

REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUGGLES AND RESISTANCE IN SELECTED AFRICAN AMERICAN AND MALIAN NOVELS

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Abstract: This article delves into the representation of Black women's socio-economic conditions, marginalization, and resistance in selected African American and Malian novels. It is true that these realities emerge in different cultural contexts, nonetheless they reveal similar systems of domination and silencing. The problem this paper attempts to tackle is the tendency to analyze African American and African women's experiences in isolation. The main purpose is to analyze and compare representations of Black women's socio-economic marginalization and strategies of resistance in African American and Malian novels. It argues that women negotiate oppressive structures and affirm agency through voice, endurance, and self-redefinition. The study uses the following theoretical lenses: Black feminist thought, womanist theory, and sociocritique to analyze the intersecting systems of oppression within their social and cultural contexts. As for the methodology, the article adopts a qualitative comparative approach based on close textual analysis of *The Color Purple*, *Mama*, *Sous l'orage*, and *Une si longue lettre*. The study indicated that African American and Malian novels reveal comparable patterns of women's marginalization and shared strategies of resistance and self-redefinition.

Key words: African American literature, African literature, sociocritique, women's marginalization, women's resistance.

Résumé : Cet article analyse la représentation des conditions socio-économiques, de la marginalisation et des formes de résistance des femmes noires dans des romans afro-américains et maliens. Bien que ces réalités se situent dans des contextes culturels différents, elles mettent lumière des mécanismes similaires de domination et silence. Cet article s'attaque à cette tendance d'analyser séparément les expériences des femmes afro-américaines et africaines, ce qui limite une compréhension globale des mécanismes structurels de leur oppression. Cette étude a pour objectif principal d'analyser et de comparer les formes de marginalisation socio-économique des femmes noires et leurs stratégies de résistance dans des romans afro-américains et maliens. L'étude emploie comme cadres théoriques la pensée féministe noire, le womanisme et la sociocritique pour analyser les systèmes d'oppression imbriqués dans leurs contextes sociaux et culturels. En ce qui concerne méthodologique, l'article adopte une approche comparative qualitative fondée sur une analyse textuelle approfondie de *The Color Purple*, *Mama*, *Sous l'orage* et *Une si longue lettre*. Les résultats indiquent que les romans afro-américains et maliens révèlent des systèmes comparables de marginalisation des femmes ainsi que des stratégies communes de résistance et de redéfinition de soi.

Mots clés : femmes noires, littérature afro-américaine, littérature africaine, marginalisation, résistance.

Introduction

The socio-economic conditions and lived experiences of Black women have been widely explored in literary and cultural studies, particularly within African American scholarship. Black feminist critics such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins are two great authors. They have demonstrated that race, gender, and class intersect to shape Black women's marginalization within patriarchal and racist societies. From this point of view, African

American novels such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Terry McMillan's *Mama* have been the subject of a wide range of analyses. The focus has been particularly on their representations of poverty, domestic violence, motherhood, and female solidarity. A common interpretation of these works is that they create a possibility for Black women to challenge silent and social exclusion with strength and self-definition.

In African literary criticism, the same issues have been studied with regard women's oppression in postcolonial societies. Seydou Badian's *Sous l'orage* has been examined because it not only critiques traditional authority, but also portrays women's exclusion from education and decision-making processes. In the same vein, Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* has significantly been at the center of scholarly attention because of the way it deals with crucial themes like polygamy, widowhood, and women's intellectual and emotional agency. Critics have frequently emphasized Bâ's epistolary form as a narrative strategy which is used to reclaim women's voices within male-dominated social structures. Notwithstanding this large and considerable body of scholarship, African and African American women's texts are rarely studied together within a sustained comparative perspective.

The problem this study attempts to tackle lies in this lack of comparative study. When they treat Black women's oppression as culturally or geographically specific, existing scholarship often loses sight of the structural similarities that shape women's marginalization across different contexts. In both African American and Malian societies, women's oppression is frequently considered as normal and natural, their voices restricted, and their economic contributions not valued or neglected. There remains a need for comparative literary studies that illuminate how these shared conditions of domination and resistance manifest across African and diasporic narratives.

