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# Aminata Sow Fall's "Demon" Women: An Anti-Feminist Social Vision

Athleen Ellington

*University of Massachusetts Amherst, Doctoral Candidate in the French Department*

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*Athleen Ellington*

## AMINATA SOW FALL'S "DEMON" WOMEN: AN ANTI-FEMINIST SOCIAL VISION

*Vous les femmes, vous êtes des démons, des démons trop sensibles à l'argent, aux folies, à la renommée.*

*[You women, you are demons, demons too susceptible to money, to extravagance, to fame.]*  
*(Le Revenant, 56)<sup>1</sup>*

**A**MINATA SOW FALL, one of the earliest women writers from Senegal,<sup>2</sup> has been acknowledged as an analyst of contemporary social mores, exposing aspects of modern African society where social, political and economic changes have resulted in the debasement of public and private customs and behavior.<sup>3</sup> There has been a curious silence, however, from feminist critics, who have largely side-stepped her work, which now numbers four novels: *Le Revenant* (1976), *La Grève des Bâttu* (*The Beggars' Strike*) (1979), *L'Appel des Arènes* (1982) and *L'Ex-Père de la Nation* (1987).<sup>4</sup> The reason for this silence may perhaps be due to Sow Fall's neglect of feminist themes, and to the critics' reluctance to challenge her negative portrayal of the "strong" female characters in her novels, given that francophone women writers have only recently emerged onto the literary scene in Africa and their numbers are few. But beyond the social satire that is foregrounded in her novels, Sow Fall's texts reveal a social vision that is limiting for the modern African woman and would restrict her to the traditional, submissive role of the African Muslim woman in West African society. In her vision, Senegal's modern, urban society appears to depend for its stability on the survival of rural traditions and women remaining "in their places." And yet, this anti-feminist vision is in part subverted by the textual ambivalence towards the strong female characters in Sow Fall's novels, which allows a conflicting feminist discourse to emerge. This subtextual discourse is perhaps unconsciously expressed, in the sense that Héléne Cixous, who herself is a francophone writer from a Muslim African country (Algeria), meant when she said "the text is always more than the author wants to express or believes s/he expresses."<sup>5</sup> So while Sow Fall herself would reject the notion of a "feminine" writing

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or a concern with feminist themes, these issues nevertheless surface in the text.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the response of her "demon" women to the law is "feminine": like Eve, they choose to ignore and defy the law, and attempt to subvert its power.<sup>7</sup> Yandé in *Ex-père*, Yama in *Revenant*, Diattou in *Arènes*, Siné in *Strike*, and the two rebellious daughters, Raabi in *Strike* and Nafi in *Ex-père*, are ultimately indicted for their "individualistic" behavior and ambitiousness, but their achievements are considerable, and they are far more compelling characters than their submissive counterparts. But because Sow Fall is so absolute in her condemnation of these "demon" women, all of whom are harshly punished with either social ostracism, imprisonment or death, the dominant discourse is anti-feminist as is the author's social vision.

In approaching the texts of an African woman writer, this analysis will attempt to discuss difference without hermeneutically appropriating it. It will depend on a reading that becomes, as elaborated by Héléne Cixous' "feminine" mode of research, an "act of listening, an attempt to hear the 'strangeness'" of a text written in a different language and of a different culture.<sup>8</sup> While our experience can approach the other's experience, at some point the social, economic and political dynamics of the African situation will prohibit complete understanding of the African text by an American or European reader. Yet given the assumption that literary writing expresses a desire to communicate with the other, and that criticism should be, in Edward Said's words, "socially responsive,"<sup>9</sup> it becomes imperative to be able to engage in a literary, and feminist, discourse without making the assumption that the Western reader can fully "know" an African text. This is not a question of the undecidability of meaning or the interpretation of an ambiguous text, but what one feminist critic has referred to as the "modest" literary goal of "respecting the distances and the refusals that some texts communicate [and acknowledging] impassable distances beyond our limited horizons."<sup>10</sup> A gendered reading of Sow Fall's texts will also consider the treatment of her female characters in the light of feminist critic Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's contention that the African woman writer has a "special responsibility . . . first, to tell about being a woman and, secondly, to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective" even while recognizing that the concept of woman "is complex and differs from society to society and that African literature has its own female stereotypes."<sup>11</sup> Within the framework of "international feminism," which recognizes similarities between the experience of African and Western women and accepts as necessary "a feminist consciousness in examining the position of women in African society," this approach also considers the world with which the text has a material relationship.<sup>12</sup> Feminist critic Carole Boyce Davies, in her book *Ngambika*, defines "a genuine African feminism" as one that will recognize (women's) common struggle with African men in the struggle against colonialism (and presumably neo-colonialism), but also recognizes that "certain inequities and limitations exist in traditional societies" (as well as in modern societies).<sup>13</sup>

