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The Place of Women in African Culture: The Literary View of Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Regina Yaou's *Aihui Anka Défi Aux Sorciers*

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Abstract:

African women have been degraded and relegated to the background of nothingness as a result of undue African cultural patriarchy. They have suffered untold trauma and hardship when it comes to childbearing and rearing. African woman is best known for caring pregnancy, delivery, caring for the child anyhow with or without the father and at adulthood she is denied exercising authority or control over the decision of such children. This paper, as a way of introduction, clarifies the relationship between the child and the extent of damage patriarchy in the African culture has caused. While theorizing Marxism in the works of Mariama Bâ, so long a letter and Régina Yaou's Aihui Anka défi aux sorciers with a view to advocating a 'restructuring' of African culture and tradition to disallow total abandonment of women's ideas concerning her constituency (The home) thereby oppressing and underrating her opinions. The paper concludes that while women's contribution in the home should be that of partner in progress and disagree that the kitchen is her constituency. They should be encouraged, patriarchal over-bearing dominance discouraged; a compromise should be reached to achieve a peaceful and blissful home. Though, African cultural values must be defended and upheld.

Keywords: women, African culture, literary view, Mariama Bâ and Regina Yaou

1. Introduction

Since time immemorial, before independence of African nations and till this day, the place of African woman has been relegated to the kitchen. African women have suffered untold hardship in the hands of their spouses especially those with the mentality of the African patriarchy. They have suffered; mental, physical, emotional and psychological depression as a form of violence. A woman is a weaker vessel in some aspect but not mentally as this has been proven when most African women have attained greater heights as a result of hard work and high display of intelligent quotient. Despite the assumed dimensions of feminism in Africa, patriarchal influence still dominates the feminine world. Due to the trending 'Sorosoke' syndrome which is a trending parlance of making one's voice loudly heard while demanding for a right, that became popular during the 2020 EndSars protest by the youths in Nigeria to register their displeasure against the indiscriminate and brutal killings by the Nigerian anti-crime arm of the Nigeria Police Force and therefore calling for its disbandment before the unfortunate shooting by the unknown soldiers of those peaceful protesters in the night of 20th October, 2020 where several of them were reported killed. It was a similar kind of agitation from women then that made way for many male folks to join their voices in defense of the agitation made by white and black women in the U.S, for the struggle for women's liberation. African feminist activists and writers, in their own different ways, revealed the constant oppression and domination experienced from the male folk. Women and more importantly African women as nourishing power of the world deserve better treatment and should be treated as such.

According to *The Longmans English Larousse Dictionary* (1968) Patriarchy is referred to as a social system in which the chief authority is the father or eldest male member of the family or clan. A community characterized by this system always looks down and even erodes female authority and right.

Ezeigbo (1996) observes thus:

In the wake of colonialism, in the 19th century, the role and status of women changed drastically. From what they used to be in the traditional pre-colonial society, they plummeted to the subsequent political, cultural and economic powerlessness that was inflicted on them and has remained their lot. Nigerian women lost all political power and influence under British rule and their position in the state and home became similar to that of women in Victorian Britain.

Though, patriarchy has been in existence as a traditional and cultural way of living of Africans since creation but it was made worse with the advent of the colonial masters as seen in the above view. This corroborates the opinions of Ojeyinka and Fasinu (2012:59) that:

Traditional African men allowed his female counterpart to fulfil herself in both political and entrepreneurial endeavours. In Yorubaland, for instance, titles such as Erelu, Iyalode and Iyaloja are bestowed on women of outstanding personal achievements.

If with patriarchy, the female folk were not given a chance to contribute their quota in the development of the society, they would not be bestowed with such honours as stated above. Therefore, the British brought what was practiced in Victorian Britain as opined by Ezeigbo to their colonies which is succinctly captured. This shows that, Africans in their mode of patriarchy still recognise the place of women as crucial in the society. 'Patriarchy is identical with negative meaning that leads universal oppression of women by men'. (1983:5)

According to Rich in his *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976:57) opines that:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men-by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part of woman shall or shall not pay and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.

The subsumed image of women as painted by Rich placed women as second-class citizens instead of partners in progress with their men.

