

# The Image of the African Woman in the Works of Birago Diop

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## Abstract

*Education is a crucial liberating force in the lives of African women; it frees them from the shackles of tradition. In this wise, Birago Diop was an African man to the core who was brought up in a patriarchal society where women's role are relegated to the background. Fortunately, Diop was influenced by his mother and grandmother at the outset which later conditioned him to literary career. In his creative works, he portrayed women as transmitter of folktales and moral values, yet most of his folktales portrayed the bad image of women in terms of ethics and behaviours. The paper sets out to ask some questions: Is Birago Diop an anti-feminist writer? Is the griot Amadou Koumba an anti-feminist writer? The work examines the role of African women in the upbringing of their children in all spheres of life and concludes that for any meaningful development to be achieved in training our younger generation, the role of women should not be ignored for it is generally believed that the woman herself is a school which if properly prepared, becomes a productive woman.*

Keywords: Image, Orature, Tradition, Education, Women.

## Introduction

The problem of inequality is a global phenomenon, thus right from the womb, through the family, to the society and school, there is a clear line of roles demarcation between the boy-child and the girl-child that tends to affect their perception about themselves. However, gender inequality has been in existence since a long time ago, African woman has been maligned, oppressed and subjugated by the African tradition in patriarchal society but a sharp turn around took place some decades back, their passiveness has changed drastically in all spheres of life. Women now sing new songs. No educated woman is ready to accept passivity as a woman's nature, though woman's nature is complicated but she must escape, liberate herself, shape her own future and her children and deny the myths that continue to confine her. In view of this, Birago Diop who was believed to be an anti-feminist writer because of his antagonistic write-up against women was among the first men who admired Mariama Bâ's *So long a letter* and strongly recommended its publication.

## Orature

Orature is a social product that has its roots in a defined cultural context, it is intricately tied to the social, cultural and political aspirations and goals of the people which invariably encompass national unity and national development attainable through peaceful co-existence.

Nkwem Okoh (2004:236) in his preface to oral literature “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” extensively enunciates and elucidates the importance of oral literature. As he puts it:

[...] Oral Literature has enormous didactic dimensions which can be channelled to the benefit of our society. In addition to being an art, oral literature constitutes a pleasurable mode of learning. In other words there are possibilities beyond this element of enjoyment.

Okoh further assures that oral literature deals with certain issues about life, man, with his environment and with other human beings, all of which are pertinent in the society today. Oral literature as he concludes has an enormous role to play in national development.

African oral narratives are significant tools of acculturation and socialization of the young. It is also important for the dissemination and preservation of traditional beliefs. For centuries, stories, legends, myths and the unwritten histories of the non-literate African’s were passed down from one generation to the other. This day-to-day life of the people is highlighted in many narratives so much that the culture, beliefs, moral and every important aspect of life constitute significant topicality of narratives, songs and poems.

Oral tales are communicative instruments through which a society expresses itself. The oral tales of individual societies according to Wychank (1998:121) “reflect that society and its beliefs although beliefs may change, the images and symbols to which they were attached remain as part of a traditional culture”

The oral narratives also bring out moral instructions because as noted by Dasyva (1999:14) there is no folktale without didactic intention. He further observes that the focus of most folk narratives is the behaviour of man and woman.

African oral literature Scholars are Birago Diop, Sembene Ousmane, Wole Soyinka, Isidore Okpewho, Liz Gunner, Abiola Irele, Mariama Bâ, and Mary Kolawole. Tunde Babawale says “For us to truly reclaim the humanity of African communities and assume the rightful heirs of our founding fathers, there must be a conscious effort to assert our African historical traditions and consciousness. We must explore African oral literature and its prospects for economic liberty, natural integration and stability” (2009: XVII). Furthermore, Babawale asked Africans to rededicate themselves to the appreciation, development and patronage of our cultural resources. We must begin to identify with our communities with good knowledge of the relics of our endowment and versed in the history of our cultural sites. To him placing premium on our cultural

endowment would earn us respect, global recognition, international co-operation, development and aid effective dissemination of our culture by projecting the best of our history.

