

## The Subaltern Can Bite: Two Female Authors and the Production of Transformed Social Contexts in Francophone Fiction

The subaltern, in other words, is not only *acted on*, despite the tendency in traditional paradigms to see it as a passive or "absent" subject that can be mobilized only from above; it also *acts* to produce social effects that are visible, if not always predictable or understandable

-Founding Statement: Latin American Subaltern Studies Group

### Introduction: Episodic Development of Feminist Consciousness and Action in African Women's Writing

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci characterizes the processes leading to what he calls the "permanent victory" of the subaltern as "episodic".<sup>1</sup> His submission implies that the emancipation of the subaltern never occurs as a fortuitous accident of history in an unprogrammable vortex. Rather, such historical processes could be usefully read as occurring in discernible phases, each phase marked by a progressive dislocation of subalternizing socio-political structures and epistemological orthodoxies. Because of Gramsci's Marxist orientation, it is safe to aver that, for him, the phases of the subaltern's struggle for agency correspond to the dialectical phases of the lumpenproletariat's trajectory in the Marxist reading of history and society.

1 This paper is a considerably shortened and modified version of a chapter in a book in progress.

The first phase occurs as *uprise de conscience*<sup>1</sup> on the part of the subaltern, predicated upon an "objective" analysis of his/her situation. The second phase is characterized by acts of resistance from subaltern individuals or groups, resulting mostly in personal or transient small-scale victories. It is the phase of "independent initiatives," to borrow Gramsci's expression. The small victories recorded in the second phase not only prepare the ground for the final phase, they also combine to produce the transformative social effects which characterize the final phase. Frantz Fanon places himself in the company of Gramsci by positing a phased, episodic reading of the development of the resistance cultures of the Third World. In his chapter, "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon makes this important observation:

If we wanted to trace in the works of native writers the different phases which characterize this evolution we would find spread out before us a panorama on three levels (222).

Fanon goes on to discuss the characteristics of each phase. His discussion of the third phase is germane here:

Finally in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature (222-23).

Although poststructuralist and postmodernist deconstruction of modernity's (in)famous linearization of time—especially in its narrativizations of post-Enlightenment "progress"—would render an unproblematized subscription to Gramsci's and Fanon's rather linear apprehension of the subaltern's temporal progression tenuous, the shifts and phases elaborated by the two thinkers in their reading of culture and history are nevertheless germane to a proper analysis of representations of the subaltern woman's trajectory in Francophone African women's fiction.

2 Literally, "coming into consciousness." Critical terminology often associated in Francophone Africa with the rise of Negritude poetry. Also has the same connotation as the expression "crisis of consciousness" in Anglophone African criticism.

From the earliest novels in the late 1950s to the effervescence of the 1990s, it is possible to trace a seemingly linear progression of a certain feminist consciousness, both in terms of thematic engagement and character depiction, in Francophone African women's novels. For instance, the resistance, albeit with limited success, of Mariama Ba's protagonists in *Une si longue lettre* and *Un chant écarlate* constitute a temporal and thematic shift from the passive submission of female characters to patriarchal ethos in early novels such as Therese Kuoh-Moukouri's *Rencontres essentielles* and Aminata Maiga Ka's *La voie du salut*. Similarly, the generation of female novelists whose works came to critical limelight in the 1990s represents another major shift. In this third phase, character representation is imbricated in the articulation of far-reaching social praxes. In this phase, the pattern of representation in Francophone African women's novels is such that the subaltern not only vacates the subaltern position, at least textually, but also provokes far-reaching social effects. This third stage constitutes the thematic core of the exemplary novels selected for discussion in this study: Abibatou Traore's *Sidagamie* and Fatou Keita's *Rebelle*.

### Polygamy as a Sign of Emancipation in *Sidagamie*

Abibatou Traore's novel, *Sidagamie*, reads, in terms of narrative craft, as the juvenilia of a very promising writer. However, whatever the novel lacks in narrative expertise and artistry, it makes up for in discursive and thematic daring. In order to fully grasp the thematic subversions at work in this text, it is necessary to recall John Beverley's theoretical mapping of Subaltern Studies as being essentially about who is losing or gaining power (1). *Sidagamie* illustrates a radical remapping of conventional discourse on polygamy by offering a representation of the institution that is radically different from the picture to which most African writers have accustomed us. In classic African novels such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Amadou Kourouma's *Monne, outrages et defis*, Isidore Okpewho's *The Victims*, and Ba's *Une si longue lettre*, polygamy is cast largely as an unproblematized site of male dominance and female victimhood. Whether polygamy is depicted as actually functioning as in the novels of Achebe and Kourouma, or is introspectively dissected after it has broken down as in Ba's novel, there can be no possible doubt as to who occupies the locations of power and subalternity respectively in those works.

In the traditional scenario of polygamy, man—as biology and socio-cultural construction—holds all the aces and reigns supreme. All authority devolves from him, and the women who occupy subaltern positions in the arrangement hardly need to be reminded of the status quo. The bickering and verbal confrontations, which usually turn polygamy into a theatre of chaos, occur horizontally among the competing wives<sup>3</sup>. Hardly do they ever occur vertically between the wives and their lord and master. Traore's representation of polygamy, however, undermines this stereotype. In *Sidagamie*, the novelist offers a subversive rendering of polygamy as a site of empowerment for the subaltern woman. In this novel, which amplifies Beverley's reading of the politics of subalternity, the man at the centre of the polygamous drama loses power with each additional wife he marries. Correspondingly, his wives and assertive daughter gain power and strength.

