

***The Revenant* and *Such a Long Letter*: Novels of a Society of Excess and Opportunism Through Some Family Ceremonies**

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Abstract: If literature feeds on social realities, it is accepted that literary works scroll the image of their emerging environment. Based on this premise, we will agree that the novel is a credible lever for the representation and analysis of community practices and values. In this respect, if birth, death, among other realities, are consubstantial with human life, these events are differently appreciated by human societies. When the organization of these ceremonies is polluted by excesses and / or diversion of objectives, the writer makes food for thought. From then on, the texts took on a pamphleteering orientation and their authors covered themselves with the cloth of militancy to mock the many vices. As attentive observers of people's daily lives, the novelists of this corpus walk their gaze through the dark corridors of repugnant social practices of which they render the smallest details. The materialist logic of actors of all stripes, outrageous opportunism and excesses that no morality or law justifies are the main sources that feed the imagination of Aminata Sow Fall and Mariama Ba. With the sensibilities of women highly aware of societal issues and concerned with the idea of progress, they make no secret of their indignation at the unproductive finality of the morality of waste, exhibitionism and hypocrisy. As a result, the novels in our corpus of study are sufficiently revealing the Senegalese society, whose characteristics they deal with.

Keywords: Hypocrisy, Drift, Ceremonies, Ostentation, Death, Marriage

1. Introduction

Social practices often reflect a mentality, a system that characterizes the individual values. In this respect, in all human communities' habits are developing as to the posture to adopt on the occasion of certain events such as marriage, baptism or funerals. These ceremonies, because they each reflect an essential stage in the curve of the evolution of the individual, must be celebrated with pomp or sobriety. As a keen observer of his immediate environment, analyst and clinician of the mores of his time, the writer transposes into his imaginary world the different clichés of his time. For this, of all literary genres, the one that lends itself best to a detailed exposition of social, cultural or religious facts is the novel. The latter, through narrative techniques such as slowing down, or acceleration, contraction or abstraction allows the author to give all the desired brilliance to the object considered. Novels such as *A Long Letter* by Mariama

Ba and *The Revenant* by Aminata Sow Fall are credible recipes for understanding Senegalese society from which the authors draw their inspirations. Does the evocation of certain family events obey a simple concern to promote values, a desire to inform or to teach? Doesn't the emphatic treatment of certain social or cultural issues reflect a (scream) from the heart of the respective authors who invite a correction? In this study, a panoramic look at the aforementioned corpus of novels, focusing on a contrastive approach, will first give a global overview of each of the stories, then consider certain family ceremonies in their pompous and exhibitionist aspects. Finally, the materialistic spirit behind the actions of the various protagonists will be the subject of special attention.

2. Summary of the Novels

The Revenant is the first novel by Amonata Sow Fall. The text is about the story of Bakar Diop, a young resident of

Ndakaarou, more precisely of Colobane. His parents are part of rural populations who recently moved to Dakar. They are people without enviable social conditions, living in total destitution. There is a very strong bond between the family members. Yama, Bakar, Bigué are all very close. *Le Revenant* is a reflection on family and community rites that are very important in Senegalese society.

Aminata Sow Fall wonders, in her story, about certain social ceremonies. She does not (only) question them but takes a sharp look at what they represent. Those who belong to a lower caste or who come from a poor background try to prove their worth. The pomp shown during ceremonies is nourished here by frustrations that are maintained by a hierarchical society. Thus Yama, who seems the most ostensible character in this novel, because the truest in her desire to explode the barriers by using the wealth of her husband, does not deny herself any pleasure to turn her back on a miserable childhood. The supreme affront that his beloved brother causes him is materialized by an arrest following a misappropriation of money to satisfy the desires of his wife. Aminata Sow Fall excels in the development of social frescoes. She provides a difficult but exciting review.