## **Folktales**

### **Fictional Folktales**

Fictional tales are tales in which animals, imaginary characters, humans and plants are the principal dramatis personae. They are more popular in the West African States. They are traditional imaginary tales, which the protagonists may be human, animals or spirits. The storytelling arrangement is uniform throughout the region. Usually, it is after nightfall and the evening meal, the children call on an elderly person, often a woman, to tell them a story; they usually lie on a mat under the moonlight or sit around a fire. Folktales manifest regular interaction between the world of imagination and that of reality. Fictional folktales are divided into the dilemma tales, the moral tales and fairy tales.

Dilemma tales – the audience is usually left at the end of the story to pick from many alternatives as resolutions to the conflicts in the tales. The following questions are raised: if it were you, what would you do? Who among the wives should the husband pick? Who do you think actually loved this farmer, his wife or his mother? Why God moved away from the earth? Why monkeys live on trees? Why the leopard is spotted?

As for dilemma folktales, they

Constitute a large, diverse and widespread class of folktales in Africa. They are prose narratives that leave the listeners with a choice among alternatives, such as which of several characters have done the best, deserve a reward, or should win an argument or a case in court. The choices are different and usually involve discrimination on ethical, moral or legal grounds. (Bascom: 1)

When a dilemma tale has a standard solution ‘solution’ it often evokes a spirited discussion which trains those who engage in it the skills of argumentation and debate and this prepares them for participating effectively in the adjudication of disputes, both within the family or lineage and in formal courts of law.

Finnegan (1967: 218) recounts a Limba tale in which the question is to decide who owns a girl with whom three brothers are in love.

Three brothers in love with the same girl brought a magic glass, a magic tail and a magic skin. In the glass they saw that the girl was dead they was carried home on the skin, she was revived with the magic tail. All three claimed the girl which of them owned her?

More dilemma stories are spurned from all corners of Africa.

Moral tales: -They teach mainly moral lessons such as obedience to parents, hospitality to strangers, goodness to parents and orphans, hard work, good relationship with one's children, husbands or wives and neighbours.

Fairy Tales: -These are tales in which spirits and ghosts are also characters. Indeed there is uniformity among African folktales, in West and Central Africa, we identify chief animal protagonists in various folktales and they cut across Francophone and Anglophone countries. For example, we have hare tradition in Senegal (Leuk-the-Hare), Guinea, Mali, Burkina – Faso and other Sahel areas bordering the Sahara. More so, we have the spider tradition (Ananze-the-spider) in Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and the West-Coast areas. We also have the tortoise tradition (Ijapa, Mbe, Konkuru the Tortoise) in Benin Republic, Nigeria and Cameroun.

Each of these animals (Hare, Spider, and Tortoise) unites several ethnic groups in Africa into one large cultural zone with subgroups of inhabitants having homogenous, mental and socio-cultural attitudes. Though these people speak different languages today but they cherish those animals as unique cultural heroes, they utilize them for farming, their social ties and the education of the individual. Africans take these animals as curious characters, half-men and half animals. Physically, they maintain most of the time, the appearances of their species. The story teller even imitates their voices from time to time in his narration. But morally, they typify human beings living in a society, men with wives who can be models to be followed or Villains to be avoided. Their names vary according to the languages of the people who own the narratives. Their rare qualities are intelligence, cleverness, wit and resourcefulness and their defects are trickiness, cupidity, bad faith and egotism. All these are embodied in their small sizes which put them at no disadvantage vis-à-vis their bigger contemporaries like goat, tiger, hyena, dog, cow, sheep, lion, antelope and elephant.

Oral narratives are formed by three oral genres namely folktales, legends and myths but folktales constitute what one can call the genre par excellence. Their occurrences are more frequent than the others, their performance is within the reach of almost everybody and they easily attract more foreigners and researchers. That was why the early Europeans were very quick to bring their existence to the notice of Africa's colonial masters. The roles played by animals are so spectacular that when one talks of African folktales, one thinks more of animal tales more than the others. Moreover, animals appear not only in folktales but also in myths, legends and all forms of speech; one of the greatest childhood pleasures is to listen to elders and youngsters telling these charming stories where animals, men and even spirits are involved in all kinds of adventures. It is this supernatural dimension which distinguishes radically African folktales from European fables.

