

The Education of the Female Fictional Character, Between a Helpless Anchoring and a Perilous Quest for Self: Crossed Views on Some French-Speaking African Stories

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Abstract: In an open and competitive world, the instinct for identity survival pushes community groups to anchor. In this perspective, our project is to flaunt, by examining some French-language novelistic texts, that the modeling of the personality of the female character is a priority in many cases. Rooted in the values of the group consists in inviting young people to strictly observe social directives, noting that any attempt at rebellion will lead to a loss. However, the influence of many outdoor factors, combined to the illusions of fashion, brings the characters to split the walls of the social conformism of their living universe. In fact, the Western school and the modern city bear the seeds of insubmission if we stick to the behavior of the young female characters studied in this paper. The logic of a dichotomous vision is established between young and old people, between the countryside and the city, between a so-called traditional value system and a libertarian tendency. A contrastive analysis of the texts of the corpus allows us to notice that at the arrival, the trail of the protagonists is very tumultuous and that the result is uncertain: if some can claim a well-being following a courageous personal decision, others will see their dreams dull, fly away or sink like drops of water on the feathers of a duck.

Keywords: Anchoring, Education, Identity, Influence, Value

1. Introduction

The manufacture of the social being is part of logic of inculcation of values specific to each community group. However, the survival or sustainability of the social identity of each human entity depends largely on the ability of its members to share the teachings with successive generations. Nourished by social reality, literary narratives, novel in particular, transpose the image of reality into imaginary space. In this respect, social relationships, the role and place of women, are among others, recipes that nourish and structure the fabric of romantic stories such as *La Nouvelle Romance* by Henri Lopes et *Maimouna* by Abdoulaye Sadj, *Sous l'Orage* by Seydou Badian. In these texts, notwithstanding the effort made by mothers who are responsible of the education of their daughters following a traditional logic, the latter will end up cracking the walls of conformism to find a different way. Does the construction of

female identity according to a classical model favoring a dogmatic follow-up guarantee the full development of the subject concerned? Doesn't the taste for elsewhere, or the appropriation of an exogenous model, mislead more than it enriches? The analysis of the aforementioned basic corpus, following a contrastive and differential approach, allows us, on the one hand, to explore the traditional¹ scheme of the education of the female character and, on the other hand, to analyze in the stakes of a quest for self of the characters influenced in this by exogenous factors such as the school and the urban city.

¹ By tradition we mean a set of ideas, doctrines, mores, practices, knowledge, techniques, habits and attitudes transmitted from generation to generation to the members of a human community. Because of the perpetual renewal of its members, the human community presents itself as a changing and dynamic reality. Thus, tradition has both a normative and functional character. The term is envisioned here as a space for men who share homogeneous practices and beliefs and who survive the different generations that follow one another.

2. The Traditional Manufacturing Model

The examination of many literary narratives opens the way to a multitude of relational logics between the different protagonists. In the basic corpus of the present study, the education of young girls is provided by mothers who are part of a logic of inculcation of the realities of the land² to their offspring. In fact, it is a question of always keeping alive the secret soul that makes the ontological substrate of the respective communities.

As a consequence, balance is only possible "thanks to the intelligent, human and far-sighted transmission of the essential values of tradition: dignity, honour, respect for others, the cult of work to guarantee one's freedom [1]".

2.1. Followers

In the work of training the girl's personality, the mother can use several levers: they draw from the morality of oral narratives such as tales, myths and legends or even resort to pedagogy by example. Both in Henri Lopes' text and in Abdoulaye Sadjì's story, Yaye Daro and Wali's mother present themselves as vectors of intangible values. They intend to transmit the lessons received as they are. Indeed, when Wali's mother endures all the suffering in front of her daughter without any form of rebellion, she invites the young maid to integrate this way of life into the future. It is in this logic that the narrator of *La Nouvelle Romance* informs:

The mother still bending under the faix, a bowl on her head. She ran at times, in small strides, to lighten the weight. And Wali was then trotting behind the mother. In the village, men were waiting under a low-roof shed, palm wine calabashes at their feet. They spoke loud and clear, as if they were going to fight [2].

