

Women's Solidarity: A Panacea to Men's Injustice in Women Novelists of Francophone African Narratives

DR (MRS) TEMIDAYO ONOJOBI,
P.O.BOX 404,ASUU-OOU BRANCH, AGO-IWOYE,MINI CAMPUS, OGUN STATE , NIGERIA.

Abstract

Most societies are male dominated and male centred and as such characteristically see man as the superior sex. This outlook accounts for the sex-based injuries and injustices meted out for women in most patriarchal settings. The male by tradition, religion and physical strength usually has an advantage over the female. In the face of the perceived insecurity and injustice, women are still finding ways to thwart the seemingly maltreatment. Quite a number of women's advocates have recommended education and economic empowerment as panacea to male hegemony. However, the recommendation appears not to be too effective for the interconnections of patriarchy, traditional gravities, harmful cultural baggage and intra-gender divides have continued to threaten women's survival. Therefore, contemporary feminists and their search for female bonding are concerned with women interrogating their own positions of privilege and power in reference to cross-pollination of meaningful interaction with others across race, class, age ability and sexuality in other to wedge the lacuna and the divides among them so that men will not continue to use them as axe-men in hewing down their species. This effort therefore, highlights women's solidarity as a first-aid panacea to male perceived injustice. The paper commences with the definition of Solidarity. It went further to examine Womanism as African-American and African women's version of the global literary movement known as "feminism". The article equally analyzes the works of Aminata Maïga *La Voie du Salut Suivi de le Miroir de la Vie* and Fatou Keïta's *rebelle* being francophone African women novelists within the womanist's framework. Finally, recommendations and conclusion on women liberation from men's injustice were proffered. The novels under focus were content analyzed focusing on texts, contexts, characterizations and the use of language among others. Our theoretical framework is Womanism.

What is solidarity?

Solidarity can be defined as mutual agreement, support, harmony of interests and responsibilities among individuals in a group especially as manifested in unanimous support and collective action for something .It can also be defined as the sentiment and action of connectivity. Although definitions remain varied and highly personalized. Solidarity lends itself to political mobilization beyond emotional rhetoric synthesis as it requires action by reasons of moral obligation to another. Sylvester (2000) defines solidarity as ; a means to reinvigorate feminist engagement... a process of positional slippage that occurs when one listens seriously to the concern , fears and agendas of those one is accustomed or unaccustomed to finding in the concerns of others borderlands of one's own concerns and fears.

When one examines the above definition, one discovers that the tenets and ideological inclinations of womanism are contained therein. Globally, women are engaging in actions and conversations in resistance to perceived male oppression meted out to the former. In so doing, they are simultaneously active at local and global sites of cooperation and community building. There are distinct movements by many women globally who have chosen to build alliances and work together under feminist principles across differences, and are thus creating solidarity in practice.

Womanism

Womanism, as defined by Walker, transcends the domain of the feminism of the White woman. It embraces the idea of enhancing stronger relationships between women and men. It is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. It is an avenue for the black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men contrary to feminism which is viewed by White women as a movement exclusively for women, used as a medium of attacking and eliminating men. It reflects a link with history that includes African cultural heritage, enslavement, women's culture and a kinship with other women of colour. Thus, the womanism of the African feminist is an epitome of Afrocentricity that encourages "*gender complementarity*". Walker is seen to have taken cognizance of Namncy Leis and Nancy Tanner (1974) recognition of African women's collective bonding and mobilisation as unique traits. She (Walker, 1993) describes a womanist: As a black feminist or feminist of colour.. who loves other women sexually or asexually... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people...

In Walker's explanation, womanist ideology encompasses all women and men, as long as they are under the yoke of oppression. The concept of universalism of oppression, as against separatism based on sexual

discrimination is embedded in the meaning of womanism. Womanism recognizes the needs of the black woman to affirm that, the African woman has passed through a chain of oppression under the system of patriarchy. Womanism equally recognises the weakness of men. they do not conclude that men are incorrigible and as such launch a severe attack on them, instead, they are subtle in their manner of presentation. It is believed that men and women should make harmony their mutual concern (Opara,1987). Feminism and Womanism thus meet in the area of political marginalization with respect to women. The African women in either light of being mostly products of multiple subjugation, colonialism, obnoxious tradition, harmful cultural practices, neo-colonialism, and patriarchy and gender imperialism have advocated Womanism as a tag for the striving oppression and denigration. To us, the *raison d'être* for African women's view is largely (apart from whatever other reason) due to their conviction that the closely knit African unit, as we mentioned earlier, is basic to the societal set-up. Thus, affinity of women for the suffering of another woman and solidarity within women all over the world irrespective of their colour or race is the main trust of womanism.

