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REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MARIAMA BÂ'S *UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE* AND SEYDOU BADIAN'S *SOUS L'ORAGE*: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The issue of womanhood remains a vital field that has continuously attracted the attention of researchers in various fields, and especially feminists. Writers of West African origin have often exposed the difficulties facing women in the subregion. Women in almost all societies of the world have been treated as second-class citizens, placing them at the bottom of the family hierarchy. This paper investigates the status of women in West African literature in order to make comparison with the status of women as described by the Holy Qur'ân. Works of feminists, historians, political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists served as useful sources of information. The immediate sources of references are *Une si longue lettre* of Mariama Bâ (2003) and *Sous l'orage* of Seydou Badian (1972). The paper shows that there is conflict between the African traditional and Islamic perceptions of womanhood. It further reveals that the condition of women as presented by some West African writers is not Islamic; instead it is a regional conception of life that mixes the traditional and the Islamic. The paper also establishes that most West African writers have spoken about the condition of women in the subregion knowing little about the *Sharī'ah* code of conduct. This paper concludes that the condition of women in the subregion should be revisited to make life better to them. It is therefore suggested that efforts should be made to facilitate interactions with women and incorporate the principles of the revealed religions into all decisions that may affect their life.

Introduction

The question of women remains an endlessly vital field of research. Despite feminist theories in the West and the relevant policies adopted in favour of women, we all know that the unpleasant attitudes of men are often overlooked. In developing countries, little effort is made to implement those women-related theories that negate the traditional image as trapped, handicapped, underestimated, suppressed, and limited to rearing children and taking care of the house and the kitchen. For long underestimated and undervalued, women are finally coming out from their cage,

having been under the domination of men, many of whom are still willing to continuously maintain them in a virtual prison. The degree of domination varies, depending on religion, the system of governance, the culture, and the level of development. In this study, our immediate sources of references are limited to *Une si longue lettre* (2003) of Mariama Bâ and *Sous l'orage* (1972) of Seydou Badian with support from Islamic books and the Holy Qur'an. Other relevant research materials will also be considered.

Womanhood in West African Literature

Women in West African literature are often presented in their supportive role in the management of the society. Often submissive and accepting their subordinate position in the family hierarchy, they sometimes cry out to protest the unfair treatment they are forced to accept (Bâ, 2003; Kourouma, 1970; Badian, 1972; Boni, 1962; Ananou, 1971). The ill-treatment is expressed in the West African literature where writers do not mince words to describe women in their 'prise de conscience' of their privileged status of womanhood, conscious of their voting and economic powers (Bebey, 1973:8). The status of Muslim women as presented in West African literature varies depending on the society. Even given their differences, one cannot rule out the polygamous status of the West African, even after contacts with the Western and Arab concepts of life and marriage. Rafatu Abdulhamid (2007:124) expresses this practically with sober reflection.

Islam, according to many people, is basically anti-women.... The observation ... may be true to some extent looking at the deplorable condition of some women in Muslim societies. But the question is: Should we judge Islam by the practice prevalent in Muslim societies? Has Islam not taken different forms in different societies?

As if to partly answer the question raised by Abdulhamid (2007), Grown, et al. (1987:76) have said: "Traditions have always been a double-edged sword for women. Subordinate economic and social status and restrictions on women's activity and mobility are embedded in most traditional cultures." Mariama Bâ introduces her book *Une si longue lettre* (2003), presenting a Senegalese woman who in marriage is forced to relate with all the members of her husband's family by giving out gifts. Once married, a woman becomes an object, a thing at the service of her husband. Thus she loses her personality, identity and respect. In her own words, Bâ (2003:11) says: "... elle sacrifie ses biens en cadeaux à sa belle famille, ... outre les biens, elle s'ampute de sa personnalité, de sa dignité, devenant une chose au service de l'homme." ["... She sacrifices her property as gifts to her husband's family ... she loses her personality, dignity, becoming a thing in the service of man." (*My translation*)]. The status of women as described by Bâ is in support of Badian who sees a female child with no right to contribute in a debate with respect to her own marriage. The Malian writer observes: "Que vient faire le point de vue de Kany dans cette affaire? C'est nous qui décidons, comme il est d'usage. C'est à Kany de suivre. Depuis que le monde est monde, les mariages ont été faits ainsi comme nous le faisons." ["What has Kany to do in this case? It is we who decide as is done usually. Kany is just to obey. Since the