This study aims at analyzing and comparing representations of Black women's socio-economic conditions, marginalization, and resistance strategies in selected African American and Malian novels. To be specific, it attempts to understand how patriarchal and economic systems influence women's lives, how women's voices are silenced, and how female characters put in place strategies to claim empowerment and self-redefinition.

This study relies on Black feminist thought and womanist theory. These theoretical tools are used to better analyze intertwining systems of oppression and at the same time underscoring community, resilience, and collective survival. Sociocritical approach is also called on to further allows the corpora to be analyzed in relation to their historical and social contexts.

As far as the methodology is concerned, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on close content reading and comparative analysis. The study examines *The Color Purple*, *Mama*, *Sous l'orage*, and *Une si longue lettre* with the purpose to explore how socio-economic marginalization, invisibility, and resistance are narratively developed in African American and Malian literature.

This paper is structured into three main sections. The first section sheds light on the socio-economic conditions of Black women in African American and Malian literature, the second analyzes marginalization and the invisibility of women's voices, and the third looks at resistance, empowerment, and self-redefinition, all this closed by a conclusion.

1-Socio-Economic Conditions of Black Women in African American and Malian Literature

Socio-economic marginalization is a key theme in the depiction of Black women's experiences in *The Color Purple*, *Mama*, *Sous l'orage*, and *Une si longue lettre*. These African American and Malian novels highlight women's economic dependency not as incidental or isolated, but as a direct consequence of a deeply rooted patriarchal, cultural, and structural systems. These systems hamper women's access to education, financial autonomy, and social progression. The narratives set in different times and countries, however they all stress how being dependent on money can be used to limit women's bodies, choices, and identities in very similar ways.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie's economic fragility and silencing can be spotted from the very beginning through the language of marriage negotiation, where she is discussed as if she were an object of exchange and not a human subject. When her stepfather offers her in marriage, he declares:

Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first. She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already. (p. 9)

These words sharply describe Celie in terms of age, sexual history, and utility. Her worth is determined by patriarchal norms that reduce her body to sexual "freshness" and reproductive value, and dismiss her experiences of abuse as moral defects. The comparison with a "fresh" woman who is "sick all the time" further entails a transactional logic which evaluates women solely by their usefulness to men. The final assessment reduces Celie explicitly to labor: "She ugly, he say. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it." (p. 9)

In these lines, we can see how Celie is fully dehumanized. Referring to Celie as "*it*" is a way to render her subhuman, depriving her of humanity. Stating that she will not require food or clothing illustrates the economic logic of her exploitation. Affection, consent, or dignity are denied or unknown to her. She is defined only by unpaid labor, obedience, and endurance. Walker, in this passage, explains how economic dependency entails patriarchal authority. The system denied Celie education, property, and income, which renders her vulnerable and easy to control and abuse. This situation of economic dependence later presents physical violence as something normal, as illustrated by Celie that "He beat me like he beat the children," revealing how poverty, silence, and brutality come into play within the patriarchal household.

McMillan's novel *Mama* tells the story of Mildred Peacock, a Black woman from the working class who constantly experiences financial difficulties. Mildred works very hard, but this prevents her from progressing financially. She spends her days "working, working, working, and worrying" while her bills go unpaid (p. 59). As a single mother, she has to take care of everything financially, such as "the kids, the money, and the house." (p. 58) Everything falls on her alone, showing how poverty affects Black women more than anyone else because their work as mothers is both important and undervalued. Mildred, on the other hand, is outspoken and will not simply sit back and accept her situation. She says, "I'm not the kind of woman to just sit back and take nothing" (p. 61). However, her defiance does not protect her from being excluded from the system, since she keeps "working and scrimping and scraping to get where? Nowhere" (p. 61). Mildred's exhaustion, "tired of being strong all the time" (p. 241), shows

how structural inequality, rather than personal failure, keeps Black women from being economically and emotionally strong.