Synopsis of novels under scrutiny.

Rebelle (Fatou Keita)

The story is about a female protagonist, Malimouna who is seen to be a rebellious character right from her childhood. She rebels against some forms of oppression which greet her all through the novel. Although she is an innocent victim of a broken marital union between father, Louma and mother Matou, by a stroke of luck coupled with a strong determination, she is able to create a name for herself and thus help underprivileged women recognize that they too can rise above their social and other forms of limitations. She rebels against sexual physical, social conjugal, psychological and academic oppressions to become a social figure that people are forced to reckon with as a leader and reformer in her own right.

La Voie du Salut Suivi de le Miroir de la Vie (Aminata Maïga)

The author uses the female sexuality as an issue to launch into a more serious social problem that is interpreted as oppression in feminist circles. As contained in the novel, clitoridectomy is regarded as a criminal act punishable by imprisonment under the colonial judicial system. This event enables Doctor Baba Kounta to blackmail Fatoumata's parents so that they will allow him to marry Bokhaya, Fatoumata's cousin, instead of the parents going to jail. The little girl's death at the clinic helps to provide us with a panoramic view of the enfeebled, malnourished peasants whom the author contrasts with the well to do. Aminata Maïga Ka's concern as expressed through Baba Kounta must have emanated from her feelings as a woman and mother.

Analysis of womanist tendencies in narratives under focus

In Aminata Maïga Ka's *La voie du salut*, Sokhna not wanting her friend Rabiadou to suffer both emotional and psychological injustices from her husband (Racine) avails the latter about her husband's subterfuge. She recalls the childhood moment they have shared together and also pledges her support of succor in her friend's time of marital distress;

Rabiadou tu es mon amie de toujours, nous avons partagé, enfants, le même lit. Indifféremment nos deux maisons ont été le foyer de l'une et de l'autre... ton bonheur est mien, ton malheur, je le partage et y compatis....Je me doit te dire tout haut ce qui se chuchote en ville. Ton mari aurait du t'informer...Il a faillie à son devoir. Il t'a lâchement trahie. Rabiadou, Racine a épouse une seconde femme...pp99

Rabiadou ! you are still my bossom friend, we have shared our childhood ,even the same bed together. Though, we lived in separate apartment, yet my house belongs to you and yours mine. Your happiness is mine so also your misfortune. I equally identify with and share in your dream. With a sense of duty, I need to let you know the rumour that is making the round about you in the town. Your husband ought to have informed you. He has failed in his responsibility. He has seriously betrayed you. (**our translation**)

Rabiadou will not have known that her husband Racine has got another woman outside wed-lock but from the revelation of her friend. Though, the consequences were tragic in that it is the shocking news that kills her. Her friend equally commits suicide the following night pp100. This show the extent to which woman can bear the cross of *sisterhood*.

In the same novel, Ndèye Cissé comes to the aid of a helpless family's house girl (Fatou) who greatly suffers sexual and emotional trauma emanating from deceit and distress from the latter's seducer (Mamadou Sène). Though, she is the mistress of the house, yet she relieves Fatou (the housemaid) of the household chores; Tu es malade Fatou?...tu as l'air fatigué. Tu travailles trop. Il faudrait que maman te donne quelques jours de repos. Alphonse (**mon frere cadet**) fera la cuisine à ta place..." pp185.

What is the matter with you Fatou? You looked tired. You must have overworked yourself too much. Mama should give you some days off. Alphonse (**my younger brother**) will take over the household chores from you. (**emphasis and translation, ours**)

More over, Ndèye, wanting to protect Fatou from social injustice, decides to keep the latter's ordeal as top secret to her self alone. She also promises to take the girl out of economic violence by making his father to foot every incurred debt of Fatou and her yet unborn baby. She consoles the house girl in the following terms;
Calme-toi Fatou. Tu sais que tu peux compter sur moi! Tu es une musulmane. Tu n'as pas le droit de penser au suicide, encore moins de le commettre! Cet enfant qui te cause tant de soucis aujourd'hui peut être demain ta raison de vivre!...Mes parents pourvoient à tous tes besoins et à ceux de t'enfant. Ils feront le baptême du petit. Ne crains rien!...nous trouverons une solution...(pp173-174.)