world began, marriages were done the way we do it.” (*My translation*)). (Badian, 1972:53-54).

In Mali, as in other societies in the subregion, women occupy the bottom of the family hierarchy, but it is interesting to note that they are conscious of such treatment. Téné, mother of Kany, was submissively explaining to her daughter the status of womanhood. She said, “you have no right to choose and a reasonable woman knows that she has the choice only to obey.” (Badian, 1972). Badian presents this ironically (1972:72): “... tu ne t’appartiens pas et tu ne dois rien vouloir; c’est ton père qui est le maître et ton devoir est d’obéir.” [“... You do not own yourself, and you have no right to want anything; your father is the master and yours is to obey.”] The unfair treatment of women cumulated in *Le Fils du fétiche* of David Ananou (1971) where a girl is given into forced marriage to a man chosen by the father denying the girl’s decision.

Et bien! Voici en deux mots ce qui motive mon départ inopiné de Séva. Depuis la dernière période des moissons, mon père a décidé de me donner en mariage à un charlatan ambulant de ses amis. Comme je ne voulais pas épouser un étranger, je repoussai l’offre qui me fût faite. Blessé dans son amour propre, papa jura de me livrer de force ou de gré à l’homme que je ne connaissais même pas encore. (Ananou, 1971:123-124)

[Well! Here are two words that motivate my sudden departure from Seva. Since the last harvest time, my father decided to give me in marriage to a travelling quack, one of his friends. Since I did not want to marry a foreigner, I rejected the offer. His pride wounded, Dad swore to give me in marriage whether I liked it or not to someone I had never met in my life. (*My translation*)].

Forcing women into an unwanted marriage is still very prevalent in Africa, despite the era of enlightenment. It is observed in all parts of Nigeria. But the position of Islam is very clear with regard to the choice of partner. In Qur’ān 30:21, it reads: “A Muslim marriage is a blessing from Allah, ... from which both husband and wife can derive satisfaction and tranquility. Women have been given the right to express their consent or refusal to a match.”

Abdulhamid (2007:128) tackles the same issue but in the Nigerian context where she holds that a Nigerian Muslim woman “can continue to exist as long as she does not upset the capitalist (the laid down) rules ... any power she may think that she possesses is an illusion.” Reflecting on women’s status in the pre-Islamic societies, Aisha Lemu (1992:185) summed up her findings thus: “In the course of human history, women have commonly been looked upon as intellectually, morally, and spiritually inferior to men.” Supporting Lemu, Sajda Nazlee (1996:9) observes that, “Before the advent of Islam, the status of women throughout much of the world was appalling (and) ... women had no rights at all; they were treated worse than animals...” Nazlee went deeper to put together a variety of quotations on woman, defining her socially, psychologically, anthropologically, religiously, and even economically. She observes in conclusion that there are many different views on

women. While the biologists and psychologists talk of female and male hormones in shaping the development and temperament of human beings, the anthropologists talk of biogrammer in modelling women. The social scientists associate women with their culture and they can be well defined in relation to their society (Nazlee, 1996:7-9).

