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Africa

Weight of Custom, Signs of Change: Feminism in the Literature of African Women

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Feminist consciousness permeates the works of four major female novelists from black Africa: Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa from Nigeria, Bessie Head from Botswana and Mariama Bâ from Senegal. I shall explore two novels by each of these writers to determine which customs and attitudes cause the most suffering in the lives of their female characters and what signs of change suggest hope that the causes of this suffering will eventually be eliminated. The works of all four of these writers belie the myth that feminist issues are not important to African women, that African women already have sufficient power, that women choose to support polygamy because they like it, and that whatever misery African women suffer can be blamed on the introduction of Western cultures into Africa. The eight novels I shall discuss disprove these myths by depicting the realities of women's lives. The eight novels are: Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and *One Is Enough* (1981), Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969) and *A Question of Power* (1974) and Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1980) and *Un chant écarlate* (1981).¹ All of these works depict extreme suffering in female characters, but they also portray some increase in feminist consciousness and indications that some change will occur. Certainly, the ideal of more egalitarian relationships emerges from all of these books. Furthermore, these novels suggest that until men become the kind of people with whom such an egalitarian relationship is possible, more and more African women will be saying "no" to marriage.

In the African communities depicted in these books, families exert a great deal of pressure upon young people in order to uphold traditional taboos, customs and privileges in relation to marriage. Families have considerable say about whom their young people may marry. Adults recite proverbs and stories to the young that warn them of the disasters that will ensue if they disobey the long-established customs and procedures that are designed to govern behaviour. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* could itself be used as a story that warns young people of what happens to disobedient girls. It is the story of

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a young woman, Aku-nna, who defies her family by running away to marry the man she loves. Aku-nna has fallen in love with Chike, her schoolteacher, who, because he is educated, seems to be an excellent choice for a husband. However, she is forbidden to marry him because he comes from a family of ex-slaves. When Chike tries to pay the required bride price for her, the bride price is refused. Traditional belief says a woman whose bride price has not been paid will die in childbirth (p. 154). Aku-nna does indeed die in childbirth, unable to survive her pregnancy after years of malnutrition, but her people believe she died because her bride price was never paid due to her disobedience. No one criticizes her stepfather for his stubborn refusal to accept the bride price nor for his rituals to invoke her death as punishment for her rebellion. People in the community condemn her, not him, because he is conforming to custom and she is not.

In *The Bride Price*, Emecheta shows how numerous indigenous African customs and superstitions oppress and degrade the female. People adhere to the belief that a female is worthless to a family except for the bride price she will bring to it (p. 10). Custom insists upon the dissolution of a family when a father dies, because a family is simply not a family without the male in it. This belief enhances male privilege, for the mother is inherited by her husband's brother without any regard for how his wife or wives may feel about that. Furthermore, the daughter may be dispensed with by making her a servant in a relative's home. As Aku-nna's aunt tells her, the death of her father makes her "an orphan." Obviously, her mother does not count. Custom dictates that the uncle's family should marry off Aku-nna quickly to get enough money to pay her brother Nna-ndo's school fees (p. 38). Custom tells Aku-nna she is "unclean" when menstruating; in that condition, she will pollute a stream or, if she enters certain households, she will cause the head of the family to die (p. 93). Custom allows boys to "play at squeezing a girl's breasts until they hurt . . . so long as it was done inside the hut where an adult was near" (p. 97). Custom lets an Ibuza boy make a girl his by sneaking up and cutting her hair. Hence, "many girls cropped their hair very close; those who wanted long hair wore a headscarf most of the time" (p. 103). When Aku-nna is kidnapped by Okoboshi to prevent her marriage to Chike, she must give herself to him sexually; otherwise, he would call and "all those drunken men would come in and help him hold her legs apart so that he could enter her with no further trouble. The men would not be blamed at all, because it was their custom" (p. 135). When Aku-nna succeeds in escaping from Okoboshi and running off with Chike, her stepfather feels he has been degraded and retaliates by following another Ibuza custom: "In Ibuza, if a man divorced or no longer wanted his wife, he would expose his backside to her in public" (p. 155). Thus is her mother punished even though, because of her powerlessness, she had made no move to help her daughter.²