Take it easy Fatou. You can count on me! Remember you are a Muslim, you have no right under whatever circumstances to think about taking your life needless to mention of committing the act. That child who is your source of anxiety now could be the only reason for living tomorrow. My parents will take care of your needs and those of your child. They will foot the bill of your naming ceremony. Do not worry, we shall find a solution to your problem...
(**our translation**)

In Fatou Keita's Rebelle, on the other hand, a car driven by a male motorist hits a young European woman along with her child leaving them in a pool of blood. With nobody in sight to rescue the hapless woman from both physical and psychological injustice, comes Malimouna who saves the life of the woman and her child by taking them to the hospital. The narrator describes the scene where Malimouna;
s'accroupit à côté de la femme blanche qui s'accrocha à elle désespérément... Malimouna qui portait toujours le petit garçon, fut embarquée d'office avec la blessée dans l'immense ambulance des pompiers. Elle fut très impressionnée par tout l'équipement à l'intérieur du véhicule dans lequel il faisait un froid qu'elle ne connaissait pas. (pp 49)

crouched beside the white woman, holding unto her desperately. Malimouna who was still holding the little boy embarked on the big ambulance of the fire brigade along with the accident victims. She was very impressed by all the equipment inside the vehicle which made everywhere cold without knowing where the breeze was coming from.
(**our translation**)

In the same novel, Malimouna makes up her mind to assist her fellow sisters who suffer sexual and economic injustices due to their financial handicap. She reiterates this decision when Philippe Blair, the Director of Institut d'Etudes Sociales (Institute of Social Studies) samples her opinion regarding the less privilege women. Her response is ;
Aider les femmes avait- elle répété par trois fois comme si ces mots étaient magique ... elle voulait porter assistance aux femmes africaines en France. C'était le défi qu'elle s'était lancée pp83.

To empower women of course, she repeated three (3) times as if the words were magical... She would want to help the African women in France. Such was the challenge she would want to meet. (**our translation**)
Malimouna knows fully well that womens' help can only come through themselves which is why she enjoins Laura. to join her Association (AAFD) in order to be liberated from cultural and social injustice .She maintains:
... les femmes qui verraient d'un milieu social demuni avaient besoin d'aide. Et cette aide devait venir des femmes d'abord.(pp164)

Women who came from socially deprived milieu needed to be assisted. And the help must come from women themselves.

She goes further to assist a distressed woman by name Fanta (Baron's wife) who suffers a cultural violence in form of forced marriage. .The story of the woman to whom she gives succor goes thus:
Depuis toute petite, elle avait été promise à Barou un neveu éloigné de son père. Baron, qu'elle ne connaissait pas travaillait en France. Celui-ci promettant chaque année à sa famille de venir chercher son épouse, mais il ne s'exécutait pas. Excédés, et de peur que Baron n'épouse une étrangère, ses parents l'envoyaient donc au près de lui.pp86-90.

Right from childhood, she has been betrothed to Baron a distant nephew of her father. The Baron who she has neither known nor met worked in France. He promised to visit the family of her wife to be every year, but he did not fulfill the promise. Exasperated and for fear that Baron may abandon her for a white woman her parents posted her to him

On discovering the succor and relief Malimouna is providing his wife Fanta, Barou, the monstrous husband severely beats the helpless woman. Unable to rescue the oppressed woman from physical violence, the former makes a distress call to the police for the safety of the hapless woman while reaffirming her decision to fight for the total freedom of abused women.

Malimouna avait beaucoup pleuré ce jour-là, de rage et d'impuissance. Lorsqu'elle se calma, sa décision était définitivement prise: elle lutterait pour ses sœurs pp94-95.

Malimouna wept furiously and helplessly that day. When calmed down, her decision was firmly taken; she would fight for the independent of her sisterhood. **(our translation)**

In pursuance of her course of assisting less privilege women, she decides to work in the centre where she will have close contact with women suffering social violence, Malimouna:

Commencerait à travailler au Centre de Guidance Féminine dans son quartier.Ce centre s'occupait particulièrement de femmes immigrées en difficulté dans un environnement auquel elles avaient souvent du mal à s'adapter pp120.

