

FAMILIES PORTRAYED IN WEST AFRICAN FICTION

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Marriage and family ties appear to pose persistently unresolved problems in West African societies and as a result literature (fiction as well as non fiction) keeps returning to these topics and keeps looking at them from different angles. This paper is about fictional portrayals of marriage and family ties. The discussion is based on the premise that two non-African religious concepts of the institution of marriage and thus family are in juxtaposition with various traditional concepts and practices. We will take examples from Francophone West African literature to spotlight the conflict between Islam and the tradition as reflected in some novels from Senegal, Guinea, and Mali, and we will take Ghanaian Literature to exemplify how Christianity, the Marriage Ordinance and tradition produce conflicts in English speaking West Africa.

According to Northern and Western perceptions, the institution of marriage is central to the whole concept of the family. Meanwhile the family is whatever form is perceived as being founded on smaller conjugal units in which the basic players are the male and the female spouses. This idea is of course profoundly different from West African customary notions whereby descent and parenthood are the central building blocks of kin groups, and marriage is merely a mechanism for regulating reproduction and legitimising filial ties. We will demonstrate that fiction portrays marriage and therefore the family in West Africa as being in a process of change, but change that is conceived as worrying, to some extent a destabilising process and most of the time not desirable. Traditional concepts, beliefs, and practices are attacked from without by 'modernity' and by new religions, Islam and Christianity, and from within by other-ethnic practices. Transferences taking place within this atmosphere are constantly brought up in the novels – indicating serious societal dilemmas that need constant reassessment.

Traditionally, polygyny was practiced and was pervasive in most of Sub-Saharan Africa. Islam came and restricted the number of wives to four – *provided the man loved all equally and could provide equally for them*. Colonialism and Christianity came and demanded monogamy. Feminism came and demanded monogamy and promoted female autonomy and independence. Traditional marriage practices were influenced by forms adapted from the practices of neighbouring ethnic groups. There is accordingly a syncretic weave of marriage and family patterns permeating the continent. These are the realities that literature attempts to portray and assess.

Francophone West Africa is predominantly Islamic and it is an area where traditional marriage, Muslim marriage and modern/official marriage co-exist in synchronic interrelation, but it is the distortion of the Muslim marriage with its implication for family life that is the more recurrent theme in the Francophone novel. Yet when a marriage falls apart, a solution to the conflict often has to be sought in 'alien' systems:

Les marabouts consultèrent le Saint Livre des lois coranique, d'autres révisèrent le "Farata et le Souinna", les ordres et les ordonnances qui unissent et désunissent. (Ousmane *Voltaïque*: 153).

(The mallams consulted the Holy Book of Koranic Laws, the others revisited the Farida and the Sunna, the orders and the ordinances that unite and divide).

– the view that the Ordinance is divisive we also see in Anglophone literature.

Whereas the early Francophone novel, such as Camara Laye's *The African Child*, presented a romanticised idyll of polygynous family life, a paradise where even the snake, his father's tame

totem, is benevolent, later novelists explore the inherent culture conflict of contemporary Islamic Africa. The novelists attempt to make the reader distinguish between the prescribed divine or religious attitudes and the individual or personal actions and conceptions. Marriage and family life in Islamic West Africa are supposed to be anchored in the Islamic rules and regulations, but there is a discrepancy between marriage as practised and marriage as prescribed in the Koran. So that even though West Africa as a whole has practised polygyny from the earliest times, polygyny is portrayed as an Islamic practice in Francophone literature. Islam is thus the apologia for the continued maintenance of the male dominated *status quo*. Yet the portrayal is of a male-oriented, a patriarchal Islam, an Islam that allows a man to get married to up to four wives. Even though the Koran states that a man is allowed to get married to a maximum number of four wives “only if he is sure he will be able to avoid injustice among his wives”, and even though the Koran then concludes with the point of view “that every man should get married to only one wife” (Koran: 4:3 entitled ‘Women’); patriarchal West Africa prefers its own interpretation of the Holy Book. As Tamsir says in *So Long a Letter*:

