

## LITERATURE AND SOCIETY: A STUDY OF ARMAH, SEMBENE, AND BA / SEMBENE OUSMANE: LES BOUTS DE BOIS DE DIEU

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### ABSTRACT

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The relation between literature and society is highly complex and difficult to determine which elements of society has exerted what influence on literature. This paper uses the reader response theory to examine the social processes including material, conceptual, emotional, and institutional elements regarded as containing the potential influences which direct the character of literature. The study aims to contribute to the scholarship on the relationship between literature and society. The authors discussed in this paper are Ayi Kwei Armah: *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragment*, and *KMT: In The House of Life*, Ousmane Sembene: *God's Bit of Wood*, *The False Prophet* (short story) and Mariama Ba: *So Long a Letter*. The discussion gives a summary of their work and how they approach social issues through their writings. The findings reveal that literature does not exist in vacuum but is closely interconnected with real life society.

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### 1. Introduction

Any creative writing that captures the ideas and emotions of great minds is considered literature. Additionally, it conveys the author's worldview. Literature and society are closely intertwined. A body of literature is a representation of the entire human culture when taken as a whole. The elements that set one group's literature apart from another are drawn from that group's traits. Its topics and issues come up in group circumstances and activities, and the degree to which they reflect and enhance culture determines how significant they are. We are members of a society, and those who are part of the society are related to one another. Naturally, we are well on our way to producing literature if we can use language to convey emotions. In other words, literature generally deals with society in some capacity. Literature is influenced by society in a variety of ways, and these linkages between literature and society are significant and convincing. The range of social influences on literature is as broad as the full range of operative social forces, including the dominant system of social organisation, which includes structure, the economic system, the political organisation, and deeply ingrained institutions; the dominant ideas; the defining emotional tone; the sense of the past;

and the pattern of contemporary realities. Everything that happens in social life, no matter how tiny or significant, whether directly or indirectly, contributes to the impression that society has on literature.

Social sympathies expressed in literature have a good impact on our thoughts and attitudes. The way society responds to literature is dynamic. A literary work has a broader impact on society. It awakens our emotions and ignites our passion for welfare. It is exceedingly challenging to pinpoint which aspect of society has had what impact on literature because of how intricately linked the two are. Therefore, we cannot afford to focus only on one aspect of society, whether it be economic or ideological. Additionally, it gives it a causal role in the selection of books. You can think of the whole social process, including all its physical, mental, emotional, and institutional parts, as having the potential to shape the direction and style of the literature of a certain time. The reality that society influences literature cannot be disputed. Literature has been compared to a mirror that reflects society, but whether the image is of high quality or is reactionary depends on the writer's mindset and attitude. Naturally, conservative-minded authors will emphasise social factors that best represent the old ways of life. For instance, he will place a high emphasis on respect for religion, the chastity of women, and other ancient ideas. A progressive writer, on the other hand, will often demonstrate how outdated beliefs stifle people's ability to think freely and restrict how freely men and women can move around in a society that is open to new ideas and striving for better ways of living. This essay will explore the writings of three authors who have used their writing to highlight societal issues. The authors who will be covered in this article are Ayi Kwei Armah, Mariama Ba, and Ousmane Sembene. The paper will provide a quick overview of their publications and how they handle social concerns.

## AYI KWEI ARMAH

### About the author

Ayi Kwei Armah was born in Takoradi in Ghana in 1939. He was educated at the elite Achimota College in Accra and received a degree in sociology in Harvard University in 1963. Upon leaving Harvard he became actively involved in the struggle of African liberation of Algeria which had just emerged from its armed struggle for independence from France. In Algeria he worked as a translator for the magazine *révolution africaine* until his health failed towards the end of 1963. After a five-month hospitalization in Boston Massachusetts, he returned to Ghana in 1964. Ayi Kwei Armah is considered as one of Africa's leading prose stylist writing in English. His works typically explore post-colonial Africa and focus on human alienation. Though Armah's vision is one of unified Africa, he writes vehemently of the psychological effect of colonialism on the people of contemporary Ghana and Africa. He wrote his first novel 'The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born' (1968). His second autobiographical novel *Fragments* was written in 1970 followed by *Why Are We so Blest?* (1972), *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), *Osiris Rising*, *KMT: In the House of Life* and several other works.

### The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born

### Summary/Discussion

The texts selected for discussion on Armah are; *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, *Fragments* and *KMT: In the House of Life*. Occasionally I will mention some of his works which are not part of the selected texts. *The beautiful ones are not yet born* is a story which tells of a nameless man, The man who struggles to reconcile himself with the reality of post-independence Ghana. He struggles to remain clean and innocent in a country full of corruption.

Looking at the title of the book we discover that there is a deviation. The word beautiful in the title has been miss-pelt. The author uses this deviation to emphasize the main theme in the story which is corruption. Symbolically the corrupted version of the word beautiful defies the real meaning of the word. Assessing this work from the post-colonial perspective, Armah sets the work in the latter stages of Nkrumah's regime in Ghana just after the end of the first coup d'état. The novel describes the aftermath of the birth of Ghana in 1957 after years of struggle for independence led by Nkrumah. Armah uses vivid description of filth like human

excrement, garbage and dust to bring out the corrupt nature of post-colonial Ghana and Africa as a whole. The writer expresses the view that the condition of Ghana and Ghanaians has been worse even when the black man is managing his own affairs. Most African leaders become corrupt and greedy after they have been elected by the people into government; they amass wealth for themselves and ignore most of the people.

