thus, the importance of the third cinema is equal to that of the postcolonial literature. Similarly, feminism attempts to deconstruct the male gaze through valorizing the women's gaze.

As Post-colonialism championed the endeavour to decolonize the white's hegemony, feminism manoeuvred to deconstruct the man's hegemony altogether. The latter became salient with each phase, across two centuries; it is still battling the essentializing cultural and social norms which confine women to mothers, caretakers, and housewives. Thus, to be a woman was inherently, biologically, and naturally to be a mother. Such a stance was patriarchally supported because it helped men maintain their dominance over women; European men controlled European women, native men, and native women. But, Simone de Beauvoir famously stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes, [a] woman" (de Beauvoir, 1952); this statement, simple as it seems, was one of the greatest summaries of the Feminist thought's beginning. One can even say it summarized the entirety of French feminism's argument which have furthered the idea that a woman and to be a woman is not subject to the self-evident notion of mother. Women, henceforth, are cultural constructions. Yet, one is dubious to African women writers' stance in the feminist spectrum because Western Feminist discourses as the canon have silenced them immensely. Chandra Mohanty criticizes this silencing; "women' as a category of analysis is used in western feminist discourse on women in the third world to construct 'third-world women' as a homogeneous 'powerless' group" (Mohanty, 1988). Of course, African women are not powerless and they do speak not only in their societies but also in the literary tradition. This is emblematic because women writers have started to use narration to tell their own stories of subjugation.

Mariam Ba is a Senegalese author and feminist who wrote in French. She was raised as a Muslim by her grandparents in Dakar; started criticizing her unequal surroundings which subjected women to be essentially inferior. Even education was not a possibility because of her grandparent's belief that girls should not be taught. Yet, she overcame all obstacles, for she had divorced her husband revolting against her society and polygamy. Her first novel *So Long a Letter* which won the Noma Award made her a strong, independent, and self-made woman. This book is written in the form of a letter in which Ramatoulaye struggles with the hegemonic, discriminatory patriarchal tradition which confines her to accept polygamy. Yet, Aissatou, to whom the letter is addressed, broke the chains of such tradition and went to the United States. The former recounts her life before and after becoming a widow showing her struggles as a woman and the patriarchy and as a mother.

Ousmane Sembene is also a Senegalese writer and filmmaker whose most successful movie XALA (1975) brought him worldwide fame. The movie is highly metaphorical and it deals with the political and cultural problems of Senegal after independence. It sheds light on the African middle class which was gaining much power and their decline if they do not attend to their society's needs. The protagonist is El Hadji Abdoukader Beye, a successful middle-aged polygamous man. He is represented at the beginning as a strong man sexually and

economically because he is arranging a huge wedding ceremony for his third wife. When he could not penetrate his virgin wife, his decline in society came to be to the degree that he was spat on by the beggar of Dakar. XALA is one of the most successful movies that have represented the postcolonial condition of the Senegalese community.

Reversed Chauvinism in *So Long a Letter* and XALA

In *So Long a Letter*, after the death of the husband, the African woman is still inferior to her family-in-law. Thus, even though he dies physically, the man's figure as a superior being continues to loom over the widow through his family. Her position, one argues, would change from dependent to independent; yet, she only trades one master for another. Her family-in-law takes hold of her. " [The husband's death is] the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity" (Ba, 1989). Yet, this same man, whose family confines the newly widowed, had taken another wife, Binetou. The latter is a young school girl which was Daba's best friend; Moudo Fall's relationship with Binetou started from within his Matrimonial house. Moudo betrays his wife and even children for sexual pleasures and lust. His betrayal is furthered in becoming a neglect that makes Ramatoulaye does her role and his. Thus, even though Moudo's patriarchy continues to imprison his wife through his family, she becomes the father and mother showing her strength and resistance against the patriarchal tradition. The latter confines women to being mothers; men are the powerful in the patriarchal power relations.