Sow Fall's anti-feminist social vision relates to her depiction of the "demon" women who have sought their own development as professionals and individuals outside the role of wife and mother. They are the women who have dared leave the patriarchal compound. Yama, the hero's sister in *Revenant*, marries beyond her station in order to

bring herself and her family out of poverty, and becomes obsessed with the power of money. Diattou, Nalla's mother in *Arènes*, goes to Europe for her education and training as a midwife and returns obsessed with western ideas of modernity and progress. Yandé, the second wife of Madiama, the hero of *Ex-père*, a teacher by profession, rebels against social and family pressure to submit, during her first marriage, to the cruel psychological domination of her first husband. Later, in her second marriage to Madiama, she becomes obsessed with the idea of political power.

Siné, Mour's second wife in *Strike*, is a young secretary in a travel agency, "very elegant and very modern [who] expresses herself with ease in the official language." Raabi and Nafi, Lolli and Coura's daughters, respectively, are politically active, intellectual university students. The ideas and actions of these women upset the traditional balance of society. They do not point the way to the future. The reader is instead presented with a reactionary view of what a woman's role in society *should* be.

These women are the modern version of "seytani," a Wolof term meaning "the embodiment of evil." In a society whose rural traditions are communal, they are guilty of "individualisme." Yet there is no discussion of the forces within their rural society that are forcing women to leave their traditional roles. In particular, although Sow Fall alludes to "la sécheresse" in three of her novels, no connection is made between women's abandonment of their cultural past and the man-made disaster of "desertification" set into motion by the continuing drought, even though "women experience desertification as a radical, irreversible disruption" of their rural lives.<sup>14</sup> Sow Fall uses the weight of a declining rural way of life to judge the actions of these modern women. While the "seytani" figure is a normal one in Muslim West African culture, it is traditionally the courtesan or griotte (female troubadour) who is "seytani" and who practices witchcraft and serves as a mediator of the dangerous contact with evil spirits. In her use of "seytani" Sow Fall also perpetuates the contradictory belief in West African culture that both good and evil emanate from the woman, a belief that reflects the co-existence in contemporary Muslim African culture of ancient African beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

Witch doctors or healers are always only men. Witchcraft is practiced by women and is believed to be hereditary in the female line: the woman may pass on witchcraft to her daughters but not to her sons.<sup>16</sup> But in Sow Fall's novels, the *seytani* figure is placed in the educated, ambitious and modern woman. She is the "satanic" one, the dangerous one, the sexually uncontrolled one.<sup>17</sup> Coura warned her husband, Madiama, that, "With Yandé you introduced the devil in person into your home." (*Ex-père*, 14) "Terrible Yandé," with her "diabolical smile," is a "provocatrice" who at birth was said to have "the eye of the witch" (14) because she was born with two teeth, "a sign of trouble." Her father is a "Bilodji," a healer of the victims of witches [*demms*]. He considered her birth an intrusion into the family and the two teeth as a sign that the *demms* had played an evil trick on him in revenge for his trying to heal their victims.

In *Arènes*, Diattou is warned that "the devil will be your teacher" and she is branded as a "sale demm" ["dirty witch"] by the neighborhood women and clients at the maternity clinic. These *demon* women are contrasted with the "good wife" or, in *Arènes*, the "adored grandmother" who, in Muslim African culture is weak, submissive and needing male

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protection.<sup>18</sup> Reluctant senior wives Coura and Lolli submit to their unwanted co-wife and maintain an inner serenity and sense of moral virtue that appears to derive, like the keeping of religious faith, from their absolute submission to the patriarchal figures of father and husband. These women conform to the dominance/submissiveness complex that is so important to traditional (i.e. rural) African muslim society, where the "good wife" is she who "gives birth to many children, especially boys, who always kneels when serving her husband food and water, who obeys her husband and does not talk to him or offend him, and who 'sits'."

The West African Mangan phrase, "kamu napcin," means "the married woman is sitting," and refers to her proper behavior in general of staying inside the compound, behind the straw fence, or within the clay walls if in town (77). Thus Coura, Madiama's first wife and mother of his children, is gentle, self-contained and respected for her ability to "keep a tight rein" on her emotions. Lolli, Mour's first wife, accepts his philandering while she bears their eight children and devotes herself to his happiness, never forgetting her mother's admonition that "... a wife must not grumble. You must understand that your husband is free. He is not an object that belongs to you. You owe him respect, obedience and submission. A wife's sole lot is patience; get that into your head if you want to be a worthy wife." (*Strike*, 27) Tante Ngoné, Bakar's mother (*Revenant*), and Mame Fari, Nalla's "adulated" grandmother (*Arènes*), are extolled for their tireless devotion to their families. To her grandson Nalla, Mame Fari's "traditional" village life was a "univers paradisiaque." Tante Ngoné is such a perfect example of the submissive wife/mother that she has never dared ask her son, Bakar, a question since he reached adolescence due to "Une pudeur toute féminine, enseignée par l'éducation qu'elle avait reçue et qui lui avait appris à ne jamais essayer d'aller au fond des choses, lui interdisait de poser des questions à son fils." ["A very feminine modesty, learned from the education she had received and which had taught her to never go to the bottom of things, forbade her to ask her son questions."] (*Revenant*, 12) Her "total abnegation" before her "intransigent" husband (who, obeying his "male instinct for domination," reigned as master and used to beat her) only "sanctified and enlarged the image [Bakar] had of his mother." (74)