2. Who is a Patriarch?

Longmans English Larousse Dictionary (1968) defines a Patriarch as a father or head of a family or tribe, especially one of the founders of the Jewish people in the Old Testament (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's ten sons and Joseph's two sons).

2.1. Patriarchal Crisis: The Manifestation

According to *The Cambridge Dictionary of American English* (2000), Crisis is an 'extremely dangerous and difficult situation.' This study observes that there is a serious conflict orchestrated by male gender via patriarchal tendencies against the women folk which do not only portends danger for happy co-existence in the home front but also cause retrogression for the society and humanity at large. This crisis denied the African woman any authority over herself, her children and her possessions. This patriarchal tendency manifests in the deployment of ego-driven energy without its direction to the development and growth of the society. It is sad to note this trending tendency among many African male chauvinists and manifests as evidenced in the selected Francophone African Novels.

2.2. Patriarchy: The African concept/Perspective

The over-bearing male chauvinism otherwise referred to as patriarchy has arrogated too much authority to the male folk to the extent that little or no respect is allowed the female folk in decision making in the home. This has reflected in the area of polygamy, where the hostess (the wife or senior wife at home) that will receive a supposed guest (a newly married wife) has no contribution or knowledge of her guest. The husband in his ego decides to add to his wife or wives, without consulting with neither the wife or wives at home nor the child or children.

3. The Problem of Polygamy

The man in most cases does not consider the feelings of his family before going into relationship that will blossom into a marriage contract. The man does not also consider the woman with whom he had laboured and suffered to achieve success, only to bring an intruder who most times is a gold digger to put asunder what God had joined together.

Another aspect to these patriarchal phenomena is that, the man single handedly decides who to give their daughters' hand in marriage without seeking the wife and daughter's opinions. Though, in African setting the children opinion is of less significant as they cannot decide for, they are still under their fathers' roof. This act is rampant in ancient African society. Such uncivilized deeds are against the reasons for which God instituted marriage and also go contrary to: Amos 3 vs 3 assertion that: 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' Mutual agreement is Key to successful relationship. Where there is true love no one sees himself as superior to the other (1Cor 13 vs 4 KJV). And mutual agreement can only be made manifest in true love.

3.1. Patriarchal Tendency: The Dominant Trait

The problem of infidelity is always attributed to the female folk. Most times when this happen, the woman is accused, the man who died at a strange woman's place is blamed on the housewife, the man from his own family side becomes a Saint, this attitude of dominance and undue false accusation is uncalled for and should be discouraged. Moreover, she is accused of not being productive and she is solely responsible for bearing female children even though Science and Technology had clearly proven that what the man deposits in the woman fertilizes the shed eggs in the ovary resulting in the sex of the child that is born. In most cases when a husband is a spend rift and has nothing to show for his hard work, the husband's family members blame his wastefulness on the wife who had no say in the financial affairs of the home. Have we ever wondered why don't men accuse the women for bearing male children? If they don't when it is a male child, then, it is callous when they do if it is a female child.

3.2. The Place of women in Francophone African Novels

The place of women in African society cannot be over-emphasized. There is a maxim that: 'When you train a male child, you train an individual but train a girl child then you build a nation'. This infers that, a male child when trained

impact only few lives but a female child impact millions of lives that invariably cause progress and development to any nation.

Women are agents of peace in the society. Despicable treatment in the hand of malevolent men against innocent women like Ramatoulaye in *So long a letter* (1980) a translation of (*Une si longue lettre* (1979), Ramatoulaye pleads with her daughter, a to-be law student Daba who wanted to challenge her father's maltreatment of her mother due to her knowledge of law on the violation of her mother's fundamental human rights. The mother did this despite her traumatic experience she is passing through to save her marriage and her home from the ridicule of her society and then protected her husband from the shame and torment of the law. However, women, as lover of peace and protector of their men's dignity most times have not enjoyed same from the men folk as a result of patriarchal ego.

Fukuyama (1992:118) in *The End of History and the Last Man* observes that:

American experience is quite unique insofar as Americans were, in Tocqueville's phrase, 'born equal.'

