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Item Type	article;article
Authors	Gadjigo, Samba
Download date	2025-04-30 23:42:38
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7516">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7516</a>

# THE NOVELS OF AMINATA SOW FALL: CRITICAL APPRAISALS

(This section of *Contributions* 9/10 is guest-  
edited by Samba Gadjigo and Heather Henderson)

*Samba Gadjigo*

## CRITICAL APPROACHES TO AMINATA SOW FALL'S NOVELS

**H**OWEVER LIMITED in scope it may be, this brief, collective work on Aminata Sow Fall's literary creation represents for us a milestone in African Studies here in the Pioneer Valley. In a broader sense, it affords a modest contribution to the criticism and canonization of francophone African literature in general and of that produced by women in particular.

But first of all, why focus on Aminata Sow Fall? This seems a legitimate question considering the fact that she is far from being the most widely read and studied francophone African woman worldwide. But it was with her novel *Le Revenant* (1976) that feminine writing in francophone Africa came into being. Previous texts in French by women did exist prior to 1976,<sup>1</sup> but this novel by Fall was the first to be recognized by the intellectual establishment. Second, Aminata Sow Fall was the first Senegalese woman writer to pay a visit to the Five College Consortium. During her stay at Mount Holyoke College in 1988, she co-taught a fifteen-day January session devoted to African women writers. To follow up on the controversial issues discussed during that brief seminar, I had the privilege of organizing a panel on her work during the 1989 African Literature Association annual meeting held in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal. Most of the contributions in this special issue were presented at that meeting, at which Aminata Sow Fall was present.

In order to contribute to a better understanding of the critical questions raised in the following articles, we wish briefly to relate the circumstances that led Aminata Sow Fall to a writing career. Before coming to writing Aminata Sow Fall had followed a path rather unusual for a Senegalese woman of her generation. In her many interviews granted critics, Aminata Sow Fall has never tried to hide her privileged social background.<sup>2</sup> It is rather with a certain pride that she recalls her birth in Saint-Louis, her identity as a Muslim and Wolof woman. Her love for books and reading goes back to her "enfance saint-louisienne": "I have always loved reading and writing. When I was young, all I did during summer vacations was reading."<sup>3</sup> Her secondary education was to take her to Dakar, where her married, older sister was already attending university.<sup>4</sup> After high school in Dakar, Aminata Sow Fall went to Paris—initially to become an interpreter but in the end pursuing a Licence in Lettres Modernes. It was during this period, as she likes to recall, that "After long hours of studying at the Sorbonne, I started drafting poems and plays. It was truly there that was born in me a need and a thirst for writing."<sup>5</sup>

However, upon her return to Senegal, after a successful completion of her Licence

de Lettres Modernes, she began her career first as a high school teacher. Very soon her teaching career led to a position as an expert in education and culture in the Senegalese Ministry of National Education. Her first assignment (1967) was at the Commission Nationale de la Réforme de l'Enseignement du Français (National Committee for the Reform of the Teaching of French). The goal of that committee was to "adapter le contenu de l'enseignement du français a nos réalités africaines" ["to adapt the content of the French curriculum to our African realities"]<sup>6</sup> For four years she took part in designing many grammar and literature textbooks before becoming the Director of the Centre d'Études des Civilisations created in 1971, vested with the mission to revalorize the Senegalese traditional heritage. That center was later to be incorporated in the Ministry of Culture in 1976. To reach the goal of safeguarding the national past, the center launched two publications: *Demb Ak Tey, les cahiers du mythe*, devoted to analyzing the content of such cultural expressions as tales and legends; and *Leeb*, a publication mainly intended for the education and entertainment of youngsters through the medium of tales.

It was in 1976, at the height of her professional career devoted to "the preservation of past traditional values" through diverse cultural institutions,<sup>7</sup> that the publication of *Le revenant* introduced Aminata Sow Fall to the literary world. The novel heralded a new birth in contemporary world literature: that of the first generation of francophone African women wordsmiths. As noted by many critics, the arrival of African women in creative writing was one of the most significant recent developments in the literature of francophone Africa. Her next novel, *La grève des bâttu* (1979) was translated into English by Dorothy S. Blaire as *The Beggars' Strike* (1981). Translations have also appeared in both Russian and Chinese. By far the most widely read of all her novels, *La grève* was awarded the Grand Prix de l'Afrique Noire and nominated for the Prix Goncourt. An adaptation to theater by the Daniel Sorano Senegalese National Theater (1985) was also presented in Carthage, Tunisia. *L'Appel des arènes* (1982), her third novel, was also nominated for the Goncourt and was awarded the Grand Prix International Alioune Diop, named after the founder of the prestigious review, *Présence Africaine*. Her most recent published novel is *L'Ex-père de la nation* (1987).

