

9-1-2021

Motherism, African Women and Ecological Advocacy in Aminata Sow Fall's L'Ex-père de la nation and Douceurs du bercail

Olubunmi O. Ashaolu
Obafemi Awolowo University



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Ashaolu, Olubunmi O.. "Motherism, African Women and Ecological Advocacy in Aminata Sow Fall's L'Ex-père de la nation and Douceurs du bercail." *The Goose*, vol. 19 , no. 1 , article 1, 2021, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol19/iss1/1>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

OLUBUNMI O. ASHAOLU

Motherism, African Women and Ecological Advocacy in Aminata Sow Fall's L'Ex-père de la nation and Douceurs du bercail

The contemporary upturn of threats to global ecosystem brings about concerns for the environment and its impact on human life. These threats resonate in different domains of the academy, including the literary world. Both fictional and critical works about Africa have been associated with concerns for the violated environment of the colonized/postcolonial marginalized people. Mostly, the postcolonial works inscribe environmental alienation that degrades the human and non-human ecosystem as well as the climate of Africa. This impasse manifests in the ecocidal activities of the centre over the periphery evident in neocolonial capitalist/patriarchal hegemony. In most cases, critical works on African environments have chastised Western powers' abuse of African ecosystem, not sparing their African collaborators. For this, some writers project desolation and degradation alongside a pristine African environment, all in a bid to highlight the degeneration orchestrated by characters whose roles are inimical to the environment. There is therefore the need for an Africanized ecocriticism that challenges the status quo and offers Indigenous responses to resultant issues across local and global scales.

While human beings are often culpable of menacing the peaceful existence of Mother Earth, most fictional works on the environment situated on the continent of Africa but written by outsiders project only a deplorably degraded ecosystem, thereby ignoring the nourishing and abundant face of the African environment. For instance, only four chapters were dedicated to African Ecocriticism in the seminal *African Literature: Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, and the chapters approach African ecocriticism from the perspectives of environmental pollution and degradation spearheaded mostly by foreign capitalists. In fact, many critics gloss over the beauty of the African environment in their analytical underpinnings.

The present article seeks to present a distinct argument using Aminata Sow Fall's *L'ex-père de la nation* (1987) and *Douceurs du bercail* (1998) (in-text referenced as *L'ex-père* and *Douceurs*) with the theoretical underpinnings of environmental Motherism. It concentrates on the symbiotic impact of the interrelations between women characters and the environment. Our

point is that the novels speak to Motherism as a theory that showcases rural African ecosystems as not always detrimental, but also capable of constituting environmental treasure. The article argues further that women characters' roles suggest an advocacy for ecological Motherist ideals as a means to counter postcolonial societal ills.

Studies of depictions of the African environment in existing literary texts draw conceptual framework from concerns about eco-degradation in various forms, from ecocriticism, ecofeminism, anthropocentrism, ecopsychology, to petrocultures and so on. Each of these theories focuses mainly on a damaging effect of the ecosystem under the abuse of capitalists, its common enemy. The ecological deconstruction becomes so prevalent to the point that critics overlook the subtle portraits of wholesome depictions of the African environment. In addition, most ecocritical works on sub-Saharan African literature have more leanings on Anglophone literature with minimal focus on the francophone. For example, the palpable absence of critical works on francophone Africa in *Eco-Critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes* (2013) and *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa* (2011) edited by Ogaga Okuyade, Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth A. Myers respectively, testifies to the under representation of ecocriticism in francophone African literature. This study sets out to bridge the gap. "Motherism, African Women and Ecological Advocacy in Aminata Sow Fall's *L'Ex-père de la nation* and *Douceurs du bercail*" is thus a study of the two Senegalese novels using Catherine Acholonu's theory as a robust dialogue that presents environmental Motherism as an ecophilic variant of, and parallel voice to, ecocriticism.