Even in Ghana and most African countries presently, there is still the issue of bad governance. In the novel, *The Man* speaks of the living condition of his friend Koomson who is a government official, he lives in affluence even more than when the Whiteman was in charge. It is ironical to see that the blacks who revolted against the leadership of the Whiteman because of inequality and biases did worse than the white when they took over the leadership of the country. In recent times, government officials live in very comfortable houses, take fat salaries, and their bills paid with monies from the taxpayer who an ordinary citizen trying hard to make ends meet.

*The beautiful ones are not yet born* is a novel which addresses the issue of corruption, rot, dictatorship and moral decadence. It describes the sinking of a newly independence country into corruption and malfeasance. The national coffers, wealth and treasure become a free for all to scramble especially by educated people who care only for their stomachs.

‘There is something terrible in watching a Blackman trying at all points to be the dark ghost of an European...’ (Page 81). The above quote agrees with Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s *Weep not Child*, where Kamau told his brother that ‘blackness is not all that makes a man...the Whiteman will always be a Whiteman but Blackman trying to be a Whiteman is wicked...’ In our societies today, we seek to approve of light-skin people. Our inferiority complex born out of our dark complexion has pervaded our every move. Women go all length to buy bleaching creams to be attractive and also to look like a white people. Men have also developed taste for light skin women because they claim their skin attracts. Though the coup came purportedly to erase corruption and bad governance, it never achieved its purpose. The issue of corruption is rather on the ascendency. There were lootings and extortions going on everywhere in the country. People openly took bribe without shame. This canker was also seen in fragments where Baako was expected to pay bribe before he was employed. The man seeing policemen taking bribes at the numerous roadblocks after he has helped his friend Koomson escaped, walked home with his head bowed, wondering when the beautiful ones would be born because he has condoned with bad act.

We see the Marxist theory coming into play in Armah’s novel. We noticed that there is a power struggle. A government is overthrown because of corruption, and another takes over to rectify situation but ends up being worse than the previous. It is also observed that when people gain power, they use it to suppress others so there is also dictatorship. There are also instances where people in higher position use their power to loot the country and amass wealth for themselves while the ordinary citizens suffer. This was seen in the case of Koomson. He diverts government funds for his personal business. He buys a boat in the name of Oyo, the man’s wife, who was working for him, and the money goes into his personal account.

Some critiques have condemned Armah on his language use in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. His language use has been condemned for being vulgar. It is true that he used vulgar imagery to depict the rot in society, but one should also not forget that his representation was a true reflection of society at the time. For example, his use of ‘shit’, ‘garbage’, and the graffiti on the walls of the public toilet about vagina (vagina sweet) are imagery that depict rot. The situation and the condition demanded that the writer called spade a spade. He has observed corruption and the rot in the Ghanaian society and has therefore decided to be brutal in his representation of society through his writing.

Armah’s presentation of women in this novel is also a true reflection the stereotypical depiction of women in the Ghanaian society. The women in the novel are presented as people who are greedy and corrupt. Oyo, the wife of *The Man* was presented as a greedy and selfish wife. She became furious when the husband refused to accept bribe and connived with her mother to help Koomson in his shady business. His exposure of the female genital organ is much to be desired. All the same, one cannot blame Armah for the negative portrayal of women in his work, because the author is only re-enacting real-life situation through his writing.

## FRAGMENTS

## Summary/Discussion

The novel is about the frustration of an educated Ghanaian 'been-to' and the bribery and corruption in Ghanaian society. Baako the protagonist returns from abroad and is expected to live in a big mansion, drive a good car and shower his family with gifts that is, the cargo mentality. He returns empty-handed to the disappointment of his family members and friends. Baako tries as a loner to change the rotten situation around him but at the end he becomes frustrated and goes mad.

Fragments captured a materialistic society. Armah paints the picture whereby so much is expected from a 'been-to' in the Ghanaian society. This is seen in the character of Obrempong. He expresses surprise that Baako who is also a 'been-to' is returning home without material things and in his interaction with Baako, he lists several things he is returning home with which include cars and a big refrigerator for his mother. We also see how Ghanaians hail people who have been abroad. This is seen in the lousy welcome reception of Obrempong by his family including people he did not even know. His sister rents a limousine and drummers just to welcome Obrempong at the airport. The reason for this lousy reception at the airport is because he has returned home with goodies for his family.

The Marxist theory is reflected in the society that Armah creates in his work. Predominantly, we notice that there is a class struggle and power relation issues. Government officials take advantage of their position and rob, in the form of bribe taking. The get-rich-quick syndrome has catch up with many Ghanaians. They lazy about at their workplaces and yet they take their salaries at the end of every month. As if that is not enough, they take bribe from unsuspecting victims before they execute the work for which they are been paid for. This kind of attitude is seen in the behaviour of the workers at the broadcasting house where Baako works. Government fund is used to buy television sets which are shared amongst the workers instead of the purpose for which it was purchased. There is also an instance where Baako is asked to pay bribe before he is offered a job. There are also instances where people are offered jobs based on whom they know. In Ghana today, the trend has moved from whom you know to who knows you. The social class struggle is again seen at the out-dooring ceremony of Baako's sister's child. His mother invites prominent people who can donate more money to show case their wealth.