Since creative writing in French-speaking Africa goes back to 1920 with Ahmadou Mapathe Diagne's *Les trois volontés de Malic*, how does one account for this belatedness of the first generation of francophone African women writers? This long "absence" of women from the literary scene in the former French colonies of Africa has been identified by analysts as a direct result of two combined factors: the deliberately exclusive and male-oriented French educational policies in Africa, and the traditional status of women in those societies.<sup>8</sup>

The validity of such interpretation notwithstanding, the recourse to social anthropology and educational history alone does not elucidate the many and complex issues involved in the understanding of the present state of francophone women's writings in and outside of Africa. We need a more comprehensive theoretical and methodological approach, one that combines both the substance and expressive modalities of those works in their dynamic interplay with the underlying local and international conditions

that generated them, and which they also reflect. Though not comprehensive, the five essays in this collection apply to Aminata Sow Fall's four novels just such an interdisciplinary reading through the diversity of their topical focus.

The initial essay, by Sada Niang, can be seen as an introductory meditation on the different issues raised in the subsequent essays. Concentrating on *La grève* and *L'Appel*, the author defines the ways in which the narrators of these two works mediate semantically between the French language, its embedded values, and the Wolof sociocultural situation these novels depict. Niang challenges numerous assumptions that prevail in the study of francophone African literature. The underlying lesson, as Niang and other contributors suggest, is that neither "African" nor "francophone" has a monolithic, hegemonic meaning. Rather they both imply difference and the possibility of bending the semantic structures of the French language to give voice to difference.

The work by Athleen Ellington, "Aminata Sow Fall's 'Demon Women': An Anti-Feminist Social Vision," looks at Fall's novels from a feminist standpoint. Based on a gendered reading of the portrayal of women in her four novels, this essay concludes that Aminata Sow Fall projects a male voice and male social and literary values. Ellington describes Fall's conservative stance on women's issues as a response to a deep patriarchal force rooted in Senegalese society. As she puts it, "Fall appears to force the 'metamorphosing woman' back into the mold of the past."

Like Ellington's work, the tension created by the transition from African traditional past to modernity is the focus of Heather Henderson's "Hard Times in an African Eden: Aminata Sow Fall's *L'appel des Arènes*." Comparing this work to Dickens' *Hard Times*, she argues that Fall's representation of the wrestling arena is symbolic of a rejection of progress for the redeeming values of tradition. To these three studies focused mainly on content, the last two add issues of expressive modalities.

Examining the discursive acts in the memoirs of the narrator and once-supreme political authority in Fall's *L'Ex-père de la nation*, Gloria Nne Onyeoriri traces how certain formulae of modal logic (epistemic and deontic) served to dramatize and interpret the painful situation that prevails in African political life.

Finally, the issue of social vision is also at the heart of Mark Beeman's "A Sociological Interpretation of Aminata Sow Fall's *Beggars' Strike*," who examines Fall's novel in the light of the two prevalent macrosociological views of society: conflict theory and structural functionalism, and argues that Fall represents the institution of begging from a point of view consistent with the latter. As a result, Fall's social vision overlooks the dialectical nature of historical change in favor of a synchronic view that advocates a stability and status quo based on value consensus.

It is our hope that this short collection will contribute to a better understanding of Aminata Sow Fall's work and generate more critical attention for "francophone" and "African" women's writing in general.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Aoua Kéïta, *Femme d'Afrique: La vie d'Aoua Kéïta par elle-même* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1975) and Nafissatou Diallo, *De Tilène au plateau: Une enfance dakaroise* (Dakar: NEA, 1975).
- <sup>2</sup> For further details on these interviews, see Thomas N. Hammond, "Entretien avec Aminata Sow Fall," *Présence francophone*, 22 (1981): 191-95; Françoise Pfaff "Aminata Sow Fall: l'écriture au féminin," *Notre Librairie*, 81 (Octobre-Décembre 1985): 135-38; and Samba Gadjigo, "La comédie humaine sénégalaise: Interview avec Aminata Sow Fall," *Komparatistische Hefte*, 15-16 (1987): 219-24.
- <sup>3</sup> Pfaff, "Aminata Sow Fall: l'écriture au féminin," 136.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.
- <sup>5</sup> Gadjigo, "La comédie humaine sénégalaise," 219.
- <sup>6</sup> Pfaff, "Aminata Sow Fall: l'écriture au féminin," 135.
- <sup>7</sup> Gadjigo, "La comédie humaine sénégalaise," 220.
- <sup>8</sup> For more information on this issue see Carole Boyce Davis and Anne Adams Graves, eds., *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1986), and Christine Makward and Odile Cazenave, "The Others' Other: Francophone Women and Writing," *Yale French Studies*, 75 (1988): 190-207.