3. Family Ceremonies

Etymologically, a ceremony is an external form, a solemnity with which worship is celebrated. By extension, this concept encompasses any external form of solemnity granted to an event, to an important act of social life. In other words, it refers to any event of a social nature. However, events such as baptism – which celebrates the birth of a child – marriage – which magnifies a matrimonial union – and the burial of a dead person or the commemoration of his or her date of death are privileged opportunities to discover the mentality of individuals in a given community. Indeed, the narration of these different social events in the texts studied reveals a pronounced taste for worldliness that even alter the symbolic meaning of such appointments.

3.1. Around Death: Funeral and Commemoration

In its complexity, society presents several forms of representation depending on the circumstances. Therefore, death requires a funeral. It consists of funerals, prayers for the peaceful rest of the soul of the deceased. This practice, which has a sacred meaning, is common to the works we study here and varies according to the nature of death. If, in *So Long a Letter* from Mariama BA, the preparations for the funeral and the funeral procession are described, in *The Revenant*, on the other hand, this part is omitted because of the alleged drowning and the body of the victim that has not been found.

But prayer sessions on the occasion of the third, seventh, fortieth days, widowhood, reading sessions or Koranic formulas are more or less noted in these two works. The mourning continues with the observation of widowhood: four months and ten days for the wives of Modou Fall. However, in Aminata Sow Fall's novel, Mame Aïssa was not in prison

because she divorced her husband following the correspondence, she sent him in prison. Moreover, the expenses incurred in such circumstances exceed the limits and divert the true purpose of the funeral. Indeed, it is more like a feast than a mourning as evidenced by these feasts of extreme rarity: hearty meal, sacrificed bull, lively atmosphere.

The narrator of *So Long a Letter*, though distressed by the death of her husband, observes and notes the smallest details of people's behavior during the ceremony on the third day. As a result, if "the group of men eats, silent" [1] because they have "in memory the stiff body, tied, lowered by their care into a gaping hole quickly closed" [1], the actions of women are more than revolting. In their words and attitudes, they transform this ceremony organized for the redemption of a soul into a folklore that no morality authorizes in such a situation. This is noticeable in these lines:

In women, so many noises: loud laughter, loud words, clapping of hands, shrill exclamations. Friends who hadn't seen each other for a long time, hug each other loudly. Some talk about the latest fabric on the market. We pass on gossip to each other. And we laugh and roll our eyes and admire the boubou of his neighbor, his original way of blackening his hands and feet with henna, tracing geometric figures [1].

This meticulous description of the event reflects the elasticity of the novel, which is intended to be detailed, unlike the theater, which does without them for reasons of concision. In truth, such attitudes call into question the sanctity of funerals, thus demystifying mourning.

Moreover, because of the communitarian character of the societies described in these texts – as opposed to the individualism of certain social groups – an unfortunate or happy event is always everyone's business. It does not matter whether they are direct members, close relatives or mere acquaintances of the grieving family. In this respect, in Aminata Sow Fall's text, the response of someone who came to sympathize with the pain of Bakar's family is quite edifying. To the question do you know the deceased? He answers bluntly, "No, I've never seen him" [2]. It is a logic of mechanical solidarity that prevails because, if "one can miss a baptism, never a mourning" [2]. In such situations, all activities are suspended, whatever they may be. And the homes of death victims are invaded without sparing those of neighbors who are voluntarily or unconsciously raped. This is confirmed by the narrator of *Le Revenant* who states that after the announcement of Bakar's death, "the crowd was breaking like waves in the fourth street. The house of the Oussèye Diop was full of people; Silhouettes of all shapes and ages. [...] From the first hours, the next day, the place fills up. All the neighbouring houses are occupied without the street being cleared" [2].

It should be noted that if the death of Modou Fall in *So Long a Letter* is a reality, the death of Bakar in *The Revenant* is a simulation of the "victim". He wears the mask of death to stare at society by attending his own funeral. The image he discovers is more than sordid. The veil of lies or hypocrisy with which the members of his community cover themselves

deeply saddens him. In this regard, the Committee notes:

Of all those who are there and mourn me, not one thinks of me, who is upset because Bakar is dead. Some cry for the parade, because it is fashionable to cry for funerals, others by mimicry, tears are contagious, others because they think of themselves, their own death and they are afraid [2].