... it is fate that decides men and things: God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it. (37)

In Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala*, el Hadji Abdoul Kader Bèye is newly adopted into the class of “les capitaines” because he has just married a third wife and this means that if he gets married to four wives, he joins the class of the “les commandants”, that of Souleymane in Sembène Ousmane’s *Voltaïque*. Marriage in the West African Francophone novel is a completely male-dominated matter, as Mariama Bâ says in *So Long a Letter* (and which echoes Ama Ata Aidoo’s grandmother in *Changes*) “... a woman must marry the man who loves her but never the one she loves.” (59)

A father decides to give his daughter in marriage to a man, or a man may send messages to another man whose daughter he would like to marry. This is relevant to both traditional and Islamic societies. Echoes of former practices are seen in for example Seydou Badian’s *Sous L’Orage*, which provides one of the few instances where the reader is shown a marriage in traditional Mande society. Père Benfa calls Tiemoko and his brothers for a consultation because Famagan has been sending messages to “ask for the hand of” their daughter Kany. But this traditional arrangement is not necessarily a happy one: in ‘Lettres de France’ in Sembène Ousmane’s *Voltaïque*, Nafi laments her unhappy marriage: everything was initiated by her father who one day showed her a picture of a man living in France for many years who wanted a wife from Africa.

Money is really the deciding factor behind these arranged marriages. A man whose fame and wealth increases may choose to take a new wife, and a father may choose to give his daughter in marriage to a wealthy or prominent man. The woman is thus commodified in terms of beauty and youth, an object to be acquired by the new husband and a means to achieve recognition and wealth by the father. In this context, the husband has to live up to expectations and cater for his wife/wives and the children, and he has to struggle to play his role efficiently. El Hadji Abdoul Kader Bèye in Sembène Ousmane’s *Xala* starts out as a mere school teacher, then becomes a petty trader and ends up as a rich businessman dealing in exports and imports. With his wealth he marries three wives, builds a villa for each of them, buys a car to convey his children to school. Unfortunately, just like Modu Fall in Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*, polygynists end up in a dilemma, as their financial commitments become so immense, or in their efforts to impress or pamper the favourite wife they amass such debts, with the result that they cannot cope with any of their commitments. It is this situation that Francophone literature exposes. The short-sightedness and immaturity of men who overstretch themselves financially in order to maintain several families and thus compete in the arena of machismo, and the women who in the final analysis are the ones who have to straighten out the mess. These are main themes in the Francophone novel. The woman who is supposed to be protected and cared for, now becomes the carer and the protector. Francophone literature abounds in examples of the strong female figure, the woman who plays the man’s role. Ramatoulaye and

Aïssatou are such women in *God's Bits of Wood* and *So Long a Letter* respectively. As was said of Ramatoulaye:

She had always been quiet and unassuming and gentle with the children; at the street fountain she never took part in the arguments,... (74)

But then something happens to Ramtoulaye; her family faces starvation,

...Ramatoulaye was not a man ... Where, then, had this violence been born? ... 'It had been born beside a cold fireplace, in an empty kitchen.' (74).

There is a role reversal: it is the women who are the providers, not the men. The women in Francophone literature expose the men as shallow and without substance; while the women are held up as the ideal who have had to assume the male role in addition to the female role and struggle to feed their families. They attain a level of maturity that cannot be attained by men whose only aim in life has been to join the club of "les capitaines" and "les commandants".

Divorce is almost non-existent in the Francophone West African novel, and this may be traced to the Islamic rules: a couple who intend to separate are given 40 days to reconsider their decision before implementing it, and during this time most couples patch up. But the real issue that discourages divorce is the refund of the bride price, which often amounts to huge sums of money. For the wedding of Abdoulaye and Sakinefou in *Devant L'Histoire*, by Sembène Ousmane, 8 cows and 16 sheep were slaughtered – to this must be added a large sum of money. The woman has been sold and cannot redeem herself.