The only protest these "good wives" are allowed to make is against the *inappropriate* use of the Muslim tradition of polygamy. Lolli and Coura protest their husbands' "irresponsible" choice. Both feel betrayed, not by the *institution* of polygamy but because of its *misuse* and because the debasement of traditional values makes polygamy no longer viable. Raabi, a law student, tells her mother Lolli, "Polygamy must be done away with; there's no justification for this practice nowadays." (*Strike*, 30) Lolli tells her husband that there is a "contract of decency and gratitude" that is stronger than the Muslim tradition which should prevent him from taking a second wife since it was she who "wore herself to a shadow to keep the home going" when he was just starting out. (*Strike*, 31) Coura, unaware of the events that forced Yandé at one period in her life to live from prostitution, castigates Madiama for taking someone "ignoble" as his second wife, someone "qui a couru tous les bars, tous les cinémas, toutes les boîtes de nuit, tous les mauvais lieux du pays, elle qui a nourri tous les scandales du pays. . . ." ["who has

frequented every bar, every theater, every nightclub, every disreputable place in the country, she who has fed all the country's scandales. . . ."] (*Ex-père*, 55) In Coura's case, the choice of a co-wife diminishes her own social status; in Lolli's, it threatens her social position, in spite of Mour's reassuring remark that "I wouldn't exchange you for anything in the world . . . I appreciate all your good qualities, your patience, your kindness. . . . You're my lucky mascot and you know it." (*Strike*, 26) The irruption into the text of a feminist argument springs perhaps from Sow Fall's own ambiguous attitude towards polygamy. In an interview, she states that while she "is against polygamy, one must respect the choice of others."<sup>19</sup>

A feminist common ground that links the African woman's discourse to a Western discourse, and Sow Fall's texts to our own, may be found in the cultural definition of women as the Other. In her book, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*, Nicole Ward Jouve points out that the phrase, "woman is the other"—which is derived from the Hegelian dialectic of the master and the slave, and defines man as the Absolute and woman as the inessential—was rephrased by Simone de Beauvoir to: "woman becomes the Other" ["on ne naît pas femme; on le devient"].<sup>20</sup> de Beauvoir did this in order to focus on the cultural *process* by which woman is reduced to this secondary position in society. So while the cultural situation may differ, the process is the same in the West as in Africa, where daughters and adolescent girls, Sow Fall tells us, are "inculcated" with the "indispensable virtue of 'jom,' which constitutes a restraint on any reprehensible behavior." (*Strike*, 56) Because the mimetic role of literature has made the novel in Africa an inextricable part of the social and political history of the continent, the images of the woman in the African novel are important clues to the author's understanding of what the woman's role in society should be. In her 1980 study of the image of the black woman in francophone African literature, *Emancipation féminine et roman africain*, Arlette Chemain-Degrange has, for example, shown that the images of the black woman in many of the politically committed novels by male African authors were influenced by the political intention of the author. The result is that the African woman is never described for herself in these works but is instead used to evoke or symbolize the political situation in question.<sup>21</sup> In other male stereotypes of women, such as the idealized woman as mother, symbolizing Africa, or the long-suffering woman symbolizing the fight against colonization, women are used either as an eulogy of black African culture or for the evocation of the anti-colonial revolt. While it is arguable that it could not have been otherwise when discourse was monopolized by men, the African female reader is nevertheless offered a deformed image of herself as seen by men, where masculine prejudices and political agendas distorted the representation of her reality and experience. The obvious danger for women readers in the creation of these mythical women is their use as role models.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast are African women writers like Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, writing in English, and Mariama Bâ and Calixthe Beyala, writing in French, who have portrayed female characters in primary roles, giving them a positive image that African feminist critics say "is in tune with African historical realities and [do not] stereotype or limit women into postures of dependence or submergence."<sup>23</sup> Or they have shown the