Theoretical Framework: Motherism

To present a wholesome evaluation of the environment, Acholonu adds the feminist advocacy of African Mother Earth and the environment as part of her theoretical framework on Motherism. Motherism as a theory exhibits diverse aspects of African femininity, one of which presents women as preservers of the environment and advocates of symbiotic relationships between humans and ecosystems. A considerable part of Acholonu's argument centres *environmental* Motherism which lays emphasis on the maternal qualities of women and sees "the woman as an extension of the earth mother—the global nurturer of all creation" (Acholonu 120). The tenet of Motherism upholds women's traditional peaceful management of the environment in this Indigenous context. It encourages them to search for solutions to the world's disorderliness that threatens the environment such as drought, global warming, oil spillage, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, to mention a few. The extreme care for the earth is ingrained in the commitment that a Motherist has to Mother Earth. Motherism in itself emblemizes the existence and consciousness of the earth which makes one "revere her and worship her as the goddess of life" (Acholonu 124).

In Acholonu's words women, especially mothers, possess strong knowledge of traditional living and the science of nature. They are the most sensitive users and care-takers of the environment and because they are closer to the environment, female rural dwellers display

essential wisdom of the ancestors. Acholonu sums up the intimacy between a Motherist and the earth:

Rural women in the villages possess the natural understanding of some of our environmental problems.... They have natural understanding of the environment, the crops, the plants, the trees. They possess ancient knowledge of nature and her ways: the behavior of the vegetation, the seasons, the sun, the rain, the waters and the animals. This personal empathy with the environment lies at the root of their success with maintaining natural harmony with the planet Our ancestors knew, and many of today's African rural dwellers know, that one string of life connects all living and so-called non-living things on this planet. (124)

Motherism fights against every form of violence and abuse of nature, prioritizing the spiritual, material, and cultural survival of Mother Earth as an entity. It calls for love, patience, tolerance, cooperation, and non-violence between all people. While giving itself to Nature emblemized by the environment, Motherism attests to a reciprocal relationship between humans and ecosystems; it respects the peaceful relationship with all human creation and the environment. There is a close link between Ecofeminism and Motherism as both theories argue that women and the earth support, nourish, and protect humanity, even though their efforts are not recognized. Motherism shares some traits with Ecofeminism where women often represent fruitful procreation in humans as well as the fullness of the earth. While Ecofeminism studies women and the environment as co-sufferers under patriarchy, environmental Motherism advocates for the complementarity that establishes humanity in an equilibrium of ecosystems of all people. In its calls for humanity without barriers, Motherism seeks peaceful consideration of human diversity that appreciates human and natural environments on the surface of the earth (Acholonu 119).

The Motherist writer is a humanitarian who is not sex-biased, not patriarchal, and not inclined toward fundamentalism. Therefore, they primarily respect each gender and promote truth and self-affirmation between humans and ecosystems. As an advocate of human rights, a Motherist writer portrays characters, especially women, as symbolic of the Mother-Earth, a doyen of biological continuity in her roles of procreation of both human and elements of the ecosystem.

Textual Analysis: Aminata Sow Fall

Most of Aminata Sow Fall's novels reveal her inclinations as more of a socio-realist than a feminist. Unlike most early francophone African female writers who took to fictional autobiography (Stringer 76), Sow Fall explores neo-colonial societal breakdown and campaigns against a general disregard for the dignity and values of human beings. Her literary works indict excessive attachment to urbanization and the western world away from African roots. Even though her novels take place in urban settings, Stringer shows how Sow Fall believes that "accelerated urbanization is causing many Senegalese to lose contact with their rural origins [hence] the village is always a significant presence" (81) in her works.

L'ex-père de la nation

L'ex-père's storyline features African characters' concerns with the harsh realities of ecology. The ecocritical concern of the novel is about an acute drought that ravages an imaginary African country under the leadership of Madiama, the protagonist. As an agrarian country, a large part of the setting goes through a terrible drought and deforestation. While Madiama is just, members of his cabinet are corrupt. They deprive the citizens of foreign aid and aggravate their plight. Side by side with the main narration, Sow Fall projects women characters' environmental Motherist roles evident in Madiama's mother Coumba Dado, his first wife Coura, and other traditional women's inclination to the environment. Their storylines run parallel to Madiama's ecologically degraded regime of governance. Linked within these women's storylines are the ideals of Motherism which offer sharp contrast to the metaphor of drought that scorches the socio-political progress of neonatal African nations emblemized by the dramatic drought in *L'ex-père de la nation*. It is in this way that the novel presents a duality of ecocriticism: overt or explicit critique of present degraded systems; and covert, or implicit fostering of more nourishing systems. In the novel, the overt is seen in the drought and the covert is evident in women's Motherist advocacy of African ecology—the animals, waters, land, climate, and nature. The latter aspect of environmental condition differs from the postcolonial environmental malaise of the drought. This article is particularly focused on *L'ex-père's* covert, or implicit ecocriticism whereby Sow Fall depicts women as eco-philic agents of the environment.