The Islamic position seems not to give a preference to any sex. In the Qur'ān, the best of the people are those best in conduct, as written in the Qur'ān:

Whoever works righteousness,
Man or woman, and has Faith,
Verily, to him/her will we give
A new life, and life
That is good and pure, and We
Will bestow on such their reward
According to the best
Of their action. (Qur'ān, 16:97)

The equality between man and woman is clearly described in Qur'ān as follows:

O mankind! We created
You from a single (pair)
Of a male and a female
And made you into
Nations and tribes, that
Ye may know each other
(Not that ye may despise
Each other). Verily
The most honoured of you
In the sight of Allah
Is (he who is) the most
Righteous of you.
And Allah has full knowledge
And is well acquainted
(With all things). (Qur'ān, 49:13)

The two verses from the Qur'ān indicate that there is no preference between man and woman, but specify that conduct determines the level of closeness to God. The complementary status of both clearly mentioned is a testimony to the fact that without women, men cannot make life's journey smoothly. For the continuity of mankind, God has equally empowered the two sexes as a sign of their complementarity. This complementarity is better explained by the physiological composition of men and women. Ibrahim Kewulere (2000:3-4) describes this situation in the following terms:

The 34th verse of *Sūrah Nisā'* regards men as the guardians of women. The duty of their guardianship covers their protection, maintenance, management and superintending their affairs ... The superiority of the men's physical powers over that of the women is not open to debate,

and as the strains and stresses to which women are naturally exposed put them at a disadvantage when their performances mentally are compared with their male counterparts. Hence Islam allots the responsibilities of the protection and the maintenance of the weak to the strong.

Reporting an encounter between the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and a man, Abdulhamid (2007:133) and Nazlee (1996:50) cite the following ḥadīth recoded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*:

‘O Messenger of Allah, who among the people is most worthy of my good company?’ The Prophet (SAW) said, ‘Your mother!’ The man asked, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet (SAW) said, ‘Your mother!’ The man asked, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet again said, ‘Your mother!’ The man asked, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet (SAW) said, ‘Then your father!’

This is to say how important women are, and consequently how important mothers are. Out of four answers from the Prophet (SAW), three were in favour of ‘motherhood’ and only one for ‘fatherhood’.

The good and reasonable gesture of the Prophet (SAW) brought to an end the ill-treatment reserved for females in Arabia at that time. There were alternatives for a female child born into an Arab family; to be buried alive or trained as a slave or a subordinate. In the pre-Islamic era in Arabia, daughters were considered to be liabilities and unfit to participate in political and socio-economic debates (Nazlee, 1996). Grown et al. (1987:27) have a supportive word. “As we know, women have been the butt of male ridicule in proverbs and myths throughout history. While women have sometimes responded in kind, the predominant myths are usually insults to women’s bodies, mental capacities, and social behaviour.” Inevitably, some concerned women, especially in the West, had volunteered themselves to stand against this discriminating attitude of men whenever it is a question of womanhood. They fought and are still fighting for their rights. Called and addressed as feminists, Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller and many others “stressed that women should at least be given the opportunity to use their talents and allow them to flourish” (Nazlee, 1996:11). Bâ’s line of argument deserves to be quoted: “... respectées ou méprisées, souvent muselées, toutes les femmes ont presque le même destin que les religions ou des législations abusives ont cimenté.” (2003:173). [“... Respected or despised, often silenced, all women have almost the same fate as religions or unfair laws cemented.” (*My translation*)]. The plot against women is also exposed by Nazi Boni (1962:41) in his provocative choice of words: “Les femmes ne sont pas souvent invitées aux réunions publiques à moins que cela ne concerne des sacrifices collectives.” [“Women are not often invited to meetings in public unless it involves collective sacrifices.” (*My translation*)]. Cheikh Hamidou Kane also said the same thing. Kane is a Senegalese Muslim writer and one of the best African writers of Fulani origin. He is the author of the most celebrated novel, *L’Aventure ambiguë*. His novel is all about African cultural problems through which he raised a fundamental problem on the position of women in his society where Islam seems to take the lead. In such a society, women were not allowed to participate in meetings or be seen in public places. Thus, he says

through *La Grande Royale*: “J’ai fait une chose qui ne nous plait pas, et qui n’est pas dans nos coutumes. J’ai demandé aux femmes de venir aujourd’hui à cette rencontre. ... car nous pensons que la femme doit rester au foyer.” (Kane, 1961:56). [“I did something that we do not like, and which is not in our customs. I asked women to come to this meeting today.... Because we believe that women should stay at home.”]. (*My translation*).