woman-as-victim character, as for example Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, to show her exploitation, not by the colonial system, but by the African male, in order to challenge the accepted and traditional role of women and to stimulate change. Their novels gave a voice to women that was denied to them in their African Muslim society. In these texts women are not projections of male fantasy and idealization, but speak their real experience. In "Muslim Women in the Periphery," Mette Bovin writes that "Muslim women are not only suppressed by society and men, but [they] can also be *strong*." (66) Because it is primarily the women who maintain and transmit the pre-Islamic and non-Islamic cultural elements of the West African Sahel countries, which include Senegal, only a rendering of a woman's experience can accurately portray the cultural difference between the West African societies and the original Muslim societies that point to the potential liberation of African Muslim women. This aspect of women's experience is conveyed in many of the female-authored texts by their adoption of themes and topics that engage women, using personal or domestic themes rather than the social and political ones generally used by male African authors. They show the reader the limited choices and the legal and cultural institutions that thwart a woman's aspirations for fulfillment outside of motherhood and the home. Katherine Frank's essay, "Women Without Men: the Feminist Novel in Africa,"<sup>24</sup> notes that these novels by women also contemplate the solution of a world without men. They raise what Frank says is the paramount question: how can the cross-cultural conflict between Western and African values be resolved, how can the contemporary African woman negotiate her way between the claims of tradition and modernization, how can she, finally, "be rendered whole again"? (18) More recently, feminist writing in Africa has gone beyond the issue of traditionalism versus modernism. Calixthe Beyala's heroine in *C'est le Soleil qui m'a brûlée* (1987), for example, contemplates the (daring) alternative of Lesbian love in a world where, she has determined, male violence and domination will never allow self-fulfillment for a woman in a heterosexual relationship; and explores the options for women who are doubly suppressed by their own governments because they are both poor and female. These feminist novelists—for whether they accept the label or not, as most do not, these novels are clearly feminist<sup>25</sup>—thus pose the question of how the new African woman can resolve the conflict between her African identity, her own culture, and her desire for fulfillment.

However, this feminine voice is not heard in the novels of Aminata Sow Fall. Her main protagonists are male, the world she projects is a male world, and the narrator's voice is a masculine one. Her themes follow the classic male African novelist's pattern identified by Frank as focussing on, until recently and with few exceptions, social and political themes.<sup>26</sup> Her novels express two concerns: how materialism brought about by colonization, and the Western domination of cultural values, are debasing traditional social institutions like marriage, polygamy, the dowry, and naming and funeral ceremonies; and how her country's economic development is being undermined by this same loss of traditional values that, in the public arena, manifests itself as official immorality and corruption. Her "strong" female characters combine the stereotypes, "reinforced by the author's own obsessions," of the African woman in male-authored novels through

whom evil occurs.<sup>27</sup> Diattou is the Europeanized city woman symbolizing all the defects of an imported civilization; Yandé the "goule," or demon, symbolizes the foreign domination that is consuming African values.

In Yandé, who is politically ambitious for Madiama when he is elected the country's first president, the treacherous woman-prostitute stereotype also reappears. As in novels by male authors, she symbolizes African complicity with colonialism and neo-colonialism. Sow Fall's images of her individualistic women characters is disturbingly sexist and perpetuate a male myth that identifies physical feminine beauty with goodness, and ugliness with evil and sorcery. Diattou and Siné are "insolent," "lipstick-smeared," "cigarette-smoking," "cropped-hair" women who flaunt their sex by squeezing their "fat thighs" into tight pants. Yandé is "extremely ugly with small, slanted eyes, high cheekbones, a flat, flat nose, and a mouth that stretches from ear to ear." Harboring a troublesome sexuality, her body is "magically fluid," but it is "the beauty of the devil." (*Ex-père*, 121-122) Yandé's first husband believed the disharmony between her "magically fluid" body and her "ugly face" was a sign that "she carries a curse within her." When she dared criticize him, a sadistically cruel man, her own family could only suppose that "she must be the plaything of the devil" and warned her: "Apprends à dompter ce caractère de possédée qu'aucun homme au monde ne pourra jamais supporter." [Learn to control your devilish behavior that no man could ever put up with.] (*Ex-père*, 125) Nafi and Raabi, the younger generation, wear jeans and disdain jewelry and cosmetics, making themselves culturally unattractive to the traditional African. In *Revenant*, when Bakar's sister Yama becomes *nouveau-riche*, she is also described in sexist terms. Yama now has a heavy gait because of her "large back porch" ["le fardeau qu'elle avait derrière."] (83) Siné, Mour's 17-year-old second wife, is berated by her middle-aged husband for wearing tight pants and lipstick, and "dangling" cigarettes from her mouth. (*Strike*, 96) Mour, on the other hand, is only mildly chastized for his "years of libertinage" during the years of his marriage to Lolli when she was bearing their eight children. (46) Significantly, Sow Fall's demonic women disobey their fathers or elders. Diattou mocks her mother's remonstrances and "scandalizes" the village elders with her "indecent" attire during a visit to her native village upon her return from Europe after three years absence: "ses fesses en formes de calebasses moulées dans le pantelon [rebondissaient] lorsqu'elle marchait" ["her gourd-shaped buttocks, molded into her trousers, bounced as she walked"]. (*Arènes*, 22)

