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Hard Times in an African Eden: Aminata Sow Fall's L'Appel des Arenes

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AFRICAN EDEN: AMINATA SOW
FALL'S *L'APPEL DES ARÈNES*

Le professeur de Nalla est très heureux cet après-midi car la leçon sur le complément d'objet direct semble être parfaitement sue.

—Nalla, donne-moi un exemple de complément d'objet direct.

—Le chasseur a abattu un lion.

—Et quel est le complément d'objet dans cette phrase?

—“Lion” est le complément d'objet direct du verbe “a abattu.”

—Très bien, très bien.¹

[Nalla's professor is very happy this afternoon because the lesson on the direct object seems to be perfectly understood. “Nalla, give me an example of the direct object.” “The hunter killed a lion.” “And what is the direct object in this sentence?” “Lion’ is the direct object of the verb ‘to kill’.” “Very good, very good.”]

AMINATA SOW FALL's third novel, *L'appel des arènes*, opens with this scene between a schoolmaster and his pupil. But despite the example chosen by Nalla, there is no discussion of hunters and lions: the lesson's abstract focus on grammar excludes any consideration of the meaning of the words themselves. His imagination starved, Nalla soon drifts off into a daydream where the tutor is powerless to reach him.

The scene may remind us of the opening of another novel concerned with the stultifying effects of the wrong kind of education, Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854). Here Thomas Gradgrind, a proponent of Utilitarian theories of education and a man concerned only with Facts, cross-examines a young girl named Sissy Jupe—but referred to as “girl number twenty”—on the definition of a horse. Although the child belongs to the circus and is thoroughly familiar with horses, she is unable to produce a satisfactory definition. Another pupil, better indoctrinated, complies:

Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.²

“Now girl number twenty,” said Mr Gradgrind, “You know what a horse is.”

Monsieur Niang, Nalla's tutor, is certainly no Gradgrind, determined to crush the

imagination out of his pupil. But the boy's entire milieu, particularly his Westernized and deracinated parents, conspires to cut him off from his past, from stories of lions and hunters, from the communal life of the village. Nalla's father, Ndiogou, is an unimaginative veterinarian, blind to the traditions of the farmers whose cattle he cares for; Diattou, Nalla's mother, is a midwife whose brusque manner at the maternity clinic discourages personal contact with the mothers and children she assists. Eager to give Nalla a modern education, Ndiogou and Diattou send their son to the "best" schools, pay for a private tutor, and buy him European storybooks. But they separate him from his grandmother, who fills his head with folklore, and chase away the griot, who tries to pass on to Nalla the traditions of his family and his culture.

Like *Hard Times*, *L'appel des arènes* depicts a modern wasteland: just as factories and industrial cities blight the landscape of the English midlands in Dickens' novel, so Aminata Sow Fall depicts a land laid waste by "the winds of the West" (88). The harmattan blows throughout the book: the countryside is ravaged by drought and villages are emptied by the exodus of young people to the cities. In both novels, traditional agrarian ways of life are devastated by the arrival of technology and foreign values. Personal relationships, particularly the close kinship network of family and community, are shattered by the alienating, isolating tendencies of the modern world.

For both Charles Dickens and Aminata Sow Fall, utilitarian education expresses the failure of society to maintain vital links with its own past. They celebrate instead the redemptive function of spectacle—the travelling circus, the wrestling arena—in nourishing the human imagination. Yet the impulse to hold on to traditional cultural forms carries with it the danger of sentimentalizing them. Distrusting those who embrace change blindly, both writers take refuge in a nostalgia that is equally uncritical. Aminata Sow Fall, however, goes a step further: seeking to assign blame for the disruptions of a society in transition, she indulges in a bitter and unproductive scapegoating of her female protagonist. The fact that the arena calls only to men limits the power of this symbol to evoke a convincing vision of reconciliation.

L'appel des arènes contrasts the sterile wasteland of the present with images of an idealized past. André, the "conkom" seller, tells Nalla that where he comes from, the trees are always green, the river teems with fish, and farmers gather abundant harvests (29-30). His vivid descriptions transport Nalla in imagination to this marvellous world "où la sérénité procure une vie toute heureuse" [where serenity creates an entirely happy existence] (32). But this harmony is shattered by violence: when he goes home to help with the harvest, André is murdered by bandits. The fight between the villagers in their canoe, armed with daggers, and the thieves in a motor boat, armed with guns and corrupted by drugs and alcohol (52-54), symbolizes the assault of the new world upon the old.

André's stories frequently remind Nalla of the contented years he spent living with his grandmother, Mame Fari. Her stories provided Nalla with a vital link to his own past. But this "univers paradisiaque" too was disrupted: Nalla's Edenic childhood ended abruptly when his parents returned from studying in Europe. Nalla's mother, Diattou, who had tried hard to assimilate Western ways, accused the grandmother of spoiling her child, and of being ignorant of how "le monde a évolué" [the world has evolved] (58).