In *The Bride Price*, custom demands death as the consequence of rebellion; in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, the community believes that a woman must have a clitoridectomy before she gets pregnant or her baby will die (p. 14). Furthermore, any young married woman must get pregnant as soon as

possible; otherwise she will be called a man. Her barrenness will trouble the marriage because, as Efuru is told, "two men do not live together" (p. 24). Flora Nwapa's novel is riddled with such sayings and, through this technique, the author conveys the strong social pressure exerted upon the couple and the mother-in-law to ensure that the male soon has not just a baby but a male baby. In the novel, those who exert this pressure on behalf of the patriarchy are female. Female gossips make their opinions known throughout *Efuru*. They say of marriage: "Of what use is it if it is not fruitful. Of what use is it if your husbands licks your body, worships you and buys everything in the market for you and you are not productive?" (p. 137). Efuru is made to understand that if she does not have children or if her husband starts running around, she is a "failure" (p. 165). This sense of failure leads her to choose another wife for her husband. She is also pressured by the common saying, which she repeats to herself: "It is only a bad woman who wants her husband all to herself." She decides to search actively for his second wife so that she can maintain her privileged position as first wife (p. 53). If the man or his mother does the choosing, she may lose power within the family (p. 164).² Women "choose" polygamy for these reasons.

At the end of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, the protagonist has been through two bad marriages and borne only one baby – a female who died. She dreams of a goddess, Uhamiri, known as the woman of the lake.³ She notes: "She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?" (p. 221). Perhaps because, with the pressure to bear male babies, the mother of many children suffers as much as the mother of none. Nnu Ego, the protagonist in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, has had both experiences. She is rejected by her first husband because she is unable to conceive. When she finally bears a son with a second husband, the baby dies. Her despair leads her to attempt suicide. Rescued, however, she goes on to bear eight more children, seven of whom live. When she, the model mother, dies, a shrine is built in her honour. At the end of the novel, she becomes the woman in the other world to whom young women pray for fertility. Yet "however many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did!" (p. 224). She denies them fertility to save them from the fate she has known. Whether the goddess is fertile but reluctant to make others so, as in Emecheta's novel, or celibate, as in Nwapa's novel, the message about the patriarchal institution of motherhood in these two endings is the same. Indeed, Nwapa's ironic mention of "the joy of motherhood" may be the source of Emecheta's title, *The Joys of Motherhood*.

Emecheta's protagonist, Nnu Ego, had long accepted the patriarchal attitude that sons are more valuable than daughters, and feels ashamed when she bears twin girls, especially when their father looks at them and says, "'Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better?'" (p. 127). Nnu Ego had accepted, too, that boys should get more education than girls, telling her daughters they must work to raise money to educate their brothers and

“ ‘put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family.’ ” She described the reward for the daughters thus: “ ‘when your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you’ ” (p. 176).

As Nnu Ego participates in the patriarchal system, both as victim and as perpetrator, she is angry more and more frequently. She begins to see how motherhood is used by the patriarchy to keep women relatively powerless. When her husband Nnaife brings home new wives or when he gives his wives too little money, she is afraid to anger him by protesting too much for fear that she may lose what little money he does give her: “She was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife. She was not even expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman in her position. It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman’s sense of responsibility to actually enslave her” (p. 137).

Finally, through her experiences with her father, husbands and sons, she comes to understand the patriarchal nature of her culture and her own role in perpetuating it: “ ‘The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That’s why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband – and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man’s world, which women will always help to build’ ” (p. 187). Nnu Ego finally realizes that women must work together to “change all this.” Freedom for them must begin with rejecting the patriarchal glorification of motherhood.

Although Nnu Ego’s anger and her feminist consciousness come too late in her life to do much for her, the impulse towards freedom from indigenous patriarchal customs is reassuring. That impulse exists as well in Efuru and her relative by marriage, Ajanupu. Both think Efuru’s mother-in-law, Ossai, foolish to have remained faithful all her life to a man who deserted her. Ajanupu scolds her: “ ‘You wanted to be called a good wife, good wife when you were eating sand, good wife when you were eating nails. That was the kind of goodness that appealed to you. How could you be suffering for a person who did not appreciate your suffering, the person who despised you. It was not virtue, it was plain stupidity’ ” (p. 79). Ossai had been so conditioned to be a good wife that she defied pressure from her family to give up that role. She is able to recognize, however, that, similarly deserted, Efuru will not be willing to suffer and wait: “Life for her meant living it fully. She did not want merely to exist. She wanted to live and use the world to her advantage” (p. 78).⁵ Efuru has the courage to leave her first husband when he runs off with another woman; yet when her second husband has a son with another woman and wants an additional two wives, she accepts the situation. She represses her impulse to live more fully, because, like Nnu Ego, she is constantly thwarted by the fact that the men consistently manage to maintain the power.⁶ She becomes one more of those females who remain silent when they would prefer to protest the behaviour of their husbands. One woman explains how she

avoids nagging her husband: “ ‘I put my mouth in a bag and sewed it up. I don’t want to be accused of being a ‘male woman’ ’ ” (p. 104). Any hints of feminist protest must be put down by the men and by the community gossips. Yet sometimes an outburst of female anger cannot be totally controlled. When Efuru’s husband, Gilbert, implies that Efuru’s illness is a punishment for adultery, Ajanupu protests, for which Gilbert slaps her. She, in turn, breaks a mortar and pestle over his head! (p. 217).