The vehemence with which Sow Fall condemns these women's attempts at "individualism" appears to express the same "apprehension and hostility to change" that Chemain-Degrange found in the reticence of some male African authors "to see the African society, in which they enjoy a privileged position, change, especially when that change is accompanied by feminine emancipation."<sup>28</sup> Thus Yama is castigated by her brother, Bakar, for being a "damned and dirty social climber with complexes" ["une sale arriviste, une maudite complexée"] because she has dared cross social boundaries. (*Revenant*, 84) Sow Fall's ideas about women may reflect her own confusion about what "tradition" and "progress" mean. It is ironical that, as a writer and member of the urban elite herself, she condemns individualism for women when, as a novelist, she practices



one of the most individualistic of careers. Not only does writing novels "keep the other out," in the words of Hélène Cixous, it also presupposes leisure time as well as an income—luxuries available to only a very few African women.<sup>29</sup> On an ideological level, Sow Fall's idealization of the past uses the feminine image to express and orient profound conservative tendencies, expressing a desire to return to old and secure structures, to a "pre-colonial golden age" that isolates women in society and keeps them away from the centers of power.<sup>30</sup> In the world with which her texts have a material relationship, this is often used as a political tactic for controlling the movement of women away from male-dominated jobs and areas of privilege. As a member of the urban elite herself, Sow Fall may be unconsciously expressing textually the male fear of women's advancement in the economic and social spheres of her society.

Sow Fall's use of the theme of conflict between Western and African culture was frequently used with a political intention in the early African novel. It is poignantly expressed, for example, in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (*Ambiguous Adventure*), where the hero's alienation from his simpler African faith has not been replaced by an identification with the materialist culture of France. But whereas the "metamorphosing African" in Kane's novel refers to both African men and women, Sow Fall uses this same image to indict the women who have turned their back on tradition in their attempt to achieve social, political or professional recognition. In Sow Fall's novels, they are the ones who cannot resist "the madness of the West at the time when they ought to do so, in order to pick and choose, assimilate or reject, [but instead are], in all latitudes, a-quiver with covetousness, then metamorphosing themselves in the space of one generation, under the action of this new egotism which the West is scattering abroad." (*Ambiguous*, 69) As in other national novels,<sup>31</sup> she projects an ideal future for her country, but locates the problem that is interfering with its development in the woman who breaks with tradition:

Diattou, attisé par les vents d'Ouest, . . . bénissant les cieus de lui avoir permis de monter dans la capitale pour y continuer ses études . . . y rencontra Ndiogou Bari . . . qui l'épousa plus tard et l'amena en Occident. Le Paradis pour Diattou. La grande solution: l'individualisme. Chacun pour soi . . . Diattou mit le plus soin à *se métamorphoser*. Elle se soumit à la torture d'appriivoiser ses cordes vocales et de les polir. Elle apprit à régler sa démarche et ses gestes sur la vitesse de l'Occident. . . .

[Diattou, stirred by the winds of the West . . . blessed the heavens for having allowed her to go to the capital to continue her studies. . . there she met Ndiogou Bari . . . who married her and took her to the West. Paradise for Diattou. The great solution: individualism. Everyone for himself. . . Diattou took the greatest care metamorphizing herself. She submitted herself to the torture of taming and polishing her vocal cords. She learned to regulate her walk and her gestures according to the speed of the West. . . .]

(*Arènes*, 88, emphasis added)

Rather than posing questions of a phallocratic society that “endlessly bans people of the female sex to the position of the Other,”<sup>32</sup> Sow Fall’s novels condemn the woman who tries to assert herself as subject. Yandé, a “disconcerting” figure with “unbridled” gestures in whom “the devil has died” (45), is blamed for her husband’s downfall even though she and Andru, her husband’s chief advisor, act together to corruptly consolidate her husband’s power. It is she who is portrayed as the “bloodsucker on the body of the State” (45) even though it is Madiama who cannot keep his own ministers from stealing from the State. Yet it is not her Machiavellianism that makes her “demonic” but the fact that she assumes an active political role and speaks and acts like a man, as when, exulting, she explains her *realpolitik* to Madiama:

A la guerre comme à la guerre, et tous les moyens sont bons . . . Ils sont solidaires dans leurs volonté de nous nuire, mais le goût du lucre est plus fort et déclenche chez eux des attitudes sordides qui les poussent à s’entredévorer. C’est par là que je les tiens; ils se sont faits bourreaux et ne savent pas qu’ils sont aussi des victimes. Tous à ma solde!