Folktales in Africa are more than story-telling event: they are a life experience. While the tale is being told, one is immersed in the seasons and landscapes of the sub-region. The raconteur creates

a world through some kind of remarkable osmosis of the region's own physical educational value of folktales.

### **Folktale Performance**

In Yoruba setting in Nigeria, folktale performance begins with the casting of riddles while waiting for all other children to assemble. Those who are tardy with their domestic chores put in more effort to finish up and join other playmates. Soon, there is a large assembly of children. Adults also share their fun and sometimes encourage the children by giving them new riddles. The riddling session begins like this: a participant secures the attention of the group by crying out thus:

Riddle poser:           Aalo o o!

Audience:               Aalo o!

Poser:                    Ki lo b'oba jeun ti ko pale mo?

Who dines with the king and refuses to clear the table?

Qui mange avec le roi sans ramasser les plats après?

A child:                 A foolish man

Poser:                    You are wrong

Another child: A goat

Poser:                    No

Another child: A fly

Poser:                    yes, you are right. Flies usually visit the table of the king as well as the common man's but they do not assist in either laying or clearing of the table.

Many more of such riddles are posed and finally a raconteur who has a tale to narrate cuts in by saying:

Raconteur:              Aalo o o

Audience:              Aalo:

Raconteur:              My tale spins round and round and finally centres on two brothers.

The standard opening formula in Diop's tales were discarded. Many conte in the collection took off without any form of prelude but the strategic importance of the traditional opening formula begins with:

- Il étaitunefois (it was once upon a time)
- Un jour (one day)
- Ecoutezdonc (listen)
- Ily a très longtemps (it is a long time ago)
- Autrefois(in the past)
- Il y avait un jour (there was a day)
- En ce temps là. (in those days)

African tales are usually meant to teach morals, pass away the time and entertain children who sing and dance during the performance. Adults participate in storytelling mainly to enrich the repertoire of the children, entertainment and education of the youths.

### **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy is a system whereby men dominate the women in the society. Patriarchy is as old as African society itself. It is a rule by male authority. The word "patriarchy is derived from the Latin word "Pater", which means father, Igbuazor defines patriarchy as:

A set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men. And solidarity among men, which enables them to dominate and control women (2006:13).

The domination and control are done by excluding women from access to necessary economically productive resources. For instance, women are mostly restricted to the domestic sphere, always at home while men control the economy. In African society, patriarchy is an African cult- a system whereby men have agreed among each other to oppress their wives, it is a system in which men have all or most of the power and importance in a society or group. Collins (2003) opines that patriarchy results to the oppression of women in the society, hence everything revolves round men within the family. Women in a patriarchal societies like Nigeria, Kenya and most African countries are not allowed to own property, for example in Delta state of Nigeria, women are not allowed to own property likewise in Kenya, property inheritance, identity, power and influence flow through the male members. No wonder, Birago Diop and Leopold Sedar Senghor were best of friends when they were alive, both of them grew up in a patriarchal society in Senegal, some of their texts were written to attack the female counterparts despite the fact that women gave birth to them and Diop was taught the art of storytelling by his grandmother and mother. Birago Diop and Sedar Senghor were not bastards, they towed the footsteps of their grandfathers; although they both knew the

importance of women in African society when Senghor wrote in the preface of *Les Nouveaux Contes d'Amadou Koumba* that:

Les femmes sont tout autres plus sensible, plus nerveuses, elles sont aussi plus de relief. On l'oublie trop souvent, dans la société négroafricaine, la femme, gardienne du foyer et du sang. On est de la race de sa mère joue un rôle prépondérant (Diop, 1961:12)

Women are all in all. They hold prominent and sensitive position, more nervous. They forget them often in African society. Woman, a keeper of home and blood. We are from his mother's race, playing an important role

(Our translation)