The double standard of fidelity for women and promiscuity for men leads Elizabeth, the protagonist in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*, to leave her promiscuous husband and racist homeland, South Africa. Elizabeth is even more fully aware than Aku-nna, Efuru or Nnu Ego of the “question of power,” and, unable to cope, she slips into madness. In her frightening hallucinations, two male characters, Sello and Dan, try to dominate and kill Elizabeth’s spirit. To undermine Elizabeth’s sense of herself as a woman, Sello uses Medusa and Dan uses his “seventy-one nice-time girls” (p. 173) to make her jealous. Dan not only parades his “nice-time girls” before her, but he even tumbles them into bed beside her (p. 127). Displaying not only his attraction to these women but also his fear and hatred of them, he punishes them for being dirty if they are more sexually potent than he. For example, one night he decides Miss Pelican-Beak, with her long, tough vagina, is “too pushy,” and he breaks her legs and elbows and redesigns her pelvis to make it more passive (pp. 167-68).

Although Bessie Head does not focus on the machinations of government officials or the acts of opposition leaders in her novels, she is certainly not, as Lewis Nkosi claims, “politically ignorant” (p. 37). Rather, Head is keenly aware of the psychological and philosophical origins of racial and sexual oppression and of the impact both racism and sexism have, for example, on the South African woman. Critics like Cecil Abrahams and Charles Larson were so blind to the politics of sexism when they were writing about Head in the late seventies⁷ that they read *A Question of Power* without realizing that her main focus is upon sexism and the connections to be made between racist and sexist attitudes. She calls both racists and sexists power-maniacs (p. 19). She sees the root of the problem as hierarchy and domination rather than equality.

In *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth is saved by discovering what Nnu Ego concluded at the end of her life – that women must work together. Elizabeth is restored to mental health by working in a vegetable garden with the uneducated, hardworking Kenosi, whose “knowingness and grasp of life” make her beautiful (p. 90). Significantly, Kenosi lets her know that she needs her: “ ‘You must never leave the garden . . . I cannot work without you’ ” (p. 142). Their relationship has possibilities quite different from the patriarchal relationships of Elizabeth’s nightmare world: their “work relationship had been established on the solid respect of one work partner for another” (p. 160). Kenosi enables Elizabeth to maintain her belief in egalitarian relationships based upon seeing the sacredness in the other person. In Elizabeth’s hallucinations men degrade, manipulate and abuse women

because they fail to perceive the sacredness in women as in all life; racism and ecological problems are based upon the same failure. Elizabeth concludes that humankind's fundamental error is the "relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky. Since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed" (p. 205). So, too, could woman.

The couple in Mariama Bâ's *Un chant écarlate* [*A Scarlet Song*] begin their relationship on an idealistic plane, believing that they can successfully overcome barriers of race, class and national origin.⁸ When Mireille de La Vallée falls in love with her bright Senegalese classmate, Ousmane Guèye, her father, a French diplomat, puts her on the first plane back to Paris. After several years of separation and letter-writing, Ousmane goes to Paris and the two defy their families and the mores of both their communities (which oppose interracial marriages) to marry secretly and return to Senegal.

As students, Mireille and Ousmane had each participated in the massive 1968 revolts against the lifestyles and politics of those in power in their respective countries. This and the exceptional intelligence of each might lead the reader to assume that they are liberated in their thinking, but the nature of their relationship proves that their defiance of the status quo does not extend to a firm rejection of sex roles within marriage. When Ousmane revolts against Mireille's attempts to make the marriage at least somewhat egalitarian, she is helpless, having given up upon marrying all contact with her family, her community of supportive friends, her religion and her homeland. By isolating herself and by accepting the Moslem religion which condones polygamy, she had undermined any basis for power within their relationship.