Torn away from Mame Fari, he never forgets the warmth and wisdom of her teaching.

Mourning his lost childhood, Nalla undertakes “une émouvante quête pour réintgrer le paradis perdu” [a touching quest to recapture the lost paradise] (59). This quest eventually leads him to the arena, the world of the wrestlers. Here he meets Malaw Lô, the greatest champion of his day. Malaw teaches Nalla how to be courageous and initiates him into the mysterious world of the marabouts (54, 113). His stories about his ancestors make the past come alive. They focus on his great-grandfather, an heroic figure who, rather than accept the shame of foreign domination, led his people to freedom in a new land where they founded a village called Diaminar.

Diaminar becomes for Nalla a kind of Promised Land, a place of magical and mythic dimensions. He imagines it as a place where the birds sing eternally and the sun never sets (72). Because of its seven encircling palisades, the village is known as “la jeune fille inviolable aux sept ceintures” [the inviolable girl of the seven girdles] (73). But Diaminar has been violated: its young people are leaving for the city, where they become paper-pushing bureaucrats, or factory workers, slaves to the machine.

Malaw’s own sister, Anta Lô, is seduced in the city. When she returns to Diaminar for sanctuary, she is pursued by the police, who reveal to the villagers that Anta killed her illegitimate baby and buried it secretly. She is sent to prison, where she dies at the age of eighteen (126-29). Despite the protection of its seven palisades, the inviolable virgin village has been raped, and once again, the false values of the modern world are to blame.

André, Mame Fari, and Malaw—their stories provide Nalla access to the past, but the lesson of each is the same: the golden age of heroic deeds and pastoral innocence is threatened, if not over. Nalla’s own parents embody that threat. Devoted to technology, they drive about in a Landrover, are irritated by power failures, and are dependent on their radio and refrigerator. When Nalla confesses his desire to become a wrestler, his father tries to distract him with the bribe of a motorbike (105). When Nalla asks why he has no baby brother, his mother’s excuse is that she needs to save money to purchase one (16). Their responses indicate how their attitudes are based on ideas of commodity and materialism. The mother does not give a natural explanation of birth; the father tries to buy his son’s dreams with a mechanized toy.

Nalla’s parents inhabit a world sharply divided between past and future, African and European, traditional and modern, rural and urban. Ultimately, of course, they cannot sustain such divisions without becoming self-divided as well. Disdaining everything African as primitive, they stubbornly turn their backs on their heritage. Diattou, for example, rejects both her mother and her village; she may remind us of Bounderby, the industrialist in *Hard Times* who denies his own mother in an attempt to conceal his working-class origins. Diattou behaves with ingratitude to her family, and shows her lack of respect by smoking, drinking, and parading around in a miniskirt (121-22). Her monomania for modernism makes her the laughing-stock of the village.

Diattou, whose pathetic attempts to make herself over in the image of the West are chronicled unsparingly, is neurotically anxious to shield her son from any African influence. She prohibits further contact between Nalla and his grandmother or the griot. She doesn’t allow him to associate with the neighbors, whom she scorns as backward and

uncultured. She drills him on European table manners, telling him it is dirty to touch the food with his fingers (61). The episode of Nalla's circumcision is perhaps the most compelling demonstration of how far his parents have distanced themselves from traditional customs: Nalla had looked forward to the ceremonies that would celebrate his becoming a man, but to his lasting grief, these were denied him. They were replaced instead by a meaningless operation in the hospital, stripped of all ritual and symbolic significance (76ff).

Nalla attempts, half-unconsciously, to fight against his parents' rejection of the past. The wrestling arena offers a way to integrate himself with a vanishing world (116). Malaw's epic stories of fierce lions and courageous warriors, Edenic villages and river maidens, supply the myth and poetry Nalla has been deprived of. Malaw explains that he learned these magical tales from his father: "mon père était mon école . . . Mon grand-père aussi, et mon oncle" [my father was my school . . . My grandfather too, and my uncle] (75). In contrast, Nalla's own father, preoccupied with his important job, bought his son books about Snow White, Merlin, and Tom Thumb. The great wrestler invites Nalla to become his "garçon-fétiche," the witness of his contact with invisible forces of air and water. Together, Malaw says, "nous communierons avec la terre" [we will commune with the earth] (112). Malaw's power derives from his bond with the land, the community, and the ancient traditions. Nalla's father, however, has no deeper feeling for the landscape: "Louga, immense ville de sable, d'arbres et de soleil, n'inspira aucune poésie à Ndiogou" [Louga, immense city of sand, trees and sun, did not inspire the least poetry in Ndiogou] (102).

