

Female Heroism in the Face of Tyranny: Sembène Ousmane's *The Mother*

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ABSTRACT

This This paper is devoted to the study of La Mère 'The Mother' in Sembène Ousmane's *Tribal Scars* and other stories (1974) translated by L. Ortzen from the original French version titled *Voltaïque* (1962). It highlights the brave characteristics of the mother and the effect of her it in the kingdom. Ousmane's (1974) is a story of a King, a tyrant, who exercises power arbitrarily over his subjects. He is extraordinarily powerful. However, his subjects see him as an absolute ruler, owing allegiance to no one. The subjects reverence the King but not without fear and hatred. The preposition of the paper will deal with the highlights of the brave mother and the aftermath of it in the kingdom.

INTRODUCTION

Womanist principles serving as the theoretical background in this article belong to the sociological branch of criticism. Womanism is a variant of feminism which is favoured by people of African descent. They have certain distinguish features in literary studies which include characterization, typical actions, plot structure and narrative view point. In this context, the woman is considerably enterprising, hardworking, industrious, beautiful and enjoys moral sympathies while the man in many cases is covetous, inconsiderate, irresponsible, proud, ugly and selfish. The main contention of this paper this paper is the examination of the female experience with a view to ascertain the womanist inclinations of the male – authored African text. However, feminism differs from womanism to some extent.

In brief, womanism tends to emphasize pro-African humanist values pertaining to women; while feminism has wider ideological and universal implications, which hardly takes care of African concerns. Both theories promote among other things, dignity, socio, economic and political development without discrimination and harmonious co-existence between men and women in the society.

It is learnt from the story that all cherish a desire to see the King burnt alive. He exterminates those who

dare to oppose him and he makes unjust laws. The King decrees that no man shall marry a girl unless he (the King) be the first to spend the night with her. When the King's daughter is getting married, the King repeals the "wicked law". He suspects that elders murmur against him; he summons all men above fifty years old and he kills them all.

DISCUSSION OF ISSUES

This section is concern with the crux of this study. The issues examined are discussed under two broad topics- condemnation and heroic fortitude.

CONDEMNATION

It is not unusual for the king to condemn to someone to death which he regards as "lacking" in enthusiasm for his particular task. Sembène Ousmane writes:

As soon as he had spoken, the deed was accomplished.

The earth became stained with blood. The sun dried up the blood, the wind blew over it and licked it and bare feet

obliterated the last traces, but the passage of time did not

wipe out the memory in the minds...

The Mother in *Tribal Scars*, P.35.

The quotation from the translated version by Ortzen shows abuse of power. He used his absolute power to exploit women sexually and assassinate male opponents, in a bid to show that he is awesome. The king kills and rapes at his will in the story. In this state of social insecurity, a ray of hope springs up in the person of the mother – the heroine. Her courage and daringness change the story for something better in favour of the people in the kingdom. The mother whose daughter the King has lately kidnapped because of her beauty revolts single-handedly. She carries her cross and ‘makes a one woman demonstration to the King’s palace’ to rescue her daughter and by extension rescue others and effect a permanent change. Her actions make a remarkable impact in the kingdom. This resulted in the dethronement of the King, which had a concomitant effect of restoring sanity.

HEROIC FORTITUDE

The novelist Sembène Ousmane, endows the mother with great heroic fortitude. She is the central character in the story. The names of the characters are not indicated. The King dominates the story but the mother’s actions lead to a great change in socio-economic and political issues in the kingdom. She does not see the King as a person destined to brutalize but to lead peacefully. Her role brings peace for all. She is a fairly old black African woman but she disregards the notion of destiny which makes people agree to suffer unjustly. She sees the King as a man who needs to be corrected and called to order. She decides to correct him. The men are afraid. The King thinks he is destined to live the way he lives and acts. He is brutal to his subjects and he sees nothing wrong in it. The heroine disregards the notion of destiny, bends it to her will and restores freedom for everybody. She is a messiah for the whole lot of them, fearing no death or threat during the process of correcting the King.

