

Essay on d.t. nianes sundiata: an epic of old mali

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Portrayal of Women in D. T. Niane's Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali

Written by D. T Niane and translated by G. D. Pickett, 'Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali' recounts the epic story of Sundiata who was the founder of the Mali empire. This epic is an example of oral history narrated by griot poets aka djeli who before the invention of manuscript passed down the stories of kings and emperors from one generation to another. Sundiata who has been referred as the son of the Buffalo, the son of the lion, Mari-Djata, Sogolan Djata and by many other names is the first ruler of the Mali Empire. The epic novel has given glimpses of Maliyan culture, the role of men and women, their customs and power division in the society. The old Malian society as described by D. T Niane was a traditional society in which men and women had stereotypical roles to play. It was a male-dominated society in which men holding the eminent official positions had the supreme power to make decisions in every matter of the family with least or no concerns shown to the opinions of the women who were valued in terms of their physical appearance and reproduction capability while the value of men's lied in their physical strength.

The Mali society was supremely patriarchal with power vested in the hands of men only while women were allowed very little freedom and powers. Considered as unequal to men, women were to play the roles of subordinates to the mighty men. The very essence of women was defined under the shadow of their men who often held positions of power and authority in the society and they had absolute control on the women they were in relations with. Throughout the epic of Sundiata, we see men enjoying illustrious position in the society in the roles of king, griot, ruler, hunter and warrior.

Men who were the heads of the family could take decisions about their women and their destiny. They hunted for food, took decisions for the entire family and would accompany king in the wars whereas women were expected of obeying the decisions taken by their men, cooking for the family, giving birth and taking care of children and tending to the garden. To a certain extent, women were considered as a commodity the very purpose of whose existence was to please men by pandering to their whims.

The story of Sundiata is narrated by a man griot and throughout the epic there is no hint of existence of any woman griot. This shows that the oral history of Mali passed down from one generation to another through the singing of griots who are the "vessels of speech" and "repositories" for harboring secrets could be trusted with men only because women are not known for keeping "secrets many centuries old" (Niane 1). After the story begins with the introduction of Sundiata's father Maghan Kon Fatta, the first woman character is introduced in the novel. Just as in a stereotypical traditional society, women's worth is measured in terms of her beauty and reproduction capability, in this novel too the woman Sogolon is described on the basis of her physical appearance and the very purpose of her existence is mentioned as providing the king with a son who would immortalize the family name, thus fulfilling the prophecy of a soothsayer. Sogolon is described as an 'ugly', 'hideous' woman who has a 'disfiguring hump' on her back. Her eyes are 'monstrous' deprived of any beauty. The description of Sogolon's physical appearance puts her in direct contrast with Sundiata's father Maghan who is "renowned for his beauty in every land" (Niane 4). Despite the ghastly physical appearance, Sogolon is proposed to be worth

being the king Maghan's wife because " she will be the mother of him who will make the name of Mali immortal forever" (Niane 6). Thus, the first woman character introduced in the novel is first measured in terms of her physical appearance and then her reproduction capability. This brings out the inferior standing of women in the Mali society in which women are considered as mere showpieces whose duty besides sexually gratifying their men is to breed children.

That women's consent matters little in case of marriage in Mali society is proven by the fact that nobody bothers to ask Sogolon if she is willing to marry the king or not. That women's consent mattered little in the Mali society in terms of marriage is also proven by the forceful marriage of Nana Triban, Sassouma's daughter, to Soumaoro, a sorcerer. Nana Triban's words " My brother sent me by force to Sosso to be the wife of Soumaoro . . . I wept a great deal . . ." bear testimony to how the desire and will of the women are given least importance in Malian society (Niane 57). Furthermore, Maghan's first wife Sassouma has no say in the matter of her husband's second marriage. Despite being a mother of his children, the king does not seek her permission to his second marriage. It shows how women in Mali society were fully controlled by their husbands who could take as many wives as they pleased. That women were meant to be controlled by their husbands also is proven by the words like 'possess' and 'master' being used to mean the consummation of husband and wife as if Sogolon is an animal who needs to be possessed and mastered and not loved. When Sogolon refuses to consummate the marriage with Maghan, he uses the trick of threat to kill her which makes her faint and the king taking the opportunity of her

unconscious state consummates the marriage. Thus the king raped her while Sogolon slept and " when she woke up, she was already a wife" (Niane 12).

This shows that a woman's consent mattered little in Mali society not only in terms of marriage but also in terms of physical union with her husband.

After Sogolon conceived, the king began to shower her all his attention and affection, thereby making his first wife Sassouma Bérété jealous. Sassouma began to feel insecure about her own future and that of her son, " What would become of her if her son, already eight years old, was disinherited in favor of the child that Sogolon was going to bring into the world?" (Niane 13).

This shows that Sassouma could be stripped of all her privileges and powers with the disinheritance of her son and that as a wife of the king, she didn't have any power or control on her husband or his decision. Though she was the first wife of the king and her son was the eldest heir to the throne, all could change in a jiffy if the king decided to make Sogolon's son as his successor. Further, despite being one of the queens she didn't have any power to prevent her husband from disinheriting her son if he decided so. After Sundiata was born, the king declared him to be his heir to the throne and though Sassouma was immensely upset by this, she could do nothing to change the king's mind.

The seeds of jealousy that took place in Sassouma's heart due to her husband's act of depriving her son of the rightful inheritance took on a bitter note when Sundiata was born crippled.. She rejoiced at the fact of Sogolon's son's disability and whenever Sogolon passed by the door, Sassouma intentionally uttered hurtful words taunting at the infirmity of Sundiata " Come, my son, walk, jump, leap about. The jinn didn't promise you anything

out of the ordinary, but I prefer a son who walks on his two legs to a lion that crawls on the ground" (Niane 16). After Maghan's death, Sassouma got her son Touman seated at the throne, defying the will of the king and banished Sogolon and her son to exile out of Mali. This shows that how a man's value was measured in terms of his physical strength in Mali society and therefore, though the king Maghan made Sundiata his heir, Sundiata could easily be stripped of all his rights due to his inability to walk. The council totally ignoring the will of the king sided with Sassouma and not only helped her in making Touman the king but also showed no objection in the exile of Sogolon and her son who had the same right as Sassouma and her son to the king's property.

In conclusion, Mali society as described by D. T. Niane was a patriarchal society in which men enjoyed the absolute power and position in the society with little freedom and rights allowed to the women. 'Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali' very beautifully touches upon the role men and women played in Mali society by giving glimpses of how men dominated women and imposed decisions on them and how women bound by insecurity and jealousy were driven to take desperate measures against their opponents. Women in Mali society were merely showpieces whose worth was measured in terms of her physical appearance and reproduction capability. They had no consent to their marriage and even to their physical union with their husbands. The very essence of women was defined in terms of their relations with their husbands and male members of the society. The men could take any decision as they pleased on the destiny of their women and women had to unquestionably obey them. The decisions of men in favor of one woman and against another

could plant seeds of jealousy and rivalry in the heart of one woman towards another. The Mali women had no power and were basically puppets in the hands of men.

Work Cited

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