Even though the quotation is somewhat lengthy, the comments of Badian on this point deserve to be mentioned:

Kany, fit doucement maman Téné, écoute-moi. Tu n’es plus une enfant, tu sais voir et comprendre certaines choses; j’ai souffert dans cette maison, j’y souffre encore. Pour toi et tes frères, j’ai tout accepté et je suis prête à continuer. Vous êtes ma seule joie. Si tu obéis, j’en serai heureuse et je prierai pour que la vie te soit douce. Mais si tu te dresses contre ton père, tu augmenteras mes souffrances et je ne pourrai plus paraître au milieu de mes semblables.... Tais-toi, tais-toi! Je ne puis rien, tu le sais bien, je ne suis rien. C’est ton père qui décide, auprès de lui nous ne sommes rien, ni toi, ni moi. (Badian, 1973:73-75)

[Kany, mother Téné said softly, listen to me. You’re no longer a child, you can see and understand certain things that I suffered in this house, I am still suffering. For you and your brothers, I accepted everything and I am ready to continue. You are my only joy. If you obey, I would be happy and I will pray for a sweet life for you. But if you stand against your father, you will increase my suffering and I would no longer be able to appear among my fellows.... Shut up, shut up! I can do nothing, you know it, I am nothing. It’s your father who decides, before him we are nothing, neither you nor myself. (*My translation*)].

Kourouma’s (1970:135) comment may be relevant here: “Il suffit que la femme soit féconde, l’infidélité était monnaie courante. La femme fidèle était aussi rare que le bélier à testicule unique.” [“Infidelity is common in fecund woman. The faithful wife was as rare as the ram with a single testis.” (*My translation*)]. The physical assault on women is highly manifested and described by Kourouma who presented Salimata and her age mates well positioned for their genital mutilation. Going by his words, Kourouma (1970:34) said: “Au champ de l’excision, les filles devaient se déshabiller, prendre position pour que la femme du forgeron, la matrone puisse couper le clitoris considéré comme impure, imparfait.” [“In the female circumcision camp, girls undressed, took a stand for the blacksmith’s wife, the matron, to cut the clitoris considered impure, imperfect.” (*My translation*)]. Infidelity is very common among women, thus having affairs outside their marriage was nothing for them (Kourouma, 1970:184; Boni, 1962:67-68). Therefore women are for sale, “Les femmes, ça s’achette.” (Kourouma, 1970:84). [“Women are bought.” (*My translation*)]. In *Crépuscules des temps anciens* (1962), women are often treated with such suspicion that there are proverbs that warn men about the danger of trusting women. Women agree with the fact that men are physically strong but that they do not accept the complementarity role of women. And no matter how

negligible their protest, women often discuss such inequalities among themselves. Even though women are not strong, they are blessed with abusive words which put men aflame. For example, Kya did not hesitate to assault his wife who misbehaved (Boni, 1962). Boni (1962:49) also says: “Kya était en querelle avec sa femme qui l’infligea d’injures. Kya l’avait bien bastonnée. Dépassé par des injures, Kya voulait tuer sa femme, ...” [“Kya was quarrelling with his wife, who abused him. Kya had beaten her well. Overwhelmed by her abuses, Kya wanted to kill his wife.” (*My translation*).]

