

## *Chapter Four*

### **SISTERHOOD AND POWER: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN BÂ'S *SO LONG A LETTER* AND YERIMA'S *THE SISTERS*.**

*By*

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In reality...any utterance, in addition to its own theme always responds (in the broad sense of the word) in one form or another to other utterances that precede it. The speaker is not an Adam, and therefore the subject of his speech itself inevitably becomes the arena where his opinions meet those of his partners...

*(The Problem of Speech Genres... 94)*

#### **1. *Introduction***

In postmodern critique of human epistemology, artistic creations assume the status of discourses, or languages which attract responses. This is most evident in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian cultural philosopher who propounded the theory of dialogism to explain the multiplicity and connectedness of human experiences across genres, groups, generations and epochs. The literary creation like an utterance, as Bakhtin states in *The Dialogic Imagination* is brought into a relationship with other works such that each becomes "a point of view" in the process of group representation (411).



Bakhtin's justification for this as indicated above is that the "speaker is not an Adam;" as such, the voices in the social system must interact for the purpose of cultural communication (94). The "arena" of communication is inhabited by structures which constitute paradigms for literary correspondences within and among the different voices in the social system. This implies that Bâ's *So Long A Letter* and Ahmed Yerima's *The Sisters* embody identifiable perspectives in African Literature, but they are made to dialogue with each other in this context in order to extend the boundaries of utterance(s) to accommodate artistic creations as gendered discourses.

## II *Sisterhood and Power' as Paradigms for Dialogue*

Literary creativity in Africa until about few decades ago was conceived as a male enterprise.<sup>2</sup> Men had the power to "utter" creation and they used that prerogative to name women as the "incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential"- to use Simone de Beauvoir's words (16). This binary opposition which assigns chaos to women and rationality to men is traceable to the social conception of sex difference because it associates production with men and reproduction with women. But African women scholars like Sofola,<sup>3</sup> Aidoo,<sup>4</sup> Acholonu<sup>5</sup> among many others have contested these binary structures because of the tendency either to confuse or gloss over fundamental differences between African and Western modes of female assertion.

Nevertheless, feminism has brought the monolithic male voice under scrutiny by incorporating the female voice into human epistemology. This is because the feminine in the works of men writers has been identified with serving emotional and physical demands while "woman's own needs are subsumed by her

definition as need meter to others" (Haste, 69). But the emerging consciousness occasioned by native intelligence and the exposure to formal Western education have necessitated the interrogation of rationality as a male attribute. The result, as Helen Haste further explains is the feminist agenda of "relocating the definition of self, out of a male perspective into a female perspective" (101).

The programme of recreating the female story which is known as gynocriticism, has subverted the phallogentric model of rationality because female oppression is a universal phenomenon. However, whether in Africa, America, Europe or Asia, the process of reversing the *status quo* has brought conflicts among women gender theorists and interest groups as a result of differences in perspectives. This notwithstanding, the entry of women into the literary space has culminated in what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guba describes as "a battle of the sexes over the province and provenance of literature, a battle which men rightly or wrongly felt they were losing..." (186). The process of identifying the basis of female oppression, examining the nature of that oppression, and making women's experience an aspect of discourse have laid the foundation for the concept of sisterhood.

The resulting struggle by men writers and critics to retain male voice as the "Absolute," has according to Grace Okereke, produced "a male insecurity consciousness constructed on what I designate 'gynophobia' (fear of woman)" (19). This is because women's gradual but determined move from the domestic to the public space challenges the "patriarchal appropriation of power over the word" (Bryce-Okunolola, 201). Consequently, speech with its numerous connotations becomes a symbol of power that replaces the concept of silence as a female virtue. Diane Herndl corroborates this position when she divulges that "to speak at all is



to assume authority..."(15). Power, in women's discourse, comes from the common agenda of women scholars to demythologize otherness.

### III *Mariama Bâ's Dialogue with Ahmed Yerima*

Dialogue for Bakhtin emanates from the interaction between the centripetal<sup>6</sup> and centrifugal<sup>7</sup> voices which cut across historical settings and eras. In Bakhtinian aesthetics

A language is revealed in all its distinctiveness only when it is brought into relationship with other languages entering with them into one single heteroglot unity of societal becoming (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 411).