Set in Ziguinchor, a volatile site of secessionist ethnic uprisings in postcolonial Senegal, *Sidagamie* is the story of Pauline, a young Christian girl who defies her family to marry a Moslem, Moussa, the love of her life. The couple settles down to a life of relative bliss and they have three daughters. Aida, the eldest, is a precocious and restless teenager, while her younger sisters, Adama and Awa, are six year-old identical twins. Life moves along on a generally happy note for the young couple until Moussa decides to marry a second wife: the balance of power begins to tilt visibly the moment he makes this announcement to his family. Part of Traore's thematic inventiveness is to register what is usually the moment of the male's triumph in much of African fiction as the narrative moment of Moussa's defeat, of his loss of power and consequent slide into subalternity in his own home. Let us examine the moment of this announcement in closer detail. Moussa has informed a devastated Pauline of his intentions and Aida, who has been eavesdropping all along on her parent's tempestuous confrontation, finally intervenes:

-Non papa, pas ça.

-Va dans ta chambre, Aida.

-Non papa, tu ne vas pas nous faire ça. Tu t'imagines une seconde le mal que tu fais a maman? Tu t'en fous?

-La ferme, Aida. On ne parle pas ainsi à son père.

-Comment veux-tu que je te parle? Comment peux-tu espérer du respect de ma part si tu cherches à commettre une bêtise qui, à mon avis, n'est digne que des

3 A good example is offered in the opening chapter of Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* where the young protagonist gives a vivid account of the petty jealousy that reigns among his father's three wives.

hommes sans éducation? Tu me dégoûtes et...

Elle reçut une belle gifle et sortit de la chambre en sanglotant. Pauline reprit enfin la parole:

-Elle a raison. Tu es dégoûtant.

Moussa ne savait plus où donner de la tête. Il cria sur sa femme aussi:

-Je suis chez moi ici. C'est moi le maître et vous n'avez pas à me dicter ma conduite (Traore 37).

-No Daddy! You can't do that!

-Go to your bedroom, Aida.

- No Daddy. You can't do this to us. Have you even considered how much this is going to hurt mum? Don't you care?

-Shut up, Aida! You can't talk to your Dad like that.

-How do you expect me to talk to you? How can you expect me to respect you when you are doing something stupid? In my opinion, only illiterates behave like that. You disappoint me and...

A stinging slap cut her short and she left the room weeping. Finally, Pauline speaks:

- She's right. You're a disappointment.

Dazed, Moussa screams at his wife also:

-This is my house. I am the boss around here and you people are not going to tell me what I can do or cannot do. (my translation)

We, as readers, know that Moussa is mistaken. There are enough clues in the passage cited to show that he has already been dislocated from his position of power and authority. The first clue is Aida's tone and her choice of words, which, in the context of subsaharan African gerontocratic tradition, are an important indicator of the gradual erosion of Moussa's authority. Pauline's outburst, which the omniscient narrator significantly explains as the first since their marriage, also figures as a kind of manifesto of emancipation. That Moussa finds himself in a situation where he has to scream to remind his wife and daughter that he is the boss is an ironic evidence of his loss of authority. The point needs be reiterated that such screams of affirmation are very unnecessary in the traditional polygamous context in which man's authority is self-evident. Reflecting on this dynamic of the naturalized given-ness of the male order in his *Masculine Domination*, Pierre Bourdieu, avers that "the strength of the masculine order is seen in the fact that it dispenses with justification: the androcentric vision imposes itself as neutral and has no need to spell itself out in discourses aimed at legitimating it" (9). Put differently, a

tiger does not need to proclaim its tigritude, to borrow Wole Soyinka's oft-quoted anti-Negritude quip.

Moussa's scream of self-assertion is thus a drowning man's last gasp for air. Once he sets certain processes in motion with his decision to marry a second wife, Moussa discovers to his dismay that not only his authority but his centrality in all decisions affecting the family are progressively undermined. It also marks the beginning of a long process of self-rediscovery for Pauline. Polygamy, rather than being an instrument of subalternization, becomes the principal catalyst for the heroine's *prise de conscience* in *Sidagamié*. Pauline, who until now has located Moussa within the unquestionable category of "man" suddenly comes to the realization that this notion is inimical to her aspiration for agency, and consequently begins to undermine Moussa's authority.

Like Ramatoulaye, Ba's heroine in *Une si longue lettre*, Pauline opts to act from within the polygamous equation. Her first action is literally to shut Moussa out of her life, thus effecting a textual marginalization of the erstwhile centralized male. Her second step in self-assertion is to return to her Catholic religion which she had abandoned to please her husband, a devout Moslem. The omniscient narrator's focus on Pauline's decision to return to the Catholic faith underscores the significance of that exercise of rebellious choice as an index of emancipation from patriarchal control. The stress on the pleasure she derives from taking a decision her husband disapproves of—and acting on it—brings to mind the Fanonian model of double negation: in order to be, the colonized must negate the negation represented by the colonizer. This Fanonian negation of negation is predicated on the therapeutic violence of the colonized. Pauline's act negates the antecedent negation of her religious identity by her overbearing husband. The violence here is, however, not Fanon's much misunderstood violence.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the violence of Pauline's act is more in line with Bourdieu's "symbolic violence" (1).

The introduction of the character of Aminta at this point is one of the novel's brightest narrative moments. Aminta, by all accounts, cuts the picture of the so-called "traditional African woman." One would therefore expect her to be cast in the mould of her type, so common in African fiction: an authoritarian agent of patriarchy seeking to impose the codes of traditional pedagogy on her young friend. Aminta, however, defies stereotypical

The literature on Fanon's discussion of violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* is vast and falls outside the purview of this essay. However, David Macey's brilliant biography, *Frantz Fanon*, explores Fanon's discourse on violence and its many misinterpretations at length.

codifications and proves that identity, even for an older woman, is a contingent factor that evolves with the times. When Pauline confides in her, she expresses surprisingly critical and secular views on polygamy. Solidarity between the two women transcends generational differences, and the older woman is not fatalistic.