In the Malian context, *Sous l'orage* depicts women's economic dependence as a result of inflexible social customs that govern access to education and personal freedom. Badian depicts a society in which women's destinies are dictated by patriarchal power, exemplified by Benfa's assertion to his daughter, "You will marry the man I choose" (p. 7), thereby diminishing marriage to a coerced social construct rather than an individual decision. Educating girls is actively discouraged because "school is the enemy of the family", and girls who are educated are accused of wanting "to choose their own husband" (p. 7), which makes women even more dependent on men. Sibiri asks, "What does Kany's point of view have to do with this?", which clearly shows that women's voices are neither valued and nor taken into consideration. That situation strongly contributes to making women invisible and insignificant in society, particularly in decision-making processes as illustrated in this sentence "We are the ones who decide" (p. 17). The novel criticizes tradition as a system that keeps women financially weak by showing marriage as "an auction" (p. 17). Badian puts forwards the idea that the exclusion and ostracization of women can lead to the stagnation of society arguing that their situation places our society "in a position of inferiority" (p. 19), which restricts both women's freedom and the progress of society as a whole.

Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* depicts more challenging social and economic conditions faced by women. The novel portrays the effects of polygamy on women, highlighting how it devastates them emotionally and financially. It reveals, through Ramatoulaye's letters, that Modou "decided to marry again... without consulting" his first wife (p. 30). Ramatoulaye is one of the "first pioneers of the promotion of African women" through education (p. 15), but her story shows that education alone cannot challenge patriarchal systems that give men power. After her husband died, she became even more financially vulnerable when her in-laws took the money for the funeral and "left [her] completely broke" (p. 7). Even property obtained through shared savings is still legally owned by men, as "the title deeds of this house bear his name", despite her contribution (p. 9). Through these experiences, Bâ demonstrates that society is unable to provide women legal and social protection, which renders them economically vulnerable despite the level of education they may have. This situation clearly reveals that education is not necessarily a guarantee of women's emancipation.

The above novels show that the cultural factors that contribute to restrict the roles of women in society and in the economy vary, but the effects are generally similar. In both African American and Malian contexts, women are relegated to economic roles that restrict autonomy and perpetuate reliance on male-dominated systems. However, the texts also imply that economic adversity serves as a catalyst for resistance. Black women turn economic hardship into opportunities which help them figure out a means to negotiate and survive by starting their own businesses, working hard, or getting education and learning more about themselves.

These novels are not just simple narratives about poverty in general. They are literary representation to show how women's lives are affected and how society is gendered. They show how poor economic conditions make women vulnerable and how they still find a way out to survive and take ownership of their lives. Through Celie, Mildred, Ramatoulaye, and the women of *Sous l'orage*, African American and Malian literature underscore the daily struggles and commitment of these brave women to break the joke of systemic inequality. This brilliantly shows women's strength, determination and unshakable will to be listened to, to be heard and to be accepted as full women capable of everything.

2-Marginalization and the Invisibility of Women's Voices

In *The Color Purple*, *Mama*, *Sous l'orage*, and *Une si longue lettre*, the marginalization of Black women is expressed not only through material deprivation but also through symbolic and narrative invisibility. In these novels, the portrayal of women's voices, aspirations, and intellectual abilities as systematically diminished or suppressed, are closely followed. This situation thereby strengthens gender hierarchies that further marginalize women socially. The texts rely on various narrative techniques to underscore how invisibility is a form of oppression and how women's voices serve as a form of resistance.