Motherism: Women's Connection with Natural Elements

In *L'ex-père*, the main Motherist character is personified by the totality of the environment on which she manifests attributes of love, healing, knowledge, power, and abundance. For instance, Coumba Dado's Motherist traits resonate with Acholonu's description of the quintessential qualities of mothers who display a genuine inclination towards drawing from the natural environment to assist fellow women in diverse conditions. According to Coura, the Motherist Coumba Dado taps into the environment:

Te souviens-tu de Lélo, la chèvre qu'elle chérissait comme un fétiche parce qu'elle était l'unique descendante de la chèvre que sa mère lui avait offerte en cadeau de nocces! . . . Elle avait trait Lélo dans une minuscule calebasse vierge. Elle avait placé sous nos mentons le lait fumant à odeur de prairie et elle avait encore dit: '*Jurez de ne jamais vous séparer de votre vie*'. Elle t'avait fait boire trois pleines gorgées avant de me faire vider la calebasse en quatre gorges, n'est-ce pas? . . . elle avait dit solennellement: *Madiama et Coura: vous deux pour toujours, jusqu'à la mort*. Et nous avons répété tous les deux: '*Nous deux, jusqu'à la mort*.' . . . elle avait enterré la calebasse pour, dit-elle la confier à la terre qui la protégerait de toute souillure. (Sow Fall, *L'Ex-père* 57-58; author's emphasis)
[Do you remember Lélo, the goat that she cherished like a fetish because it was the only descendant of the goat her mother gave her as a wedding gift! . . . She

milked Lélo into a small and clean calabash. She placed the steaming meadow-smelling milk under our chin, and said again, ‘Swear never to separate from each other, all your life.’ She gave you three full sips before she made me empty the contents in four sips, isn’t it? . . . she said solemnly: ‘Madiama and Coura: the two of you forever, till death.’ And we repeated ‘Both of us till death.’ . . . She buried the calabash, in her words, to entrust it to the earth which would protect it from any blemish.]¹

Each of the items used (goat milk, goat, fresh calabash, land, and the act of burying the calabash) in the process of oath-taking between Coura and Madiama becomes significant as a natural element in Motherism—they are all components of the ecosystem. Metaphorically, these elements constitute co-participants in the swearing of the oath, and they are witnesses to the allegiance between human beings. By orchestrating and supervising the oath-taking between Madiama and Coura, Coumba Dado takes on the Motherist role of African woman as a priestess/queen (Acholonu 33). The consumption of the goat milk thus connects Madiama, Coura, and the Mother Earth—the three of them being one under the oath. In this way, the goat, its milk, Coumba Dado the priestess, Madiama, and Coura all suggest full elements of the ecosystem whose longevity becomes eternalized in the land, recipient of the calabash. Burying the calabash depicts a way to seal the durability of the oath of allegiance between man and the ecology. It is important to note that land in African traditional beliefs is a vital component for swearing oath, for instance among the Igbo and Yoruba people of West Africa (Babatunde 432). The belief is not common to the Igbo and Yoruba groups alone, but equally shared by the Wolof in Senegal as evident in Coumba Dado’s method of oath-swearing.

As an important element in ecology, we note that Lélo the goat is also not just an ordinary animal. It has a name which elevates its identity among humans. That Lélo descends from a mother-goat, a gift from Coumba Dado’s mother, casts this goat, an animal, as an essential part of earth’s ecology. It is a generation of goats which emblemizes procreation, thus hinting at productivity and abundant fruitfulness, a highly respected motherly trait in African ideology. It is significant to note that in the storyline, Lélo is eternalized as she does not die. Coura explains that “Un matin elle était allée broutér l’herbe tendres des premières pluies avec sa chevette, et n’était jamais revenue” (Sow Fall, *L’ex-père* 57). [One morning she had gone to graze tender grass of the first rains with her baby goat, and never came back]. As an environmentalist, through Lélo, Coumba Dado evokes the ineffaceable contact that humans have with animals. With the goat, she advocates for the need to put other non-human species into a horizontal position of equivalence with humans. Coumba Dado does not underestimate other elements of the ecosystem.