Despite the diversity of backgrounds, lands, and races to which Americans traced their ancestry, on coming to America they abandoned those identities by and large and assimilated into a new society without sharply defined social classes or long-standing ethnic and national divisions.

The issue of women and patriarchy in Africa should be compared to the above observations as seen in Tocqueville's born equal theory. Men and women were born equal and therefore, there is no need for the superiority effrontery usually displayed by some men against the women folk probably because of the popular saying that; 'women are weaker vessels', they may be truly weaker to men but they are not weak-willed. As we have male boxers and in every profession in the world, we equally have female Boxers, Wrestlers, Soldiers, Pilots, Teachers, Engineers, Doctors, Nurses and Presidents and so on. In order to have a society where peace, love and progress will be achieved, an egalitarian, born equal theory must be maintained.

Fasinu (2007:139) advocates that; changing of value system should be inculcated into individual through proper literary system in accordance with Kofi Annan's view that: 'Literacy is the bridge from misery to hope'. A properly educated individual will be reformed to exhibit useful norms of an enlightened society expected in the 21st century. Especially, now that those women have moved from the back seat to the front seat and not only that but have taken the seat right behind the wheel to steer it.

However, the roles of both men and women have been clearly stated and no one should go beyond his/her bound for effective co-existence as observed by Sofola's *The Sweet Trap* (1977) thus:

The roles are so clearly defined and each person so meticulously upheld the status quo that nothing like the confusion of roles was ever dreamt about. Everyone knew his place and stayed there.

Consequently, sometimes the status quo is not maintained not as a result of confusion but rather as that of ego. The ego in a man with patriarchal tendency breeds much agony in his partner for instance; the case of Ramatoulaye in Mariama Bâ's *So long a letter* (1980:12):

My efforts cannot for long take my mind off my disappointment. I think of the suckling baby, no sooner born than orphaned. I think of the blind man who will never see his child's smile. I think of the cross the one-armed man has to bear. I think...But my despair persists, but my rancor remains, but the waves of an immense sadness break in me! Madness or weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love? What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou?

Despair made all of the above thoughts ruminates in Ramatoulaye's mind. She had seen in Modou, a trusted companion, a friend, an ally, a confidant with whom they can struggle and enjoy together the fruit of their labour. She felt disappointed as she could not fathom the reason why her husband had to marry the friend and age mate of his daughter. Could it be love or what? Meanwhile, this thought brought back the memory of their lovely and sweet beginning as she recounts:

As we danced, your forehead, hairline already receding, bent over my own. The same happy smile lit up our faces. The pressure of your hand became more tender and more possessive. Everything in me gave in and our relationship endured over the school years and during the holidays, strengthened in me by the discovery of your subtle intelligence, of your embracing sensitivity, of your readiness to help, of your ambition, which suffered no mediocrity. (1980:13)

This is unbelievable. In Africa, the patriarchy tendency goes along with pride when no remorse is shown when Modou Fall, Ramatoulaye's husband secretly married Binetou, a child the same age with their daughter Daba. Ramatoulaye recounts the arrogance and pride of Tamsir, Modou's brother, with Mawdow Bâ and the local Imam this way:

And in the evening of this same Sunday on which Binetou was being married off I saw come into my house, all dressed up and solemn...I sat in front of them, laughing with them. The imam attacked: 'There is nothing one can do when Allah the Almighty puts two people side by side'. 'there is nothing new in this world.' (1980:36)

It was in her inquisitiveness that she asked after, Modou her husband that the Imam answered:

Yes, Modou Fall, but, happily, he is alive for you, for all of us, thanks be to God. All he has done is to marry a second wife today. We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place. (1980:37)

Undoubtedly, one can see a level of arrogance and complicity even from a perceived religious leader who ought to be a custodian of virtue, honesty and mutual respect. But this behaviour of the Imam demonstrates patriarchal phenomenon.

Patriarchal tendency breeds betrayal and anger as expressed by Modou's daughter:

Daba's anger increased as she analysed the situation: 'Break with him, mother! Send this man away. He has respected neither you nor me. Do what Aunty Aissatou did: break with him. Tell me you'll break with him. I can't see you fighting over a man with a girl my age. (1980:39)

This is the height of patriarchy in the African contest. Most a time religion is often used as a yardstick to perpetrate such acts which again they term destiny.