The concept of choice is central to this narrative. Pauline constantly finds herself faced with situations in which she has to make difficult choices. But it needs be mentioned that unlike the situation in a good number of African texts by both male and female authors, in which a woman's choices are either severely controlled or already pre-determined by her socio-cultural context, Pauline's margin of choice and action is much larger. She makes her choices usually in response to an analysis of her situation and not in deference to the prescriptions of her context. For instance, her decision to remain married to Moussa is based on the realization that it makes financial and economic sense for her and her children to remain with the man she now considers a traitor: she begins to instrumentalize the marriage—even with its polygamous structure—as opposed to being instrumentalized by it.

Polygamy not only empowers Pauline in the sense of forcing her to make difficult, independent choices, it also enhances her assertiveness and her desire to have a voice in the quotidian running of their household, an area of action that was the exclusive preserve of Moussa. Faced with the practical problem of where to accommodate his new wife, Moussa attempts to make Aida vacate her room for the new bride. He makes this move out of the conviction that he is still the lord and master of the household whose decisions can go unchallenged. The dissentient reaction he receives from Aida and Pauline bears further testimony to his loss of power and authority and the corresponding empowerment of his wife and daughter. During a heated verbal encounter, both women make it clear to him he would have to make alternative arrangements to accommodate his new wife. This encounter marks the second time in the narrative that a disoriented Moussa has to scream in a futile bid to assert his by now largely meretricious authority. Because mother and daughter hold similar views on polygamy, and because of the considerable space they now occupy both within the scopic regime of the narrative, Moussa progressively finds himself entrapped in a domestic space circumscribed by the deconstructive and resistant feminist discourse of his wife and daughter. Aida and her teenage friend, Marietou, serve as instruments of an authorial intervention that disrupts the fictional illusion, although their sociological dissections of polygamy often appears to be contrived. Marietou

also serves another role in the plot, since Moussa's new wife turns out to be none other than her elder sister, Maimouna. The latter enters the narrative as a doubly subalternized subject, since she has had the misfortune of having her first child out of wedlock in a cultural context in which being a single mother is frowned upon. As she moves in with Moussa and his family, one therefore expects her relationship with Pauline and Aida to be marked by incessant bickerings, quarrels, machinations and competition for their husband's attention, as is characteristic of polygamous situations in much of African fiction.

One of the signs of patriarchal triumphalism in the polygamous context is precisely the Hobbesian relationship which it engenders among the wives. It titillates the man's ego to be the prized "possession" for which the women engage in acrimonious competition. Their quarrels centralize him, consecrating him as the essential man. It is therefore to Traore's authorial credit that she denies Moussa this strategic traditional positionality. Unlike some of his textual predecessors in African fiction, polygamy progressively decentralizes Moussa. Although Pauline and Aida accord Maimouna anything but a warm reception on her arrival, their hostility soon dissolves into mutual respect and, finally, friendship. Maimouna even becomes Aida's confidant.

In a radical departure from the customary situation, polygamy in *Sidagamie* results in a kind of female bonding, with each of the women understanding the peculiar position of the other. A mutual appreciation of each other's situation as victim of an overriding cultural system is thus established. This *entente* reinforces the transformation of Moussa's erstwhile space of unquestioned patriarchal power in to a locus of women's talk, thereby increasing his alienation and peripheralization within the scheme of the narrative.

The cordial relationship which Maimouna succeeds in establishing with Pauline and Aida yields an interesting textual consequence: we learn in the course of an intimate conversation between Aida and Maimouna that the latter is still very much in love with her first lover, Ricardo. Moussa is merely being used by Maimouna for convenience. Maimouna eventually succeeds in re-establishing contact with her true love and begins to cheat on Moussa. Every action undertaken by Moussa's two wives and his eldest daughter ultimately translates into a corresponding subalternization of the man: Pauline stops having sexual relations with him, Maimouna cheats on him, Aida no longer accords him the customary respect due to a father. His domestic space having

been "conquered" by these three women, an alienated Moussa increasingly escapes to the street.

This progressive sense of worthlessness and the need to shore up his badly damaged ego are responsible for Moussa's sudden decision to marry a third wife, this time an eighteen-year-old peasant rigidly trained in Islamic and traditional codes: a suitable candidate for absolute submission and docility. Moussa feels the need to have at least one woman in his household over whom he has unquestioned control. While Pauline manifests a cold, if not surreal indifference to the idea of a third wife, Maimouna decides to fight it, thus making things very difficult for N'Deye Mareme, the new wife.

While not totally restoring Moussa to his former central position, the incessant quarrels between the last two wives give him a new sense of relevance in the scheme of things, as he now has to come home more frequently to make peace between the women.

The acrimonious situation between the two women does not however last long. Ma'imouna's renewed contact with her first love gives her a new sense of direction. It rejuvenates her and she decides to adopt a more positive attitude to life and to people around her, including her bitter rival.

Eventually, we find out that N'Deye Mareme, who has been hospitalised for a while with a curious illness, has been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. She was obviously infected long before she married Moussa. The news devastates Moussa, who now realises his folly. Not only did his experiment with polygamy disempower and decentralize him, but the whole arrangement has turned from "polygamie" to "sidagamie" (from SIDA, the French acronym for AIDS), with the realization that he and Maimouna are also infected. Only Pauline is safe, having stopped all sexual relations with him since his second marriage. By the time the novel ends, Moussa's textual eviction from his original location as an essential man has been fully realised.