Looking at Fontaine's fables, in 'The Ant and the Cricket', the fable narrator who derives joy in amusing himself spoke about precious time and natural period that ought to be planned for judiciously, but was wasted by the cricket. Naturally, summer and winter are separate periods that should be regarded and kept sacred. This natural season cannot be changed by human factor; it is a natural division of the year. This climate transcends linguistic boundaries, it cuts across cultures. When it rains people are expected to farm and save for other period when the condition will not be conducive for planting. One of the features of *La Fontaine's* fable is borrowing which is not limited to the French and Yoruba cultures alone. The idea of borrowing with respect and the capital sum is universal and of ages. Every human society engages in this act. It also teaches that when you lend certain amount of money, what is economical is that certain agreed percentage on the capital should be paid at a fixed time.

Faith is another area that needs to be viewed. The 'ant' cementing and concretizing her words leads to swearing. It could be noted that swearing authenticates somebody's allegiance and makes the addressee to have positive consideration towards the speaker or the borrower request. *Swearing by her faith* (line 13). This is considered very central in the daily life of an individual and in terms of spiritual aspect. It exists in all human sphere of life of an individual and in the devout realm of life.

## **La Fable De La Fontaine**

### **The Careless Cricket**

Sang the summer away  
Just to find herself  
Poor and with nothing to eat  
No fly, no bread  
In the winter to have.

Hungry and whining

To the ant she went  
Begging for something to have  
Just out of kind heart  
As to be able to eat

Till the good season comes:  
Swearing by her faith  
Next August she would refund  
With interest and capital sum.

The frugal ant, who double thinks  
Before anything she lends  
“How did you spend your summer away?”  
Thus asks straight out.  
And the cricket:- “My dear friend,  
I did nothing but sang day and night”  
“Well done, my dear friend,  
Now you can also dance”

African folktale is didactic in nature, it teaches morals and preserves African culture likewise *La Fable de la Fontaine* titled “The Ant and The Cricket” which condemned laziness in its entirety but the most powerful message on laziness could also be found in the Holy Bible in the book of proverb 6:6v8 which says

“Go to the ant, thou sluggard: consider her ways and be wise:  
which having no guide, overseer or ruler, provideth her meat in  
the summer and gathereth her food in the harvest.

How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When will thou arise out  
of thy sleep?

Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to  
sleep.

So shall thy poverty comes as one that travelleth, and thy want as  
an armed man.

The story above made us to understand that laziness and too much sleep could impoverish, multiply and aggravate one’s condition of life.

The archetypal theory places emphasis on words and opposites which can be noted in the fable above. For example careless/frugal; sing/dance; day/night; summer/winter; lend/refund etc. this set of antonyms appears antithetically in the fable. The purpose is not for connotation alone, but also to add to the aesthetics of the fable and the theme of the story. While some antonyms are natural,



others are manmade, despite this classification; they materialize in every human gathering irrespective of where the person is located.

*The fable narrator like others mirrors the happenings in the society.* The events are universal and could be said to be relevant to every age. The act of extravagancy is always present in the human milieu, it could be on time, economy, materials etc. the misuse will definitely have impact, which is usually negative. For the cricket to receive insult from ant, could be said to be part of the culpability paid for having failed to work and fend for itself. This may be linked to the saying that ‘*he who fail to plan, plans to fail*’.

The audience’s roles cannot be disregarded in fables so also in other oral traditions. This will be highlighted with the Yoruba fables. The commencement of narration in Yoruba resembles a dialogue involving repetition of words and phrases. In addition, the fable narrator, Fontaine, makes use of many features that are traditionally inclined and which the meaning is rooted in the tradition of his fable. This could be seen in the word of Dubois (2006) as said earlier that, *performer and audience engage a shared “set of interpretive resources”*. The traditional engagement of working during the summer and resting in the winter is clearly emphasized. This is categorized as the situation which is stressed by the archetypal theory. Whosoever that fails to comply with this tradition of farming, stands the risk of starvation as the cricket in the fable Drout (2006:276) opines that;

...repetition reinforces not only the justification component of a tradition (by improving its word-to-word fit as it evolves towards the universal tradition Meme) but also the recognition component, because a repeated recognition is more likely to be entered into and retained from long – term memory.