Nalla's parents are horrified at his passion for the arena, which they consider vulgar and barbaric. Diattou exclaims that such things are not for her son, but for "gens grossiers qui n'ont aucune civilisation" [common people who haven't any culture] (65). Nalla realizes that it is hopeless to try to make his parents understand:

Ils ne pourront jamais savoir ce qui se passe en lui lorsque résonne le tam-tam et que la voix limpide des griotes célèbre la force, le courage, et l'honneur des dieux des arènes. L'extase des sons, des couleurs et du mouvement, ils ne la sentiront jamais. (101)

[They will never know what it is that takes place in him when the drum reverberates and the clear voice of the griots celebrates the power, the courage, and the honor of the gods of the arenas. The ecstasy of the sounds, of the colors and the movement, they will never feel it.]

The tutor, Monsieur Niang, defends Nalla: "je crois que votre fils a un certain penchant pour l'esthétique de la forme, de la couleur et des sons" [I think your son has a certain bent for the aesthetics of form, color, and sound] (66). Like Dickens' circus, the arena represents living art, the expression of the vitality of the people (67). But the life of the imagination is unappreciated, indeed despised, by the bourgeoisie, the rational Gradgrinds of the world. Ndiogou angrily refuses to allow his son to become either an artist or a wrestler (66, 105).

But if Nalla's ultra-modern parents don't realize the value of the past, neither does the past provide answers about how to come to terms with a changing society. In this divided world, past and present are locked in an unproductive standoff. Monsieur Niang, alone of all the characters in the novel, promises a bridge: he is a modern educator, yet does not despise tradition. We can see this in his reflections about electricity: he wonders if perhaps those without it may really be happier (104). But rather than reject Western technology altogether, he uses it creatively: the symbol of his ability to connect the two worlds is the tape recording of the sounds of the arena that he brings to the lesson with Nalla. Monsieur Niang thus suggests a way to integrate the lessons in French grammar with the arena that sparks the boy's imagination (81-84).

But, while Monsieur Niang's solution to the divisions of modern life seems a good one, it is an isolated example which the rest of the novel does not endorse. Despite Niang's ingenuity, he is a rather weak character who cannot stand up to Nalla's parents. Diattou's contempt for wrestling is so great that she bursts into the room shouting hysterical insults at the teacher for his shabby, unfashionable clothes and smashes the tape recorder. But although even Nalla is driven to revolt by her behavior, Monsieur Niang leaves without a word, confining his protests to some distanced and academic observations in his private journal (86). He does not emerge as a leader or a visionary. Finally, it seems, he has little to offer Nalla except sympathy and impotent nostalgia.

Just as we may question whether Dickens' circus and the circus master's simplistic formulation, "people must be amuthed,"³ really provide an ample bulwark against the tide of dehumanizing industrialism, so we may question whether *L' appel des arènes* ever transcends its lament for lost innocence, for a vanished golden age. The novel's idealization of an agrarian past seems untempered by any larger vision of how to reconcile tradition and folklore with twentieth-century technologies and economies. What can the arena offer, except spectacle and ritual? Despite the extravagant claims of Malaw's dying father that the arena can actually save the lost souls of the people (128), one cannot help but ask: is it really a solution, or merely a symbol?

The problem with the novel's approach may be that it allows all of modern life to be represented by the strivings and aspirations of one misguided couple. They alone—and particularly Diattou—must bear the weight of all the evils of assimilation, deracination, and unthinking progressivism. It is too great a burden. As a result, Diattou is less a fully realized character than a scapegoat upon whom the novelist vents her bitterness and frustration at what is happening to her country.

The author's hostility towards Diattou appears unmotivated and excessive; she continually emphasizes her short flabby figure, her miniskirts and cigarettes. At times, the text seems almost out of control:

elle avait ôt  sa blouse et . . . se ballottaient ses grosses fesses rebelles   toutes les cr mes amincissantes, sous une jupe tr s courte qui mettait   nu ses mollets bourr s de cellulite. (88)

[she had taken off her smock and . . . her stout buttocks, impervious to every slimming cream, shook beneath a very short skirt that revealed her naked calves, bulging with cellulite.]

It would certainly be possible to see Diattou as a victim of the cultural schizophrenia inflicted by colonialist education. But Aminata Sow Fall does not portray her as such; Diattou is consistently denigrated throughout the novel. Her ridiculous affectations merit only contempt, never pity.

In her eagerness to demonstrate the sterility of the modern world, the author insists that women who try to be independent, like Diattou or Malaw's sister Anta Lô, are child-killers. For Diattou, a midwife who cannot have any more children herself, is accused by the neighbors of being an eater-of-souls ("mangeur d'âmes"). When she delivers a still-born infant, its mother blames her for having devoured the baby (89). Soon no one will come to her maternity clinic (99), and she is ostracized by the community.