Although linear simplism and a sometimes defective handling of narrative techniques are weaknesses in this novel, they take nothing away from the work's thematic and discursive originality. Traore offers a revisionist construction of polygamy that is rare in African literature. Indeed, there is hardly any Francophone African female novel at the moment in which a polygamous male character is made as peripheral and irrelevant as Moussa turns out to be in *Sidagamie*. His wives and daughter achieve empowerment at his expense. What is more, this peculiar polygamous situation occurs without any serious social pressure being put on the women to conform and re-centra-

lize their husband. There are very minimal references to extended family pressure in *Sidagamie*.

In the customary situation, the entire community, acting as one big family, would have made a concerted effort against Moussa's wives, especially Pauline, forcing them to "behave". Evidence of this traditional enforcement of patriarchal codes, often by elderly women working against the interests of younger women, abound in Francophone African male and female fiction from Seydou Badian's *Sous l'orage* to Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle's *Sous la cendre le feu*. *Sidagamie* thus presents us with a situation in which the emancipation of the subaltern woman through the peculiar instrumentality of polygamy is made all the more concrete by the flexibility and adaptability of the social context in which she operates, as opposed to the resistant and outright hostile contexts one usually encounters.

### **Negofeminism and Collective Action in *Rebelle***

Fatou Keita's *Rebelle* explores the discursive possibilities offered by Obioma Nnaemeka's notion of "negofeminism" and the dialectical imperative of subaltern action as described in such works as James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: The Hidden Transcripts*, Peter Hitchcock's *Dialogics of the Oppressed* and Barbara Harlow's *Resistance Literature*. Despite the divergent preoccupations of these theoretical offerings, they are united by a generalized perspectivization of the subaltern as oppressed subjects "whose singular mark lies not in the oppression itself but in their capacity to end it" (Hitchcock 4). The major accomplishment of the author of *Rebelle*, however, lies in the successful transformation of the personal into the collective, one subaltern subject's personal struggles and triumphs against patriarchal oppression being wholly embraced by her peers. While not dissolving class difference among the female actors in this novel, the author sublimates it to the higher imperative of working together for a common goal. A rare occurrence in Francophone African women's fiction, the usually arrogant, westernised female characters are made to "unlearn their privileges," to borrow a popular Spivak phrase, and struggle alongside the so-called illiterate village women.<sup>3</sup>

From the outset, this novel lives up to its tide. It is a narrative embedded in resistance and rebellion and the entire plot is structured around the need to

5 This offers a sharp contrast to the situation in Philomene Bassek's *La tache de sang* where sophisticated city women form an association and look down on their rural counterparts.

accommodate those imperatives. The story evolves as a long flashback into the life of Malimouna, a teenage peasant girl living with Matou, her mother in the fictional village of Boritouni. Malimouna and her mother live alone because the latter was repudiated by her husband as a result of her inability to have a male child. Malimouna is a precocious child. Her mother's unjust treatment by society, coupled with her association with Sanita, a city girl raised in Paris who visits the village for holidays, sharpens the rebellious streak in her. For instance, in the course of their wanderings in the thickets surrounding the village, Sanita teaches the heroine to touch, caress, and appreciate her own clitoris. One is therefore not surprised that her narrative trajectory starts with her firm refusal to submit to female circumcision (genital mutilation in Western feminist discourses).

Matou, who is already condemned to a life of humiliation as an outcast, is understandably devastated by her daughter's rejection of circumcision, an action that is bound to result in the most severe social consequences for mother and daughter. Matou presumably attributes Malimouna's deviance to Sanita and her Westernized parents. The novel at this point begins to set the stage for the classic discursive binaries between town and country, tradition and modernity, which numerous strands of postcolonial and postmodernist theorizing claim to be undermining in favour more contingent categories of discourse. Malimouna's agency would have been compromised to some extent if the narrative had cast her resistance as a mere consequence of Sanita, the city girl's conscientization. What we witness instead of this scenario is a situation in which the young heroine resists pressure from her mother and other elderly female figures and thus successfully preserves her clitoris. The heroine's resistance against circumcision, of a key patriarchal prescription, evokes the larger politics of the time worn struggle for the control of the woman's body in its social and political constructedness by patriarchal structures which massively overdetermine the very possibility of its being and becoming.

After this initial victory, Malimouna faces another potentially dangerous situation in which the male order seeks to re-establish control over her body. Louma, an absentee father who abandoned her in childhood, suddenly remembers that he had promised her in marriage, ever since she was born, to an old friend. The wedding is hurriedly arranged without Malimouna or her mother having any say in the matter. On her wedding night, two elderly women acting as agents of patriarchy lock up the hapless Malimouna in a bedroom. She is to remain there waiting for Sando to come and consummate

their marriage, after which the two women will inspect the bed sheets for bloodstains, evidence of Malimouna's virginity. Sando enters the room some time after midnight and reaches for her. Malimouna grabs a wooden statue and hits him on the head, knocking him unconscious. She steals out of the bedroom and runs out into the night, with no idea where she is headed.

This event marks the second incidence of feminist praxis against another formidable canon of patriarchy in the novel: arranged marriage. These first two victories are, of necessity, personal but the narrative evolves in a manner that reflects the need to move from the personal to the collective, if the possibility of Gramsci's "permanent victory" of the subaltern is to be remotely imaginable. It is therefore not by happenstance that Malimouna's flight takes her to Salouma, the capital city of the fictional country in which the story is set. By successfully overcoming female circumcision and an arranged marriage, Malimouna has reached the limit of her potential for emancipatory agency in the village. It is difficult to imagine the possibility of further dissident action on the part of this teenager in a village rigidly governed by religious and traditional ethos, as well as hierarchized binaries of gendered subjecthood that hardly stand the chance of any Derridean reversal.