From the starting point of narrating Yoruba fables the audience is thrilled and eager to hear the whole story. The narrator needs to seek the attention of his audience. The pattern of doing this follows the traditional prototype. This repetition/style is maintained and cannot be divorced from fables. This is what is explained in the Meme – based theory by Drout (2006:269) that repetition helps to retain the mnemonic information. Looking at fables,, hardly can one say there are any new ones, it is already those in existence that are being regurgitated. The pattern of introducing fables also remains unchanged. In Yoruba for example, the narrator starts with this dialogue with the audience:

Narrator: A – a – a – lo o

Audience: A – a – a – lo o

As the narrator pronounces this, the audience get seated and settled to pay attention. This helps in keeping the audience mentally awake. The atmosphere becomes tranquil and everybody joins the narrator to achieve the aim of recreational and educational values.

## Archetypal Theory

Archetypal theory propounded by Carl Jung uncovers expression in works of arts and in rudimentary folk tales. Archetypal according to Jung, are “*primordial images*”; the “*psychic residue*” of repeated types of experience in the lives of very ancient ancestors which are inherited in the “collective unconscious” of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, and private fantasies, as well as in the works of literature. This theory tends to reside principally in oral traditions. It addresses literature rather than specific literary works, or to use literature chiefly as a means towards cultural criticism. *Fables are transmitted from generation to generation without knowing the origin.*

### Image Of Women In: *Les Nouveaux Contes D'amadou Koumba*

The image of women in male authored texts is usually conditioned by the inbuilt concept of who a woman is in the writer's personal view. It is also determined and conditioned by the writer's social background. Male authors with strong paternal influence present women characters as weakling. The thematic concern of the wicked stepmother tales often depicts child abuse. For example in the tale titled “La Cuiller Sale” the Dirty Wooden Spoon in *Les Nouveaux contes d'Amadou koumba* is the Story of Binta who is an orphan completely at the mercy of her wicked step-mother, she is thrown out of the house to wash dirty spoon in a faraway river called River Danyane.

Va-t'en, ordonna-t-elle en poussant la pauvre fille hors de la maison, Et Binta l'orpheline s'enfuit dans la nuit

Go there, she commanded her having pushed her out of the house.  
And Binta, the orphan went away in the night

Binta went through a wilderness experience but for the sudden intervention of a benevolent spirit, who transformed into an old woman. The sudden intervention of the old woman transformed the life of Binta, an helpless child that there is a reversal of fate, which makes the child to come into much wealth. She shares this wealth with her wicked step mother who refuses to accept the gift but sent Penda, her spoilt child on a risky mission. However, Penda could not endure the pains and tribulation that Binta went through and she refused to follow the instruction of the old woman. Animals that came out of the egg she was supposed to break last later devoured Penda. The tale teaches women to shun wickedness to their stepchildren and the young ones to abide by the instructions given to them by their elders.

The pattern of hostility revealed in the wicked step-mother tales depict a situation where the step-mother's selfishness and cruelty to her step-child result in the total neglect of the training of her

own children. The consequence is that the integration of such children into the social norms of their immediate society becomes difficult.

Some of the Birago Diop's tales promote negative myths about women's unreliability. His folktales focus on women as principal characters and they reveal the woman's deep emotional, logical and illogical reactions to problematic situations. For example, In "Fari the Donkey" it illustrates a myth of metamorphosis, the myth of the soul's migrations: the transformation of a human being into an animal and at the same time of a woman into a donkey, the question this paper asks is why women? In "Mamelles" Momar is married to Khary Kougué who has a hunch back and an angry wife. Diop portrayed the woman having hunch back as a woman of evil heart. In "Mamelles", Momar is married to two women that are hunch-backed, the first wife is portrayed as a woman of evil heart who never took food to her husband on the field while the second was generous and happy who wanted to get rid of her hunch. Although "Mamelles" form an allegory of the antithetical fight between the Good and the Bad, but the characters would be women. Diop portrayed women as fundamentally jealous beings while men are as people with kindoki, which is (magical power).