Throughout the story, men are seen as mere beasts whose weakness and helplessness to sexuality produce polygamy. Michael Kelly argues that "[I]n the traditional, mono-tribal, rural sector, polygamy is still common, particularly for the older man, who collects kinship wives as well as status wives as he grows in the gerontocratic community structure" (Kelly, 1978). In this sense, polygamy becomes a way for the individual to show his or her financial and societal prowess. Yet, men in XALA and *So Long a Letter* are polygamous because of their inability to strain their sexuality. Moudo, after 25 years of marriage, chooses a young girl because of her pleasing body, but, Ramatoulaye does not blame him because she understands his bestiality. Mawdo explains to Aissatou his animalistic side over which he has no control, which is why he married Young Nabou. Dieng, whose sexual lust for Ramatoulaye lasted lustfully 25 years, came back to marry her. Moudo's brother came to marry his brother's widow in the day of his funeral and burial. These representations essentialize men in their genitalia, yet all of them are great men whose standing in society is notable. "Man is one: grandeur and bestiality or animality confused. No gestures on his part are pure ideal. No gestures on his part are pure Bestiality" (Ba, 1989). Miriam presents the reader with the same chauvinistic qualities which deemed women. Chauvinism can be articulated, according to Marriane Hester, as an "[o]bjectification to make a woman into 'a concept, a lump sum, a thing, an object, a non-individualized category'; fixation on 'portions of the female anatomy' to make her even more distant and unreal; and penile penetration being the ultimate conquest" (Hester, 1984). Men, then, are lustful beings who are incapable of resisting their

genitals; indeed, they cannot even resist their sexual urges. Through these representations, Mariam Ba, I argue, criticizes the patriarchy through reversing the chauvinism of which women were subject in the pre-independence and, ironically, the post-independence era.

Sembene, I argue, represents El Hadji as a man immersed in a lustful lifestyle. He searches and finds a new 'virgin' for his sexual fantasies and demands. He becomes a representative of lust and corruption because, after independence, his interests are not in the development of the country, but in marriage. Although he has two other wives, he as a man cannot restrain his sexual desire for other young women. He *must* marry again using Islam and tradition as an excuse which is ironical because he speaks French, drinks Evian water, and wears suits. Thus, he uses tradition only as a means to attain and satisfy his sexuality over which he seems to have no control. Furthering this argument, Bjorn Beckman reasons "we are given the impression that if the bourgeoisie pursued its objective interests as a *national* ruling class it would be able to gain in stability and legitimacy and the people would benefit from efficient government, less congestion, less squalor, more real industry" (Beckman, 1981). This impression in itself is a camouflage for the exploitation and corruption which they are engaged. The common individual is always engaged with the idea that since the national bourgeoisie is African, they would serve their countries. But because they are represented as incapable of containing their sexuality, they cannot think of anything but marriage and sexual intercourse. This reverse chauvinism becomes a means to dismantle the polygamy which has continued to exist through and after the colonial era. Yet, it seems to be too radical, but I would argue that it is Sembene and Ba own manner of critiquing the patriarchal system which is confined in the phallus.

One then notices the great leap of feminism from a demand for equality to antagonist endeavours against patriarchy and men. The famous definitions of feminism demand equality, empowerment, and self-emancipation. As Patricia Stubbs argues:

Feminism as freedom for women is meaningful if it includes the freedom to associate with whom I like, to spend my money on what I please, to choose the topic and ways of communication, to decide on my life plans and follow them, to decide what I talk about and with whom, to go and come as I like and go where I like. To choose the type of relationship I like and decide whether it should include sex or not. (Stubbs, 1981)