Little wonder then that Coura holds on to the oath after marriage. She reminds her husband about his failure to keep allegiance by taking on a second wife. As a Motherist, Coura stands by her marital oath, but she transforms from a wife to a mother through another process involving her own breast milk. She authenticates this transformation to Madiama’s consternation as he

¹ In this article, all translations are mine.

notes “Elle avait fait gicler le lait de son sein et avait dirigé le jet sur ma bouche encore ouverte” (Sow Fall, *L’ex-père* 59). [She had sprayed the milk from her breast and had directed the jet on my still open mouth]. The splashing of Coura’s breast milk into Madiama’s mouth is symbolic and it is a Motherist transformative way that takes Coura from being Madiama’s wife to becoming his mother. Coura, now transformed to Madiama’s mother, authenticates her commitment to the original oath. She warns, “Si tu cherchais en moi la femme, sache que c’est ta mère Coumba Dado Sadio que tu chercherais, et alors, honte, sacrilège, malheur . . .” (Sow Fall, *L’ex-père* 58). [If you were seeking a wife in me, know that it’s your mother Coumba Dado Sadio that you would seek, and then shame, sacrilege, woe]. Coura’s transformation maintains her allegiance with the original oath under Coumba Dado’s supervision.

Even though Coumba Dado is now dead, Coura’s own breast milk spurting into Madiama’s mouth eternalizes Coumba Dado. It also suggests Coura’s transformation into Coumba Dado. Milk, once again, becomes an element of allegiance through Coura’s transformation from being a wife to becoming a mother. Coura’s breast milk, taken by Madiama, suggests that their marital relationship now transforms into that of mother and son. Coura’s milk, taken by Madiama, signifies a taboo that prevents intercourse between mother and son, hence Coura warns, “honte, sacrilège, malheur” [shame, sacrilege, woe] await Madiama if he seeks wifely roles in her. As a wife betrayed by Madiama, Coura’s stand is underpinned by Motherism, “which no longer emphasizes female militancy, sexism, female chauvinism, and sterile or mechanical equality, but rather focuses on the motherhood qualities of woman, mutual respect . . .” (Acholonu 120) between man and woman. Coura advocates Motherist justice by renouncing her wifely roles towards Madiama.

Motherism: Protective Trees and Bountiful Farming

Most Motherist protagonists in these novels are depicted as closer to the earth. They are “peasants” or rural women which makes them distinct from city dwellers. The management of female characters’ Motherist zeal becomes obvious in the management of the farmland between Coumba Dado and Coura as a girl. In her passion for cultivating the land, Coumba Dado, “avait passé toute sa vie dans les champs, bravant le vent, la foudre, le soleil et la pluie. . . elle contemplait d’un œil ravi le lopin de terre dont elle avait fait un *jardin d’abondance*” (Sow Fall, *L’ex-père* 62; my emphasis) [had spent all her life in the fields, braving the wind, lightning, sun and rain.... With a pleasing look, she contemplated the parcel of land, out of which she made a *garden of abundance*]

Here, Coumba Dado’s role of creating a garden of abundance impugns Madiama’s reign epitomized by a devastating drought that constitutes the major storyline. In sharp contrast to the men’s rule filled with drought, Coumba Dado in the true characteristic of a Motherist, passes the heritage of mastery of plants and climate on to her adopted daughter—Coura—as a child. Coumba Dado asks the latter:

– Comment trouves-tu le champ, ma fille?

– Il est plein et beau ma tante, la graine a germé, verdi et fleuri, et nous a rendu milles graines (Sow Fall, *L'ex-père* 62).

[How do you find the farm, my daughter?

- It is full and nice, my Aunty. The seed germinated, flourished and is greenish, and has given us a thousand seeds].