In Ghana "He is marrying Abena" does not mean that a wedding is taking place soon, nor do we necessarily have to consider, "He is not marrying her any more," as incorrect usage. From a pragmatic point of view, both sentences are absolutely acceptable. Marriage in Ghana is not an event that starts at 3:30 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon and ends an hour later. Nor is it the brief meeting of families to negotiate the terms of the union. Marriage is a process, not an event. It involves other people, not just a man and the woman he hopes to mate with. So if "Kwadwo is marrying Abena", it means that they live together or hope to live together, though not necessarily in the same house, and Kwadwo will name Abena's children and both will have to relate to the wider family (affines) of the other. They will have undergone a traditional ceremony in which gifts are exchanged before witnesses, so that these same people can be called upon to intervene should the union encounter difficulties. Kwadwo and Abena might later decide to marry under the 'Ordinance', which means that Kwadwo may now not take another wife, as this would be deemed bigamy, and marriage under the Ordinance means that Kwadwo's wife and her children have definite rights as to inheritance. Abena would now discard her former surname and assume her husband's name with Mrs. in front. The couple may, if they can afford it, decide to have a big church wedding – the bride dressed in white lace and with a white veil.

Marriage is traditionally an organization of one's whole life, and it involves procreation and caring for those who need to be cared for: children, the old, the widowed, the sick. Yet today we are in a culture contact situation and family and marriage are in contact with many extra-traditional concepts, so that the institutions of old are under attack from all sides and are thus redefining themselves.

Written literature in Ghana has from the beginning taken family and marriage as one of its major themes. This includes the output of the first generation of Gold Coasters to write in English: Casely Hayford, Mensah Sarbah, Kobina Sekyi and Hutton Brew, who wrote in the second half of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century. This early literature deals with the threat posed to the Gold Coast male by new and alien Christian and Ordinance (monogamous) institutions of marriage. The traditional way is held up as an ideal that can produce good husbands and wives

and therefore need not be replaced by any new forms of marriage contracts that after all do not enhance a relationship in any way. Far from it, the modern Christian cum Ordinance marriage is a disruptive force. In the traditional system, according to these Cape Coast intellectuals, the role of the husband is to protect and the role of the wife is to obey – the new system creates a wife who can protect and thus disobey and a man who therefore must obey.

Ghana's first novel, *Marita: or the Folly of Love*, by an author writing under the pseudonym, 'A. Native', and serialised in the Gold Coast newspapers *Western Echo* and later the *Gold Coast Echo* from January 1886 to January 1888, describes the disastrous consequences that befall African men who enter marriage according to the colonial Marriage Ordinance of 1884. This law drastically changed the status of the women who now got married 'legally' or in church. When the Gold Coaster was encouraged to marry 'under the Ordinance' he was supposed to enter a monogamous and life-long marriage. According to 'A. Native' this type of marriage transformed good, well-behaved Fante women into nags and termagants ready to usurp the domestic reins of their husbands.

My wife, the obedient loving girl, the pride of my life, the solace of my evil days is turned into the very incarnation of a curse in my own house and *I cannot send her away on account of an oath I took at the ceremony.* – I am doomed by my oath to carry this *incubus*, this woman about with me. (*Marita*: 86)

The main thrust of the novel is thus the subversion of traditional marriage by Christianity and the Marriage Ordinance. This sentiment is again found in Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) in which Tandoh-Kuma and his wife, Ekuba, battle it out in London, he, a professional aiming to be invited to Government House, wonders how he can bring his uneducated wife, Ekuba, along, a wife to whom he is yoked, but who will most likely embarrass him and be a liability in his career prospects. The author then lets Kwamankra, the protagonist, propose an alternative to the Christian monogamy, namely the return to the traditional system of polygyny!

The Ordinance is also a theme in Kobina Sekyi, who lets a fisherman in *The Blinkards* make the following comment: "Wonders never cease! What has marriage to do with the Government?"

