

THE CHANGING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: A STUDY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*, OUSMANE SEMBÈNE'S *LE MANDAT* AND *XALA*, AND MARIAMA BÂ'S *UNE SI LONGUE LETTRE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the changes which have occurred overtime in the African woman's condition. Examples are taken from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ousmane Sembène's *Le Mandat* and *Xala*, and Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*. These novels illustrate the evolution from abused and unvoiced to self-asserted and voiced women. The changes were made possible largely because of (i) women's western education which helps them develop their skills and competence, and as such it arouses their awareness to their human rights and capacities; (ii) man's readiness to live a new lifestyle with woman by behaving differently compared with the old times. However, the struggle continues, as there is still much to be done.

The paper concludes that for an integrated development of the African continent, women should be educated and involved in the decision-making process.

Assessing the woman's condition in Africa, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues:

A brief glance at women all over the world today shows that women are oppressed. A brief glance suggests that educational attainments, participation rates, occupational structure, private and public laws, family planning systems, technological advance and, above all, socio-cultural attitudes are all weighted against them. (27)¹

Nevertheless, if we compare African women's conditions today to what prevailed in the pre-colonial or post-independence era,

there are some discernible signs of change. The changing times, each society's structures, institutions, customs and traditions, values, and above all evolution must be taken into account in this assessment. As a matter of fact, man's attitude and perception are instrumental in facilitating the improvement of woman's condition. Ousmane Sembène in Gadjigo Samba et al (1993) insists that for Africa to develop, "our forefathers' image of women must be buried once and for all" (100)².

This study focuses on some of the changing conditions of African women in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *Le Mandat* and *Xala* by Ousmane Sembène, and *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ. The choice of these writers is very significant as each of the novels under consideration is set

in a different period of African history. If Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* depicts a pre-colonial African society and its disintegration following the incursion of Europeans, *Le Mandat* and *Xala* describe the social realities of a post-independent Africa. The former reveals the barrage that the colonial-inherited administrative bureaucracy represents in the Third World after independence, and the latter mirrors the impotence of young African nations. Set in a more recent Africa, *Une si longue lettre* relates the life experiences and feelings of African women.

Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994)

Recreating Ourselves. African Women and Critical Transformations

² Gadjigo, Samba et al (1993). *Ousmane Sembène. Dialogues with Critics and Writers.*

The three writers selected for this study come from West Africa and the changes in the conditions of women are analyzed with reference to polygamous households. Though the conclusions reached in this paper cannot necessarily be applied to all Africa, not even to all West-African countries, they reveal somehow that women's conditions are showing some encouraging signs of change on the continent.

WOMEN'S CONDITIONS IN PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL AFRICA

Women as depicted by Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart*, do not play a significant part in the framework of the story. On the contrary, in this traditional society, not only they are abused physically, but also they are kept unvoiced. They live in constant fear of their husbands' anger and as such must obey all their wishes and desires. It is the case of the hero Okonkwo's wives, who "lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (14). For instance when Ojiugo, Okonkwo's youngest wife, went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not come back home early to prepare dinner, her husband got angry. When she returned "he beat her heavily" (31). Another example of physical violence is given when the same wife cut a few leaves from a banana tree to wrap some food without her husband's permission. When Okonkwo discovered it, he "gave her a sound beating" (40). In both cases we observe that the victim, Ojiugo, did not react. But how dare she when the laws, customs and traditions of the society have established that the husband is the master of the

household and as such his wives must show full respect and total obedience.

In addition to the physical abuse they are the victims of in this novel, women are not associated in the decision-taking process—even on matters in which they are directly involved. For instance, to settle the bride-price of Akueke, a young girl of Okonkwo's clan, only men gathered for discussion.

There were seven men in Obierika's hut when Okonkwo returned. The suitor was a young man of about twenty-five, and with him were his father and uncle. On Obierika's side were his two elder brothers and Maduka, his sixteen-year-old son. (72)⁶

Similarly, to decide on what should be done after a young girl of the Umuofian clan was assaulted and killed in Mbaino, a town crier "asked every man to be present at the market place the following morning" (11). No women were invited because in traditional Africa decisions are taken by men only. Excluded from the decisions that engage their future and the fate of the society they are living in, women cannot fully participate in its advancement and welfare.