Another tale is titled 'N'gor Niébé' in this story Diop portrayed women as unpredictable beings that cannot keep secret for a long time when it comes to law or order, a woman represents the tempter, the she-devil who demolishes everything. In an intimate relationship, the woman is the weak link where everything can fail. Is this not an antifeminist conception? Especially when Diop advised his male counterparts when he says: Donne ton amour à la femme, mais non ta confiance. (Diop 1961:45) Give your love to the woman, but not your confidence. This statement tells us that Birago Diop is an antifeminist writer. Men and Women are prone to divulge information that is meant to be kept. No one can keep secret except God.

Another folktale in *les Nouveaux contes d'Amadou Koumba* is the story of Khary-Gaye, an orphan who was loved and cherished by her mother, before her death she loved her to the extent that she bought her a gold necklace. Khary-Gaye was well cultured than any other lady in the community, her father could not wait till eternity, she got married to Penda who was jealous because of her step daughter's wisdom, fortune, beauty and the gold her mother bought for her. She was even jealous of all the care her father showered on her, one day Samba went on hunting and Khary show off her gold and the stepmother was annoyed and sent her to the river to fetch water for her

Prends cette cale basseet

Va me chercher de l'eau.

Take this calabash and fetch water for me

The calabash was so heavy and big because it was made of wood, she took it and went straight to the river, in an attempt to carry the water, she discovered that the calabash was too heavy and she

started singing and crying. It was a big snake who helped her to carry the calabash on her head unfortunately Khary's father never came back from his journey.

Khary grew up and suitors showed interest in other ladies except Khary who had snake as suitor whom she rejected. However, her stepmother was happy and made jests of her. Fortunately for Khary, she met a handsome and a rich man, a Prince who proposed marriage to her. At last, luck smiled on her and she gave birth to beautiful children and was very comfortable but she was home sick and wanted to take her children home. Her husband consented to her wish and warned her not to tell her people the source of her riches. One of her children, a male never said the truth but the sister revealed the secret to Khary's kinsmen. The boy learnt how to say: from his father:

Je ne sais pas

(I don't know)

While the girl revealed all the truth

Elle raconta tout cequ'ellesavait... aux amies de  
samère. (Ibid : 98)

She told all what she knew to her mummy's friends.

To cut the long story short the prince was annoyed, he placed curses on them and both of them transformed into parrots while he praised the boy. In the tale, Diop portrayed women as talkative, who do not keep secrets while men get praised for managing secret well.

### **Samba-de-la-Nuit**

It is another story in Birago Diop's tales. It is a story of a child who decides to be born early through his own efforts. Wants to go with brothers who have gone to seek seven sisters as brides.

Brothers refuse. Turns into coin which one of the brothers picks up, cross river on back of crocodile. Come to house of old woman with seven daughters. She prepares food, grain sown, grown, harvested, prepare in one day etc. The child tells brothers to change garments and places with girls in bed. Child sleeps with old woman. Wakes when she wants to sharpen her knife. Asks for blanket made of cotton, sown, irrigated, gathered, woven the same day. Old woman cuts throats of what she thinks are the brothers, kills her daughters instead. Brothers escape. Pursuit. Old woman changes to jujube tree. Child recognises her. Old woman became white horse. Made to flee. Brothers cross river. In home village find old woman has turned into a tamarind tree. Cut this down, and the old witch dies.

Diop's tales antagonizes the old woman in the tale, despite her leniency and hospitality to the seven brothers and strangers she was named an old witch and was cruelly dealt with while the stubborn boy escaped unhurt and unpunished. The tale was narrated from an African point of view where

the status of an old woman will be changed to a witch because of her long stay in her husband's house and despite her long suffering in the home, she will still be labelled an old witch which must be out rightly rejected by educated women.