Coura's words accentuate the abundance of her aunt's farmland and produce. Her words contradict and condemn the biting effect of the main storyline riddled with drought and famine under the male-dominated and corrupt governance of Madiama. Coumba Dado and Coura's motherists' management of farmland exudes abundance, beauty and peace of the agricultural setting. As such trees become an element of repute in their perspectives as they reaffirm the emotional attachment that women have with trees and their environment.

Considering Mary Vidya Porselvi's opinion that "trees symbolize an interdependence of life, which is very clearly understood by Indigenous women In folklore, women find refuge in trees as a sister, mother or a goddess" (106), women's intimacy with trees in *L'ex-père* deserves closer study. Women characters reveal that trees, for instance, play protective roles for humans and animals as they form large shade over their courtyard. As a grown-up, Coura taps into these protective qualities of trees to nurse her baby "Coura lui avait donné le sein en se dirigeant d'un pas alerte au pied du citronnier dont les branches touffues couvraient la cour comme un parasol" (Sow Fall, *L'ex-père* 59). [Coura had nursed her baby, walking steadily towards the foot of the lemon tree, whose dense branches formed an umbrella that covered the compound].

It is significant to note that the Motherist role of nurturing a baby via breastfeeding goes on under the protective shade of the lemon tree, a role that makes Coura concur with nature seen in the tree and its protective shade. Her role of breastfeeding also lays bare the African mothers' awareness of the benefits of lactating, which makes "African women feed on demand, even in public" (D'Avanzo 656). Coumba's neighbor, Tante Gnagna, attests to trees' multifarious usefulness, from providing shade to ensuring healing. For example, Coumba Dado, Tante Gnagna and their children find refuge under the tree "Tante Gnagna était allée s'asseoir à côté d'elle au pied du tamarinier qui étendait son ombre sur l'arrière-cour de la maison. Nous qui étions là: Coura, Sanou et moi avions respiré un air de délivrance" (Sow Fall, *L'ex-père* 98-99; my emphasis). [Aunt Gnagna had gone to sit next to her at the foot of the tamarind tree whose shadow extended to the backyard of the house. Those of us there: Coura, Sanou and I took a breath of relief]

Contact with the tamarind tree is encouraged by Tante Gnagna, who is also a Motherist character. The air of freshness and deliverance coming from the leaves exemplifies the gains of interrelations between a tree and a human. The leaves not only provide shade from sunlight, they also emit oxygen that purifies characters' respiration and thus rejuvenates them. While humans breathe in oxygen, plants take in the carbon dioxide exhaled by humans. Thus, Tante Gnagna and her group provide the means of reading the healthy gas exchange partnership between trees and humans. Also, when Tante Gnagna becomes sick, Madiama's mother draws

on leaves to heal Gnagna. Madiama vaunts, “‘pour dire adieu à la maladie’ selon la formule de ma mère Tante Gnagna avait pris un bain de décoction de feuilles trempées pendant trois jours par ma mère dans un énorme canari . . . nous n’y avons vu que le miracle de la résurrection” (Sow Fall, *L’ex-père* 98). [‘To say goodbye to the disease following my mother’s method’, Aunt Gnagna took a bath of decoction leaves soaked for three days in a huge earthen pot by my mother We only saw the miracle of resurrection in it.]

Motherism in *Douceurs du bercail*

Turning to another novel, Sow Fall’s *Douceurs du bercail*, Motherism offers a window into the intersection between immigration and ecology, where emigration reveals postcolonial issues among African youth. Detained in a French airport dungeon near Paris, Asta Diop, a Senegalese single mother of two, and other characters are humiliated and disappointed with their immigration experience in France. Before her official trip to France, Asta gets all the necessary documents for a legal entry. However, upon arrival, the French immigration officer subjects her to the humiliation of wanting to palpate Asta for hard drugs. Seen as a violation of her body and human rights, Asta objects to the invasive touch of the French immigration personnel. This causes her detention. Her and other characters’ detention lays bare their ordeals in France.