WOMEN'S CONDITION IN POST-INDEPENDENCE AFRICA

In *Le Mandat*, however, women's conditions look somewhat different. In this novel, women dare take initiatives. For instance when the postman delivered the money order in Dieng's absence, the hero's wives did not wait for his return to receive instructions. Instead, they got some rice and oil on credit to cook lunch. When Dieng returned, "he had not asked where the flavoured rice with dried fish had come from. He had eaten to repletion" (116)⁸. This initiative-taking as well as the solidarity trait described below are most probably attributed to the writer's perception of woman. Indeed, Ousmane Sembène is one of the male authors, including Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Henri Lopès, and Ahmadou Kourouma, who have contributed to the promotion of women by presenting another image of woman in their works. They are convinced that the liberation of Africa is directly connected to the liberation of women.

³ Achebe, Chinua (1959)
Things Fall Apart

⁴ *idem*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Sembène, Ousmane (1966)
Le Mandat. The translation into English is mine

Ousmane Sembène shows in *Le Mandat* that women are not afraid of proving in public that they too have a sense of solidarity. When Dieng was injured in the altercation with the apprentice of the photographer, it is a woman he did not even know, who took care of him. She offered water to wash his bleeding face (163). Similarly, as Dieng's second wife knew that her husband did not have the money to give to his sister who had come for the three thousand francs sent by her son Abdou, she suggested that he pawned her expensive gold earrings (155). Another example which shows women's expression of solidarity is provided by Mety and Aram, Dieng's two wives. They could not understand their husband's over-generosity. Although he had not cashed the money order, he would share the rest of the family food with neighbors who were in need. But Mety and Aram, knowing that some of them pretended they were in need because they thought Dieng had received plenty of money, decided that they would be the ones to tell who should be helped (136).

Woman's expression of her solidarity can also take the form of the defense of man's honor. This happened when Mety, informed that her husband was having an argument with his creditor Mbarka, the shopkeeper, over his debts, rushed to the shop. She took sides with her husband, informed Mbarka that she knew what they owed him and assured him that he would be paid (176). Therefore, women's conditions as depicted in this post-independence novel are

changing due to a positive change in the African man's attitude who behaves differently from the pre-colonial man with the African woman. This has helped the latter gain in confidence and reveal to the society other traits of her nature that she was not given the opportunity to demonstrate. As such, we can assert that African women now seem to be considered more as partners than as 'docile onlookers'. This partnership will contribute to a better harmony in the family and, above all, to a more harmonious development of the society.

WOMEN'S CONDITION IN MODERN AFRICA

In *Xala* and *Une si longue lettre*, Ousmane Sembène and Mariama Bâ present a new generation of women. Having been to the white man's school, literate women are at the forefront of the new changes occurring in women's conditions. They continue their struggle and assert their outspokenness. That is the case with Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre*, when her deceased husband's brother came to ask her to marry him. She debates and decides, "This time I shall speak out. My voice has been reduced to silence for thirty years" (85). For a woman to refuse to marry her late husband's brother was unheard of in the traditional society. Times are really changing! In *Xala*, Rama, a twenty-year-old university student, is another example of a voiced woman. When El Hadj Abdou Kader

Beye, her father, asked her if she were ready to accompany him to his third marriage ceremony, she refused to go and even had the courage to tell him face-to-face what she thinks about the marriage. She points out, "I am against this marriage, father. A polygamist is never frank" (13). El Hadj Kader was stunned. He then slapped Rama adding that he would not admit such a "revolution" in his house. But to his surprise, his daughter retorted, "This is not your house. Nothing here belongs to you" (13).

Rama's courage, which was unthinkable a few years ago, is a true evidence of the changing conditions of African women. Indeed, in traditional Africa, polygamy was accepted as a norm. However, today, it is criticized and even rejected. No doubt that school education is transforming the African woman and as a consequence, relations in African societies.

Because of the education they receive in the white man's school, and the new ideas to which they are exposed, African women today, little by little, voice their opinions about certain mores. There, Rama, again, is a telling example. Unhappy about her father's third marriage, she says she would rather divorcé than share her husband with another woman (12)¹⁶.

¹³ Bâ, Mariama (1986) *Une si longue lettre*. The translation into English is mine.

¹⁴ Sembène, Ousmane (1976) *Xala*. The translation into English is mine.

¹⁵ *Idem*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Bâ, Mariama (1986) *Une si longue lettre*. The translation into English is mine.

⁹ *idem*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

Similarly, in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, Aïssatou, Ramatoulaye's friend, informed by her husband that she was going to have a co-wife, tells him in a letter that she was not prepared for a polygamous life. She writes, "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I continue my way. Goodbye" (50) 17.