The work also explores the conflict between tradition and modernity. This is included within a narrative by another that emerges from the mind of Naana, Baako's grandmother. She appears to symbolise the value of old Africa that is being swept away by the impact of western notions. In that her voice is heard at the beginning and end of the work, it is significant that this mother figure encloses the story of the son who falls victim to the unresolvable tension between the two value systems, Western and African. The enclosure restores the lost equilibrium by situating Baako's account of his quick descent into insanity within the context of conventional philosophy. Naana believes not just in reincarnation but also in the continuance of life after death and the necessity of maintaining communication with the deceased.

There is also the aspect of fragment which concerns with Juana the psychiatrist which completely has something to do with the cultural clash and its interpenetration with the relationship with her and Baako who is an African. The differentiation of his mind is shown not only in the presented world of a therapist, but also in the presence of a second supporting figure who is also like a mother and grandmother figure. The most convincing demonstration in the work of powerful divisive pressure of the clash of cultures may be seen in the decline into madness of Baako

The image of women improves in this novel as compared to *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Naana is given a strong character; she is seen as philosophical in her perception of the world. She is someone who sees the end from the beginning even though she is a bind old woman. She predicts the plight of her grandson Baako and she is also the only person who understands his predicament. Though Naana is illiterate, Armah portrays her as the reservoir of knowledge and wisdom. Another powerful and assertive female character is Juana. She is presented as an independent and a librated woman. She leaves her country and ventures into an unknown territory. She is passionate about her work and does so whole heartedly. She shares a strong bond with Baako because both feel alienated from their physical world.

## KMT: In The House of Life

Ayi Kwei Armah is one of the most consistent African writers in terms of his novelist vision of confronting the current African problems of decolonization. The idea of the return and the quest for the African identity are central themes in *KMT: In the House of Life*, *Osiris Rising*, and *Two Thousand Seasons*. In this novel, Armah believes that it is through education that Africans can liberate themselves from mental slavery as the legendary Bob Marley said in his song. Education in the novel is portrayed as a two-edged sword. It built and the same time destroyed. It is through education that the Blackman can identify and rediscover him/her. In the novel, Biko discovered through research that civilization and education begun in Africa, Egypt to be precise for which the Whiteman unduly takes credit for. It is the discovery of this truth that lead to his death. The imperialists cannot accept the fact that a black young mind is challenging a falsity which they have propounded. The best option to stop the threat is to nib it in the bud and that lead to the dismissal of Biko from school.

In this narrative cultural alienation is orchestrated by the Europeans through the education system which tend to celebrate everything European but demonizes everything African. This education according to Armah is designed to do little good than to induce African children to embrace European values and despise their own cultural values. This same issue was expressed by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Mask*. We see the psychoanalytic literary theory coming into play here. The imperialists believe in the principle of “catch them young and they will be yours forever”. They know that it is easier to capture the mind of children and mould them as their puppets. African children are educated and indoctrinated to believe that everything European is good while everything African is bad. In our Ghanaian society, people patronize foreign products more than our own Ghanaian products. Governments award contracts to foreigners rather than Ghanaian contractors. This attitude Armah paints of Africans is not farfetched.

The friendship and the bond that exists between Biko, Lindela, and Wennefer are worth mentioning. Even though Wennefer is not a strong character in the novel, he plays an important role. He sees the potentials in two children and does not allow it to go waste. He mentors these young children and guides them to become better persons in the future who can help change Africa. In this harmless effort to assist these children, he was later blamed for being the cause of the death of Biko. There are still some African parents who do not see the importance of education and will therefore not encourage their children to be educated. We should therefore not forget that ignorance and illiteracy is the woes of most African countries. The University is Armah’s institution for affecting the desired social change. If intellectuals can ever meet and discuss plans, it is inside higher learning institutions like the Teacher’s Training College in *Osiris Rising* and in the University campus in *KMT: In the House of Life*. Upon her arrival at the imaginary state of Hapa, Ast wonders which institution appeals best to her friend Asar. Knowing him from their students’ day in the United States, she is almost certain that his heart and soul vibrate only in the direction of social change in Africa, and that can only take place with the institution of school.

Armah’s novel is set against a background of colonialism in Africa. The novel is set at a time when most African countries were controlled by European rulers. The colonial masters make sure they distort the facts about African culture and make Africans believe that being black is evil and ignorance. They force their culture and religion on the people of Africa. Christianity is used to make Africans to believe that their own cultural and religious practice is barbaric and inhuman. The imperialist project themselves above the blacks, and make the blacks to believe they are inferior to the whites. In th is novel, we see the segregation that exists between the blacks and the whites. The habitat of the blacks is completely different from the white people. The blacks who are the owners of the lands rather live in slums and poor environment. The Marxist theory comes into play here, even though the lands belong to the blacks, the imperialist seem to be in control because they have the economic power, and this is seen in the living conditions of these two groups of people. Armah identifies education as the dominant corrosive destabilizing historical facts that have been undermining Africa’s racial civilization and the socio-economic growth since the pharonic period. In other words, the Europeanization of Africa’s education system does not only consciously dislocate the African from his or her root but socio-economically enslaves him or her.