Environmental Motherism: Women and the Return to African Land

More than *L’ex-père*, *Douceurs* highlights place or the environment emblemized by France as a land which becomes an unfavourable ecology for the detained African immigrants. For them, France constitutes an unpromising land to which African characters could hardly adapt. The immigrants’ anguish reaches its climax as Asta, Yakham, Codé, Dianor, Sega and other detained immigrants face humiliation, anguish, rape, and extreme flood light illumination that denies them sleep and healthy notions of time. In the face of severe suffering as immigrants, which reaches its climax in the airport dungeon, discussion between Asta and other African detainees demystifies immigration to Europe. The discussion evokes their own countries as better places, veritable options for a return to the source evident in the novel’s full title, “DOUCEURS DU BERCAIL, c’était un label de réconciliation avec soi...” (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 217; author’s emphasis). [DOUCEURS DU BERCAIL, it was a label of reconciliation with oneself]. The title calls on characters to invest their efforts in the preservation of Africa—their ‘bercail’, home, source. Inherent in Sow Fall’s focus on the neocolonial malaise that tears Africans down, are the subplots of hope in which the epistemologies of reform of and return to Africa take pre-eminence.

Sow Fall suggests optimistically that the immigrants’ return and commitment to their motherland illustrate a reconciliation with Mother Earth, a feat that enables them to break away from the prison of immigration which France represents for them. Sow Fall strongly recommends a turn-around where, rather than fester in extreme poverty and dehumanization, African characters in *Douceurs* abandon the hostilities of French environment to rebuild their own motherland. Their collective return to Africa reverberates the fulfilment of reinstatement; it implies an attachment to and reconciliation with the environment, culture, and African

values. From this commitment to motherland comes the protection of African ecosystems seen in Motherism. The novel indicts the abandonment of Motherland Africa for France, demonstrating migration's attendant problems such as racism, poverty, anxiety.

Leaving Africa for Europe evokes the illusions of contemporary African youth, who seek futures antithetical to the watering of and tending to one's own land. The characters' initial choice of immigration suggests the duality of land symbolized by France and the immigrants' African origin. For them land parallels the notion of environmental rejection of motherland and acceptance of the colonial myth of the superiority of Europe. Their struggle to fit into French land "highlights the sense of environmental longing that migration produces" (Mount and O'Brien 532). However, the French system of environmental racism ensures that ecological integration is unattainable for the African characters in France. Hence their resort to a return to their roots in Africa. The potentialities that Africa promises provide the characters' hope of exploring the wealth of African natural environments. Asta vows "Quand je sortirai d'ici, je serais plus à l'aise pour dire à mes frères, sœurs, parents, et amis, que l'eldorado n'est pas au bout de l'exode mais dans les entrailles de notre terre" (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 87). [When I get out of here, I will be more comfortable to tell my brothers, sisters, parents and friends that the Eldorado is not at the extremity of exodus but in the bowels of our land].

Women and Bountiful African Land

The Motherist message becomes glaring here as it is through Asta Diop's ingenuity that the returnees become reinstated in Africa to secure their land's survival. After repatriation back to her country, Asta settles the young men and women on a ten hectare farmland that she purchased (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 188). Proliferation as an element of Motherism is seen in Asta's land, named Naatangué where happenings within the agricultural farm "do something other than document ecological crises" (Wenzel 139). Naatangué is thus a setting that creates a refuge for the returnees as "[L]es moissons avaient été bonnes. *Naatangué* avait vibré avec tous les villageois pour remercier Dieu et la terre de leur avoir prodigué tant d'abondance" (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 223). [The harvest had been bountiful. Naatangué rejoiced with all the villagers by thanking God and the earth for providing them with so much abundance]. Asta's Motherist traits explain her advocacy for working closely with African land in order to benefit from the land's resources; Asta incarnates a pillar of ecological support for both the environment and her team. It is in this rural African land that the repatriated returnees will find freedom, a new lease on life, and hope for their future breakthrough in Africa.

Asta's message is that immigration destroys the fabric of attachment between the characters and their motherland. Her focus on rural African land underlines its capacity, innovation, and establishment; it predicts immigrants' (including African mega city dwellers) need to consider a return to the rural land in order to delve into her resources for the good of humanity. Attracted by the ideals of Africa as the mother of all continents, Asta in this farmstead plays the role of the good shepherd who leads the returnees to discover the beauty of their land "sur la vaste étendue de terre déployée comme un tapis multicolores avec de teintes noires (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 193). [on a vast expanse of land that spreads out like a colorful carpet with dark

shades]. The beauty of the land suggests an attraction to Africa, which draws immigrants and continental Africans to look inward and labor to harness the wealth that lies within their land.