On another note, the misuse of objective is an attitude strongly criticized by both novelists. In fact, behind the words of the characters, the concerns of the authors are heard mutedly. It is with this disgust that Bakar can understand that "to honor [his] disappearance, all these women enter into their finest finery. Concours d'elegance. Jewelry, wig, xeesal¹" [2]. The same festive atmosphere of the ceremony of the third day in Mariama Ba's novel makes that "from time to time, an exasperated manly voice warns, redefines the gathering: ceremony for the redemption of a soul" [1]. These moments reserved for prayers in order to implore the divine mercy and alleviate the sufferings of the deceased in his grave, are transformed into joyful and noisy reunions. "The significant expenses incurred on these occasions by the actors de facto maintain a real 'funeral industry'" [3].

It is exactly this misuse of purpose that entangles the narrator of *Le Revenant* who, at Bakar's funeral, notes this: "It lasted all day. There was no shortage of food: grilled meats, rice with succulent fish, fruit, cakes, drinks of all kinds were served abundantly to the guests. Rarely had anyone heard of the poor dead" [1]. So, instead of being moments of contemplation, of the expression of a deeply felt sadness, these ceremonies become occasions when the material and festive aspect takes precedence over the essential.

3.2. Baptisms and Marriages

Baptisms and marriages are social practices. These are moments when we celebrate the sacredness of a conjugal union or celebrate the birth of an infant. But the waste they cause leads society into uncomfortable situations. In the society where these stories are rooted, having takes precedence over being. Appearance is the only barometer for measuring the importance or insignificance of the individual. This is the meaning of the many sacrifices made by Bakar in *The Revenant* to enter the graces of his future wife, Mame Aissa. To get her hand, on the advice of his sister Yama, the suitor floods his in-laws with gifts. Skeptical at first, the girl's father will be convinced by his wife dazzled by the wealth and the status of Bakar's postal agent. To always give himself importance, Bakar is even more generous after the wedding. In this regard, we learn:

Bakar had offered a hundred thousand francs of dowry, a trousseau of a higher value, and one morning, a large truck had unloaded at El Hadji Wellé a bedroom, a living room, dining room, all the imported furniture, of the latest luxury. Neighbors had rushed to admire these furniture, and for weeks and weeks, there was only talk in the neighborhood of the kindness and generosity of Mame Aissa Guèye's husband [2].

If this is so, it is because Yama, as a shadow technician, had orchestrated everything. In your eyes, to earn the esteem, respect and attention of the in-laws and the surrounding you have to be pompous and ostentatious. This spendthrift madness will lead Bakar to embezzle money to end up in prison. Add to that the costs associated with the baptism of the couple's daughter. This opportunity was seized by Yama with "two hundred cloths woven 'ndiango', three suitcases of effects for the baby, six bathtubs for the baby's bath, one hundred thousand francs" [2]. This same pompous spirit prevails during circumcision ceremonies. On these occasions, each child is covered with an outfit whose "value makes it possible to assess the wealth that the person may possess" [9]. It is a competitive and exhibitionist logic that drives individuals the most.

However, this materialistic spirit does not determine the marriage of the narrator of *So Long a Letter*. There, Ramatoulaye gives her heart to Modou Fall against the will of her parents who wanted to marry her to Daouda Dieng. The latter, like Bakar in *The Revenant*, cover the parents with his lust with "useful gifts... ranging from the bag of rice, appreciable in this time of scarcity of war, to the futile gift for [her], wrapped with preciousness in wrapped paper" [1]. It is a question of negotiating feelings by force of material and pecuniary goods since money dictates its law and confers social status. When she refuses to give in to the temptation and commercialization of her feelings, Ramatoulaye will marry her man in the sobriety and indifference of those around her. In this regard, it notes the following: "Our marriage was made without dowry, without pomp, under the disapproving gazes of my father, before the painful indignation of my surprised sisters, in our city silent with astonishment" [1]. Over time, this husband becomes fickle by deciding to marry for the second time. For this, he committed large loans to the bank by mortgaging the Faaleen house, acquired with his first wife. He installs the raptor Dame mother-in-law and her daughter Binetou in luxury and ensures the pilgrimage of his new wife's parents.