In this novel, Lindela and Jengo’s visit to Yarw is symbolic. It is the same as the reunification experienced by Ast on her return to Africa and Bara in *Osiris Rising*. Lindela Imana expresses her spiritual bond with Yarw on the way long before her physical contact with the place. Armah is telling us that as Africans we should not forget our roots. Today, there many Africans who have

left the shores of Africa in such of greener pasture and to acquire higher education. These people after making it, refuse to come back home to contribute their quota in the nation building in other to make Africa great and strong. We noticed that in *KMT: In the House of Life* Armah assaults the education system especially the university. The derisive memo outlined by the main character Jengo entitled “conferencitis” underlines Armah’s attempts at ironically deriding the negative motifs of African academics. Instead of clarifying issues under study in seminars and conferences, academicians are rather encouraged by financial bodies to mystify and make problems insoluble. Poverty, when taken as an example, is cunningly articulated to appear like a pre-condition for Africa while every effort to alleviate it is monitored to look like a waste of time.

Assessing Armah’s work through the feminine lens, one can say that the image of women for that matter the African woman in the novel is projected. Lindela the main character is empowered through education and that gives her a strong voice. The vision of Armah in his novel is carried out through her voice. She is portrayed as a strong and assertive woman who believes in the emancipation of women and Africa as a whole.

Ousmane Sembene

About the author

The son of a fisherman, Ousmane Sembene was born in 1923 in Senegal’s Cassamance region. He only completed three years of formal education due to being fired for retaliating against a French teacher. The fact that his kid had upheld his dignity thrilled his father. His goal was to reclaim African reality from colonial and neo-colonial misrepresentations while also announcing the dignity, independence, and strength of African culture. During World War II, he worked for the French military as a docker and a sharpshooter. Sembene started his career as a writer and is self-taught. His lack of a formal education has also prevented him from receiving a formal indoctrination, which has given him the freedom to develop a unique worldview that sets him apart from his peers. In Senegal, he rose to fame as a writer and filmmaker. His works include *The Black Docker*, *O Pays*, *Men Beau People*, *God’s Bits of Wood*, *Voltaïque*, *L’Harmattan*, *The Money Order with White Genesis*, *Xala*, *Niiwan*, and others.

God’s Bits of Wood

Summary/ Discussion

*God’s Bits of Wood* and *The False Prophet*, two of Sembene’s writings, were the main topics of this conversation. The essay examines the social implications of Sembene’s previously stated works. *God’s Bit of Wood*, Ousmane Sembene’s third book, was initially created and released in French. The fight of African railroad employees in three cities is followed in the story, which is set in Senegal before independence. The chapters of the book alternate between Bamako, Thiès, and Dakar and follow the development of men and women whose lives are changed by the strike through their deeds and actions. This book takes place just before Senegal won its freedom from colonial domination. The book makes the reader aware of the blatant disparities between native inhabitants and foreign settlers who arrived in the area to take control of and use its natural and human resources. The process of highlighting indigenous resistance is more important than illuminating the issue brought on by western colonial violence. Sembene depicts a conflict over cultural distinctiveness in a modernised African environment. African railway employees are on strike, which by its very nature fosters conflict between the company and the employee. The fact that the French management is backed by the French government, which has oppressed the Africans and denied them food, increases this tension. The conquerors have also forcibly replaced the previous environment and way of life that would have allowed the African strikers to survive with submissive industrialization. The Marxist theory is brought into play in *God’s Bits of Wood* by the sheer nature of the power dynamics between the colonisers and the colonised; this is because the narrative is framed by inequality and social injustice. The topic of polygamy is discussed in *God’s Bits of Wood*, along with some of its benefits. When his brother is slain in a labour dispute, the character Bakayoko follows the traditions of his people and marries his brother’s widow, Assitan, providing for her and her witty daughter, Ad’jibid’ji. At the end of the book, Bakayoko declares that he opposes polygamy, but

he later admits that if Penda had survived, he might have taken her as his second wife. Such a relationship would have been polygamous, and it's possible that Ousmane is admitting that polygamy is a good way to organise society.

He is more direct in his disdain for chauvinistic western habit of dismissing polygamy as a practice of savages. In the novel, one of the demands of the striking workers is that they should be giving family allowances as part of their compensation. The imperialist objected by saying they do not want to support women who are only concubines. It is the arrogance of the French management that fuelled the determination of the women to make their march to Dakar. This is to say that when people are pushed beyond their limits they react with equal force.

We also see the interdependency of Africans in the various communities. In the novel, the people regarded each other as one big family. The problem of one person equally affects the other. Sembene portrays an African society which is communal rather than individualistic. It is this communal spirit that brought the people together to fight for their rights. The communal spirit is also seen at the meeting places of the men, though there were few instances they disagreed on opinions, they were able to stay together to run the strike successfully. It is also seen in the attitude of the women. They mobilize themselves to find foods for their families and fight their oppressors.