Yet, the feminism that Mariam Ba represents, I would reason, seems to be different. It does not stop at a positive representation of the woman, but reverses patriarchal chauvinistic discourses and applies it on men. Thus, men are the eternal problem that stops society from development after independence because they are sexual beings. As soon as Aissatou chose to defy the norm and divorce Mawdo, she went to France and then to the United States where she became esteemed and renowned without needing her husband. Even though Aissatou is not the protagonist but Mariam idealizes her self-liberation because it appeals to her own life. She also divorced her husband in defiance to the established patriarchal norms. "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go

my way” (Ba, 1989). Mawdo, on the other hand, immersed in his own uncontrollable lust, loved and longed for her; he asks Ramatoulaye about her whereabouts, for he did not and could not live without that sexual satisfaction which Aissatou used to provide. In Xala, El Hadji is a representation of the national Bourgeoisie’s failure in governing society because of their submission to their sexual desires. He cannot but take a third, “virgin” girl to quell his sexual appetite while at the same time he is using corruption to buy her a villa and gold. In this very sense, El Hadji exemplifies that even the representatives of society, the chosen ones, are in actuality slaves to their genitals.

Women, contradictorily, are represented as heroines, responsible, and capable. Aissatou became a successful person in the west not because of her beauty, but her intelligence and wit. “What society refused you; they granted: examination sat and passed took you to France. The School of Interpreters, from which you graduated, led to your appointment into Senegalese Embassy in the United States” (Ba, 1989). Ramatoulaye, who became the father and the mother, understands her responsibility, unlike her husband who went after lust. While Ramatoulaye is reasonable, considerate and thoughtful, for she would not interfere in a fellow woman’s peaceful family life through marrying Dieng; yet, the man, Dieng, wants and insists to abandon his wife and children just to marry a widow with twelve children after twenty-five years of separation. Ibrahima Sall, the future generation, cannot stop himself from impregnating Young Aissatou; his family and Ramatoulaye act as if it was an unknown force that compelled Ibrahima to have sexual intercourse out of wed-lock, which is forbidden in Islam. All men in this novel are irresponsible, careless and idiotic. They would surrender their own families to oblivion for the sake of earthly pleasure. Yet, women, furthering Ba’s reversed chauvinism, are depicted as heroines who can think reasonably and thoughtfully about themselves and those about which they care. Ramatoulaye, or any of the women in the novel for this matter, presents not an interest in the west. The west is not an end for them, but only a mean for emancipation. Daba as a rational person, which is a ‘characteristic’ of men, is not attached to her husband, but rather thinks logically about her state as a wife, not a slave; her husband shares her idea. Rama, the daughter of El Hadji, is represented as a woman who can speak! She is not interested in the Francophone lifestyle like her father but is embracing her own culture. On the other hand, the national bourgeoisie seeks the attention and recognition of the colonial bourgeoisie, but it continues to be an imitation.

In the colonial era, power relations were clear: the white is powerful and the African weak; thus, resistance seemed much more visible for the African individual to attain freedom. Yet, after the African took charge of their country: they only reproduced the same regime their ex-masters had. As Franz Fanon argues, “The native intellectual has thrown himself greedily upon Western culture. Like adopted children...the native intellectual will try to make European culture his own” (Fanon, 1963). Dieng and Moudo were also engaged with making the colonizer’s culture and way of life their own which is emblematic in the manner in which their tuxedos are described. Dieng, who belongs to a socialist party, and voices his demands for women’s emancipation, takes advantage of his polygamy and wants to marry Ramatoulaye although he has a wife. El Hadji, too, gives in and reproduces the same colonial

regime and lifestyle. He is not concerned with the development of the country, but only with his wealth which he boosts through corruption.