Clearly, these social practices constitute real hindrances to the progress. Showing joy by spending one's fortune is not reprehensible. But when the costs take on disproportionate proportions and become ostentatious it can be indisposed. Presumably, in many cases, such behaviour is not simply overly generous. They hide ulterior intentions ranging from fancy to opportunistic calculations on the part of their authors.

4. Opportunistic Calculations

Acting with disinterest, without expecting anything in return, is not a characteristic of opportunistic people. Both stories in this study are teeming with characters who are profiteers. Behind every act taken there is a calculation.

4.1. Social Hypocrisy

It is obvious that any action taken has motives, whether admitted or tacit. The organization of the family ceremonies mentioned above reveals a face of social hypocrisy. First of

¹ Depigmentation product.

all, these ceremonies are an excuse to feast. Moreover, the hearty meals served prove it. And the expenses they incur plus the cost of renting chairs and/or tarpaulins come from the resources of the grieving family as illustrated during the ceremony of the third of Modou Fall and the funeral of Bakar. In addition, solidarity shown in kind or in cash testifies to falsehood. This overflowing generosity shown in hindsight could have been salutary if it was noted upstream. It is in this (case) that Ramatoulaye can be sorry in these terms: "And I still think: how many dead could have survived if, before organizing their funeral feast, the relative or friend had bought the saving prescription or paid for hospitalization" [1]. The material or financial support provided to grieving families is ostentatiously recorded, even to the point of creating an unhealthy atmosphere. It is in this respect that we note that in *Le Revenant*, "around the microphone, a crazy disorder reigned, created by those who made their contribution, who shouted their names to avoid confusion" [2]. This aid creates more load than it relieves. Indeed, the reimbursement of the sums received will be doubled, tripled or even increased tenfold in such circumstances. This is why, at the ceremony on the third day after Modou Fall's death, the solidarity shown hides unspoken intentions. The narrator of Mariama Ba's story remarks:

Each group shall show its share of the costs. In the past, this aid was given in kind: millet, cattle, rice, flour, oil, sugar, milk. Today, it is ostensibly expressed in banknotes and no one wants to give less than the other. Disturbing externalization of the invaluable inner feeling, valued in francs! [1]

Worse, the grieving family does not benefit from this money as the recipient of the letter points out: "Our in-laws thus take away bundles laboriously completed and leave us in total destitution, we who will need material support" [1]. Similarly, the exhibition of the money that is given connotes competition and a feeling of pride. This opportunistic calculation also takes place in baptism and/or marriage ceremonies. Even the acceptance of the suitor is dictated by the profit that the family could derive from it. Adja Dado and Dame-belle-mère, respectively mother of Mame Aissa and little Nabou, serve as illustrations. Materialism is at the center of concerns and relegates nobility to the background. In *So Long a Letter* as well as in *The Revenant*, families hope to enrich themselves through the matrimonial union of their daughters. Mame Aissa's mother, Adja Dado, did everything she could to convince her husband to marry their daughter off in Bakar. In fact, she sees this union as a success because Bakar had a good financial situation. In this respect, all those oppose this marriage do so out of pure jealousy because "none of them would have sent Bakar away if he had come to his house" [2].

She wears the dress of a lawyer pleading on behalf of their daughter's suitor, Bakar. The same materialistic logic characterizes Marième's mother, courted by Karim in the novel of the same name. Here, on the eve of the feast of

Tabaski², the mother advises her daughter to ask her suitor: "Tell her that you need to have your earrings repaired; Buy Louis d'Or to put on your braids. You also have to pay the cherry that must redo your hairstyle, and do not forget the price of two silk boubou, a pair of golden slippers..." [4].