The issue of religion also features in Sembene's work. Islam is the dominant religion in Senegal and it is captured as such in God' Bits of Word. In this novel, we see how religion is used as a tool of oppression and exploitation. Religious leaders are corrupted by the colonialist with money and easy lifestyle accorded through their cooperation with the French management. Islamic religious leaders and other government officials were used by the French management to put an African face to the effort of the French management to rule and exploit the people of their own resources. This is affirmed in the speech of the imam to the striking workers. He makes them to believe that it is ordained by God for the white to rule over the blacks

The evolution of the strike causes an evolution in the self-perception of the Africans, but the most noticeable is the women of Dakar, Thies, and Bamako. These women go from seemingly standing behind the men, to walking alongside with them and eventually marching ahead of them. It is a known fact that most African countries are patriarchal in nature. Men always have an upper hand over women and women are made to succumb to every need of men. But in Sembene's novel, he gives voice and power to women. While the men are able to work at the railways and the factories, the women were responsible for running the markets, preparing food, and raising children. The break of the strike gives the role of bread winners or precisely bread scavengers to women. They moved from supporting the strike to participate in it. Eventually, it is the women who marched on foot for days to Dakar. Many of the men opposed the action of the women but it is the show of determination by these women that yielded fruit for them and their husbands.

Sembene captures the transformation of the African woman through Penda. She is first presented as an unmarried woman who breaks customs by having periodic escapade with men, but the experience of the strike changes her into a dedicated and a selfless communalist. Her strength and spirit leads the union officials to seek her out to be in charge of the food ration and also lead the women to Dakar. The novel draws its name in part from Penda's method of keeping the march together. Their tradition abhors the practice of counting human beings which they believe brings misfortune. Penda wilfully violates this tradition and begins counting the women in order to keep in the march.

In this novel, the use of language plays an important role in the story. Language is the soul of every culture and society. In the novel, the striking workers and their families are primarily speakers of Ouolof language. As a result, learning French is not necessary in their bid to organize themselves for the strike. In the novel, French serves as a language of exclusion. Beaugosse one of the junior union official who is bought over by the French management, uses French in his conversation with the local union leaders. In Bakayoko's response to Beaugosse's attitude says "you can keep your French to yourself, the men will understand you better if you speak their language"(pg186). It is not Beaugosse's intention to communicate directly to the people. His venom is directed at the leadership of the striking group because he knows that majority of the group are illiterate and therefore could not communicate in the French language.

N'daye Touti's knowledge of the French language allows her to embarrass the local French official. The constable assumes that because N'Daye is black and female, she is ignorant and incapable of speaking French. The constable refers to her sexuality as if she is a prostitute. He later realizes that she speaks French, and he feels ashamed of himself.

Bakayoko points out to the French negotiators that if Africans must learn French in order to deal with the managers, then, the French managers will soon have to learn Ouolof in order to communicate to their African employees. With the instances cited concerning language use, the Africans used language as a unifying tool against their colonial masters. Sembene seems to portray the fact that language gives an identity and also unifies people who use it. Wa' Thiongo also buttresses this point in his book, *Decolonizing the Mind*. He believes that the use of European languages by Africans is a form of mental slavery, Wa Thiongo (1986).

#### The False Prophet (Short Story)

This story is about a Senegalese muslim, Mahmoud Fall. He is lazy and does not like to do any difficult work to earn a living or to be exact; he did not like killing himself with hard work. Tired of being poor, and with an empty pocket, he journeys towards the sunset and the country of the Bilals. He travels to Senegal and changes his name to Aidra, a name that opens all doors to him. He uses the name and the position falsely and exploits the black Senegalese whom he regards as inferior to him. Through impersonation, he extorts from the people and feeds fat on them. He leaves the town unexpectedly after getting much to last him for some time. He journeys towards the deserts and encounters a very bad experience. He decides to rest after his long journey under a tree and wakes up from a dream to realize that his hair and beard had been shaved and the money he extorted from the people stolen. Mahmoud finally encounters with his conscience, he could not stand the encounter and runs off like a madman into the desert.

In this short story, Sembene addresses the issue of laziness. Mahmoud Fall is an energetic young man who refuses to do any difficult work to earn a living. He lazes about by sitting in the mosque all day reciting prayers and yet expects to be fed well by the people. Relating this to our Ghanaian society today, there are instances whereby people will not work and spend the whole day in churches and mosques praying for God to make them rich. Pastors and men of God encourage laziness by organizing church programmes for members to attend on weekdays while others are working hard to make ends meet. The youths of toady also prefer to lazy about and yet want all the good things in life. This attitude lures most of them into many social vices like prostitution, robbery, fraud, and many others.

The False Prophet addresses the issue of deception and fraud. Mahmoud Fall changes his name and his identity to exploit the Senegalese black Muslims. He deceives the people that he is from a respectable lineage. He is accorded the necessary respect due to his rank in the Islamic religion. His knowledge in the Koran earns him much respect and profit. The people treat him well and give him the best part of the meal serve though he contributes nothing towards it. Besides being fed well, Mahmoud amasses wealth for himself though he never considers there is enough for the trouble he is taking.

The story also touches on the theme of exploitation. Mahmoud Fall uses false identity to extort from his unsuspecting victims. He capitalizes on their generosity to exploit them. He plays on their intelligence and makes them believe he is an important religious person. I believe the author is exposing the vulnerability of most African societies. Africans open their arms to welcome Europeans on their lands who later exploit them. The same exploitation is captured in Wa' Thiongo's *Weep Not Child*. In this novel, we see how the Europeans take away the lands from the natives and they had to fight hard by losing their lives in order to regain their lands from the strangers whom they opened their arms to. Though Africans are free from colonial rule, European exploitation of Africa is not completely over. Most of our natural resources are still exploited by Europeans. They determine what to pay for our gold, cocoa, timber, oil and other minerals. Sembene uses the character of Mahmoud Fall to portray how Africans are easily deceived and exploited by strangers.