Started working at Woman Guidance Centre of her quarter. This center is particularly in charge of immigrant women who have difficulty to settle down in an environment. **(our translation)**

She equally helps Fami Kana , a woman who in trying to seek liberation from the man to whom she is forcefully betrothed kills him. As the crime attracts being jailed, Malimouna and other women gather to fault the condemnation. The story of the former goes thus;

Fami Kana était une jeune adolescente de quinze ans mariée de force à un vieil homme. Une fois chez son mari...cet homme la battait.Elle avait fini par s'enfuir et retourner chez ses parents...ceux-ci administrèrent une sévère correction à leur fille avant de la rendre manu militari à son mari. N'ayant aucun soutien et haïssant sa situation, une nuit, prise de folie, Fami égorgea son mari...Il fallait se mobiliser pour faire échec à cette condamnation...L'on ne devait pas s'arrêter à l'acte accompli par Fami Kana, mais voir surtout les circonstances qui l'y avaient conduite.pp221-222

Fami Kani was an adolescent of fifteen (15) years, married by force to an old man. In her husband's house she was being battered. She eventually ran away and went back to her parents..., the latter further meted cruel punishment to their daughter before forcefully taking her back to her husband. Without any hope in sight and disgusting, one night, raving madness, she slaughtered her husband... we, women needed to mobilize to fault her condemnation... No one should judge Fami kana's act at the surface but rather look at the circumstances surrounding the action. **(our translation)**

But for the effort of Malimouna and other women who rally round her during her sexual and cultural violence, Fanta, the innocent woman would have been jailed for killing her monstrous husband; C'était grâce à elles, et avec elles toutes, que les changements seraient possibles. Il fallait qu'elles restent solidaires et infatigablement concernées par ces injustices insitutions nalisées.pp222

Thanks to... all the women, without which the victory would have been impossible. They needed to bond together and worked tirelessly against the unjust institutions found everywhere. **(our translation)**

When Malimouna is apprehended for running away from being slaughtered under the guise of being circumcised,which is another form of cultural violence, before the sitting council, suddenly appear Laura (Malimouna's friend), Matou (Malimouna's mother) and other women who come to rescue the former from the executioners of the obnoxious cultural violence and the molestation that would have greeted her;

Les femmes de l'AAFD que Laura avaient entraînés avec elle jusqu'à Boritoni...les amies de Malimouna apostrophaient les villageois qu'elles traitaient de sauvages.Malimouna monta dans la voiture de Laura sous l'oeil vigilant de ses amies, après quoi, celles-ci regagnerent leur car.Le convoi s'ébranla. Alors, les femmes laissèrent éclater leur joie. Des commentaires ponctués de rires allèrent bon train.pp231-232.

AAFD women with whom Laura came along to Boritoni... and Malimouna's friend addressed rudely the primitive villagers. Malimouna embarked on Laura's car under the strict surveillance of her friends after the latter (friends) have embarked on their care. The convoy set off. Then the women burst into joy. Comments punctuated with laughter went on at a good pace amongst them. **(our translation)**

CONCLUSION

Women's solidarity is critical for effective global framed activism and it is capable of combating male hegemony possibly bridging some of the divides between and among women. Female solidarity to our mind is a welcome attribute and a good step capable of entrenching genuine affection among women so that men will not be able to turn them against themselves. Abused women need individual and communal resources to nurture their talent; neither is sufficient alone. Their tapping of individual resources and the giving of mutual aid is genuine scaffolding towards their liberation. For it will go along way in helping women seek one another's goodwill and well being. We do not submit that all women's movement are reconcilable or peaceful, but rather, women bonding offers a response to the totalizing intransigence of past criticisms that have either assumed or denied cooperation (among women) by homogenizing their identities and political aspirations or asserting incompatibility across differences. Massive female education and economic empowerment among others shall help selfless assistance to other oppressed and depressed female victims of male injustice. For; Nous les femmes avons un role particulier à jouer dans l'entreprise. Car les veritable esclaves qui ont intérêt à la grande lessive de l'Afrique, ce sont les femmes (Lopes 1976;139)

We the women have a particular role to play in this enterprise; for the real slaves who have interest in the greatest washing of Africa 's **(injustice of all kinds)** are the women. **(Our emphasis and translation)**

Women solidarity is critical for effective globally framed activism and can counter the male hegemony possibly bringing some of the divides between and among different shades and brands of "Feminisms". However, we do not submit that all women's movement are reconcilable or peaceful, but rather, women bonding shall offer a response to the totalizing intransigence of past criticisms that have either assumed or denied cooperation by homogenizing women's identities and political aspirations or asserting their incompatibility across difference. Undoubtedly, there is a need to codify solidarity, firstly, so that men wont seize the differences between and among women to pitch them against one another and secondly to eschew the perpetuation of men's whims and caprices in employing sisterhood as axe-men against their own species. This effort undoubtedly continues the debate of the relevance of Feminism in Africa. It prolongs a new paradigm in gender studies in Africa for the study of women's liberation.

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