The role of the women in this story is central and significant though the male characters are much more numerous. This presentation of Sembène Ousmane is similar to that of several English novelists like Samuel Richardson, Daniel Defoe, George Meredith who present women as central characters in their works particularly in 18th and 19th century. The women in Ousmane’s story are seen primarily in relation to the King. The daughter’s contribution in

the story is of interest largely in terms of the sexual relationship to the King. The King orders that she be taken by his servants to his palace for his sexual pleasures, which she is resisting. The idea of kidnapping young marriageable women was common in Africa up to the early years of independence. A type of forced marriage was then in vogue. The young women saw the force in action. Some of them were carried by huge men to the man’s house in the night. Such a practice was usually carried out without the prior knowledge of the young woman concerned. Sembène Ousmane, a writer born in 1923 in Senegal, must have seen or heard of the kidnapping of young women. As a social critic with a soft spot for women, he exposes this sexual abuse in a way to encourage mothers to come out bravely to rescue their daughters from the brutality and oppression of men, not minding whether the oppressor is a king or not. This goes a long way to demonstrate the fact that it is largely the duty of the mother to ensure that the children are properly settled in life. This is a womanist vision, a type cherished by Mariama Bâ in so long a Letter (1980). The children enjoy motherly love and the mother ensures that the children are happily settled in life.

This is to say that the duty of the mother towards her children does not end at childbirth, it goes beyond that. There is no age limit to it. It may not cease but may become reciprocal with time and change in status. The mother should see her children through a good education. In ‘Domestic Labour and Child Care’ by E. Croll, women are encouraged to invest more time in family relations. They are encouraged to be guardians of social morality within and outside the family. To ensure a healthy and progressive community/society, men and women are urged to be considerate to each other in their daily lives. In our story, the king is not considerate. The King, by kidnapping that girl, is imposing his own will and desire on the girl. In essence, he is trying to hinder that girl’s plan and will.

By extension, the King is equally hindering the will and plan of the girl’s parents for her. The act of hindering women/girls’ will and plan is one of the social ills which is seriously attacked in feminist and womanist trends. Today, feminist and womanist writers and critics detest the idea of blocking or stopping the stage of evolution of women and girls by

the opposite sex. Such hindrance is dangerous because in many cases, it restricts them to unjust monopolies. The women are, in such a case, restricted to one virtue. The King's desire towards the girl he is trying to kidnap is nothing other than to compel her to consume her energies in the functions of housekeeper or wife. As far back as 1953, the Reverend Theodore Parker preached in Boston against such existence. Robert Dale Owen has a similar view, so also has Sembène Ousmane who tries to promote the necessity of equality of the two sexes for true sexual fulfillment. These men try to show that after the sexual revolution, 'then will the monopoly of sex perish with other unjust monopolies'.

Sembène Ousmane is against the idea of 'suffering humanity' in the story. He tries to educate the readers with a view to eradicating the agony of women as caused by some men. He does not like the way the King exploits women. The novelist endows the mother with great courage much more than the elders (men), the chiefs, the King-makers and the other men in the story. Her action leads to a stop in bloodshed. It leads to freedom and preservation of life. The mother's heroic action is for the benefit of all the subjects in the Kingdom. When the King kidnaps the young beautiful daughter of the Mother, little does he know that he is digging his own grave. He does not know that it would lead to his dethronement. He does not know that the Mother would be extraordinarily bold enough to come to his palace and query him face to face, in such a way that his crown would be removed from his head for life. For the first time he is automatically rendered impotent to kill. In the presence of the mother, his absolute power collapses before him. His orders become void of power and value. He sees for the first time too that his absolute power, honour and glory are in danger.