Then comes R.E. Obeng, not the highly educated coastal intellectual of the type A. Native (J. E. Casely Hayford or James Hutton Brew) or Kobina Sekyi, but an inland Akropong-trained teacher. His novel *Eighteenpence* (1942) has family, marriage and the woman within marriage as major themes. The ideal is here not the traditional marriage. Obeng, although he himself practised both polygyny and serial monogamy, always appeared as a good Presbyterian to the outside world. Konaduwa, the female protagonist in his novel, is not the malleable traditional wife. She is a harridan who clearly demonstrates that if a woman sets out to destabilise the *status quo*, neither the traditional authorities nor the colonial administration can deal with her. Obeng obviously is not of the same sentiment as A. Native and Casely Hayford who are looking back to the 'good old polygynous days' with nostalgia. Obeng lives 'the good old days' and has experienced its positive and its negative sides. He thus investigates the western ideal of marriage, as he must have read about it in contemporary popular literature and Victorian novels, to see whether that might not rather be a preferable type of union for an educated Gold Coaster. The author juxtaposes the traditional contractual polygynous marriage, with the Victorian mode of monogamous marriage, in which the nameless and faceless and voiceless woman cleaves to her husband and thus neglects her wider family to serve her lord and master in all. It is the reader who in the end must make the choice of which type of arrangement is the more desirable, if any of them.

Mabel Dove Danquah, writing in the 1940s and 1950s, one of the early, but by no means the first, Gold Coast women authors, western educated, yet consciously emphasising her 'Africanness', in one of her short stories, *Anticipation*, tells the tale of Nana Adaku, Omanhene of Akwasin, who cannot keep track of his numerous wives. The commodification of the female is here clearly

demonstrated as part of the traditional system, an argument later taken up by Amma Darko, writing in the 1990s and 2000s, and brought to its logical conclusion in her writings.

“This dancer is totally different,” thought the Chief; “she will be a joy to the palace.” He turned round to the linguist:

“I will pay one hundred pounds for her.”

“She might already be married, Nana”

“I shall pay the husband any monies he demands.”

The linguist knew his Omanhene: when he desired a woman he usually had his way. (in ed. Busby:224).

The Chief does have his way – he proposes to marry this beautiful creature, and receives acceptance from both the woman and her parents. His new bride is a woman who has been his wife for two years already.

The author, Mabel Dove Danquah, was married to the famous J.B. Danquah, lawyer, historian, anthropologist, writer and politician, who quite openly practised the ‘good old polygynous ways’ in spite of his education, exposure and position in society.

During Ghana’s next literary period: the immediate post-Nkrumah years, there was a sudden proliferation of novels. Ama Atta Aidoo’s title of her collection of short stories (1971) echoes the spirit of the age: there is *No Sweetness Here*. Marriage and family are treated in both the autobiographical novel such as Selormey’s *The Narrow Path*, which exposes the wrangle between the wider family’s demands of a traditional union and the Christian marriage that is expected of a Christian teacher in the community, and these same themes are treated in the novels of disillusionment, such as Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, in which the man suffers the verbal assault of his mother-in-law, who has assumed the traditional role of advocate for her daughter and whose materialism the protagonist cannot stomach, because he cannot fulfil the traditional role of the husband as the provider. In Awoonor’s *This Earth My Brother* Amamu is destroyed by being torn apart, trapped in a modern marriage, whereas all his other values cleave to his traditional roots. Writing in the 1980s, Kojo Laing has a whole series of unusual unions scattered through out his works, *Search Sweet Country* and *Woman of the Aeroplane* – hardly any fulfilling, all limping along in limbo.

Then comes Ama Ata Aidoo with *Changes*. This is an important book on being a woman in Ghana. We will not call it a feminist novel – it is not – it is a book that looks at marriage and family and male-female relationships with brutal honesty. It unravels traditional concepts, it strips the modern concepts naked and it leaves the emancipated African woman abandoned and alone, paid off with a new car but short-changed in everything else. She has lost both husbands. She has abandoned her only child, having sacrificed it for her own gratification. She has had to present her best friend Opokuya with a car to keep her friendship.