Naatangué underscores African land as a source of plenitude, dignity, and peace (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 197) in contrast to the servitude and poverty that France represents for the immigrants while they were there. The plenitude that surges out of Asta's farm contradicts Africans' illusions of yearning to emigrate. Asta recounts the treasure found in African lands which conforms with the Motherist ideas that land and women play the same roles of nourishing humanity. Land then becomes indispensable as Asta personifies 'her':

Toute l'équipe, les gens du coin, et beaucoup d'autres vivront de cette terre qui cache tant de merveilles en son sein Mais ce qui sera le plus important pour moi, Anne mon amie, tu le sais bien mais j'éprouve tant de plaisir à te le répéter: c'est l'ineffable bonheur de sentir la terre, de communier avec elle quand, de son sein, jaillit la vie, la nourriture qui donne vie et consistance. (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 200; my emphasis) [The whole team, the people in the corner, and many others will live off this land that *hides so many wonders within her* But what will be the most important for me, Anne my friend, you know it but I feel so much delight to repeat it: it is the unspeakable happiness to feel the land, to communicate with her when, from her breast, spurts the food that gives life and consistency].

Land takes on a metaphor of woman with breasts here, through the allusion to land's hiding so much resources within her breast—'sein.' As such the resources within the land are likened to the sweetness and nourishing freshness of mothers' breast milk which, reminds one of Coumba Dado and Coura's ideals in *L'ex-père*. The fertility of the land, which is responsible for productivity, is juxtaposed with the reproductive nature of Mothers. Hence Naatangué emits abundant fruitfulness that supports good nutrition that depicts happy women as they are busy with culinary activities. "Ça et là, des groupes de femmes . . . s'activent autours de gros mortier en chantant à la cadence des pilons" (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 192). [Here and there, groups of women . . . are moving around the big mortar singing to the rhythm of pestles]. With the ingenuity that Sow Fall places on women in *Douceurs*, Asta is able to establish a vibrant agricultural commitment to land in a way that uplifts her team while the environment ensures abundant yields. In this way, Asta's passion for the land elicits Wangari Maathai's call for commitment to African land through the easy and attainable process of growing trees that guarantees quick and successful results (Maathai).

Also, within Naatangué, the hard labor of the returnees leads to the discovery of a mysterious herb, 'güewê', by Yakham (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 214). This plant allows Asta's team to hit "énormes profits" (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 215), [enormous profits] that rescue Asta from her wasted efforts of securing a bank loan (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 209-210). What is more, part of the proceeds from vending güewê serves as a means to build a canal that irrigates the 10 hectares which permits the plantation of economic trees, cash crops and consumable ones thus ensuring greater agricultural yield. Sow Fall's depiction of farming compares well with Bessie Head's

sustainable farming in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968). Asta's farm demonstrates that not only is African land sufficient for the returnees, it also symbolizes an Edenic terrain for Asta's French friend Anne, and Didier, her husband, who share Motherist ideals in their solidarity visit (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 191-201) to Naatangué to encourage Asta and her team.

Asta calls for an embrace with African land and ecosystems in order to solve Africans' problems; she strongly affirms that "la terre ne ment pas" (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 188, 214). [the earth does not lie]. As an amazon empowered with ecological managerial skills, she champions the cause of other characters' re-establishment in Africa as they settle in Bakhna (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 192), the rural setting that has been hitherto abandoned.² Through the abandoned and now occupied Bakhna, Sow Fall speaks metaphorically against the neglect of Africa, first by immigrants to the West and also by exodus from the rural area to the urban cities where modernism makes the city dwellers and immigrants forget about their origins—rural African settings. More precisely in the case of the returnees, the remoteness of Bakhna makes Sow Fall campaign against the abandonment of Africa. The author speaks through Asta that "le Paradis n'est pas forcément ailleurs" (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 201) [Paradise is not necessarily elsewhere] in the cold cities of Western nations. It is in this rural setting that they found joy as they discover the beauty of African land, her capacity to support people by providing self-employment that satisfies their needs. Asta's roles hint at Juliana M. Nfah-Abenyi's opinion that "all change in the long run would depend on the women of the country . . . who would rally the others and 'help open the way for new agricultural developments'" (711).