The change of setting from the village to the city therefore opens up narrative possibilities which have the overall effect of facilitating the further development of Malimouna's character. In Salouma, she works in rapid succession as a domestic servant and nanny for two expatriate French families. The second family decides to take her to a small village in France for the holidays. There, her employer's husband attempts to rape her and she escapes to Paris. This marks her third flight from male exploitation. By situating the heroine as a potential victim of white male sexual predation, the novel transcends the question of race and universalizes its perceived problem of male domination, a textual strategy reminiscent of Mariama Ba's and Mariam Warner Vieyra's exploration of male sexual domination across racial lines in *Un chant ecarlate* and *Juletane* respectively.

We meet a better educated, newly conscientized Malimouna in Paris. The incident which convinces her that she has the ultimate mission of helping women, particularly African women living in France, occurs when she suddenly finds herself hosting Fanta, a victim of an arranged marriage sent to join her husband in France. The narrative moves at a faster pace from here on in order to accommodate Fanta's case as a story within a story. Fanta and her husband live in the apartment opposite Malimouna's, making it possible for the two women to establish a strong friendship. Malimouna's determination,

her zeal to improve her lot and evacuate the position of subalternity, begins to rub off on Fanta who expresses the wish to start schooling. This initiative is impeded because Fanta soon begins to have children in very rapid succession and is already carrying her fifth pregnancy at the age of twenty-four. Malimouna, who by now has developed into a full-blown sloganeering feminist, is naturally dissatisfied with this state of things and confronts Fanta.

The encounter between Malimouna and Fanta is indicative of the novel's sustained engagement of the tradition/modernity binary. This atavistic opposition is significant because it enables us to see cons denudation at work as Malimouna tries to sensitize Fanta to the dangers of uncontrolled childbirth. One must be careful not to decontextualize Malimouna's position on children. She is not against multiple childbirth/«r *se* but adopts a position in which the decision to have several children should be mediated by a couple's economic situation and, more importantly, by the woman's health and willingness. Malimouna's position therefore does not run foul of Roseline Acholonu's little known concept of motherism<sup>6</sup> but rather reinforces it, one of the cardinal tenets of that notion being that rather than avoid motherhood, African women must occupy that location strategically and remap it, whenever necessary, as a de-subalternized position of strength.

Fanta's fatalism, her docile resignation to fate is calibrated by Malimouna's grasp of the need to unlearn her own privileges and treat her uneducated sister as a reasoning subject. Malimouna, even when convinced of the superiority of her opinions, never imposes them on Fanta. She conveys them as suggestions in the course of their conversations and allows the latter to reflect and make her own decisions. This is precisely what happens when Malimouna suggests the pill as a solution to Fanta's recurrent pregnancies. It takes Fanta several months to approach Malimouna with her decision to go on the pill.

By placing emphasis on Fanta's eventual exercise of choice in the move towards agency, the novel brings into focus the inevitable confrontation between subaltern female subjects struggling to vacate that position and a patriarchy intent on maintaining the status quo. The confrontation in *Rebelle* is even more interesting because it is played out in Paris. The "Foyer Africain" (African Quarter) in which this part of the novel is set is a quintessential ethnospace rigidly governed by patriarchal pedagogy and hegemony. In an

earlier study<sup>7</sup> of this phenomenon in Francophone African fiction, I suggested the notion of ethnospace to account for the spaces which immigrant communities carve out for themselves in Western cities—the ubiquitous Chinatowns for instance—in which they reterritorialize the mores, cultures, traditions and even the architecture of the homeland.

The ethnospace is a site of resistance to incorporation into the dominant Western culture. It provides psychic anchorage for the immigrant/diasporic community through a reproduction of the *realia*—I borrow the term from Pierre Nora—of the lost homeland. This is the sense in which Isabelle Allende, to take an example from Latin American fiction, explores the concept of ethnospace in her novel, *The Infinite Plan*, where we encounter a Chicano barrio in California peopled by Mexican immigrants. The barrio is an ethnospace invested with the food, dress codes, ethical norms, religion and, most importantly, the language of the immigrants. The cultural boundaries are so rigidly marked that the barrio becomes, for the immigrants, a site of resistance against incorporation into the dominant American culture: a veritable antidote to the psychological schisms occasioned by exile and deracination. So effective is the ethnospatial "Mexicanization" of that United States' space that one of the characters, an elderly grandmother, never even realized that she left Mexico years ago. She dies comforted by the illusion that she will be buried beside her ancestors.

In essence, an ethnospace reroots the deracinated immigrant/diasporic subject who withdraws frequently into it on account of the daily indignities s/he encounters with the dominant culture. Fanta's husband and his fellow African brothers in *Rebelle* see their Parisian "Foyer Africain" as Africa, and themselves as the patriarchs and lords of that space. Because they are mostly Moslems from Mali, they impose religious and traditional codes on that space and this puts them on a collision course with Malimouna who, they fear, might "corrupt" their wives with her "dangerous" ideas of female emancipation couched in Western rhetoric.