Women in traditional society, as described in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, are unvoiced. However, today, they analyze and decide for themselves. Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre*, Adja Awa in *Xala*, are good illustrations of women's assertiveness. Ramatoulaye, having discovered the betrayal of her husband who has taken a second wife, decides, after deep consideration, not to divorce him. She analyses the situation as follows:

Leave? Start again from scratch after twenty-five years of marital life, after having borne twelve children? Am I capable of bearing alone the weight of this responsibility, which was both moral and material? (40)¹⁸

What is important to mention here and which denotes the changing condition of woman is that, the decision not to divorce was not imposed on her. It was rather hers personal. Even though Daouda Dieng, her former suitor before she married, today a rich man, offered to marry her, Ramatoulaye kindly but persistently maintained her decision not to remarry. The

comment, by Farmata —a griot woman— to her refusal is a good example of the old mentality. "Who do you think you are? You trample upon your luck: Daouda Dieng, a rich man, a deputy, a doctor, of your own age group, with just one wife. He offers you security, love, and you refuse?" (101).¹⁹ Ramatoulaye's decision confirms that African women today, are rejecting some of the traditional beliefs and ideas. They are more and more determined to choose for themselves.

Adja Awa in *Xala*, victim of the same betrayal now that her husband is marrying his third wife, refuses to take her daughter Rama's advice. Like Ramatoulaye, she believes divorce is not the best solution for her:

You think I should get a divorce. Where would I go at my age? Where would I find another husband? A man of my own age and still a bachelor? If I left your father and with luck and Alla's help found a husband, I would be his third or his fourth wife. And what would become of you? (12)²⁰

However, contrary to Ramatoulaye and Adja Awa who believe divorce is not the best solution to their new situation, Aïssatou in *Une si longue lettre* does not hesitate to take the decision to divorce her husband when he informed her of his intention to have a second wife. She chooses what she thinks is best for her. After she leaves, she decides to look resolutely to the future. The education she received at school proved to be very

helpful, both morally and financially. Thus, books supported and saved her as they have become her refuge (51)²¹. Moreover, they enabled her to better herself as she continued her studies at a School of Interpreters and after she graduated, she was appointed at the Senegalese Embassy in the United States of America. Consequently, she became financially independent and started to make a very good living.

These attitudes are significant of the changes occurring in the conditions of African women who can today decide what they feel is best for them, who can make their own choice. As Irène Assiba d'Almeida (1986) emphasizes "What is important is that the choices have been made. For too long a time women have been denied to choose the course of their lives" (171)²².

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Sembène, Ousmane (1976) *Xala*

²¹ Bâ, Mariama (1986) *Une si longue lettre*

²² d'Almeida, Irène Assiba (1986) "The Concept of Choice in Mariama Bâ's Fiction"

This assertiveness can have deeper implications as it contributes to women's liberation from the burden of some customs and traditions which have so far worsened their condition. One of these customs is that in some parts of Africa, a younger brother usually inherits his elder brother's wife after his death. For instance Tamsir, in *Une si longue lettre*, to respect the tradition, wanted to marry Ramatoulaye—although in this case he is the elder brother. Ramatoulaye's anger burst out:

Did you ever have any love for your brother? You already want to build a new home over a body that is still warm.... You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed around. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you.... I shall never be the one to complete your collection. (85)²³

Ramatoulaye's violent reaction reveals that African women today are determined to challenge traditions, make their voices heard, and assert their outspokenness. That way, I believe, their voice will count and the development of Africa will be more integral. As Ousmane Sembène (1993) mentions "The development of Africa will not happen without the effective participation of women" (100)²⁴.

CONCLUSION

Women in traditional Africa are victims of physical violence and do not have their say in the decisions which are taken. After the colonial period, however, they started acting on their own initiative and could express their solidarity without fear. Today, they can express their opinions, desires, and feelings, which means their voices can be heard.

This evolution in women's conditions is largely due to their education at the white man's school and to the positive change in man's attitude. The instruction they receive helps them develop their skills and competence, and as such it arouses their awareness to their human rights and capacities. The exploitation of these potentialities are beneficial for the progress of their society and mankind in general. Consequently, it is vital that every action, aimed at the improvement of African women's conditions, encompasses an educational component because, as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) puts it "...Western education ... will provide the social and economic basis and security from which they (women) can resist subjection and indignities..." (81)²⁵.

This does not mean, however, that African traditional education should be rejected. It is desirable that Africans reconcile their

western education with the positive elements of their traditional education. As for the African man's attitude, it needs to be in perpetual adaptation to support this evolution. It will certainly be difficult as it is not easy to change habits. Efforts must be made, both individually and collectively, to accept that men and women are born with equal rights and as such, the latter should receive a fair and equal treatment in the society. Only then can the female population feel concerned about and be integrated into the development of the continent.

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²³ Bâ, Mariama (1986) *Une si longue lettre*

²⁴ Gadjigo, Samba (1993) Ousmane, Sembène. *Dialogues with Critics and Writers*