The status of Ousmane's heroine here is not limited to the marriage level. This heroine sees beyond that point. She is a social, economic and political reformist in the Kingdom. She reforms the King, the Kingmakers and the subjects. She does not tolerate nonsense. Her anger shakes the social order and reforms it considerably. Her interest is to restore peace and freedom and she does it. The tyrant sees her as a devil but the other subjects see her as a messiah. Thus, when the King orders that she should be killed, nobody obeys him. The heroine's honesty, sincerity and seriousness command widespread respect and dignity. Instead of killing her, the

subjects' comportment towards her reveals nothing short of, 'may she live long'. The King's act of aggression and hostility fails him. The subjects prefer a state of non-aggression. Ousmane's heroine is different from the house-wife heroine of Betty Friedan in *Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan's heroines try to distinguish themselves but amazingly, they rise and fall owing to the storms of life, particularly as a result of indifference from their husband/man. They fall from the grace of their men. They risk to be abandoned if they refuse to be quiet. It is optional. Ousmane's typical heroine has her freedom to execute her plan. She has freedom at home and in the community at large to execute her potential creativity. She makes decisions not only for herself but also for others in the Kingdom. She starts by working on the highest power, she shakes the throne, removes the King and eventually gets him replaced. She provokes the subjects to a state of awareness through the power of speech.

Unlike Friedan's heroines, Ousmane's heroine executes her plan and decision without any disturbance from her family members. Some of the husbands of Friedan's heroines pose problems for them. The women are sad over it and they condemn male chauvinism. Significantly, heroines are special, they are capable, they identify their problems. They see their status degrading and they desire a change because they detest child-like existence. The sandwich maker of Betty Friedan, for instance, wants to solve her problem of money. She wants to earn money because she hates to ask her husband for money every time she needs a pair of shoes. She takes orders for sandwich and she makes them to the best of her knowledge. Her husband says: 'You're a mother. That is your job. You don't have to earn money, too'. The heroine replies: 'Yes, boss' She murmurs like a child and she keeps quiet.

Ousmane's heroine sees the King as an instrument of destruction in the life of her daughter, if not corrected at once. This heroine is a guardian of morality for both men and women. She does not want her daughter's life to be ruined or wasted away in the King's palace. The way the King kidnaps the girl could not be seen as a form of marriage. It is a sexual abuse – a violent sexual crime. He is a kidnapper. The King is supposed to eradicate such immoral behaviour but surprisingly, he is fond of committing such a crime. The brutal action of the king suggests

malevolent absolutism and commitment to the principle that ‘might is right’.

In the text, the heroine sees that the King has erred, Armed with a metaphorical mirror and a real power of speech, she brings herself before the King where he is resting in his palace, surrounded by his servants. On seeing her, the King jokingly exposes his sexual exploitative desire verbally: “old one if you have a daughter, take note that I don’t receive during the day”. (Tribal Scars P.36) “Vieille,... je ne reçois pas dans la journée (Voltaïque P.40.) The heroine ignores his statement and like a typical African woman, she lashes him with her eyes. She goes straight to the point. She presents the King with a critical mirror of his existence.

Sire, by the look of you, anyone would think that you have

No mother. From when you were born until now, you have

Contended only with women, because they are weak...

“The Mother” in Tribal Scars, p.36.

She means that he has no manners. He is wicked to women and girls. In essence, she is telling him to look at himself in the mirror of her mind and to see how he really is. In a typical African posture, her limbs dramatize and she slightly bends to the left, half akimbo, and she waves the right hand slightly to and fro, in front of him. Calmly, she stresses her point and as if saying, look at your life, see what you do and see what you are. Her gestures and words amount to a metaphorical and critical mirror which she places in front of him. Before he knows what is happening, he has already taken a good look at himself. His actions provoke the mother to call his historical and political records for re-examination. His record is nothing to write home about. It reveals no justification and no praise. He sees himself in a mess. Despite that, the mother says she is not angry with him, for he has a mother, and through mothers she respects every human beings. She underlines the fact that the world does not rejoice in seeing women destroyed and that the motherhood instinct detests wickedness and brutality, the two evils which he practices. She forgives him because of her love for his mother, thereby categorizing the mothers on the same human level bound together by love. She then

brings the King to the level of a son, to be taught to respect and honour women/girls but not to bring agony to them.

Hold women in respect, not for their white hair but

for the sake of your own mother in the first place and then

for womanhood itself.

“The Mother” in Tribal Scars, p36.