Celie's marginalization in *The Color Purple* is closely linked to the fact that her voice is not heard. This is clear from the very beginning of the book, when she is told, "You better not never tell nobody but God" (p. 1). This order makes her speech secret and removes her from the public conversation. Her abuse occurs in her own home, where no one talks about it or questions it. When she is hurt, she is told to "shut up and git used to it" (p. 2). Male authority figures speak for Celie and tell her what she is worth. They turn her into a worker and a follower, "she ain't no stranger to hard work" (p. 9), and keep her from being able to participate in social life in a meaningful way. Celie's early letters, which were addressed only to God, show how alone she is and how there is no one around to listen. She feels even more isolated because no one comes to see her (p. 6). Over time, this silence becomes part of Celie's mind, and she "makes [herself] wood" (p. 23) to erase herself. Walker shows how patriarchal structures keep Black women's voices silent, private, and socially unimportant by making Celie invisible.

McMillan's *Mama* shows a different but related kind of invisibility that comes from making women's suffering seem normal. Mildred is very visible in terms of work: she is always working, taking care of her family, and supporting them, but she is not seen as a person who deserves empathy or help from society. Her emotional withdrawal shows that she is being ostracized. Mildred's voice is further silenced when she tells herself that "ain't no sense in me whining," which shows how society expects Black women to go through hard times without complaining. She thinks that exploitation is unavoidable and says, "women've done worse thangs to earn a living," which makes her suffering seem normal and unimportant. Even though her work is essential, it is done "on her hands and knees," and the human cost is still ignored because "it did not care how much money she was getting for it." McMillan shows the paradox of visibility and invisibility. Mildred's work is seen and relied on, but her humanity and voice are mostly ignored, showing how Black women's contributions are only recognized when they help others.

In the Malian context, *Sous l'orage* reveals how deeply entrenched patriarchal traditions suppress women's voices and consider marriage an economic transaction controlled by male authority. This can be observed when Birama complains about the marriage arrangement imposed on Kany:

This is not, in fact, a marriage, but an auction sale. You behave as though Kany were not a person, but a mere animal. What concerns you is how much you can get from her. You hand her over to the highest bidder and no longer care what becomes of her. Whether she becomes Famagan's slave, confined to the back of a hut among other slaves, is of no concern to you." (p. 17)

This passage brilliantly illustrates how women are commodified within the patriarchal system. By comparing marriage to an "auction sale," Badian enables us to understand that society is stripped of moral and emotional legitimacy and foregrounds its economic foundation. Kany is clearly stripped of personhood and treated like an object whose value is measured only by the profit they can obtain from her. Repeating this - "how much you can get from her" and "the highest bidder" speak volume about the fact that women's bodies represent currency within male-dominated social structures.

Moreover, using the term of slavery stresses the critique. The prospect that Kany may become "Famagan's slave," entrapped in domestic space, highlights how marriage favors relations of domination rather than partnership. The marked indifference that almost everybody expresses toward her fate illustrates the complete restriction of women's freedom and agency. Through this, Badian uses Birama's intervention to strongly condemn cultural practices that normalize women's exploitation for the sake of tradition.

Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* directly addresses women's invisibility by using the epistolary form to place a woman's voice at the center. Ramatoulaye's letter serves as a medium for expressing and legitimizing suppressed experiences, particularly as she reveals marriage as a site of dispossession where a woman is compelled to "sacrifice her possessions" and, more distressingly, to "give up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her" (pp. 4-5). Even though Ramatoulaye is educated and has a job, she is still excluded within a patriarchal society that makes it acceptable for women to be erased and treated like objects. She passionately fights against this trend of dehumanization in the novel by declaring, "you forget that I have a heart, a mind, and that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand" (p. 54). This is her way of asserting her agency in a system that denies it to her. Ramatoulaye redefines marriage as "an act of faith and of love" based on mutual consent, emphasizing the word "chosen" (pp. 54-55). This illustrates how women's emotions, pain, and desires are often ignored. Bâ uses these narratives as a political tool to help women regain their voice, redefine themselves and assert their agency.