Moudo Fall and El Hadji belong, I would argue, to the National Bourgeoisie. Bill Ashcroft defines the comprador class which refers to the bourgeoisie: “[A] relatively privileged, wealthy, and educated elite... introduced by the colonial domination, and who may, therefore, be less inclined to struggle for local cultural and political independence” (Ashcroft, 1988). Moudo’s struggle because of his European education was lesser and he climbed the ladder of power rather quickly. Yet, when he became all-powerful and wealthy, he chooses to use tradition to fulfil his desires. Thus, even the National Bourgeoisie which is the most educated and wealthy gives in to their gentiles. Even when he was in France, he thought about African women’s hips and his sexual desire. “You missed the swinging hips of black women walking along the pavements, this gracious deliberate slowness characteristic of Africa, which charmed your eyes. You were sick at heart at the dogged rhythm of the life of the people and the numbing effect of the cold” (Ba, 1989). Similarly, El Hadji as one of the elites of the Senegalese society cannot govern his sexuality and uses polygamy and tradition as an excuse. When he could not penetrate N’Gone virginity, the third wife, his downfall began because he as a man cannot be powerful without the ability of penetration or the phallus. The absence of the phallus means the absence of manhood; that is, for a man to be as such, he should be able to penetrate. This description contrasts sharply with that of Aissatou because she is a woman not because of her obedience, but because of her dismantling of polygamy. Her state of mind did not make her another National Bourgeoisie or even a Comprador who reproduces the same regime of the European power, but she rather represents her country in the U.S. which shows again that she transcended polygamy. As I have argued, Mariam Ba gives much freedom to Aissatou because it resonates with her own life as a self-made woman. Thus, the National Bourgeoisie failed not only in facing the colonizer but their sexual drives. This adds more emphasis on women’s resistance, independence, and intelligence while furthering men’s bestiality, and animalistic desires.

If one looks critically at the character of Rama, El Hadji’s daughter, one is met with a strong woman whose hatred towards the French is highly contrasted with her father love for their lifestyle. Rama is engaged with a counter-discursive endeavour which valorizes the African and the traditional lifestyle. She, herself, essentializes polygamous men as and shouts it in her father’s face which resulted in a slap. According to Fernando Selanas and Octavio Getino, “at best, films succeeded in bearing witness to the decay of bourgeois values and testifying to social injustice” (Selanas and Getino, 1971). Thus, the movie itself is a production against the bourgeois values which have been valorized after independence. In the same sense, the man cannot speak with his mother tongue; El Hadji is incapable of in actuality express himself without the aid of French. He can be viewed as a person who is incapable of speech and whose identity is restrained through wanting to mimic the European. The woman, on the other hand, is represented as capable of expressing and talking through her identity as a strong African woman. Awa, the first wife of El Hadji, is the very symbol of tradition because she is represented as wise and patient although her daughter Rama is against such patience.

Rama's ability to talk about and to speak is of ample importance because she is a symbol of the strong African woman. N'Gone, on the other hand, is silent and muted because she does not talk against male sexuality. This silence is needed in the movie because we, as the audience, contrast between her and Rama whose perspective is very strong and telling. In this sense, N'Gone is made to be silent. Rama views men as people who are following their phallus and sexual needs. She cannot trust a polygamous man because he cannot control his sexual drives. I would further reason that the failure of penetration that El Hadji encounters has made him fall from bourgeoisie to someone whom the beggars spat on. Thus, his sexuality is the determining of his pride and essence as a man because once it is gone El Hadji becomes someone with no importance in society.

Conclusion

Moudo's patriarchy lives with his family which imprisons Ramatoulaye in the polygamy to continue to exert power over her. Mariam Ba through *So Long a Letter* reverses the chauvinism against women and applies it to men who use tradition to essentialize women as inferior; thus, because men are inherently beasts who cannot resist their gentiles, they are the problem that stops society from flourishing and developing. Accordingly, XALA represents women as more powerful and capable than men while the latter is only concerned with their genitals. El Hadji, the protagonist, could not penetrate his third wife; with this sexual failure, his social and political standing have become of no importance because his essence, sexuality, is no longer there. They, the educated and non-educated, confine women to their houses for their sexual pleasure because men, for Ba and also for Ousmane, are mere beasts. Women, on the other hand, are reasonable, rational, responsible, and represented as heroines who can develop and better not only themselves but those that surround them. The west is reproduced through the national bourgeoisie which is supposed to better the society, yet is still confined in their gentiles.

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