However, when Bakar was imprisoned for embezzlement and his stay in prison was prolonged, Adja Dado "spared no effort to break up his daughter's marriage: Advice, imprecations, maraboutage, she had gone everywhere" [2]. When she no longer sees her son-in-law as a dairy cow, there is no justification for her daughter to be linked to this prisoner. Nevertheless, Mame Aissa loves her husband despite his situation as a convict. Faced with Mame Aissa's obstinacy not to file for divorce despite her mother's insistence, she mobilizes the whole entire extended family to coerce her daughter. In this regard, the narrator informs that "in Adja Dado Sarr's room, transformed for the purposes of the case into a courtroom, sat all Mame Aissa's paternal and maternal aunts, all Adja Dado's friends and all her aunts" [2].

Alone against all, Mame Aissa can discover the full extent and ugliness of human hypocrisy. Now all those who praised the merits of her husband have turned into regular critics because he is now in a bad position. It is rightly that she is red with anger and appears like "a lioness who watches for prey, lurking in the tall grass, shredding the steppe with big yellow eyes"[10] She is sorry that all these women approve of her mother's position inviting her to ask for divorce from a husband "who is rotting in prison" [2]. A dive into the recent past reveals the contrast of the attitude of these women. The honeyed words spoken to Bakar turn into slander. It is the same attitude deplored by Yejid who suffers the assaults of his mother-in-law for not having succeeded in fathering two years after the wedding. She is held responsible by this mother-in-law who questions her in these terms: "Why do you refuse a child to my son?"[11] This means that social relations in these romantic spaces are a function of circumstances. The posture of a chameleon that changes color depending on the living environment is decried in the following passage:

They had forgotten the praises and blessings they had once addressed to Bakar and all the good they had said of him when, on the occasion of Mame Aissa's marriage and her daughter's baptism, they had had to share considerable sums that none of their "nawle"³ had received on those occasions. None of them remembered the price of kola offered by Bakar on feast days or a visit to Adja Dado [2].

Stendhal's metaphor that "the novel is a mirror that one walks along a path" [5], applies well to these two novels. Their content is very illustrative of a capitalist mentality of the society that inspires them. When it reaches certain proportions, a hypocritical attitude can not only create disappointment, but above all put the victim in a dead end.

4.2. The Loss of Victims

The feeling of being insignificant in the eyes of those

²Feast where a sheep must be sacrificed.

³Equal by social rank.

around you is a traumatic force that can decimate the individual from within. Bakar, having lost his job, inspires nothing but disgust and contempt on the part of his sister. His imprisonment is interpreted as a humiliation of his family. From then on, it becomes a shame and a gaping wound that must be discarded.

Moreover, on the occasion of the reception organized at Yama's, he finds it natural to go there to have a good time. But great will be his surprise when his sister ordered him to join the children's room, to the general surprise of the audience. Wounded in his pride, Bakar begins to sink into decay. The malaise "turns into imperious malaise to the point of vertiginous despair" [12] A black anger is perceptible in his reaction against the affront that had just inflicted on him by his sister whom he calls an upstart and complex: "Yama is not reasonable! [...] She is a dirty upstart, a damned complexed who is ashamed of me and who deems me unworthy to appear in front of her husband's gang, which is composed only of scoundrels! I am an intruder because I have nothing" [2].

The moral wound is so deep that he finds it difficult to realize that it is the same entourage that adored him yesterday that is turning against him today. If the physical wound can heal, the moral affront has a lifespan proportional to the subject who carries it. This is why he can declare that he is fed up with this life "where interest drives people to commit the most despicable actions!" [2] The abysmal depth of disappointment precipitates Bakar into drunkenness. Having realized that he is "despised, mistreated, cursed because he fell into bankruptcy where they pushed [him]" [2], he decides to drown his grief in alcohol like the protagonists of the novels *Broken Glass* by Alain Mabanckou or *The Maquis* by Mosé Chimoun. The narrator of *Broken Glass* informs that he is a fan of the bar "Le Crédit a voyageagé" for having "spent more than fifteen years drinking there anytime, anyhow" [6]. In Chimoun's text, one of the unfortunate concludes once and for all that "only our beer will never deceive us. She is faithful to us like a dog" [7]. As part of this same logic, the consumption of alcohol quickly transforms Bakar into a human foulbrood. For him, it is necessary to send back to society the sordid effects of his cynical acts. To this end, "as time passed, Bakar sank into his evil.