These novels foreground a form of literary resistance by underscoring how Black women are restricted and give them a platform to voice their concerns. They strive to shake patriarchal narratives that ostracized women and assert the legitimacy their experiences as epistemic sources and critical viewpoints. These are the narratives of African American and Malian literature which join together to show how Black women endured social and cultural marginalization.

3-Resistance, Empowerment, and Self-Redefinition

A vivid portrayal of how society marginalizes women is offered in *The Color Purple*, *Mama, Sous l'orage*, and *Une si longue lettre*. They also showcase how women can stand their ground, become empowered, and reclaim their voice. In these works, resistance is not always political, it is sometimes subtle. It can be seen in everyday activities like self-expression, making a living,

being a mother, getting an education, and reclaiming one's voice. The notion that Black women are merely passive victims are questioned in the novels because they depict women as autonomous agents within oppressive systems. They reveal that resilience is a process that evolves and gets stronger over time. As noted in the *Kurukan Fuga journal*, African women writers have tirelessly and extensively used the novel as a space for women's liberation, utilizing literature as a powerful medium for awareness, confidence, and resistance against oppressive social structures (Coulibaly & Traoré, 2023)

In *The Color Purple*, it is clear that Celie's struggles to break and cast off the stereotypes about her. From being passive and submissive at first and dependent on others, she gradually gains economic independence. She begins to resist persecution by writing, claiming, "because I ain't got nobody else" (p. 1). Writing letters is both a form of therapy and a way for her to express her thoughts. It lets her share her feelings and tell her story in a world that does not recognize her subjectivity (p. 75). When Celie states, "I'm pore, I'm black... but dear God, I'm here" (p. 187), this growing self-awareness paves the way for agency and self-definition. This is a big step for Celie toward recognizing her own worth. Celie's ability to earn money through sewing reveals the autonomy she is gaining. She states with pride, "I got a business now" (p. 213), which provides her the freedom to leave an abusive marriage: "I'm leaving you" (p. 209). Celie's assertiveness shows how empowerment emerges from the interwoven processes of reading, working, and seeking support from others. This transition in her identity, from one of submission and silence, is made possible by women working together.

In *Mama*, Mildred's resistance is also founded on her strength, her willingness to fight, and her role as a mother. Despite the fact that Mildred does not have any institutional power, she refuses to accept her hardships as permanent, declaring that "this may not be the bottom for me," (p. 62), which suggests that she is not accepting being subjugated but rather determined to shine and face resolutely her fate. Her refusal is based on how she feels about herself and her worth. She claims she has "way too much sense" to stay on her knees forever (p. 62), which transforms the meaning of endurance from submission to conscious decision. McMillan demonstrates that motherhood can be a formidable force. When Mildred advises her daughter, "take your mama's word for it" (p. 61), she is both the supplier and the guide. Mildred intentionally defines survival as "this is what I gotta do right now" (p. 61), turning work into agency, even if she is having a hard time making ends meet. Her efforts show how hard it is for one person to be strong in an oppressive system, but they also show that she can change her family's future, since resistance has lasted through generations to a time when she "wouldn't have to work so hard to get so little" (pp. 63–64).

In the Malian setting, *Sous l'orage* represents resistance through the dichotomy of tradition and modernity. Women in the story fight against cultural conventions that limit their freedom and knowledge, which makes them question the validity of procedures that keep women in certain social roles. Even though the characters in this novel often cannot help but do what society expects them to do, their actions reveal that they want things to improve. Sidi vehemently questions the patriarchal standards in this assertion: "it is the woman who sets society in motion; she is the one who ensures its progress and constitutes the principal agent of emancipation" (p. 19). This saying highlights Badian's depiction of education as a key tool for empowerment, contending that the intellectual development of women is fundamental for personal liberation and societal progress.

In Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, resistance is expressed through narrative voice and writing can be both a personal refuge and a political act. Ramatoulaye's letter acts as a refusal

to be silenced in a society that marginalizes women's emotional and intellectual experiences. Through narration, she turns private suffering into a collective critique of patriarchal institutions, particularly marriage and polygamy. In harsh words, she fiercely questions marriage institution saying that,

This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends. (p. 4)

This passage shows that marriage is not a partnership but a way of systematically making things disappear. The wife's personality is lost in an endless chain of duties, which shows how much women have lost their rights. Calling the woman "a thing" strips her of all human qualities and shows that marriage is a system of slavery, not a partnership. By giving this a name, Ramatoulaye breaks the silence about women's pain and redefines what is generally accepted as systemic abuse.

Resistance in these novels is not sudden or spectacular, but gradual, emerging through repeated confrontations between women's desires and rigid patriarchal norms, as also observed in studies published in the *Kurukan Fuga journal* (Coulibaly & Traoré, 2023). Female solidarity, manifested through friendships, mentorship, or intergenerational connections, emerges as a vital source of strength. In *The Color Purple*, women help each other heal and learn more about themselves. In *Une si longue lettre*, the letters between the two people show that they are emotionally connected and understand each other. Even in *Mama* and *Sous l'orage*, where women are not as obvious as about being together, their interactions show that they are all going through the same experience and are strong together. These relationships highlight a womanist ethic that prioritizes community, care, and survival above individual success.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the socio-economic conditions, marginalization, and resistance strategies of Black women as represented in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *Mama* by Terry McMillan, *Sous l'orage* by Seydou Badian, and *Une si longue lettre* by Mariama Bâ. The study has used a comparative literary and sociocritical approach to demonstrate that despite significant historical and cultural differences between African American and Malian contexts, Black women's experiences are deeply influenced by similar structures of patriarchy, economic exclusion, and social exclusion. This study has revealed that such systems operate across geographical boundaries to produce comparable patterns of constraint and resilience.

The selected texts have foregrounded the experiences of women to expose socio-economic marginalization not as an individual failing but as a structural condition deeply seated in gendered and cultural power relations. Women evolved within systems that block their progression to access to education, financial autonomy, and public authority. This situation is depicted in all these novels foregrounding the segregated American South, the urban working-class environment of *Mama*, or the postcolonial West African societies. Yet, the novels consistently and eloquently demonstrate that women are not passive victims by emphasizing their capacity for endurance, negotiation, and self-assertion.

A central contribution of this study is to place particular stress on resistance as a multifaceted and relational process which can be considered as its central contribution. Rather than framing empowerment as overt political rebellion, the novels do not limit themselves in illustrating how resistance unfolds through everyday practices such as literacy, motherhood, economic survival, emotional expression, and female solidarity. They also describe empowerment as overt political rebellion. Celie's transformation through writing and entrepreneurship, Mildred's struggle as a working-class mother to protect her children and avoid collapsing under a discriminatory society, Ramatoulaye's fierce determination to reclaim her voice through letters, and the women's strong will to get schooled and autonomy in *Sous l'orage* collectively make it evident that resistance often rises from constraint. These acts which can be sometimes subtle, represent powerful assertions of agency and humanity.

This comparative analysis has the merit to underscore the important role of transnational literary approaches in Black feminist and African literary studies. By making a parallel between African American and Malian texts, this article questions the tendency to treat Black women's struggles as culturally or historically isolated. On the contrary, it brings to light the interconnectedness of Black women's experiences across the African diaspora thus respecting contextual specificity. Such a perspective richly contributes to the literary criticism by unveiling shared patterns of oppression and resistance that transcend national and cultural boundaries.

Ultimately, the novels under study confirm literature's undeniable role in giving voice to women and valuing their experiences of long marginalization within dominant historical and cultural narratives. Through storytelling, these texts transform silence into speech and suffering into critical questioning, offering bright visions of identity, dignity, and possibility. By centering Black women's perspectives, African American and Malian literature center Black women's perspectives which allow the documentation of social injustice but also allow pathways toward empowerment and self-redefinition. Future research may extend this comparative study to other African and diasporic texts which will broaden the understanding of Black women's resilience and agency within global literary landscapes.

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