As Ama Ata Aidoo lets Esi’s grandmother say in *Changes*:

My lady Silk, it is not a question of this type of marriage or that type of marriage. It was not a question of being an only wife or being one of many wives. It was not a question of being a wife here, there, yesterday or today. ... it was just being a wife. It is being a woman. When we were young we were told that people who were condemned to death were granted a wish on the eve of their execution. ... Anyhow, a young woman on her wedding day was something like that. She was made much of, because the whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been.’ (*Changes*: 110) (emphasis ours)

And Esi’s best friend Opokuwa muses:

In a polygamous situation, or rather in the traditional environment in which polygamous marriages flourished, happiness, like most of the good things in life, was not a two-person enterprise. It was the business of all parties concerned. And in this case it should have included the first wife of Ali whom Esi had not even met! (98).

‘Love?... Love?’ says Esi’s grandmother: ‘Love is not safe, my lady Silk, love is dangerous. – Ah my lady, the last man any woman should think of marrying is the man she loves.’ (42).

The irony of *Changes* is Esi, the modern, educated woman belittling the security of the monogamous Ordinance marriage and opting for the traditional polygynous union. But in life you cannot have your cake and eat it. Esi marries her first husband, Oko, out of sympathy for him (he had relentlessly pursued her for many years). She thus thinks she can call the tune and have it all her way. Her husband raping her and then walking away like a king who has conquered her, shocks her to her innermost being, how could the husband she thought she could manipulate behave like the traditional husband.

... who demands all of you and all of your time. ... the one who eats his wife completely and pushes her down with a good gulp of alcohol. (109).

But Esi, on account of her education and financial independence, is not amenable to the imposition of this traditional role, the ‘funeral of the self’. In *Changes* the more things change the more they remain the same. In spite of all her independence, Esi ends up as a discarded second wife, husbandless and childless.

Amma Darko, a younger novelist writing in the 1990s, implicitly laments the loss of the institutions of family and marriage as places where loyalty, loving kindness, trust and compassion may be nurtured for the good of man and woman. She gives traditional marriage the final blow. She deconstructs traditional marriage. In *Beyond the Horizons* Mara is sold to her husband, Akobi, for a few heads of cattle and some trinkets and once sold, she is Akobi’s to do with in whatever he finds profitable. Mara is made to prostitute herself with Akobi acting as her pimp. Amma Darko thus poses the question: “in what way does traditional marriage, as Mara’s father practises it, differ from the relationship: prostitute / pimp that her marriage to Akobi turns out to be?” Thus while being presented with traditional marriage, as seen through the materialistic eyes of Mara’s father, we are also confronted with the metamorphoses of these same tendencies as they unfold through Akobi’s perverted perception of a wife. In her second novel, *The Housemaid*, Amma Darko goes even further. Family and marriage no longer have any relevance and have more or less ceased to exist, as have all human compassion – where some loose filial relationships remain, these are a means to be exploited for gain. The future is barren and bleak, when even intra-family loyalty is sacrificed for material expediency. As Efi’s mother and grandmother scheme to benefit from their daughter’s position as housemaid in Accra:

‘The gods and ancestors of this village of ours designed everything. And your going to live with her is an essential piece of that design. So hear me! Be subservient, humble and very dependable...’

‘Good advice, Mother!’

‘Then get yourself pregnant.’

‘W-h-a-a-t?’

‘You both heard me right. Efi, you will live with her, win her affection, become indispensable to her. So that when you innocently become pregnant...’

‘Innocently? How does she become pregnant innocently?’ Efi’s mother asked.

‘By pretending she was forced into the sexual act,’ the old lady replied. (46-47)

‘So what is in it for us?’ asks the father. ... ‘What are we getting out of our daughter’s going away to the city to serve somebody?’ (43).

Ghana has destroyed the family: there is no future for Ghana.
And so *Kwadwo is not marrying Abena any more.*

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