In this short story, the picture of class relation is seen through Mahmoud Fall, even though he is also a Senegalese Muslim from upper Senegal and fair in complexion, he believes that he is superior to the black Muslims in Bilals of Senegal. In his view these ebony-skinned people are his inferiors only good for guarding the haram. Because of his knowledge of the Quran and his ability

to preside over prayers, the people revered him. He uses his skin colour to deceive the people to believe that he is from a respectable lineage. On the other hand, he regards his benefactors as fool who could not see through his deception. In Africa people believe that the closer you are to the Whiteman in language and in skin colour then they are superior. The idea is also portrayed in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Mask* (1967). He writes that Europeans breed with Africans and their offspring who are high breeds are sent to Europe for education, these people come back as scholars and instead of building their nations they Lord over their people. Africans still have the mentality that the Whiteman is their superior. Mahmoud Fall makes fun of the people when they referred to him as "Souma Narr" meaning my moor. This referent IS ridiculous to him because to him a Blackman cannot own a moor which he says would be a topsy-turvy kind of a world.

The question of religion also features in Sebene's short story *The False Prophet*. Senegal is a country which has Islam as its main religion. In this story religion is used as a tool of exploitation. Mahmoud Fall uses his knowledge of the Quran and his ability to preside over prayers to exploit the people. The author reveals himself through the negative perceptions he has about religion. He sees religion as a tool of oppression and exploitation. In *God's Bit of Wood*, we see how the Imam and AL haj make the strikers to believe that it is God himself who has ordained the Whiteman to rule over the blacks. This short story also shows how the name Allah is used to exploit others. In our societies today we witness instances where people to extort from others. Pastors organize all sorts of programs and activities to pray for people to acquire wealth instead of encouraging them to work hard to get the wealth they pray for. Contrary, Sembene believes that no one can use the name of God or Allah to cheat without going unpunished. Towards the end of the story, Mahmoud loses all the money he steals from the people even including his hair and beard. In his dream he sees a Blackman shaving his hair and beard which became a reality. The Blackman he exploits outwits him and takes back what he steals from him. Before Mahmoud hides the money in the hole, he remembers that he has not paid his due to the Almighty and he addresses him thus 'I owe it to you...' indeed, God takes away from him that which does not belong to him. This is to admonish us that nobody can extort from others with the name of God without going unpunished.

Mariama Ba

*So Long a Letter*

Summary/discuss

*So long a letter*, Mariama Ba's first novel is literally written as a long letter. As the novel begins Ramatoulaye's Fall is beginning a letter to her lifelong friend Aissatou. The occasion for the writing is Ramatoulaye's recent widowhood. As she gives her friend the details of her husband's death, she sets off on a journey of remembering the major events in her and Aissatou's lives.

Ramatoulaye's husband Modou Fall, died suddenly of heart attack. Following the structure of her Muslim faith, Ramatoulaye must remain in seclusion for a long period of time. This seclusion is broken, however, by the ritualized visits of her relatives and friends of the dead man. During the first days, Ramatoulaye must share her home with Binatou, her co-wife.

Ramatoulaye looks back on the happy times she and friend had in married lives and tell about struggle for survival while being ignored by her husband and co-wife. Similarly her friend Aissatou also was faced with husband taking another wife and Ramatoulaye describe her friend's decision in not staying in the marriage and also applauds her for her choices and success.

*So Long a Letter*, bothers on issues of tradition and culture. In the story, tradition allows a man for that matter a Muslim man to marry more than one wife. Madou and Modou, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's husbands take second wives because their tradition permits it. Ramatou's husband of twenty years marries her daughter's best friend Binetou leaving her to her fate and shirks all responsibilities of a husband and a father of a dozen children. The major question or problem Mariama Ba tends to answer with Ramatoulaye character is her decision to remain married to a man who had for all intents and purpose divorced her, whilst at the same time, she describes herself as a part of African women. She is afraid of divorce because she had rejected her parent's choice and went ahead to marry Modou. Another reason is that she does not want to break tradition because divorce is frowned upon. Ramatoulaye in a way tries to avoid this kind of stigma though her husband has actually left her.

we also see cultural practices which oppress women in the story. As The letter unfold, we get to know the exact cause of Ramatoulaye's pain, the extent of her suffering in the last five years of marriage until Modou's eventual death and the suffering she goes through even after his death. As customs demands, she seats in public with her rival Binetou the very person who breaks her home. She is compelled to feed the numerous visitors who attended the funeral and shower her sisters-in-law with money. She plays the role of a senior wife and goes through the funeral rites for forty days as customs demands. She also has to put up with a proposal from her brother-in-law at the funeral of her husband, because custom permit a man to marry the wife of his deceased brother. Most women have fallen prey to some of these cultural practices. Fortunately for Ramatoulaye, she is able to stand her grounds and refuses to marry her brother-in-law.