It emerges from this that there is a clear division of roles. There is a picture of a community where women work hard and men are lazy. This is a principle of life that the mother wants her daughter to copy. It is not a question for the girl, in the future, to externalize any anger by protesting against the nonchalance of men. In fact, even overwhelmed by a feeling of disgust, the mother "would then sigh loudly through her nose, barely nod her head, and then disappear to indulge in more serious activities: preparing the evening meal [2]". As for Maïmouna, the character of Abdoulaye Sadjì's eponymous novel, she is a young girl whom Yaye Daro jealously incubates with a protective wing. Maïmouna is used to domestic work, but she also assists her mother in her small business at the market. In the educational tradition of Yaye Daro, the formation of the social being goes in keep with the teaching of culture. It is through the latter or its forms of representation that society models its perception of the socialized individual. It is a question of training the child to root himself mechanically as Amadou Hampaté Bâ writes: "From childhood, we were trained to observe, to look, to

listen, so that every event was inscribed in our memory as in a virgin wax [3]". In this respect, one of the reservoirs of wisdom from which Yaye Daro wants to forge the personality of Maïmouna is constituted by the tale. Thus, in the past, to rock the sleep of her daughter, we learn that "the mother spoke amicably of the hare and the jackal, ridiculed the hyena, brushed the wild mask and veiled of the family of the tiger and the lion [4]". Through this lever constituted by the tale, the child regulates his first steps and learns the wisdom demanded by the elders. That is why when "Maïmouna sleeps, after the fatigues of the household and the emotions of the day, came quite quickly, the mother [began] with a soft and sleepy voice, which gave Maïmouna the impression that this voice came from far away, from the bottom of a mysterious world of the unknown [4]". This strategy of Yaye Daro is a trick to imprint in the mind of her daughter the idea of an interaction between the world of the senses with a universe masked by the dark veil of existence³.

2.2. Contestation, as a Sacrilege

One of the barometers that makes it possible to measure the level of anchoring of the characters in societal values is constituted by the question of marriage. When the girl has to move from single life to married status, she has no choice of her spouse. Rather, it is a prerogative of the father. The daughter is presented with a fait accompli by receiving information from her mother. The latter must stifle any attempt at rebellion by the maid by persuading her of the danger that would result from her refusal to comply by the father's decision. This is what justifies the concern of Mariama's mother in *Toiles d'Araignées* by Ibrahima Ly. It should be noted here that according to Daniel Berger et al., "literature offers imaginary forms, symbolizations, words, to intuitions [5]". When her daughter declares without blinking that she does not want to marry the husband chosen by her father, the mother is disturbed. This is noticeable in the questions below where she makes no secret of her immense concern. The narrator of Ibrahima Ly's story reports:

Have you lost your mind? How dare you speak like this in front of me? How dare you say that you don't love him in my presence? Would you have gone crazy? Would you have lost all sense of modesty? Do you want to make me the most miserable of mothers after being the most miserable of wives? I just called you to let you know [4].

There is no doubt that the mother's well-being depends largely on the docility of her daughter. She must bend to prevent the father's wrath from creating consequences of disproportionate proportions. The same maternal effort vis-à-vis Kany is made by Mother Téné. In *Sous l'Orage* by Seydou Badian, anxious to perpetuate a fatalistic understanding of the status of women, the mother informs her

² The term is envisioned here as a space for men who share homogeneous practices and beliefs and who survive the different generations that follow one another.

³ In the effort to explain the meaning of appearances, Léopold Sédar Senghor is part of a Platonic logic theorizing the existence of sensitive and intelligible worlds. Like Baudelaire, who sees the universe as "a forest of symbols", Senghor supports the idea of the image-analogy: the African defines himself more in relation to invisible forces than by Cartesian logic.

daughter the decision concerning her, taken without her knowledge. The heroin of *Sous l'Orange* learns from her mother:

Kany, your father and his brothers got together. They decided that you will marry Famagan. So know how to behave yourself accordingly. In the street, in the market, wherever you go, do not forget that you are no longer free. You have a husband now. And people will look at you. This is your father's word [7].