Ousmane refuses Mireille's request that he clean up after himself, that he not eat outside the kitchen and that he restrict the inconsiderate and sloppy habits of his friends and mother during their visits. His revolt strengthens when, attracted by his money, his childhood friend Ouleymatou decides to seduce him. When he goes to visit Ouleymatou, he is treated like a lord:

Chez Ouleymatou, il était le maître et le seigneur. Il se déshabillait où il voulait, s'installait où il voulait, mangeait où il voulait, salissait ce qu'il voulait. Les dégâts étaient aussitôt réparés, sans murmure. Dans ce foyer, on prévenait ses moindres désirs. (p. 222)

[At Ouleymatou's, he was the master and lord. He undressed where he pleased, sat where he pleased, ate where he pleased; he could dirty whatever he wished. The mess he created was immediately cleaned up, without a murmur. In that house, the women anticipated and fulfilled his slightest desires.]⁹

Ouleymatou has no expectations of being his "partner." Unlike Mireille, she does not think "en terme[s] d'égalité" (p. 223) [in terms of equality]. The path of least resistance for Ousmane is to allow himself to be spoiled, since

un homme ne dédaigne pas d'être guide et avoir le dernier mot. Un homme

ne se détourne pas des prérogatives qu'on lui accorde. (p. 223)

[A man does not refuse to be the guide and to have the last word. A man does not turn away from the special privileges that one accords him.]

Ironically, the root of Ousmane's inability to relate to females as a responsible adult may go back to Ouleymatou's rejection of him in his early adolescence because he helped his mother with her chores and hence was doing "women's work." His rejection had been announced in these words:

"Ma soeur Ouleymatou ne veut pas d'un garçon qui balaie, porte des seaux d'eau et sent le poisson sec." (pp. 17-18)

["My sister Ouleymatou does not want to have anything to do with a boy who sweeps, carries buckets of water and smells of dried fish."]

Fearing further ridicule, he had resolved not to trust or allow himself to be seduced by any female:

les femmes, décrites volages et irresponsables, prêtes à mentir et à tromper, ne l'intéressaient pas. (p. 20)

[women, described as fickle and irresponsible, ready to lie and betray, did not interest him.]

However, as one might expect from someone who thinks in stereotypes, his view of woman shifts from devil to angel: when he meets Mireille, with her angelic "chevelure dorée" [golden head of hair], he quickly places her on a pedestal. Because her last name is "de La Vallée,"

le nom précédé de particule faisait de la jeune fille blanche "sa princesse." (p. 25)

[he imagined that the "de," signifying high station, made this white girl "his princess."]

Once married to Mireille, however, Ousmane can no longer relate to her as a romantic image. Ouleymatou takes over as the romantic image in his life. She is not real; she is a symbol:

"Ouleymatou, symbole double dans ma vie!"
"Symbole de la femme noire" qu'il devait affranchir,
"symbole de l'Afrique" dont il était l'un des "fils éclairés." (p. 225)

["Ouleymatou, double symbol of my life!"
"Symbol of the black woman" whom he must set free,
"symbol of Africa" of which he was one of the "enlightened sons."]

His white wife not only undermines his privileges as a Senegalese male, but she also undermines certain privileges owed to the Senegalese mother-in-law. Here is what custom has led Ousmane's mother to expect:

La belle-fille installe la mère de son époux dans un nid de respect et de repos. Évoluant dans ses privilèges jamais discutés, la belle-mère ordonne, supervise, exige. Elle s'approprie les meilleures parts du gain de son fils. La marche de la maison ne la laisse pas indifférente et elle a son mot à dire sur l'éducation de ses petits-enfants. (p. 111)

[The daughter-in-law installs the mother of her husband in a nest of respect and repose. Assuming privileges that are taken for granted, the mother-in-law orders, supervises, demands. She appropriates for herself the best parts of whatever her son brings home for the family. She is not indifferent to how the house is run, and she always has her word to say about how her grandchildren should be brought up.]

This situation, in which a man's mother rather than his wife rules his household, ensures the powerlessness of the daughter-in-law within her own home. In turn, the wife's expectations of ruling within her own son's household ensures that she will perpetuate the patriarchal tradition of son-preference.

The powerlessness of the African female within her own home and within her husband's family is matched, however, by the portraits of the French mother and daughter. Mireille's mother, Mathilde de La Vallée, had never been interested in the problems of the "libéralisation de la femme":

Dans sa vie, son mari seul comptait. Elle le choyait, lui obéissait et allait au devant de ses moindres désirs. (p. 119)

[In her life, only her husband counted. She coddled him, obeyed him and anticipated even his slightest desires.]