The word "language" here is synonymous with any kind of artistic creation that is capable of engaging other literary works in a discursive struggle in order to reveal the different perspectives which constitute meaning in the social system.

Since Bakhtinian dialogism is a conflict-based theory which was used to subvert authority in Russia of Stalin's era, the voices are placed as oppositional constructs. But for Don Bialostosky, the dialogic does not just explore conflict; rather it examines "the relations among persons articulating their ideas in response to one another, discovering their mutual affinities and oppositions, their provocations to reply..." (789). This suggests that dialogism has much to do with intertextual relations, a fact which Bakhtin validates in *The Dialogic Imagination* when he states that "Languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all,

see itself only in the light of another language" (12). Consequently, this work has identified vital relations between Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Yerima's *The Sisters* that can extend the boundary of discourse on the subject of conjugal love with its attendant problems in Africa.

Following the epistolary tradition which Virginia Woolf sees as an exclusively female form, Bâ's *So Long A Letter* unravels the excruciating pains which polygamy imputes on women in Islam. Although the Victorian women were not allowed to work outside the home, Woolf has disclosed that the act of writing letters was acceptable for women. As such, she intimates that "A woman might write letters while she was sitting by her father's sick-bed. She could write them by the fire whilst the men talked without disturbing them" (64).

Anne Herrmann confirms Woolf's position when she divulges that women's use of the epistolary form is "a self-conscious strategy for engaging in a public critique of masculinist culture while presuming to engage in private correspondence" (33). In other words, though women's writing is highly autobiographical, there is no distinction between the personal and the political for women writers and scholars. Yet the idea of "correspondence" as used here does not just contextualise the private within the literary; rather, it extends the discussion across genres. For Bakhtin, genres do not just refer to the "tendency to order the total literary domain into three overall classes" poetry, prose and drama as M. H. Abrams explains (70). But he describes genres as "a horizon of expectation brought to bear on a certain class of text types. It is, therefore, a concept larger than literary genres..." (428). This implies that genres are not necessarily fixed literary types.

But since all "utterances are heteroglot" because of the multiplicity of meanings imbued in the diverse voices, genres are used to refer to texts that are capable of generating discourses, particularly where there are identifiable patterns for dialogue. Incidentally, the paradigms for dialogue between *So Long A Letter* and *The Sisters* are clearly marked. The point of affinity between



these works is the creation of a universe peopled by women whose responses to life are determined by men's absolute control of power. This is why Mariana Bâ, a Senegalese Muslim woman's novelistic discourse confronts Ahmed Yerima, a Nigerian Muslim man's "official"<sup>8</sup> language - to use a Bakhtinian terminology for the authoritative voice.

Bâ's protagonist in *So Long A Letter*, Ramatoulaye, is married to Modou Fall for thirty years in a relationship which has produced twelve maternities. Dipo, like Modou, the husband to Funmi, Yerima's principal character in *The Sisters* is almost a perfect husband to his wife for thirty years though she is childless. But the last five years of Ramatoulaye's marriage is traumatic because Modou abandons his wife and children because of Binetou, a friend to his daughter whom he takes as a second wife. Nothing betrays Ramatoulaye's faith in her husband before she receives the news of the new relationship. Even though he spends longer hours at work and tries to become more trendy, she attributes these to the demands of his duty as a trade unionist.

The challenges which this second marriage bring on Ramatoulaye notwithstanding, she chooses to be committed to Modou's name unlike her childhood friend, Aissatou, who breaks her marriage to Mawdo Bâ when his mother brings young Nabou to him as a second wife. The situation of Funmi though similar is slightly different because she is caught in the officialdom of power as the wife to the President and the Military Head of State.