She goes further to teach him women’s values; she stresses the importance of women in the society in a simple educative form. She says: “C’est d’elle, la femme, que découle toute grandeur, celle du maitre, du brave, du lache, du griot, du musicien...”La mere in Voltaïque p.41 [It is from women that all greatness flows, whether of the ruler, of the warrior, the coward, the griot or musician...”

The heroine’s method of approach shows that nobody is above education. The King’s comportment from the metaphorical mirror with her shows that the King needs such education, which is informal but essential for good living and solidarity in the Kingdom. She mirrors the King’s life calling on everybody around him as witnesses to his bad conduct. She says:

You were all witnesses when he used your sister, on his orders, your fathers were put to death. And now he’s

putting his hand on your mothers and sisters.

“The Mother” in Tribal Scars, p.36.

This is the summary of his reign. It has no record of peace and happiness. It is all death, mourning, weeping, sadness and sorrow. The King is violent. His language is violent. It is shown in his use of words. Desiring to kill the heroine, he yells: ‘Kill her’ (“Tuez-la) Voltaïque, P. 41. He kidnaps the daughter. He wants to kill the mother. He has already killed all men above fifty years old. He is fond of killing without trial. He has over used the act of aggression to the extent that the terminology is now posing a special problem for him. The King senses that of a truth, this woman, standing before him, lashing him with her tongue, is not like the rest. After mirroring his life and reign for him, she fearlessly turns her attention to the people around him, the servants and provoke them to awareness like the way Aimé

Césaire provokes the black race during the colonial era in his work: *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939).

She urges them to stand up and claim their rights for freedom and dignity. She does it effectively with the power of speech. All along, the men have been looking like robots, seeing that they lack a sense of reasoning and direction, she challenges them by saying: 'To look at you all, anyone would think you'd lost all senses of dignity'. (*Tribal Scars*, p. 36) 'A vous voir, on dirait que vous ne possédez plus de dignité. Voltaïque, p. 41). For the first time, the King feels insecure on his throne. His order that she should be killed is not obeyed by anybody. Revolt follows and he is dethroned that same moment. The heroine brings victory to the Kingdom. She carries her cross to the end. She is not renunciatory. She is calm. Her weapon is truth and love. We see here that she uniquely raises the image of women to honour, dignity and freedom in the Kingdom.

The Mother is a remarkable heroine. She is a big asset to the members of the society and she systematically encourages the subjects and wakes them up to a state of awareness. She is surrounded with marks of respect and honour because of her love and truthfulness while the King is surrounded by the marks of hatred. At the end of the story, he is not burnt alive, he is dethroned. The mother's actions show elements of womanist ideological standard in the story.

CONCLUSION

The mother is a guardian of morals, guiding others in the Kingdom along the right paths. This is Ousmane's desire. The aura that surrounds the mother suppresses the hostility of the absolute King. This symbolizes the fact that a good mother is a refuge.. The daughter recognizes: she calls on her mother for protection. Her mother protects her and by extension protects others in the kingdom. She is in fact a messiah. Through her initiative, people could now move freely. For this purpose, her bravely is compared to that of a lion, and both men and women sing her praises in the Kingdom.

In "La Mère translated "The Mother" in Sembène Ousmane's *Tribal Scars* and other stories, the concept, the idea or the principle of female heroism connected with the fiction is straight forward according to the

manner of presentation by the author. The Mother, the chief female character is a woman of great courage. She has undergone a great danger and difficulty, specifically the danger and threat of death. The king declared that she should be killed. However, through her power of speech, style and honesty, she prevailed over the oppressive network of the king on socio-cultural issues in the entire kingdom. Rather than being killed, the mother is highly regarded and worthy of admiration by the subjects for her courage, truthfulness and open mindedness concerning willful killing, aggression, absolutism and the philosophy of might of the king. Her daring is equated to the classical mythology and such characteristic is a unique divine parentage noted for outstanding courage and heroic fortitude. As a unique heroine not collective and not limited to conjugal issues within a social unit, the mother in this fiction has a large heart. From the beginning to the end of the text, her style and comportment are befitting the deeds of heroes.

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