To overcome boredom, to forget the anguish and idleness that gripped him in his moments of lucidity, to brave the contempt of a stupid, hypocritical, greedy world" [2]. A deep sense of disgust fills the person of the hero as well as his wife who, forced to divorce, may regret the feeling "powerful and strong that unites [them]" [13]. Bakar matures a plan of revenge. The original strategy he found for this purpose was to simulate death by drowning. Disguised, he attends funerals where folklore and appearance have taken precedence over the essential. Against all odds, he returns at night to the moment when the whole family has locked themselves in a room to take stock of the revenues. Surprise, disorder and stampede set in. He grabs all the money and thus takes revenge on the social greed, particular of his sister Yama who now falls into dementia. Bakar's unimaginable return not only deprives Yama of money, but leads her to madness:

"She walked out of the room, with a steady step, as if dancing, and then out of the house; and in the streets, in the dark night, barefoot, she tore her clothes laughing: - He came back - Wooy he came back! Bakar Diop dekkina!" [2].

In addition, it should be noted that the disqualification extends to opportunists made up mainly of women. In reality, they could not enjoy their unhealthy works for a long time. The fate of their victims has dragged theirs in its path. In *The Revenant* Adja Dado and her husband painfully witness the requisition of furniture bought by Bakar in broad daylight under the gaze of the curious. Their humiliation is boundless and their future uncertain because everything collapses in record time and "takes on the faces of prison horror" [14]. In the epistolary text, the hope of Dame mother-in-law to see continue the payment of a monthly deposit by the heirs of the deceased Modou Fall and to continue his life of nobility, will be bitterly disappointed. Not only will his payments come to an end, but the villa and its contents already recorded by a bailiff, will be used to repay the many acknowledgements of debts listed in detail in chapter 4 of the novel. The narrator informs that her daughter "Daba, she, brandished a bailiff's report dated the very day of her father's death which indicated all the contents of the villa SICAP" [1]. This puts down the opportunistic calculations of Dame Stepmother and suggests the lamentable situation in which she and her daughter will find themselves. They will now be alone behind the "curtain of stones"[15] that will arrive from everywhere.

In the light of the above, we can admit that the hypocrisy of these opportunists has led to the fatal decline of the victims. Like Meursault who understood that "things were not going well for [him]" [8] in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Bakar concluded that the world was false. He does not recognize himself in the collective mentality. In a society of anomie, wanting to distinguish oneself by carving a different path is fraught with consequences because "no one is oneself anymore and wanting to keep one's moral integrity, refusing to participate in social lies, is a sure risk of being considered as a marginal element" [2].

5. Conclusion

As a way of conclusion, it is possible to note that these novels paint the many facets of a community with complex social practices. The texts question the meaning of certain ceremonies that trace the curve of human existence: weddings, baptisms and funerals. During these events, certain acts and behaviors break with orthodoxy to disguise the symbolic meaning of the appointments. By becoming encounters where appearance and competitive logic take over, the essential is distorted. In this respect, these social practices lead to real abuses that hinder human progress. At the same time, hypocrisy becomes the only compass that guides intentions. While it should be recognized that the meaning of ceremonies must be mainly the consolidation of harmony, solidarity and fraternity, here they generate feelings of deep

4 Bakar Diop is resurrected.

disappointment that can break all the springs of the balance of the victims. In this way, novelists have succeeded in plunging their pen into the ink of social filth from which they propose to criticize and erase.

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