In these capacities, the home is submerged in the complexities of power because of the contradictions which are associated with the monologism of the authoritative language. Funmi's courtship with power is symbolic of the tendency of the Nigerian elite and political class to design a world of fame and power for themselves while the masses are left at the mercy of providence. In her position as the First Lady, she is trapped in this power structure; and so, she sustains the *status quo* through an extravagant but passive approach to reality. Passivity is indeed one attribute which the patriarchal social structure needs to sustain

itself.

In Bakhtin's analysis of the relationship between rulers and their subjects, he posits that "the ruling class does in a certain sense, belong to the world of 'fathers' and is thus separated from other classes by a distance that is almost epic, (15). This demarcation empowers the rulers to control the destiny of other people by assigning to themselves unusual privileges. It is understandable, therefore, that Dipo, the President, has five children from five different women outside the home while Funmi plays the role of the only wife.

Since "fathers" are rulers of a certain category, Funmi's father has the power to conceal his fatherhood of Nana, a girl whom he brought to his home as a maid but who has spent more than sixty-years with his home. The truth though known to his extended family is kept from his wife until few hours to her death. Funmi gets to know Nana as a sibling through the clause which his father inserts in the Will. These women feel betrayed by these acts of infidelity, but they pass on as acceptable behaviour because morality in patriarchy is often identified as a female phenomenon.

But despite the perpetration of female exploitation in the social system, the woman insists on choice as a major step in the affirmation of self above patriarchal suppression. Irene Assiba d' Almeida validates this position when she reveals that:

It is indeed through choice that Ramatoulaye and Aissatou find strength and courage to face problems that overburden women, to overcome what threatens to deny the self. It is also through choice that they arrive at self-realization. However, this is not achieved without, conflict (161).

The tension generated by their pains rather than asphyxiate



the female voice has become the springboard for creativity. This propels Ramatoulaye to re-construct her experiences when Modou's sudden death from Heart Attack and the burial rites equate Binetou's five years of indulgence with Ramatoulaye's thirty years of devotion. The spring that harbours Ramatoulaye's recollections overflows, leaving behind *So Long a Letter* as a testament on betrayal of love in patriarchy. But the narrative technique of the work is a major factor in its success as a novel. Based on the Islamic concept known as "mirasse" which demands that the secrets of a dead man should be opened before his family, Bâ extends "the conceptual boundaries of Mirasse to accommodate the Secrets of Modou Fall's marriage, especially his weaknesses and the impact of this on his first home" (Charm, 91).

Since female creativity often begins as an act of self-purgation, the woman writer has a commitment to re-construct self. Consequently, the tension which Ramatoulaye encounters in maintaining her twelve children, the challenges of an independent woman in a society where female individuality is a misnomer and the insistence on choice as a fundamental issue in women's self-assertion are aspects of Bâ's recreation of self. Presented as a letter, the author uses Aissatou as the focal point for the explication of the female story in Islam. This is presented with the kind of "animation, conflict, suspense, actuality (or realism), specificity and proximity" which John Wilson and Arnold Carroll identify with the oral style (225). As such, the style of *So Long a Letter* agrees with the message as an unchallenged classic<sup>10</sup> on female exploitation despite Ndubisi Umuunnakwe's patriarchal monologism in *Dear Ramatoulaye*.

Just as Modou's death prompts Ramatoulaye's letter, the demise of Dipo constitutes the central action in Yerima's *The Sisters*. In a mode characteristic of all dictatorship, Funmi's sisters are compelled to gather in the Presidential Villa in order to mourn the President's exit. This gathering sets the rationale for the interrogation of male power and female victimage within the Nigerian experience as Taiwo illustrates in the following lines:

Dark embers of my inner soul  
The drink lobes of sadness pour  
Melting, pelting... dropping drops of tears  
Wrapped once in stately glory...  
Now searching for pity  
Where there is none... pity

This poem is the loudest commentary on the insensitivity of male power in *The Sisters*.