[All’s fair in love and war, and the end justifies the means . . . They are united in their will to destroy us, but the lure of money is stronger and causes them to behave in a sordid way, and pushes them to devour each other. That is the way I hold them; they’ve made themselves the executioner and they don’t know they’re also the victims. They’re all in my pay!]

(*Ex-père*, 42)

Sow Fall’s ideological and social critique is also expressed in the hierarchical structure of her narrative, a structure that is identical in all four novels. At the base of the triangle are two opposing female types: the “good wife” and traditional mother, or grandmother, versus the modern, city woman, the demon, *demon* or *seytani* figure. At the apex stands the patriarchal figure. Mediating between them are daughters who rebel, on the female side, and the friend or mentor on the male side who represents traditional society. In each novel the male hero, a misguided but basically good man, is destroyed by the sorceress’ figure. Thus it is that the young and innocent Bakar, pressured by his social-climbing sister, begins to embezzle from his employer, the Post Office, in order to give his young wife, Mame Aissa, “gold bracelets, necklaces and expensive boubous.” Bakar mistakenly believes that “it was his duty as a respectable husband to fulfill all his wife’s desires.” (*Revenant*, 38)

Hélène Cixous has analyzed the internalization of the phallogocentric perspective by a woman writer in terms of the *writing* of sexual difference. In this analysis, the qualifiers “masculine” and “feminine” do not refer in an exclusive way to one or the other of the genders but function as differential predicates that can be used for either men or women.<sup>33</sup> Writing in a masculine voice, as Sow Fall does, thus refers to the subject’s relation to a network of power relations, a repetition of mythical concepts that have historically excluded women and inform the “cliché of woman [as] an hysteric, a sorceress [who is] under the spell of the father.”<sup>34</sup> The traditional woman, the woman

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of the African rural village—"ces excellentes femmes" of Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir*<sup>35</sup>—is the "inessential woman" of Simone de Beauvoir's classic analysis. In Sow Fall's novels she is the silent woman who consciously and unconsciously accepts herself as the Other, the inessential woman counterposed to the essential man: "Pour moi, rien d'autre ne compte, Mour," Lolli tells her husband. . . . "Je suis ton épouse et il est normal que je cherche ton bonheur, car ton bonheur est le mien." ["For me, nothing else counts, Mour. I am your wife and it's normal that I seek your happiness because your happiness is mine."] (*Strike*, 26-27) Throughout their twenty-four years of marriage, she adhered to her mother's advice to always "obey your husband; make his happiness your main concern; on him, your fate and especially that of your children, depends." (*Strike*, 27)

One sees the drama of this conflict, between the fundamental need of any subject that always presupposes itself as the subject and the needs of a situation which always constitutes the woman as inessential, unfold in the generational conflict of mothers and daughters in Sow Fall's novels. However, rather than establishing themselves as essential subjects, the self-assertion of these rebellious daughters is seen as an evil force disrupting the harmony of African culture. Infatuated with the idea of progress, Diattou "insolently" tells her mother, "Le monde n'est plus ce qu'il était heur. Personne ne peut arrêter le progrès. Il faut vivre dans son siècle sous peine de s'éteindre. Notre siècle, c'est celui du progrès et de la liberté." ["The world isn't what it was. Nobody can stop progress. One must live in one's own century or become extinct. Our century is that of progress and freedom."] (*Arènes*, 122) Punished for these words, Diattou is ostracized by her neighbors and hex clients at the maternity clinic, where she works as a midwife, and is branded a "sale demm," a "dirty witch," for her deviant behavior. Rejected by her son and husband, who reconcile themselves to their cultural past, Diattou, like Lady Macbeth, wanders offstage as the novel comes to a close, half-mad and possessed by the forces of evil. Coura and Lolli's daughters rebel against their mothers submission: university-educated and politically-active women, they "are filled with resentment" against their fathers and seek a new role for themselves. "Lolli was informed about the campaign for women's liberation that her sisters were waging. Her eldest daughter, Raabi, who was a law student, was always saying, 'Polygamy must be done away with; there's no justification for this practice nowadays.'" (*Strike*, 34) But these errant daughters do not project an ideal future for women in Africa in Sow Fall's novels. Rather, their modern ideas are like a Western disease infecting the African woman and weakening the State. For Raabi, the disease has made her unmarriageable, because she is "intellectual" and "ugly." Nafi, who had joined her father's political opposition, is beaten to death by the mob during a political demonstration, killed by the very people she was trying to help.