In Mariama Ba's novel, the society in this story is portrayed as a patriarchal one. Male dominance is seen in every aspect of the society. Men have all the privileges and the opportunities to explore while the women on the other hand are exploited and suppressed by these men. For instance, the men are free to take decision on their own and are permitted by their culture to take many wives. The women on the other hand are treated like dolls and are afraid to divorce their husbands even as they treat them bad. This is seen in the lives of Ramatoulaye and Jacqueline who did not have the courage to break away from bad marriages except Aissatou who is bold enough to walk away from her husband. All through the narrative, explicit statements are made about the turning away from the old patriarchal societies of west African countries to one where everyone will have equal right and access. Ramatoulaye is one of its proponents. She is politically aware, a working mother, and a feminist revolutionist advocate. She rejects all suitors after her husband's death, yet some of her decisions seem to run counter to what she preaches. For instance, though she argues against all male National Assemblies, she will not enter into politics. But most importantly it is her reasons not to divorce her husband that baffle "leave? Start again at zero, after living twenty-five years with one man, after having born twelve children? Did I have enough energy to bare alone the responsibility, which was both moral and material (pg 41)." We realized that Ramatoulaye's reasons are not justified because eventually she ended up taken the responsibilities all alone.

Another point to note is that though the women in the bad story are Muslims, they are all against polygamy. Regarding Ramatoulaye, one finds it difficult to know if it was the second marriage that made her bitter or her husband's maltreatment. In all three instances of polygamy that is Ramatoulaye and Modou; Aissatou and Madou; and Jacqueline and Samba Diack. The husbands' treatment of their first wives is the appalling result of emotional distress, divorce, nervous breakdown and eventually death for the women. The issue of education seems to be vital in the novel. All the major characters in Ba's novel are educated people. This issue of education can be assessed through the men, both young and old generation and the women, old and young generation. The old generation of men that is, Modou, Mawdo, Samba Diack and Mahmoud, though all these men are all educated, they still believe in patriarchy and tradition of their society. It is assumed that these educated men understand the complexities of polygamous marriages and therefore will avoid it, rather these men in the story are not affected by their education at all. They still uphold the tradition and custom of their society by marrying second wives and neglecting their wives. But we notice a new dimension to the role of education in the lives of the younger generation. Ramatoulaye's first daughter Daba's husband does not see marriage as enslavement; therefore he does not hesitate to help his wife to cook or do house chores. He affirms this by saying in the story that his wife is not his slave but rather his partner so there is nothing wrong for him to cook. Another instant is the student lawyer who impregnates Aissatou Ramatoulaye's daughter. The boy accepts responsibility of the pregnancy and visits Ramatoulaye's house to assist his fiancée in her studies and her other siblings as well. Looking at these two generations of men, it is obvious there is a change in the attitude of the younger generation towards women. Ba wants to re-affirm that with time the condition of women will change for the better due to the emergence of the new crop of men.

Education also plays important role in the lives of women as well. Though Ramatoulaye is well educated, she could not break away from tradition and customs. She allows herself to go through undue pain and torture when her husband left her. She does not believe she could stay unmarried and sacrifice her life for her children. One would think that with her kind of education she could liberate herself and become a better person, but she chose to remain in the marriage despite the hurt. Aissatou on the other hand is portrayed as an assertive woman, when her husband decides to take a second wife she could not stand the betrayal, she left with her children. It is the perception that women who are divorce do not thrive well after the divorce, but Aissatou rises out

of her position to disprove this oppressive culture. She is a radical woman and an inspiration to Ramatoulaye and her daughter Daba. Aissatou takes her life into her own hands and chooses to walk out of a polygamous marriage. Though she is not as young as Nabou her rival, she holds on to her integrity and moves by enslaving culture. She comes out as a strong and liberated woman. We also notice how education and life experience shapes the life of young women. Daba absorbs her mother's experiences and turns them into her own philosophies. She marries a man who is supportive and appreciates her as a woman and her wife as compared to her mother.

The novel also portrays a strong sense of friendship. The story is based on friendship letter between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Ramatoulaye is inspired by her friendship with Aissatou and her resolute behaviour in the face of adversity. She writes to her friend to relief her stress. She shares with her about the death of her husband, the things that led to his death and also reminiscence about their life back in school and how they got married to the men involved in their lives. The same friendship bond made Ramatoulaye to name her second daughter after Aissatou. In African society, it is an honour for a child to be named after another person because it is believed that the child will grow and take after the person. This shows the deep affection she has for Aissatou her friend. The same friendship bond makes Aissatou to buy a car for her friend Ramatoulaye. Ramatoulaye tells her friend about how her husband buys a new car for his new wife Binitou. She tells her how it was difficult for her to move about in order to care for her family. Aissatou sympathises with her friend's predicament and buys a car for Ramatoulaye to ease her movement. This gesture by Aissatou can also be seen as something done to spite Ramatoulaye's husband Moudou. The car Aissatou sends to Ramatoulaye is viewed as a symbol of movement. Aissatou is directly telling her friend to move on with life without her husband. It rather takes Ramatoulaye a longer time before she makes that decision.

Another side of friendship is shown through Daba, Ramatoulaye's eldest daughter and Binetu. Binetu was Daba's classmate, and she comes home with Daba occasionally. Ramatoulaye gets to know Binetu because of her friendship with her daughter. Binetu opens and tells Daba her

friend about her relationship with an elderly man and seeks advice from her. Daba on the other hand informs her mother about the predicament of her friend and asks for advice unknowing to her that the secret lover in question is her own father.