But her husband's rejection of their daughter because of her marriage to a Senegalese is almost more than she can bear. Given his attitude, she realizes that she will never see her daughter again. For thirty years, writes Mariama Bâ, Mathilde de La Vallée had had no thought of her own, no initiative; for thirty years "elle n'avait fait que marcher où on la poussait" [she had only walked where she had been pushed], so by habit she repeats her husband's insulting remarks about her daughter: "La traîtresse! La saleté!" [the traitress! The filthy thing!]. But then she faints; and when she awakes, she feels like "la plus solitaire des femmes" [the most isolated of women]:

Il ne lui restait plus que son mari, homme de pierre, à servir, satisfaire, et applaudir jusqu'à l'éclatement de son cœur. (p. 120)

[All that remained was for her husband, a man of stone, to serve, satisfy, and applaud until her heart burst.]

Echoing the French proverb "Tel père, tel fils" [Like father, like son], one might say "Telle mère, telle fille" [Like mother, like daughter]; for at the end of the novel Mireille is likewise "la plus solitaire des femmes."

Disgusted by her brother's and her mother's behaviour towards Mireille, Ousmane's sister Soukeyna reveals to Mireille his marriage to a second wife. But as a daughter totally cut off from her family and as the mother now of a mulatto child whom she adores, Mireille feels she has no choice but to accept the situation and stay in Senegal. From then on, "la souffrance s'était incorporée au rythme de sa vie" (p. 243) [suffering had incorporated itself into the rhythm of her life]. In a state of agony one night, she decides to look again at the love letters Ousmane had sent to her in France, promising her such happiness. Suddenly, driven mad by her emotions, she begins to paste them all over the room:

Dans un coin, la lettre où Ousmane jurait:
"Je n'aimerai que toi toute ma vie."

Vite de la colle! Vite de la colle!

Au-dessous de ce tableau de maître, un autre missive où il criait:

- Toi ma blanche! Toi ma blonde, comme tu me manques!

Vite de la colle! Vite de la colle!

Elle ricanait fébrilement pour trouver l'endroit convenable où serait affiché le pli où Ousmane constatait: "Sans toi, la vie n'a pas de sel."

Vite de la colle! Vite de la colle!

Elle se hissa sur un tabouret et fixa son papier à l'abat-jour de la lampe.

Vite de la colle! Vite de la colle! (p. 244)

[In one corner, the letter in which Ousmane swore:

"All my life, I shall love only you."

Quick some glue! Quick some glue!

Below this masterpiece, another missive in which he cried:

- You, my white one. My blond one, how I miss you!

Quick some glue! Quick some glue!

She laughed derisively, feverishly, as she tried to find the appropriate place to put up a sheet on which Ousmane stated: "Without you, life has no salt."

Quick some glue! Quick some glue!

She pulled herself up on a stool and attached the letter to a lampshade.

Quick some glue! Quick some glue!]

Mireille cries out "Gnouloule Khessoule! Gnouloule Khessoule!" which in the local language means "neither black nor white." Submerged by her bitterness, she decides that "Le 'Gnouloule Khessoule!' n'a pas de place dans ce monde" [He who is neither black nor white has no place in this world], and she kills her baby. Railing against the racist world that is not ready to receive her son, she cries,

- Monde de salauds! Monde de menteurs! Toi, mon petit, tu vas le quitter!
Gnouloule Khessoule! (pp. 244-45)

[– World of bastards! World of liars! You, my little one, are going to leave this world! Gnouldule Khessoule!]

She poisons the baby; then, having taken a knife from the kitchen, she collapses on the sofa. Hours later, in the early morning, she is awakened by the arrival of her unfaithful husband. Like Ajanupu, whose burst of anger led her to attack Gilbert with the mortar and pestle, Mireille's anger is no longer repressed, and she attacks Ousmane with the kitchen knife. Striking him repeatedly, she follows him outside. The neighbours discover her standing beside the wounded Ousmane, who has collapsed at her feet. In an extraordinary line, Mariama Bâ tells us:

[D]es blessures d'Ousmane, sourdait un chant profond, écarlate d'espérances dispersées. (p. 248)

[From Ousmane's wounds, a deep song surged forth, scarlet with dispersed hopes.]