Malimouna's inevitable confrontation with patriarchy in the Parisian African ethnospace comes to pass when Barou, Fanta's husband, catches his wife taking the pill, even after he had warned her against it on the pretext of religious and cultural piety. A furious Barou descends on Fanta, beating her

6 She develops the notion in her book, *Motherism: An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*.

7 I proposed the notion of ethnospace in my essay "Ethnospatial politics in Francophone African Fiction" which I presented at the XVIIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association held in Pretoria, South Africa from August 13-19 2000.

to a pulp and threatening to administer the same treatment to Malimouna whom he holds responsible for his wife's cultural contravention. Malimouna knows that the right thing to do is to call the police, but that option sensitizes her to another serious ideological consideration born out of their collective condition as African immigrants in France:

Elle souleva le combiné du téléphone pour appeler la police. Elle composa le numéro mais, lorsqu'elle entendit la voix au bout du fil, elle raccrocha. A quoi cela servirait-il? Que pourrait la police, si d'ailleurs elle daignait s'intéresser à ce genre de problèmes? Cela ne ferait qu'aggraver la situation dans laquelle se trouvait Fanta. Cette dernière était démunie et sans aucune instruction. Son mari était tout pour elle dans cette ville étrangère. Et puis comment elle, Malimouna, une noire, pourrait-elle causer des ennuis à un noir dans un pays où la couleur de leur peau était l'objet de tant de misères? (Keita 94-95)

She picked the receiver in order to call the police. She dialled the number but when she heard a voice at the other end, she hung up. What purpose would it serve? What could the police do even where they bothered with those kinds of problems? That would only worsen Fanta's situation. Poor and uneducated, her life revolved entirely around her husband in this foreign city. And how could Malimouna, a black woman, cause problems for a black man in a country where their colour was already a liability? (my translation).

Faced with the choice between feminist action and ideological solidarity with the male oppressor predicated on racial affinities and the laws of the ethnospace in the racist context of Paris, Malimouna sacrifices the feminist imperative on the altar of racial solidarity.<sup>8</sup> Sticking together to shield one another (even an errant brother/sister) from the law is one of the cardinal rules of ethnospatial formation by immigrant communities in the West. As the narrator puts it in *The Infinite Plan*, the characters Pedro and Immaculada Morales refuse to reveal the identity of the woman who carried out a crude abortion on their daughter to the police "because in the Mexican barrio informing was an unthinkable crime" (Allende 142).

One aspect of Fatou Keita's politics that merits attention in *Rebelle* is the manner in which the use of the familiar postmodernist technique of delinearized plot affects thematic development, problematizing issues and

8 Malimouna's action has a parallel in *The Infinite Plan*. When Olga performs a failed, near-fatal abortion on Carmen, the bohemian daughter of Pedro Morales, police investigation of the matter fails because nobody agrees to inform them on who carried out the abortion

questions of temporality that would otherwise appear as narrative simplisms. An example of this lies in Fanta's achievements and reversals, her successes and failures in the push for agency. While her problematic acceptance of the pill, in the face of her objective existential condition, figures appropriately as a step forward, her unquestioning validation of female genital excision is presented as a disastrous reversal. That Fanta asks Malimouna to help convince her recalcitrant daughter to submit to circumcision is indicative of how the novel mediates the problematic discourses of cultural relativity—understood here as all cultures being valid from the perspective of insiders to each particular culture—and its attendant dangers. This is especially true in some African contexts where women are sometimes the most avid defenders of those subalternizing patriarchal cultures the feminist wishes to change. Faced with Fanta's insistence on the cultural validity of the practice—even in Paris—Malimouna finds herself in a Foucauldian bind in which any contradiction of Fanta's "truth," would reify her as a mere producer of what Foucault calls "subjugated knowledges" (7).

Mais elle savait que, dans cet instant critique, elle ne trouverait pas les arguments nécessaires pour convaincre cette femme pétrée de traditions. Comment la persuader, là, maintenant, tout de suite, que sa fille, sa petite Noura chérie, ne deviendrait pas une dévergondée simplement parce qu'elle garderait entier son clitoris? Fanta justement pensait que c'était bien là une preuve d'amour que de vouloir exciser sa fille: la était SA vérité, SA réalité. (Keita 125; emphasis in the original).

But she knew that at that crucial moment, she lacked the argument to convince the woman, mired in tradition. How could she persuade her right there that her daughter, her dear little Noura would not become a slut just by keeping her clitoris intact? Fanta rightfully believed that her desire to circumcise her daughter was proof of love: that was HER truth, HER reality, (my translation)

Fanta's plight in Paris and other factors bordering on racism convince Malimouna of the need to return to Africa and attack most of the problems she sees in Paris from their roots. Once back in Salouma, she joins the feminist "Association d'Aide à la Femme en Difficulté" (AAFD), along with her best friend Laura. After she meets Karim, a successful businessman, during a lunch break, a relationship blossoms between them and they eventually marry and start a family. The eternal conflict between family and career ensues. When Karim convinces her to resign from her job and become

a full time housewife, Malimouna needs little persuasion as she now is determined to sacrifice everything for her marriage and children.

Despite her sacrifices, Karim begins to lose interest in his family, keeping late nights and seeing other women. This sudden turn of events, coupled with Laura's persistent heckling, jolts Malimouna who realises how deep she has sunk into complacency. She rekindles her interest in feminist issues and resumes full-time employment with the AAFD. In no time, she becomes the brain of the association, articulating an entire philosophy of women's emancipation and also developing pragmatic strategies for action.

It is precisely at this narrative juncture that *Rebelle* scores its finest textual achievement in terms of the elaboration of a negofeminist approach to the struggle, rooted as it were, in the historical imperative of collective action on the part of the subaltern sexed group. A rare occurrence in Francophone African women's fiction, Westernised city women and their peasant village sisters come together to reflect on their condition and, more importantly, act decisively. *Rebe/le* is perhaps the only Francophone African female novel in which the praxis of a full-blown revolutionary women's movement, sufficiently conscious of the cultural peculiarities of its milieu, is established and pursued to its logical conclusion: social transformation.