Ba also portrays betrayal in relationship in her novel. The instances of betrayal are seen in the sour relationship between Daba and Binetu. These are two people who had been very good friends and shares every secret. Binetu betrays her friends trust by getting involved with her friend's father and eventually marries him. She is the same person who causes heart ache to Ramatoulaye by taking her husband away from her completely. The once healthy friendship between these two people turns sour because of Binetu's betrayal.

Another instance of betrayal is seen in the relationships Aissatou and Mawdo and Ramatoulaye and Modou. Madou is compelled to take a second wife due to pressures from his mother. Aissatou could not stand the betrayal of her husband for abandoning a twelve years' marriage for another woman younger than herself. Aissatou leaves her husband Madou and eventually succeeds to have a job at the Senegalese embassy in Washington. Right away, Aissatou starts her protest against what she deems unacceptable for a liberated woman.

Modou also betrays Ramatoulaye by marrying a young girl as young as his daughter. This young lady happens to be a friend of Ramatoulaye's daughter which is more painful to her. Modou takes a second wife without notifying his first wife as custom demands. The message gets to Ramatoulaye through third parties. As if that is not enough, Modou abandoned his family and moves to stay with his new wife. Despite all these harsh treatment Ramatoulaye stays in Modou's house because according to her she can never conceive of happiness outside marriage. (pg55) in this story, class relation between men and women, poor and the rich is portrayed. The author shows a stratified society where people are regarded due to their status. For instance, old Nabou is bitter about her son's marriage to Aissatou who is a daughter of a common blacksmith. Old Nabou, who is from a royal family, could not tolerate his son's marriage to a "nobody". She eventually finds a wife from her own family for her son to marry. Another instance is shown in the life of Bineto and her family. She and her family live in abject poverty. She is forced into marriage with Modou who is old enough to be her father. Her family benefits from the marriage because Modou provides for their needs. He gives them a house to live in, a car for Binetou and a car with a chauffeur for lady mother-in-law. The marriage

between Binetou and Modou changes the status of a once poor family drastically. Lady mother-in-law wants a social recognition for herself and her family therefore she sells out her daughter to a man she did not love.

In the novel we also see the oppression of women by their fellow women. It is a generally accepted fact that the oppression of women is perpetrated by men, but in this novel Ba shows how women are their own enemies. This instance is seen during the funeral rite of Ramatoulaye's Husband Modou. She is treated unfairly by her sisters in law. She is the one to shower them with money and gifts when she is the one burying her husband. The responsibility of the funeral is left on her yet she has to dash out money in order to please her in laws. Another instance is seen in the attitude in the lady mother-in-law. Because of poverty she forces her daughter to marry a man as old as her father against her will. She destroys another woman's home and marriage because she wants money and fame. This kind of oppression is again seen in old Nabou Madou's mother. She has been against the relationship between her son and Aissatou and she does everything possible to destroy their marriage by getting a second wife for her son because she considers Aissatou as a down trodden person. Ba asserts to the fact that the oppression of women is not only cause by men but by women as well.

The story presents cultural conflicts through the character of Ramatoulaye. She would not resort to the normal mode of correction especially when her daughter Aissatou got pregnant, she accepts the man responsible instead of reprimanding her daughter as suggested by her neighbour. Her focus to stay the cause of tradition is once again threatened when she caught her twin daughters smoking. For those western culture she did not agree with she is made to accept them, so that in some way her revolution is aided by her children. In this discussion, Ba uses the theme of polygamy, religion, betrayal, and friendship to bring out the problems that confronts women in patriarchal African societies.

## **Conclusion**

Literature they say is life, and life is the very existence of people. From the discussion of the three authors, one can conclude that authors do not write in vacuum rather use their story-telling skills to reflect society. For instance, Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born* reflects Ghana post-independence. The novel brings to light the corrupt nature of government officials and how they amass wealth for themselves while the masses suffer. Armah's novel is still relevant in the sense that, presently in Ghana and most African countries, we find the same situation replicating itself. Fragment also captures a materialistic society where respect is accorded to people without knowing the source of their wealth. The novel exposes how society puts pressure on people rich or lose their respect. KMT: *In The House of Life* reflects current African problems of decolonization. The story brings to fore how education or knowledge as a source of power is rather used as a tool of oppression of the Blackman. The novel is set against the background of colonialism in Africa. The Blackman is made to believe that anything black is evil while anything white is good. It is sad to mention that some African still hold that opinion.

Sembene's novel *God's Bit of Wood* exposes the reader to the inequalities between Senegalese and their foreign colonizers who came to the land in order to control and exploit the people. This incident was a real life event that happened in Senegal before independence and it tells the story of the past. *The False Prophet* by Sembene, addresses the issue of laziness and how people use religion to exploit others. This kind of situation is quite predominant in most African society today. Africans still believe that religion can solve our problems without working hard.

Ba's *So Long a Letter* also brings to light how polygamy negatively affects the lives of African women. It also throws light on how religion is used as a tool of oppression. Women are forced to live in abusive marriages all in the name of religion. Ba through her novel reveals that education is the tool for women empowerment and emancipation.

From the novels discussed, it can be concluded that writer's write from their experiences in life. It is these experiences that put in their creativity to weave beautiful stories that reflect real life situations. Conclusion can therefore be made that "literature is society and society is literature".

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