When Ousmane's parents are informed of the tragedy – that their grandson is dead, their son in the hospital, and Mireille in the hands of the French Embassy, their response indicates that their parochial view has not been altered. Again, the popular wisdom that reinforces custom to the detriment of change is expressed in a proverb:

“Quand on abandonne son tertre, tout tertre où l'on se hisse croule.” (p. 250)

[“When you abandon your own mound, every mound you pull yourself up on crumbles under you.”]

Except for minority pockets in both, neither the Senegalese nor the French world is ready for international or interracial marriage. Like the story in Nwapa's *The Bride Price*, the story in Bâ's novel suggests to Ousmane's parents and people like them that custom should never be disobeyed or tragedy will ensue; those who are not sociologically aware place the blame on the individual rather than on the prejudices of society. In the “In Memoriam,” which serves as a preface to *Un chant écarlate*, Bâ's editor clarifies Bâ's point that the culture, not the individual, should be forced to change. As her editor says, it is difficult for love to triumph over the “préjugés et incompréhensions qui font partie de l'héritage culturel” [prejudices and misunderstandings that are part of the cultural heritage]. Love can only thrive in an egalitarian relationship, and egalitarian relationships are rare in a context of patriarchal customs.

In the next three novels, *Une si longue lettre*, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and *One is Enough*, there is a little more emphasis upon models for future behaviour. Even in *Un chant écarlate*, there are two couples who oppose Ousmane's treatment of Mireille and the traditional attitude, expressed by

Ousmane's friend, that a woman is only a woman, black or white (p. 132). Lamine, married to a French woman, Pierrette, appeals to Ousmane to change his ways. He tells him: “Tu ne veux pas d'une femme. Tu as besoin d'un esclave” (p. 152) [You do not want a woman; you need a slave]. Another interracial couple, Ali and Rosalie, condemn Ousmane's total disregard for Mireille in marrying Ouleymatou. They note the influence upon him of his family and friends, who see Mireille only as an outsider, the rival, for whom they have no sympathy. Ali tries to remind Ousmane of the more global vision of his youth:

“Il y a l'Homme partout, quelles que soient sa couleur et sa langue.” (p. 204)

[“Human beings are the same everywhere, whatever their color or language.”]

With age, Ousmane's behaviour had become racist, nationalist and sexist.

Lamine and Pierrette, Ali and Rosalie suggest that all female/male relationships need not be as unequal as Ousmane's with either his French or his Senegalese wife. In Bâ's first novel, *Une si longue lettre* [*So Long a Letter*],¹⁰ two of the letter writer's daughters seem able to find men who want egalitarian relationships. For example, Daba's husband says,

“Daba est ma femme. Elle n'est pas mon esclave, ni ma servante.” (p. 107)

[“Daba is my wife. She is neither my slave, nor my servant.”]

The mother sees this couple as a model of what is possible:

Je sens mûrir la tendresse de ce jeune couple qui est l'image du couple telle que je la rêvais. Ils s'identifient l'un à l'autre, discutent de tout pour trouver un compromis. (p. 107)

[I feel the tenderness between these young people maturing, transforming them into my image of the ideal couple. They are considerate of each other and discuss everything in order to find a compromise.]

Although the mother, Ramatoulaye, knows life brings changes, Daba tells her not to worry, that a marriage is supposed to last only as long as the relationship is viable. She points out that the woman should feel as free to break it off as the man (p. 107). Ramatoulaye's other daughter marries a man who encourages her to continue her education. He and Daba's husband are new men, models for the future.

The writer's own husband, Modou, and her friend Aïssatou's husband, Mawdo, both insisted on their Moslem right to another, younger wife.¹¹ Aïssatou's response to this was not traditional. Instead of accepting it, she took her four sons and left the country. Because Ramatoulaye is older and the

mother of twelve children, she does not choose to leave her home when Modou marries her adolescent daughter's friend. Throughout a long period of suffering, she describes beautifully and accurately the feelings of a rejected wife, but by the end of the book she has risen out of her depression and expresses optimism about the future:

je ne renonce pas à refaire ma vie. Malgré tout - déceptions et humiliations - l'espérance m'habite. C'est de l'humus sale et nauséabond que jaillit la plante verte et je sens pointer en moi, des bourgeons neufs. (p. 131)

[I am not against starting my life over again. Despite everything - deceptions and humiliations - I continue to have hope. It is from offensive, nauseating humus that the green plant springs, and I feel coming up within me, new buds.]