Sow Fall's traditional women, on the other hand, are projected as ideal members of the communal group because they repress any desire for self-expression. After an initial "stormy reaction" to Mour's announcement that he was taking a second wife, and a few days "sulking," Lolli quickly resigns herself to being a co-wife and "redoubles her efforts to win back her lord and master [because she] will never permit herself any deviation from the accepted standards." (*Strike*, 34, 56) Feminine self-abnegation is particularly

striking in the depiction of Coura, Madiama's senior wife who renounces her own sexuality in order to punish her husband for having taken an *inappropriate*, "ignoble," second wife. In a bizarre oedipal metaphor, Coura symbolically reincarnates herself as Madiama's mother, to prevent him from ever having conjugal relations with her again. To seal her oath of revenge, she squirts breast milk from her nipple into his gaping mouth:

Je jure au nom de Dieu, que pour toi, je ne serai plus une femme parce que, par ma propre volonté, je me fais des aujourd'hui la réincarnation de ta mère . . . Si tu cherchais en moi la femme, sache que c'est ta mère Coumba Dado Sadio que tu chercherais et alors, honte, sacrilège, malheur! [Et après avoir détaché l'étoffe qui maintenait l'enfant sur son dos] Elle avait fait gicler le lait de son sein et avait dirigé le jet sur [la bouche de Madiama] encore ouverte.

[I swear in the name of God, that for you I will no longer be your wife because, by my own will, I today make myself the reincarnation of your mother . . . If you seek the wife in me, know that it is your mother Coumba Dado Sadio that you would be seeking and then, shame, sacrilege, sorrow! (And after having undone the wrap securing the infant on her back) She squirted a jet of milk from her breast into (Madiama's) gaping mouth.]

(*Ex-père*, 58)

She thus punishes him by depriving herself of a sexual relationship with her husband (or any other man, given the strictures of traditional African society) for twenty-two years—while he shares his bed with the sensuous Yandé.

The impasse in Sow Fall's novels, in a feminist reading, is not that her vision of the future relegates women to an inferior role in society, but that she locates women as the problem interfering with that development, in particular, the "metamorphosing" woman who must of necessity be part of the solution. Her nostalgic gaze focuses on a rural past that she sees as both desirable and recoverable. The men in her novels long for traditional women like Bakar's mother, Tante Ngoné. Yet these ideal and virtuous African women who express the dream of a return to a former equilibrium and who stifle their own desires for the sake of group harmony, cannot sustain themselves, nor are they being sustained by the men in whose interest it is to keep them as helpmates. This paradoxical situation perhaps expresses the author's own confused ideas on the place of women in her society. There is no solution offered for the tradition-modernist conflict, beyond a rejection of the Western model and a return to the past. This retrospective gaze ignores the fact, as African critic Mohamadou K. Kane points out, that "une évolution décisive de la société ne pourra se faire sans le concours féminin."<sup>36</sup> Arlette Chemain-Degrange has posed the question of whether the creation of this ideal woman rooted in the traditions of the past does not, in fact, indirectly act as a *brake* on the evolution of the continent.<sup>37</sup> While Sow Fall does very tentatively explore the possibility of female emancipation in the sketches of Madiama's daughter, Nafi, and Mour's daughter, Raabi, she quickly

backs away from the future for the more reassuring nostalgia for an idealized past. In her portrayal of Nafi, who has symbolically challenged the law of the father, Sow Fall's project takes on a clear political significance and responds to a deep patriarchal force in African society, perpetuating a literary and political tradition which "reinforces the common gendered disabilities of subordination that African women share regardless of caste, class or ethnic location," according to a recent study of women and the family in the African economy.<sup>38</sup> This tradition manipulates African history

according to the ruling gender ideologies in order to portray and reify as "traditional" only those aspects of precolonial gender relations, such as cults of motherhood, that are patriarchal. Women demanding reforms and change [as Rafi and Raabi do] are put down as "untraditional" and therefore *unpatriotic*. (emphasis added)<sup>39</sup>

The second and third generation daughters, who in the novels of Mariama Bâ and other feminist writers are seen as the hope for the future liberation of women in African society, do not play the same role in Sow Fall's novels. Instead, they symbolize a kind of social maldevelopment in the elaboration of her social vision which is built on a denial of the individual woman's aspirations. When Mame Fari reminds Diattou that in traditional African society the "individual does not exist and child-rearing is a communal endeavor," she is expressing the author's yearning for the past. But if tradition is a "moral contract" that makes each member of society responsible for each other, as Madiama tells us in *Ex-père* (96), then women are not equal partners in this social contract. Sow Fall's concept is coercive and reactionary and too much of the burden of the national drama is laid on the shoulders of women who are told that their "degradation" is the *necessary consequence* of their letting go of tradition: "Tearing aside the veil of mystery which had covered them since the dawn of time [women] had at the same time destroyed their own value . . . "From being made of gold woman became a plain metal, braving the most sordid scandals. It wasn't without nostalgia that Bakar remembered the refrain of a song sung by his mother: 'Not shame, rather death'." (*Revenant*, 32)