Here is a sentence that plunges the girl into sadness and makes her weep warmly. The paternal decision has enforceable value. There emerges the image of a phallogocentric society where "the father is in his house like the shepherd in his flock, having to watch over the family, especially the women who are looked at in fact in the same way as the domestic animals. [8]". But, everything in the mother's words indicates that swimming against the current of this decision is synonymous with sacrilege. As a result, Mother Téné told Kany: "You will have God's blessing... if you follow your parents. You don't have to cry, you're neither the first nor the last [6]". Here we can note a normative dimension of this form of education that is essentially based on both collective and individual consent. It makes tradition a kind of collective agreement accepted by the majority of members, a frame of reference that allows one people to define or distinguish itself from another. When the mother specifies to her daughter in these terms: "You are neither the first nor the last [7]", she puts forward the interests of the community instead of those of individuals. In any case, we can note that "behind this romantic fiction is the drama of African societies torn between unbridled Westernization [...] and ancestral traditions and local beliefs [9]". Multiple efforts to integrate members into the ideology governing the life of the group are often disrupted or rendered ineffective by exogenous factors.

3. The Influences of Exogenous Factors

The desire to educate one's offspring according to the requirements of socio-cultural belonging may come up against the rigidity of exogenous realities. If we follow the itinerary of the young girls of the corpus of novels, who are the subject of this analysis, it appears that the motive of insubmissiveness is sometimes the school, sometimes the mirage of the city. Under the influence of school teachings or the illusions of the urban world, the characters seek to define themselves by making a different path.

3.1. The Western School

Contact with the school is perceived by several female characters as a door that leads to more freedom. Through the values it promotes, the contact of one value system with another that it allows, or even an interaction of entire civilizations, the school participates in acculturation in the sense that values it conveys are often different from those of the space where the narratives are anchored.

In Henri Lopes' text, Wali may regret many possibilities offered by school, unlike his married life. In this regard, the

narrator informs that "the school was also for her a shelter. In her family, she escaped all these feminine chores by pleading lessons to learn and homework to do. Thus, she had been one of the few girls to go all the way to the fifth grade. It took marriage to destroy everything [2]". Unlike a life of submission and obedience advised to the girl, the school opens a window for Wali to escape from conformism. Wali's independence of mind and his willingness to disagree with the most deeply granted beliefs appear in his exchange with Awa. With regard to the matrimonial property regime of women, Wali was indignant that the latter was not recognized as having two husbands when the man could afford to marry two women. His exchange with Awa is quite edifying on this point:

- So, resumed Awa. Do you find it normal for a woman to have several husbands? Do you think this is normal?

"And you, do you think it's normal for men to have several wives?" replied Wali.

- Ah! that has always been the case.

-Yes, but not everything is as before [2].

The transgression of the established order to arrive at a reconsideration of the gaze on women and their prerogatives is Wali's main concern. She intends to succeed in this challenge by implementing the texts of laws from which she learns that "we have opted for a Constitution that says that 'women have the same rights as men' [2]". Wali's marriage to Delarumba is perceived by the wife as hell; "It took this marriage to destroy everything [2]". From then on, she sought a way of salvation through her weekly acquaintances. The meetings organized by the Women's Federation of the National Democratic Party helped her a lot in this. Indeed, "she loved these encounters that were an escape from her domestic hell. She knew that all the women who found themselves there had, to the minimum of details, the same life as her [2]".

The other solution to get out of the distress caused by her husband's infidelity is school. Having stopped his studies in the fifth grade, Wali intends to re-register to pass the Brevet: "I will prepare to leave it. I will learn a trade, just enough to earn a living and then pan! I will drop it out [2]". She perceives the school as a credible lever on which she will have to rely on to obtain both material and sentimental independence. In fact, she concluded once and for all that "men are really disgusting. My father, my brother it's the same thing. And we still have to put up with that. I am not determined to accept it. Or rather less and less [2]". The education received at school is often opposed to that of the parents. The village is characterized by submission to parents and customs, a prison that deprives young people of their freedom.