Ramatoulaye and her friend Aïssatou are examples of educated African women. They were among the "premières pionnières de la promotion de la femme africaine" (p. 26) [pioneers who raised the status of the African woman]. Their future, like Mireille's and Ousmane's, should have reflected their emancipation from "traditions, superstitions et moeurs" (p. 27) [traditions, superstitions and customs], yet even they found themselves victimized by polygamy. Silenced for thirty years, Ramatoulaye's fury concerning polygamy bursts forth when, after her husband dies, his friend Tamsir asks her to be one more in his collection of wives. She tells him:

"Tu oublies que j'ai un coeur, une raison, que je ne suis pas un objet que l'on se passe de main en main. Tu ignores ce que se marier signifie pour moi: c'est un acte de foi et d'amour, un don total de soi à l'être que l'on a choisi et qui vous a choisi" (p. 85).

["You forget that I have a heart and a head, that I am not just an object to be passed from one hand to the next. You are unaware of what getting married means to me: it is an act of faith and love, a total gift of oneself to someone you have chosen and who has chosen you."]

Again when Daouda Dieng asks her to marry him, she rejects the easy path and says no. She likes and respects him, but she simply does not love him. Despite her age and dependent situation, she can not bring herself to accept less than the real thing. She wants to remain friends with Daouda Dieng, but he is not capable of being friends with a woman; he wants all or nothing, "tout ou rien" (p. 101).

She also refuses his offer because he already has one wife whom she does not want to hurt. This is the kind of female solidarity that can defeat polygamy. In *Un chant écarlate*, Ali and Rosalie criticize Ouleymatou for not having this attitude and therefore actively seducing Mireille's husband:

Son attitude est indigne de la femme de ce siècle. Les femmes doivent être solidaires. (p. 205)

[Her attitude is shameful for a woman of this century. Women should unite.]

Uniting would be so much better than being isolated like Mireille and her mother. Women should choose to be "solidaires" rather than "solitaires."

The need and greed for money often hinders this solidarity. For example, money has made Binetout's mother willing to "sell" her young daughter to Ramatoulaye's husband. The adolescent daughter, selfishly victimized by her own mother, becomes "morte intérieurement" (p. 103) [dead inside] after her marriage to a man in his fifties. Similarly, Ouleymatou accepts Ousmane's right to come and go as he pleases with no guarantee of "her turn," because he has set up her family in an apartment much nicer than they could have afforded themselves.

Those who wish to reject sexism in male-female relationships must consciously struggle against it. In Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*,¹² a male character, Makhaya, believes in equality in all of his relationships. After his father's death, for example, he asks his sisters to "address him by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends." To his mother's objections he replies, "Why should men be brought up with a false sense of superiority over women? People can respect me if they wish, but only if I earn it" (pp. 15-16). The women with whom he works on an agricultural project find him odd; they are "unaccustomed to a man speaking to them as an equal. They stood back awhile, with uneasy expressions, but once it struck them that he paid no attention to them as women, they also forgot he was a man and became absorbed in following his explanations" (p. 106).

The woman he chooses to marry is Paulina, another African female who defies custom. Paulina refuses to pretend "to be inferior" to men; "she was the kind of woman who could not lie to men." Some men thought her "too bossy"; the women found her "daring and different" (p. 93). She had retained since childhood a "fresh lively curiosity and ability to enter an adventure, head first" (p. 94). Until Makhaya, she is too independent and assertive to have a permanent lover. She is totally unaccustomed to a man like Makhaya, who treats her as an equal and is willing to share "woman's work" (p. 139). He forces "friendship and understanding on her because he needed this in a woman more than he needed anything else" (p. 142).

Amaka, the protagonist in Flora Nwapa's *One Is Enough*, is the most independent female character in these eight books. Angered by Amaka's barrenness, her mother-in-law unjustly attacks her performance of her wifely duties and one day announces that Obiora, her son and Amaka's husband, has two sons by another woman, and that mother and children are to live with them. A fight ensues, and Amaka leaves to go to Lagos. There she discovers that no man will help her without sexual payment (pp. 67-68). Yet she becomes wealthy. As a result of an affair with a priest she becomes pregnant, but when he wants to leave the priesthood to marry her, she refuses:

I don't want to be a wife any more, a mistress yes, with a lover, yes of course, but not a wife. There is something in that word that does not suit me. As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul. Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me. When I rid myself of Obiora, things started working for me. I don't want to go back to my "wifely" days. No, I am through with husbands. (p. 127)

One has been "enough" for her. Like Aïssatou in *Une si longue lettre*, she can get along without a husband; and like Ramatoulaye, she would certainly rather be single than marry a man she doesn't love. What is different, however, about Amaka is that she has no intention of depriving herself of sexuality simply because she will not marry.