In Régina Yaou's *Aihui Anka défi aux sorciers* (1999) patriarchal tendency was also displayed when Anka, the only child of Bèkè is to marry; the mother has to go through her in-laws to reach Djèkè's parents before asking her hand in marriage. When Anka took ill, the same men in her late husband family were informed, they conveyed Anka to Topoadia, while with the traditional healer, he informed them that the day he will be meeting with the family members, no woman should be in attendance. This seclusion is an infringement on the right of the mother of a sick child.

Le jour fixé par le guérisseur pour la réunion des membres du clan était arrivé. On allait discuter (une fois de plus!) et prier a propos de la maladie d'Anka. On allait aussi interroger les esprits pour savoir si la guérison totale était possible. Cela dépassait toutes les préoccupations. Il avait été décidé qu'aucune femme ne prendrait part à cette réunion avec le guérisseur Dzomba. (1999:260)

The day fixed by the healer to meet with the members of the family arrived. We are to discuss one more time and pray with regards to Anka's ailment. We shall also inquire from the spirits to know if total healing is possible. That exceeded all precautions. He had decided that no woman must take part in this meeting with Dzomba the healer. (Our translation)

This patriarchal tendency is widespread; there are cases of men displaying the highest level of arrogance and dominance to the extent that after using the restroom in their homes, call upon their wives to go and flush and clean up the mess in the toilet. All of these are as result of patriarchy and security reasons, which if the woman is aware of could possibly find a way out.

4. Recommendations

The place of women in African society as seen in the study as a result of patriarchy has been discouraging and appalling. Therefore, the following have been suggested as recommendations:

- There should be an enlightenment to educate and discourage men in Africa with the patriarchal mentality.
- Men in Africa should be assisted to have the right marriage counseling before wedlock.
- Men in Africa and all over the world should be reminded that women are neither inferior to their male counterpart nor worthless as thought by some.
- Women should be engaged in conflict resolution as they are very good at peace-making.
- Legislation should be promulgated for women to deal with economic stability, deal with unemployment after post-COVID 19.
- Government at all levels should bridge the gap between men and women in governance.
- Legislation should be done to include women in high profile security matters in all tiers of government.

5. Conclusion

Patriarchy is a cultural practice and since culture is dynamic, it is expected that patriarchy should also move from that crude domineering tendency to a mild and more accommodating level with the female folk. In a modern society and in a global democratic village that the world has become, archaic and uncivilized mindset should be a thing of the past. To develop our society, women must be allowed to maximally exercise their freedom because freedom brings development. If this does not happen, if the power exhibited by men is too rigid, it may bring about a situation where women will be forced to turn the tide and begin to marry men and therefore become the husband just as women today are seen to engage in more domestic violence against men unlike never before. Whenever a goat is pushed to the wall it may turn back to bite.

However, women, especially African women should be accorded their rightful place in the comity of women in the world. They are mothers of the society who dare all consequences to see that peace prevail on the planet earth. Furthermore, women are peace loving, peace makers, patient and good planner that allows progress in the society. African women are full of success story. This is described among others in Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953) thus:

A ma mère	For my mother
Femme noire, femme Africaine	Black woman, African woman
O toi, ma mère, je pense à toi...	O you, my mother, I think of you
O Daman, o ma mère, toi qui me portas	O Daman, o my mother, you who put me
sur le dos, toi qui m'allaitas, toi qui gouvernas	on your back, you that breastfed me, you
mes premiers pas, toi qui la première	guided my first steps, you who first opened
m'ouvris les yeux aux prodiges de la terre, je	my eyes to the wonders of the earth, I think
pense a toi...	of you...
Femme simple, femme de la résignation,	Simple woman, woman of contentment,
O toi, ma mère, je pense à toi...	O you, my mother, I think of you.

The above poem sings the praises of African women and what they represent; she nourishes, guides, teaches children the way of life, her qualities of simplicity and contentment is second to none.

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