This state of mind to revolt that inhabits Wali is a feeling shared by almost all the girls of the Lopesian story. One of the girls of joy with whom Delarumba sleeps easily manifests her independence of mind in a discussion she had after a game of legs in the air. Victorine says head-on:

That's right. You believe that we will continue, like our mothers, to let you do what you want, go and tell in all

your speeches, to make modern, that we are your equals, and not allow ourselves what you allow yourself. If only one of us in the couple is required to be faithful, is it not exploitation? [2]

From these allegations arise issues related to fidelity, parity and equality between men and women. These are all questions that the content of school teaching raises, thus arousing the critical thinking of learners of all kinds. When such remarks are made by a girl in a society where dogmatism is imposed on women, surprise and indignation remain the most shared feelings. This is the whole meaning of Delarumba's attitude, who remarks to Victorine: "Really the girls of nowadays... If this is what you are taught in school, there will soon be no more morals. How can one woman love and go do this with another? [2]" From this exchange between Delarumba and Victorine emerges the sordid image of a society of anomie. This couple of unfaithful husband and wife gives meaning to the concept of the absurd: they moralize themselves in the stench of carnal sin committed together to heart joy. What should be noted is that the girl is in a position of strength by pleasing herself in the act committed. By indignant of her partner, she takes a moral ascendancy over him.

If the school presents itself as a framework of awareness allowing the girl or young woman to smash the walls of conformism in which they have long been locked down, the fact remains that the illusion of elsewhere often cause a break with the original framework and the beliefs attached to it. In the stories of this study, the city is this place of fantasies that attract female characters whose most beautiful dreams will fly away forever.

3.2. The Illusion of City

If *Mirages de Paris* [10] relates the experience of Fara, a young Senegalese who embarks on the France he dreamed of all his childhood and that *Un Nègre à Paris* [11] is an epistolary story where Tanhoé, the character-narrator is dazzled by the discovery of the city of Paris, the experience of Maïmouna, heroine of the eponymous novel by Abdoulaye Sadjì, can inspire a story of the title *Les Déboires de Maïmouna à Dakar*. Paris has long been a catalyst for dreams, represented as a paradisiacal space. This image of a magical city, city of lights and abundance marked young minds before contact with reality gave rise to a feeling of disappointment or regret⁴. Nowadays, more than ever, many young people swear by going to Europe. Similarly, many rural youth have no goal but to reach urban centers. Whether material, circumstantial or cultural, there are always reasons that push to the beginning. In Abdoulaye Sadjì's novel, the young Maïmouna, after being well incubated by a courageous mother, has no dream to realize but to go to Dakar. It is all absorbed by the image of Dakar and remains insensitive to the village setting:

The village no longer told her anything, her mother's love and protection left her indifferent; a single idea, a single dream, filled his young head: to answer Rihanna's invitation, to go to Dakar. His imagination, stoked by a worried sensibility, represented this country to him as an incomparable stay [4].

The crisis of adolescence that places the girl in a path of identity quest, added to the influence of a sister living in the city make that Maïmouna can not resist the temptation of the trip to Dakar. The monotony of the village is also the main cause of Magamou's departure in Malick Fall's novel, *La Plaine*. The character expresses it bluntly:

I didn't like life in the village. However, at that time, I did not have any elements of comparison unfavorable to some of our traditions, some of our mores. More simply, I was disgusted by the spread unfolding of a life without relief, also divided between the work in the fields, the long holidays, the cyclical palavers. I felt, early on, that other possibilities of action, other joys, less prosaic occupations were available to informed men [12].

The movement towards the capital is perceived both as a possibility to leave a framework with outdated values (the village), therefore an act of liberation, but also as an opportunity that offers great prospects. In this regard, the narrator reveals the color of thought and projects of Abdoulaye Sadjì's female fictional character:

Undoubtedly, there were other activities to which she had not been initiated: sewing, washing, ironing, household care; and even in the culinary art of her milieu there were many secrets to know that she did not know, because at home we lived poorly, too poorly. She already thought that the day she had a husband who is as socially high as her sister Rihanna's husband, this lack of education would put her far below her new condition [4].