The textual references to contemporary political and ecological events, particularly in *Grève*, *Arènes*, and *Ex-père*, underly the tension in her novels between her retrospective gaze on an idealized past and the struggling efforts of her country towards modernization. But what is strikingly absent in these novels of social criticism is any discussion of the events that have changed the cultural past and forced the women in the West African Sahel countries, of which Senegal is one, to undertake new roles in an evolving world. While Sow Fall alludes to "la sécheresse," no connection is made between this ecological disaster in the Sahel and the lives of rural women. Yet the degradation of the environment penalizes women especially because the mass exodus of the men from the Sahel to urban centers has destructured and caused profound changes to all the traditional societies. Desertification, a man-made phenomenon which is exacerbated by the drought, has "hastened the breakdown of socioeconomic structures in societies undergoing forced change."<sup>40</sup> And although the values she laments as disappearing come from this pre-colonial village society, the world she presents is urban

Dakar or, for *Arènes*, the regional city, Louga. She sees the solution to problems that are a result of national policies, modernization and foreign domination of the international economy in the simplistic restoration and maintenance of traditional rural values.

As a woman writer, then, Aminata Sow Fall projects a male voice and male social and literary values. There is no proposed solution to the cross-cultural conflict beyond a retrograde "taking up of the veil" again. Her narrative calls for a return to the domestic and patriarchal values of an idealized pre-colonial golden era that gives little place to the woman in an evolving and dynamic situation: the modernization and development of an African state. Where the feminist concern is to transform individual, family and society, to *undo* the laws of society that have divided individuals into man and woman, Sow Fall appears to be attempting to force the "metamorphosing woman" back into the mold of the past.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All translations are the author's, except for *La Grève des Bâttu*, which has been translated into English as *The Beggars' Strike*.

<sup>2</sup> Her first novel, *Le Revenant* (the ghost), was published in 1976, three years before Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre*. Another Senegalese woman writer, Nafissatou Diallo, wrote three novels before her early death in 1982, including an autobiographical novel, *De Tilène au Plateau: une enfance dakaroise*. (A *Dakar Childhood*) in 1976.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Samba Gadjigo, "Social Vision in Aminata Sow Fall's Literary Work," *World Literature Today*, Summer 1989. 411-415.

<sup>4</sup> Anthologies such as *Ngambika, Studies of Women in African Literature* (1986) and *Women in African Literature Today, 15* (1987) have only brief mentions of her work. In a more recent study of francophone African literature by Christopher L. Miller (*Theories of Africans, Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* [1990]) she is called, since the death of Mariama Ba, "the leading Senegalese woman writer," but no mention is made of her work. He also quotes Sow Fall as saying she is not a feminist "In the sense that people mean" (p. 273).

<sup>5</sup> "Conversations with H el ene Cixous and members of the Centre d' tudes F minines" in

*Writing Differences*, ed. Susan Sellers, 144.

<sup>6</sup> In an interview, Sow Fall stated that "Western feminism" was not relevant to her society because women's inferior position in that society was not "institutionalized." She also stated that women did not have to declare their "manness" ("homonitude") because "she is a whole human being, a man in the generic sense of the word." "La Comédie Humaine Sénégalaise: Interview with Aminata Sow Fall," In *Komparatistische Hefte*, Universitat Bayreuth, Heft 15 /16 (1987), 221.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Sellers, ed., *Writing Differences, Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> "Conversations with Hélène Cixous," in *Writing Differences*, 141-54.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, *The World and the Text and the Critic*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 155.

<sup>10</sup> Doris Sommer, "Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers," to be published in a forthcoming issue of *Poetics Today*.

<sup>11</sup> Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, "The Female Writer and Her Commitment" in *Women in Literature Today*, 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Davies & Graves, "Introduction: Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism," *Ngambika*, 10-12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Marie Monimart, "Women in the Fight Against Desertification," in *Women and the Environment*, ed. Sally Sontheimer, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Mette Bovin, "Muslim Women in the Periphery: The West African Sahel," in *Women in Islamic Societies*, ed. Bo Utas, 66-89.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>20</sup> *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Arlette Chemain-Degrange, *Émancipation féminine et roman africain*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Davies & Graves, *Ngambika*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> In *Women in African Literature Today*, 15, 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ngambika*, introduction.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Émancipation féminine*, introduction.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions, The National Romances of Latin America*.

<sup>32</sup> Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman*, 72.

<sup>33</sup> "An exchange with Hélène Cixous" in *Writing the Feminine*, 134.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>35</sup> *L'Enfant Noir*, 44.

<sup>36</sup> Mohamadou K. Kano, *Roman africain et tradition*, 405.

<sup>37</sup> *Émancipation féminine*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> Editorial signed by Bolanle Awe, Susan Geiger, Nina Mba, Marjorie Mbilinyi, Ruth Meena, Margaret Strobel, in *Signs*, 16:4, Summer 1991, 648.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Marie Monimart, "Women in the Fight Against Desertification," in *Women and the Environment*, ed. Sally Sontheimer, 32-39.