Diattou is caught between two worlds, unable, because of her infertility, to satisfy the expectations of traditional culture, yet equally unable to belong fully to contemporary Western society, whose values and manners she imitates but has imperfectly assimilated. But the novelist's lack of sympathy with women prevents her from analyzing the complexities of Diattou's situation. She condemns Diattou's disregard of the past, yet never shows what that past had to offer her. The novel's relentless censure suggests an inability or reluctance to imagine any accommodation between past and present, Africa and the West, patriarchy and feminism.

This scapegoating of the woman is all the more striking in that Ndiogou, the father, is continually let off the hook. Where the mother's role as a midwife is sterile, even fatal, the father's technology is life-giving: he battles to save the farmers' dying animals. And although Ndiogou absents himself from every family crisis with an uninvolved shrug and a smile, the author's disapproval is mild. If Ndiogou has been a distant father, forgetting to play with his son, the fault is shown to be primarily the mother's, for her uptight prohibition of horseplay in the house (110).

And in the end Ndiogou is allowed insight into his situation, insight entirely denied his wife. Like Gradgrind, Ndiogou sees the suffering of his child and begins to understand that his rational system of upbringing is flawed. He too has tried to stuff his son's head full of facts, oblivious to the needs of the heart. Remembering his own father (115), he sees how he has given Nalla only an abstraction in place of family and community (132). He realizes how Malaw has filled the void, and he determines to play a larger role in his son's life. It is a kind of awakening, and in this moment, he goes to the window and notices signs of coming rain, symbol that the protracted drought may be coming to an end (135). With a sudden change of heart, Ndiogou decides to go to the arena to watch his son assist Malaw in a great combat against an unknown challenger. This sympathetic portrayal of Ndiogou culminates in the final scene where father and son are united in the emotional male bonding of the sporting event.

But the scene at the arena is rather curiously described. The fight itself seems oddly anti-climactic; most of the narrative focuses on Ndiogou's observation of the audience. When he first arrives he is recognized and accorded respect; a social inferior gives up his seat to him. Ndiogou is struck by the fact that a lot of well-known professional men are present, including a famous psychiatrist from the capital, a man who spent twenty-five years in the West and married a white woman (142). He also notices that an important state inspector is there, applauding madly. Just as the combat is about to begin,

Ndiogou catches sight of the Solicitor-General, and the narrative digresses to inform us of the details of his impressive career and educational background. At the climax of the fight, Ndiogou recognizes a white university professor. Only when he realizes that it is socially acceptable to attend this wrestling match does Ndiogou begin to feel less self-conscious and allow himself to be caught up in the excitement of the crowd.

What kind of genuine realization about the meaning of the past is this, if it has to be so mediated? The message seems to be that it's all right to participate in the frenzied communal experience of the wrestling match, since all the "best people" are there. An espousal of a return to African roots on such terms seems insincere, and it raises a number of questions: if the experience of the arena is intrinsically valuable, why does it require the presence of these professional men to validate it? And why is the father alone redeemable and redeemed? Why is his bourgeois snobbery acceptable, while his wife's efforts at social climbing are contemptible? Why are women always shown in conflict with one another, while men are shown cooperating?

The notion that the arena, the call of the earth (128), will be able to redeem an entire people from the sinfulness of their modern ways seems suspect. Clearly Aminata Sow Fall wants to make this connection: the long-awaited rains arrive to end the drought just as Malaw achieves his greatest victory. But the arena's masculine ritual bonding, its valorization of the notion that "un homme est fait pour lutter et pour vaincre" [a man is made to struggle and to conquer] (139), seems finally inadequate as a response to the deep divisions the novel has portrayed between past and present, country and city, tradition and technology, man and woman. In *Hard Times* the circus has a saving function for both sons and daughters: the circus-master saves Gradgrind's son from prison, and Sissy Jupe saves Gradgrind's daughter. In *L'appel des arènes* the arena does not seem, finally, to have this universal redemptive power.

For if the novel's premise is that the snake of the West has invaded the African paradise, it is clear that Diattou has been cast as Eve, embracing foreign temptations. She is condemned on a mythic as well as a literal level. In the book's final paragraph, father and son are reunited, but Diattou is still out in the cold, a pathetic and defeated figure in wrinkled skirt and smeared lipstick, dragging off to work as a sterile midwife. What has the arena offered her?

NOTES

¹ *L'appel des arènes*, (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1982) 9. Subsequent references are noted parenthetically. Translations from the French are my own, and I am grateful to David Ellison for suggestions. A version of this article was read at the African Literature Association conference in Dakar in 1989.

² Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 50.

³ *Hard Times*, 82.