### **Women's Emancipation in Africa**

(NEPAD) The New Partnership for Africa's Development NEPAD seeks to accelerate the hitherto intractable emancipation of women in Africa. Ayeleru, B (2004:287) posits that

Traditionally, the African woman is considered a second class citizen. Some of the religious practised by Africans, both traditional and Islamic, support this practice. The African woman is not heard. She does not even have a say in affairs that concern her directly.

This issue and related ones have been discussed by writers like Guillaume Oyono-Mbia, in his *Trois Prétendants –un Mari*, Mariam a Ba's *Unesi longue lettre*, Jean Pliya's *La Secrétaire Particulière*, Sembène Ousmane's *SesTrois Jours* and (*God's Bit of Wood*) *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*.

In *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (God's Bits of Wood) Sembène Ousmane champions, for the first time, the cause of women. He brings them out of obscurity to the limelight. He accords them a primordial role in the struggle for the wellbeing of their husbands and children. Indeed Sembène Ousmane gives them the befitting role of mothers as opposed to that of sex objects. Ramatoulaye joins the men, rail workers to fight their European masters and their black collaborators, she kills her brother's ram, El-Hadji Mabigue, a collaborator of the whites and she feeds her famished children with it. Even under arrest at the police station, she speaks bravely thus:

Quand on sait que la vie et le courage des autres dépendent de votre vie et de votre courage, on n'a pas le droit d'avoir peur (p.117)

When one knows that the life and the courage of others depend on your life and your courage, one has no right to be afraid.

Sembène Ousmane's women organized a march and rally in support of their striking husbands. Panda, a prostitute leads these women and their march contributes in no small measure to the success of the strike. Their action is quite revolutionary and symbolic given the fact that it happens in Dakar, a centre of Islamic tradition where women are expected to be docile. Panda while addressing the public says:

Je parle au nom de toutes les femmes,  
Mais je ne suis que leur porte-parole.

Pour nous cette grève c'est la possibilité  
D'une vie meilleure...et demain nous  
Allons marcher jusqu'à Ndakarou. (Ibid: p.288)

I am speaking on behalf of all women,  
But I am only their mouthpiece.  
As for us, this strike is the possibility  
of a better life ... and tomorrow  
We shall march to Dakar

The meeting held by the women was so well organised and coordinated that the narrator confessed that in the memory of man, it was the first time African women would be so organised and talk in public (P. 289). Despite the suffering and loss of lives experienced in the course of their march, they remain resolute and united until the end. The participation of Maimouna, a blind woman, is a testimony of the commitment of the African woman to her liberation from socio-political and economic jokes. This superlative performance of women shows that African women are no longer passive beings but are now active participants in the development of their continent, which is indeed in the spirit of the NEPAD.

### **Roles of Motherhood in African context**

Train a child in the way he should go, when he is old, he will not  
depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6)

A good mother does beyond giving birth to children to loving and caring for them, including her husband, building the family and the society at large through them. So, her position in the home and the society is both unique and strategic. No family can flourish well without a mother. Therefore, mothers should take the assignment of home building seriously. A wise woman builds her home. Many children became wayward, miscreants, prostitutes, armed robbers, rapists because parents especially mothers pursued material possessions to brace themselves for the misplaced values of our time while neglecting the most important duty God assigned to them, that is the proper upbringing of their children.

Being a mother does not only mean giving birth to children, it also means caring, training and bringing them up in the way of the Lord. A good mother should be able to show good example to the children. Whatever life a child lives outside the house is a reflection of his family life because children are the ambassadors of their families.

Children are good imitators of their parents, mother has to be conscious of her behaviour what she does and says in the presence of the children is very important because they learn quickly. So it is very important to show good example at home for the children to copy.

## **Challenges of African motherhood**

Women remain marginalized in their homes and new husband's homes – a second class citizen in word of Buchi Emecheta. She will always be an outsider among his people. At her in-laws, she does not move into attain her independence or find her place of centrality instead, she is reduced to a permanent state of dependence and estrangement.

She is always the first suspect when things go wrong in her family. Her position of motherhood entails hard labour to provide food for the family. Women are not allowed to call her younger in laws by their names. It happens often in Yoruba tribe in Nigeria. An extra name would be given to them such as Idileke, Aridigbaran.