As Oyewumi Oyeronke notes in the introduction to her edited volume, *African Women and Feminism*, the bane of much of feminist action in Africa has been the unwillingness of activists, Western and African, to take the required time to study the terrain and identify those cultural peculiarities with which they must negotiate. Malimouna and her friends in the association are able to avoid this pitfall, basing their actions on a careful analysis of those areas in which negofeminism is the only viable option. One such area is the domain of meaning, a usually volatile and contested terrain between oppressor and oppressed. In "Paradigms of Conquest: History, Historiography, and Politics," a seminal essay on Latin America whose theoretical planks are useful for the present discussion, Steve Stern discusses the relationship between Spanish conquistadors and Amerindians as having been imbricated in a much broader "political struggle" for meaning:

There was no single meaning of conquest, then, to those who promoted its cause, but multiple paradigms, fantasies and Utopias. What emerged on the Spanish side of the conquest was a political struggle to define the terms of coexistence, collaboration, and contradiction among these visions \_\_ The political struggle to define the meaning and spoils of conquest moved in unexpected and complex directions not only because Spaniards quarreled among

themselves... the struggle took unexpected turns, too, because the conquistadors contended with a formidable array of Indian initiatives and responses. Indians as well as Spaniards would end up enlocked in the struggle to define what the Spanish Conquest meant, and what it might yet turn out to mean. (9-10)

The political struggle for the meaning of such notions "woman," "agency," "freedom," "emancipation" and, even, "feminism" has been at the heart of all feminisms be they African, Africana, Third World or Western. All these feminisms are also singularly and transcendently interlocked with various global/local patriarchal establishments and institutions in the struggle for the meaning of those problematic staples of discourse. As some of the contributions in Oyewumi's volume correctly assert, feminist action frequently runs into trouble in Africa because of its Western-inspired vocabulary and notions always occasion a struggle for meaning. Conscious of these dynamics, Malimouna and her colleagues invent new concepts that could promote their cause without ruffling feathers:

Malimouna pouvait donc se donner a fond a la lutte qu'elle et ses amies de l'Association avaient entrepris de poursuivre. La lutte pour un "mieux-être" de la femme. Elles s'auto-censuraient et ne parlaient jamais de "liberté" de la femme, pour ne pas être mises au pilori par de nombreux hommes. Les femmes en detresse auxquelles elles tentaient de porter secours vivaient bien souvent avec ses hommes-la. Ce mot de "liberté" était tabou. C'était, leur lançait-on au visage, un mot emprunte a l'idéologie occidentale. (Keita 179)

Malimouna was therefore able to dedicate herself totally to the struggle that she and friends in the Association had undertaken. The struggle for the "well-being" of the woman. They censored themselves and never spoke about the "freedom" of the woman in order not to attract the hostility of men. The distressed women they were trying to help lived very often with those men. The word "freedom" was taboo. They were told bluntly that the word was borrowed from western ideology, (my translation)

Against the backdrop of the struggle for meaning, radical strands of Western feminism—especially American feminisms of the Judith Buder variety—would probably view the avoidance of the word "freedom" by Malimouna and her friends as capitulation to patriarchy. However, African feminisms, usually less confrontational than their Western counterparts, have equally been more pragmatic in their confrontations with patriarchy over meaning. This is where

Nnaemeka's negofeminism becomes crucial instrument in the context of the struggle for meaning. Authorial intrusions, masquerading as narrative omniscience, give Fatou Keita away as a writer who is enamoured of the pragmatic modalities of action made possible by negofeminism:

Les femmes de l'Association avaient le sens de la diplomatie. Elles savaient s'entourer de précautions, elles savaient qu'elles étaient sur un terrain glissant et qu'il leur fallait manœuvrer avec finesse et subtilité. (Keita 180)

The women of the Association had a good sense of diplomacy. They moved cautiously, knowing that they were on a thorny path and needed to move carefully and with subtlety, (my translation)

The Association's actions inevitably put Malimouna and her associates on a collision course with men who feel threatened by this new surge of feminist energy in the society. But Malimouna is a good student of history who knows that self-reflexivity is an integral part of a struggle. She has learnt valuable lessons from the example of her abysmal failure to conscientize Fanta in Paris, a failure due largely to the confrontational posture she adopted with Fanta's husband instead of persuasion and negotiation. Negotiating with the authoritarian husbands of women in difficulty thus becomes one of the main strategies of the Association.

The greatest threat to the aspirations of the Association, however, comes from some educated women like Malimouna who have been co-opted into what Ogun-dipe-Leslie has termed "first things first"<sup>9</sup> philosophy of Africa's male intellectuals and who consequently believe that the ideological confrontation with foreign domination is more important than any Western-inspired feminist cause:

Le plus dur, pour Malimouna et ses amies, était de rencontrer de l'hostilité de la part d'autres femmes. Des femmes dont les propos pouvaient être encore plus virulents que ceux de leurs opposants masculins. Ces détractrices expliquaient à qui voulait les entendre que les femmes n'avaient jamais été les esclaves des hommes, et que tout ceci n'était qu'une récupération des conceptions occidentales visant à perpétuer l'image de l'homme, de l'homme noir en particulier. (Keita 181-82)

9 She quotes from a poem, "Letter to a feminist Friend" sent to her by Malawian poet, Felix Mnthali.

The most difficult thing for Malimouna and her friends was hostility from other women. Women whose diatribe could be worse than that of their male detractors. These women contended that women had never been slaves to men and that Malimouna and her friends were merely regurgitating Western conceptions of man, the black man especially, (my translation)