The four female characters in Yerima's work reflect historical snapshots of women's exploitation in the social system. Funmi's commitment is betrayed by a husband who is "busy making children outside while [she] hung diligently by his side" (22). Taiwo is confined to the wheel chair because of pelvic injury after losing a two-month pregnancy and her husband, Joe, to a failed coup which led to the execution of forty-one officers. Toun decides to marry the "good Lord Jesus" when she lost everything to her husband - a man who impregnates his wife's best friend and bribes the Judge to rule the case in his favour. Yet Nana endures sixty-two years of invisibility which is occasioned by male conspiracy. Throughout the period of her concealed identity, she adopts the outsider status by a process of systematic enslavement to the power blocs in the family and the political arena. Therefore, Dipo's death provides an avenue for identifying and naming the nature of women's exploitation.

The process of interrogating the nature of female exploitation through the fractured humanity of the four characters in *The Sisters* reveals the basis of male power and female subservience. But since every literary work reflects the ideology of its creator, Yerima's concept of sisterhood embodies the patriarchal ideology in his preference for hierarchy. As such, he locates sisterhood between the borders of power and powerlessness in order to present women as conflict models. This accounts for Nana's psyche which combines the authoritativeness of rulers and



its demand for "unconditional allegiance" with the emerging consciousness of the oppressed and their search for individuality. But if women's creativity has helped them to assume authority in the public space, it is because vocality has equally produced the consciousness for confronting male power and transcending the attendant traumas.

#### IV Conclusion

Bakhtinian dialogism conceives literary language as "an artistic image... from speaking lips, conjoined with the image of a speaking person" (*The Dialogic Imagination...* 336); Therefore Mariama Bâ and Ahmed Yerima's works embody the gendered voices in the social system. By investigating the female story within the letter form, Bâ does not just bridge the tenuous link between art and life, she also acknowledges the epistolary mode as women's space. But using the dramatic form which some gender scholars describe as a predominantly male genre, Yerima explores women's experience from a masculinity perspective. This is why he infuses authoritarianism into his concept of sisterhood contrary to Bâ's emphasis on choice and female bonding. The difference in perspective is traceable to the problematisation of sex difference and its tendency to obstruct an adequate understanding of male-female sexual politics.

#### NOTES

1. Issues on sisterhood and power form the basis of Obioma Nnaemeka's collection of essays, *Sisterhood: Feminisms and Power from Africa to the Diaspora* (1998).
2. See Femi Ojo-Ade and Schnipper Mineke in ALT 13 (1983) and ALT 15 (1987), respectively.
3. Zulu Sofola who has introduced powerful women to the Nigerian stage rejects the term feminism because of its "de-

womanization" of the modern African woman. Refer to "Feminism and African Womanhood in Obioma Nnaemeka's *Sisterhood: Feminism and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* (1998).

4. Aidoo's essay "African Woman Today" makes a roll-call of prominent women in African history in order to state that African women unlike their western counterparts descend from the most powerful women the world has produced. See Obioma Nnaemeka (1998).
5. Acholonu's *Motherism: An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* rejects the concept of patriarchy which is widely accepted as the source of women's exploitation and replaces it with "patrifocality" which celebrates fatherhood.
6. Centripetal is Bakhtin's word for the authoritative word which is (univocal) and highly hierarchical.
7. Similarly, centrifugal refers to the other voices in the social system which threaten to decentre the former. This embody the discourses of the masses who are suppressed by the centripetal voice. Refer to Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* for a detailed discussion on centripetal and centrifugal forces in the society.
8. Bakhtin categorizes genres as official and unofficial languages depending on whether the voice is centripetal or centrifugal.
9. Epic distance is the distinguishing feature between the authoritative voice and the internally persuasive one. For Bakhtin, the epic belongs to a distant past as a highly hierarchical genre; and so, it adopts a univocal approach to rationality.



10. Written in 1980, *So Long A Letter* existed as an unchallenged classic till 1994 when a Nigerian Igbo male, Ndubisi Ummunnakwe decided to write a rejoinder titled *Dear Ramatoulaye*. The latter is a beautiful dialogue with the former, but it fails as act and succeeds as propaganda. See Emenyi's 'Intertextuality in Bâ's *So Long A Letter* and Ummunnakwe's *Dear Ramatoulaye*' in *Humanities Review Journal*, Vol. 6. NO. 4 (forthcoming).

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