Polygamy in West African literature

Polygamy is not strange in Africa. It is also practised in some other parts of the world. The issue of polygamy has dominated a good number of African novels, but was dealt with at length by Mariama Bâ in *Une si longue lettre* and in *Sous l’Orage* of Seydou Badian. But the Holy Qur’ān seems to have resolved spiritually long ago the question of marriage and family management raised by the two authors. In respect of polygamy, it is stated in the Qur’ān as:

Marry women of your choice,
Two, or three, or four;
But if ye fear that ye shall not
Be able to deal justly (with them),
Then only one, or (a captive)
That your right hands possess.
That will be more suitable,
To prevent you
From doing injustice.
(Qur’ān, 4:3)

The Qur’ān explains plainly the issue of polygamy. Equitable treatment for one’s wives is the prime condition for whoever is willing to have a second, third or fourth wife. All steps you take into another marriage must be open to your immediate family, that is, your wife and children. The question of cooperation of your wife or wives must be sorted out. Having gone through various questions related to marriage, the family and the polygamous family, a man is then allowed to bring home his new wife, who will be received by the old one(s). Such prescribed steps are not often followed by Muslims in West Africa. In *Une si longue lettre*, Modou Fall, the husband of Ramatoulaye, had a clandestine second wife, involving no member of his family, spending out of the meagre resources of his family in unlawful marriage. Besides, Modou is confirmed to have no respect for women, and was under the control of his sexual drives. Of all the steps taken by Modou, none is carried out in accordance with Islamic rites. Ramatoulaye and Modou are lucky to have found themselves in a society which could not be defined as Muslim, Christian or traditional. The steps taken by Modou to engage one of his daughter’s peers into marriage are pure and simple symptoms of child abuse. Modou, by so doing, established two parallel families, thus neglecting the old one, endangering his first wife and children and exposing them to societal vices. It is better to listen to the

choice of words and their combination which spell out emotionally the suffering of his old wife:

J'étais abandonnée ... J'entendis un jour Daba leur conseiller: "Surtout, ne dites pas à maman qu'on étouffe dans les cars, aux heures de pointes". Je pleurais de joie et de tristesse mêlée: joie d'être aimée de mes enfants, tristesse d'une mère qui n'avait pas les moyens de changer le cours des choses. ... Tu crois simple le problème de la polygamie. Ceux qui s'y meuvent, connaissent des contraintes, des mensonges, des injustices qui alourdissent leur conscience pour la joie éphémère d'un changement. (Bâ, 2003:103 ; 133)

[I was abandoned ... I heard one day Daba advising them: "Specially, do not tell Mum that we suffocate in the cars, during the rush hours." I wept for joy and sadness mingled: the joy of being loved by my children, sadness of a mother who could not afford to change the tide. ... You think so simple the issue of polygamy. Those who are experiencing it, share stress, lies and injustices that increase their awareness of the fleeting joy of a change. (*My translation*)].

Benfa, father of Kany and husband of Maman Téné, was reported by Badian to have neglected Téné because of his two newly married wives: "Il avait transporté ses affaires chez ses nouvelles épouses et était devenu étranger à maman Téné." (Badian:1972:74). ["He packed his personal belongings to his new wives' room and became a stranger to Maman Téné." (*My translation*)]. Boni (1962) presenting an African society before the penetration of alien cultures mentioned the spread of polygamy. Most women as presented by Boni are not at ease and feel disturbed to share a man with some other women. They feel uncomfortable in a polygamous family and protest about their condition of womanhood. They feel cheated, compared with men who can marry more than a wife, while women are compelled to have just one husband. Again, this is the way Boni (1962:134-135; 150-151) puts it: "La nouvelle mariée jouissait de tout mais elle va souffrir des menaces de ces coépouses. ... Les femmes s'en veulent aux hommes qui se font plus d'une femme ... On ne peut que s'attendre de jalousie dans une famille polygame." ["The bride enjoyed everything, but she will suffer the threats of her co-wives.... Women are not happy with men who marry more than one wife ... One can only expect jealousy in a polygamous family." (*My translation*)].