Thus African fiction displays a wide spectrum of human behaviour. The extent to which patriarchal customs are accepted or rejected by the female characters in these eight novels determines the extent to which these women have freedom of choice. All of these works depict not only extreme suffering in the lives of these black African women, but resiliency, strength and courage. Every novel conveys the ideal of egalitarian relationships; and in several there are signs that some couples are moving closer to this goal.

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NOTES

- 1 Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1979); Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (1966; London: Heinemann Educational, 1978) and *One Is Enough* (Enugu, Nigeria: Tana, 1981); Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (1974; London: Heinemann Educational, 1979) and *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969; London: Heinemann Educational, 1979); Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre* (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979) and *Un chant écarlate* (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1981). Further references are incorporated in the text.
- 2 For other feminist discussions of Emecheta's novels, see Lloyd W. Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981) and Marie Umeh, "African Women in Transition and the Novels of Buchi Emecheta," *Présence Africaine*, 116 (1980), 190-99. Emecheta's own feminist perspective comes out in three accounts of conversations with her: "Buchi Emecheta," *African Women*, Jan. 1976, pp. 48-49, "It's Me Who's Changed," *Connexions: An International Women's Quarterly*, 4 (1982), 4-5, and Judith Wilson, "Buchi Emecheta: Africa from a Woman's View," *Essence*, Feb. 1980, pp. 12, 14.
- 3 See Prema Nandakumar, "An Image of African Womanhood (A Study of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*)," *African Quarterly*, 11, No. 2 (1971), 136-46.
- 4 For a fuller discussion of *The Joys of Motherhood* and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, see Nancy Topping Bazin, "Venturing into Feminist Consciousness: Two Protagonists from the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head," *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* (forthcoming).

- 5 Nandakumar's article rightly emphasizes Efuru's strong, generous, nurturant role in the community.
- 6 Maryse Conde in "Three Female Writers in Modern Africa: Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Grace Ogot," *Présence Africaine*, 82 (1972), 132-43, would like Efuru to behave in a manner consistently feminist; Eustace Palmer in "The Feminine Point of View: Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*," *African Literature Today*, No. 13 (1983), would prefer Emecheta to cut the ambivalence and contradictory attitudes from Nnu Ego's half-traditional, half-feminist personality. In fact, these tensions between old and new beliefs in both characters are what make them interesting and true to life. Moreover, their failure to rebel further is understandable given the strongly patriarchal environment in which they live.
- 7 Cecil A. Abrahams, "The Tyranny of Place: The Context of Bessie Head's Fiction," *World Literature Written in English*, 17 (1978), 22-29, discusses Head's novels well in terms of the evil of racialism but he misses the evil of sexism that pervades her finest novel, *A Question of Power*. Similarly, Charles R. Larson, *The Novel in the Third World* (Washington, D.C.: Inscape Press, 1976), pp. 164-73, discusses *A Question of Power* in terms of guilt and ignores the destructive sexist forces that Elizabeth struggles against.
- 8 A literal translation of the title *Un chant écarlate* would be *A Scarlet Song*. Figuratively, it refers to the cry of despair uttered from the depths of one's being at the recognition that something beautiful that might have been has been lost. The idyllic love between Ousmane and Mireille cannot survive in a patriarchal, racist context. The outburst of despair is symbolized by the deep scarlet blood gushing from Ousmane's wounds when his wife, in anger and desperation, stabs him.
- 9 All translations from the French in this article are by Nancy Topping Bazin. Thanks go to Jean-Pierre Metereau and Paulette Caram, who kindly read the translations and suggested a few changes, some of which were adopted.
- 10 This novel is available in English under the title *So Long a Letter*.
- 11 Femi Ojo-Ade's article on *Une si longue lettre*, "Still a Victim? Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*," *African Literature Today*, No. 12 (1982), claims that the issues raised by feminism are foreign to African culture; he erroneously blames the problems of African women solely on foreign influences.
- 12 Charlotte H. Bruner's article "Bessie Head: Restless in a Distant Land," in *When the Drumbeat Changes*, ed. Carolyn Parker and Stephen Arnold (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1981), pp. 261-77, and Cherry Wilhelm's article "Bessie Head: The Face of Africa," *English in Africa*, 10 (1983), 1-13, provide good discussions of *When Rain Clouds Gather*. For comments by Bessie Head on this novel, see her article "Social and Political Pressures that Shape Literature in South Africa," *World Literature Written in English*, 18 (1979), 20-26.