Passages such as these betray the author's insertion into the crosscurrents of African feminist discourses in their intersection with Western (American and French) feminisms. Underlying these tensions is the inevitable backcloth of colonialism/imperialism and the discursive reactions it has engendered even at the postcolonial moment of its assumed deconstruction. African feminist discourses, like all other areas of African knowledge production, constantly have to negotiate what the critic Harry Garuba has described as a "postcolonial impasse," a discursive netherworld in which every imaginable margin of action, all structures of African self-imagining, continue to be determined by the consequences of the encounter with the West and its ur-text: modernity. That fellow women condemn the actions of Malimouna and members of the Association as Western-inspired underscores the seriousness of Western atavisms in the postcolonial context.

Malimouna does, however, overcome these difficulties. Her most ambitious project is to organize a huge public rally with the theme: "Les dangers de l'excision" ("The dangers of female circumcision"). For the first time in the history of the country, Malimouna intends to convince excised women to testify publicly at the rally regarding the physical and psychological trauma they have had to live with as a result of the procedure. To convince women to testify in public on such a sensitive issue in Africa stretches the negofeminist and persuasive prowess of the members of the Association to the limit and the narrator regales us with meticulous details of the reasoned and systematic manner in which they go about the daunting challenge.

Karim, Malimouna's husband, becomes very jealous of her celebrity status and also virulently opposes the feminist cause she champions. The heroine opts for divorce rather than cave in to her husband's insistence that she jettison the idea of a public rally against female circumcision. The rally turns out to be a huge success in terms of the release of hitherto repressed women's energies and stories and also in strengthening their collective resolve to end female excision:

La pudeur auto-destructrice des femmes se libérait tout d'un coup. Elles n'avaient plus honte de leur corps et se sentaient libres d'en parler, de le défendre. Dieu

les avait créées avec un clitoris. Pourquoi, et au nom de quoi, un simple être humain pouvait-il décider que l'œuvre du "Tout Puissant" était imparfaite? Comment pouvait-on croire à la fois en Dieu et en de telles absurdités? (Keita 218)

The self-destructive restraint of the women disappeared immediately. They were no longer ashamed of their bodies and felt free to talk about them, defend them. God created them with a clitoris. Why — and on whose account — should a simple human being decide that the almighty's work was imperfect? How could one believe in God and such absurdities at the same time? (my translation)

The use of vocabulary here is instructive. In much of Western feminist discursive interventions, female circumcision is frequently described as a form of "savagery" or "barbarity." African women critiquing the same practice speak of "absurdity." The rebellion against the absurdities of their existence portends a new dawn within a fundamentally transformed social space. At this point, the narrative begins to place considerable emphasis not only on the transformed consciousness of the individual members of the Association but on their awareness of the fact that women's emancipation must, of necessity, be accompanied by a radical transformation of their socio-cultural and political contexts. They consequently pursue various objectives aimed at transforming political structures and social institutions.

The greatest test of the women's resolve to maintain the social transformation they have painstakingly established occurs when the inhabitants of Boritouni, Malimouna's village, send people to kidnap her. They have not forgotten the "crime" she committed twenty years earlier by knocking out her "husband" and fleeing the village. Malimouna must be brought to judgment in the assembly of elders. A significant part of the punishment will be to circumcise her by force. Laura informs the AAFD of this threat, and the women along with the police invade Boritouni. They arrive just in time to liberate Malimouna and the stunned villagers come to the realisation that things have indeed changed. Permanently.

### Conclusion

The discursive refiguring of polygamy as a possible site of resistance and female agency in *Sidagamie* and the collective action of modern and rural women in *Rebelle*, bring about transformative social effects through the instrumentality of negofeminism. The textual strategies at work in these two

novels, aimed at moving the question of women's social and political agency beyond individualized trajectories, call to mind Julianah Nfah-Abbenyi's suggestion that we read African women's novels both as "fictionalized theory" and "theorized fiction".<sup>10</sup> What these two novels suggest, in their radicalized thematic engagements, is a radical departure from a generalized inscription of questions of agency and subjectivity as individualized narratives in African women's fiction. This contention is true for female textual practice on the Anglophone and Francophone sides of the linguistic divide. The familiar trajectories of heroines such as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Mariama Ba's *Ramatoulaye* are, for instance, instances of individualized victories in which the concerned subjects gain agency but socio-cultural institutions and their sexist, patriarchal underbellies are left largely intact. For all the critique of polygamy we encounter in *Une si longue lettre*, the institution is largely left intact in terms of the unassailable location of man at its epicentre. Although *Ramatoulaye* and *Aissatou* reject and critique it, there is no textual index to indicate an all-encompassing social transformation. What largely occurs, then, in most female novels are processes of evacuation in which the subaltern woman acquires agency through individualized praxes spelt out in terms of a physical evacuation of the sites of oppression.

Francophone African women writers of the 1990s hold the distinction of overcoming this singularist paradigm not only by "destroying the emptiness of silence" as Irene Assiba D'Almeida, quoting Camerounian novelist, Calixthe Beyala, puts it in her book, *Francophone African Women Writers*, but by proposing alternative visions of society in which individualized agency becomes indissociable from concrete social transformation. Female novels such as Regina Yaou's *Leprix de la revolte* and Mpoudi Ngolle's *Sous la cendre k feu* join the two novels studied in this essay in consolidating this significant paradigm shift in Francophone African fiction.

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10 See in particular Chapter 1 of her book, *Gender in African Women's Writing*

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