Another area is food. In some African homes, women that have just given birth would not be allowed to eat certain food like stew, fish, and meat. Such mothers will eat their food without meat or fish, sometimes no food at all until after eight (8) days. It was a horrible tradition; it was believed that such treatment was meted out to their female slaves who cursed who were starved after placed curse on the family that if a child is born in such family without their belief was that such child might not live. In some states in Nigeria especially in the Delta area, women have no property, a woman has no right of inheritance nor can she give legacies to anyone – women are not allowed to own properties like landed property, house or car. Many studies have shown how the contribution of women to labour is undermined especially in rural areas. In patrilineal societies, women cannot own land or cattle.

Polygamy is almost universal in Africa relations among the co-wives are seldom wholesome. Rivalry and insecurity within the institution result in hatred. The accusation involving witchcraft is a common ploy designed to cause the mother's social demotion. It is often used against a powerful woman when the real aim is to discredit her socially. The arrival of the daughter-in-law introduces an added strain and a triangular one in the relationship among the mother, father, the son and his wife, the mother and the wife see themselves as competing for the son's love and income. Sometimes, sons are often at a loss how to handle these conflicts among mothers and wives. Indeed it is a complex tangle of relationships (Ngcobo: 2007: 538) but in spite of all the conflicts there are strong ties that bind mothers to their daughters-in-law.

## **Conclusion**

With the above analyses, it is expedient to make some recommendations, which we believe will go a long way in addressing the issues of gender imbalance in African societies:

1. Government and non-governmental organizations should embark on the reorientation of the society in terms of the equality of rights and freedom for both sexes. Emphasis should be placed on equality, gender stereotype must be deconstructed in order to reconstruct a society that is genuinely sensitive to equality of both sexes.
2. Women participation in teaching profession is very necessary, because of gender peculiarity in some subjects. However, teaching is impossible without education. It is generally believed that woman herself is a school which if properly prepared becomes a productive youth.
3. The transcription and translation of many folktales from many ethnic groups in Africa are necessary for the benefit of our children now and for future generations.
4. Mothers should live up to their calling as mothers because they are home and nation builders, they should keep eyes on their children and make sure they live fulfilled lives. Mothers should spend quality time with their children, tell them folktales and interpret moral lessons behind them.
5. Gender segregation must be avoided like a plague since it turns out detrimental to the African female cause. However, women should play complementary roles to their male counterparts.

Educating women guarantees her many rights. It also qualifies her for becoming an influential figure in the society to contribute her quota in nation building the likes of Dr. Okonjo Iweala, the Finance Minister of Federal Republic of Nigeria, Prof. Oluyemisi Obilade, the Vice Chancellor of Tai Solarin University of Education Ijebu-Ode and Ellen Johnson-Sir Leaf of Liberia. Also, Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, Senior Economic Adviser – Africa Economic Development Policy Initiative; the Late Prof. Dora Akunyili, and hosts of other notable women.

Gender imbalance could lead to the domination or manipulation of women in decision making therefore women representation in politics must be based on the principle of equality. Women are partners not only in marriage but also in the total work of reconstruction of the continent for the complete development of humanity. Therefore, women should remain an integral part of this world as reflected in the saying that “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”.

There is urgent need to restructure Africa and Nigeria’s educational system with the aim of using folklore as an instrument of reorientation and redirection of the youths to prepare them better for the challenges of life. In view of the morals and eminent common sense they embody, Education and Information Ministries must make active interest in transcribing and translating the folktales that are recounted in towns and villages for the benefit of school children and for generations yet unborn. Moreover, the educational value of folktales cannot be overemphasized. They constitute a body of morals and eminent common sense, which can be employed in favour of the popular campaign against indiscipline. The Holy Bible advises that: “To neglect education is to neglect knowledge and indirectly court destruction” in (Hosea 4:6) meaning, that education is of paramount importance than anything else. In the words of Bernard Shaw;



If you don't blow your trumpet nobody will blow it for you.

Therefore, Africans should love and live their cultures as the Japanese have excellently done.

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