Now Maïmouna believes she is the victim of "lack of education" that she intends to fill once in Dakar. The urban space appears to the girl as a much better setting than that of the countryside. Therefore, values that Yaye Daro has so far tried to instill him are perceived as anti-progressive. The cultural authenticities of the village die in the hope of acquiring a civilized or modern life. The same enthusiasm that inhabits Maïmouna is characteristic of the attitude of Wali, one of the girls who seek themselves in *La Nouvelle Romance*. For the young lady, "leaving is a promise of happiness. It is a deliverance [2]". Leaving Louga for Dakar, turning your back on the Congo for Brussels is the joint project of Maïmouna and Wali. For both of them, the departure is a symbol of the death of the traditional values received in the village. They will make a new cultural identity in the city. For this reason, Wali is excited to bid farewell to her friends:

This is the first time that one will leave the others. Yet, we don't see sadness on Wali's face. There is even like a flower of happiness in his eyes. A strong and heavy happiness to carry. A feeling of fullness that invades her: she feels happy to leave, but sad to leave her friends. And she is not ashamed of any of the feelings. She wants to

⁴ In the sixteenth century, Joachim Du Bellay expresses all his bitterness in the poetic collection *Les Regrets* after having gone to Italy, a city he has always dreamed of.

take on both of them [2].

The desire to leave, which is born in the female characters, and the instinct refractory to indigenous values, result from an incentive policy. The mirage of elsewhere is in the representations made by the various channels of communication. We can look at this in this excerpt where the narrator specifies:

And then, there is that the myth of departure represents for every African, every African of that time. Who has never dreamed of one day going to these countries of "civilization" whose records, radio, newspapers and school books speak to us? There, "there are things..." Here, nothing [2].

The wonders of the city are revealed not only through electric light, but also through cinema in characters such as Maïmouna. Yaye Daro's daughter cannot hide her emotions in view of the cinema for the first time. She harasses her big sister with questions about the projected world. The narrator recounts:

The first time she went to the Rialto cinema, Maïmouna was dazzled by the rawness of the light and staggered a little. There were so many people! She had never seen that. His sister, accustomed, walked in front; she followed almost in hiding. Later on she could not have said where she had sat [...]. What an emotion gave rise in Maïmouna to the sight of a cinematographic film! On the first day she couldn't resist the urge to ask a thousand questions: were they people, real people? Were they walking on the web? Where did they come from? Why did they make so many gestures? Her sister pinched her thigh, telling her to shut up. She didn't want her to pass for one of those beings in the bush, who had never seen anything. At home she would explain everything to him in detail [4].

In their desire to be different, the girls of romantic stories like Wali and Maïmouna see in the city a happy outcome. But it emerges from the description of the city, the image of an imaginary place of perdition [13]. The most beautiful dreams of departure turn into a nightmare at the finish. In this case, the return to the starting square, once rejected, is inevitable as can be seen with the heroine of Abdoulaye Sadj. This unfortunate experience of the young girls reinforces the opinion of Cheikh Hamidou Kane. Indeed, when asked about the significance of Samba Diallo's death at the end of *L'Aventure Ambiguë* [14], the author indicates in essence that it is a proof by the absurd that African civilization exists. It exists to such an extent that if an individual gives in to the temptation to extirpate or abandon it, he inevitably dies. Denial, transgression, disobedience or any other form of rupture of the umbilical cord symbolically represents a form of suicide in the cultural universe of conservative societies.

4. Conclusion

The proximity between Wali and his mother is reminiscent of the complicity between Yaye Daro and Maïmouna. The old women of the romantic tales of Lopes and Sadj convey values of a traditional world that they pass on to their

respective daughters. Young girls regulate their steps behind their mother's teachings. The latter, resorting to pedagogy by example, transmit an ideal of life as received from their community. On the other hand, this willingness of mothers to commit their children to the path of strict observance of inheritance will come up against the transgressive tendency of young pucelles. Many exogenous factors create and maintain the rebellious spirit of young girls. However, the desired break does not necessarily help to realize the initial dreams. In this respect, one may wonder if the relevance of otherness is not found in the effort of each subject to achieve a harmonious marriage of differences of all kinds.

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