Divorce and inheritance are also vital topics often treated in West African literature. Modou, husband of Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre* was given an Islamic burial with a prayer session on the third, eighth and fortieth days. Tamsir, a relative of Modou, who was attempting to take over Modou's role, is ignorant of Islamic laws regarding marriage. The power of choice given to girls when going into marriage is extended to a situation where a woman is called to have another partner after the death of her husband. But ironically, Bâ has put Ramatoulaye before a situation different from the expected Islamic way. Let us recall the words (Bâ (2003:111): "Après ta "sortie"(sous entendu: du deuil), je t'épouse. Tu me conviens comme femme et puis tu continueras à habiter ici comme si Modou n'était pas mort."

["After the religious obligations, I will marry you. You are a woman of my taste and then will you continue to live here as if Modou was not dead." (*My translation*)]. The condition of Ramatoulaye as presented by Bâ after the death of Modou is not new. Sometimes after the death of a husband, the wife can be often treated as a witch. The African society often takes the wife as a property to be inherited. She is forced to marry someone else or is forced out of her house, thus depriving her of her belongings. Lemu (1992:206) reporting from the Qur'ân, informs us of the Islamic way of inheritance:

The Islamic system of inheritance (*mīrāth*) is a highly developed field in which the shares of inheritance are divinely prescribed, according to the relationship of surviving relatives. If it is established that a person is dead and has wealth or property to be inherited, the court is to work out the prescribed shares of heirs, taking into account the following principles: If the closest relatives are all alive (parents, children, wife or husband), then the other relatives are excluded. If, however such relatives do not exist then the inheritance extends to more distant relatives (brothers, uncles, etc.) ... Females have a share of inheritance.

Conclusion

Modou in *Une si longue lettre* (2003), Benfa in *Sous l'orage* (1972), and Fama in *Les Soleils des indépendances* (1970) are types of Muslims in the subregion of West Africa. They are not fully converted Muslims nor convinced idol worshippers. They hide under the auspices of Islam to commit all sorts of misdeeds, guided by their human desires. If converted West Africans followed the rules as prescribed by the revealed religions, that is, Islam and Christianity, West Africa would be a better place to live, with a prosperous political and socio-economic orientation. It was the bastardization of Islam in Hausa land that led Usman dan Fodio to launch his jihad and establish a Muslim society with *Sharī'ah* as the code of law in which references are to the Qur'ân and the *Sunnah* (teaching of the Prophet – p.u.b.h.). The following verse of the Qur'ân summarizes it very well: "O Believers, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those vested with authority among you. If you have a dispute about anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger..." (Qur'ân 4:59). In an ideal Muslim state, Islam should be a way of life, and converts would surrender all their affairs to the will of God as confirmed by verse 208 of chapter 2 of the Qur'ân: "O you who believe! Enter perfectly in Islam (by obeying all the rules and regulations of the Islamic religion) and follow not the footsteps of *Shaiṭān* (Satan). Verily, he is to you a plain enemy." In West African literature, women are relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy, having been misused, deceived, deprived, abandoned, underestimated, depressed and transformed into playthings in the hands of men. It should be noted that women are for a nation like the roots of a tree. Men are therefore invited to change their attitude vis-à-vis women and revisit the issue of polygamy. Efforts should be made to free West African women from bondage as Bâ (2003:119-120) counsels:

La femme ne doit plus être l'accessoire qui orne, l'objet que l'on déplace, la compagne qu'on flatte ou calme avec des promesses. La

femme est la racine première, fondamentale de la nation, où se greffe tout apport, d'où part aussi la floraison. Il faut inciter la femme à s'intéresser d'avantage au sort de son pays.

[The woman should stop being just the accessory that adorns, the object that one moves around, the companion that we flatter or pacify with promises. The woman is the principal root, fundamental for the nation, where everything comes from, where the flowering begins. We must encourage women to care more about the plight of their country. (*My translation*)].

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