Sow Fall recommends that African immigrants should return home to discover and embrace the abundance of African land and its capability to meet their needs and transform them to self-fulfilled characters. Codé, also an advocate of Motherism, continues to preach:

aimons notre terre; nous l'arrosserons de notre sueur et la creuserons de toutes nos forces, avec courage. La lumière de notre espérance nous guidera, nous récolterons et bâtirons. Alors seulement nous pourrons emprunter les routes du ciel, de la terre et de l'eau sans être chassés comme des parias. (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 88; my emphasis) [Let's love our land, we will wet it with our sweat and dig it with our might, with courage. The light of our hope will guide us, we will harvest and build. Only then can we pursue the road to bliss, *earth and water without being driven away like outcasts*]

It is in characters' embrace of the motherland that Sow Fall accentuates the wealth of raw materials that lay within African rural land—so much abandoned for emigration to the West.

² "Amazon" here refers to female warriors of the African Kingdom of Dahomey, present day Republic of Benin, in West Africa. In history, these female warriors existed from around 17th century until 1904. Because their practices resonated with outsiders' understandings of the role of women warriors in Greek mythology, they have been called "amazons." For more: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/dahomeys-women-warriors-88286072/>

Women and the Waters

The intimacy between woman and environment is not restricted to the land alone; it covers other forms of nature—the waters—be it the river or the sea. Just as Motherism knows no racial barrier, Anne, who spent part of her childhood in Africa, acknowledges the intimacy between women and rivers. She enthuses:

. . . c'était au Mali. J'étais encore toute jeune. Ma mère aimait se promener le long du fleuve Djoliba, écouter le chant des femmes, les voir dessiner des symbols sur des pagnes et les tremper dans une bouillie d'argile ou d'indigo. Ma mère essayait ensuite de me faire comprendre qu'il y a, entre la femme et le fleuve, une mystérieuse complicité. (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 195) [. . . it was in Mali. I was still young. My mother loved strolling along the Djoliba River, listening to the women's songs, seeing them draw symbols on fabric and soaking them in a boiled mud mixture or indigo. My mother then tried to make me understand that there is a mysterious complicity between the women and the river.]

While Anne's mother recognizes the bond between women and river, Mame Fanta, Asta's mother, also brings to the fore the intimacy between women and the river when she prepares the ground before her daughter takes over Bakhna. In her veneration of the African river, Fanta, had "versé du lait et des pièces d'argent dans le fleuve pour saluer la 'grande dame invisible'" (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 204) [... poured milk and silver coins into the river to greet the 'great invisible lady'], the spirit mother of the river. Fanta's roles illustrate the respect and veneration that Motherism accords African waters. She personifies spirituality as an essential part of friendly interrelations between human and ecosystem. Fanta's reverence establishes a sentiment of attachment between woman and nature; it accentuates a reconciliation with African culture and beliefs. It is significant to note that the recognition and reverence of the mothering nature of African waters are ideals propagated by Anne and Asta's mothers. Their roles indicate that beliefs in the supernatural power of African rivers transcend race and generations. In the same vein, Fanta's role and the observation of Anne's mother confirm that African rural women display Motherist traits of seeking spirituality which gets them closer to the natural environment and their ancestors (Acholonu 214).

Little wonder that Asta also recognizes the riverine matriarch: "Mame Coumba Bang le génie titulaire veille, du fond des eaux, sur la plus petite goutte de son précieux liquide On dit qu'elle est omniprésente, belle, charmeuse et impitoyable contre ceux qui seraient tentés de semer le désordre dans les eaux et tout autour du fleuve" (Sow Fall, *Douceurs* 195-196). [Mama Coumba Bang the owner spirit watches, from the depth of the river, over the smallest drop of her precious liquid She is said to be omnipresent, beautiful, charming but ruthless against those who dared to sow disorder in the waters and around the surroundings of the river]. Mame Coumba Bang is portrayed with extraordinary and spiritual feats to protect the ecosystem within and without the waters. By the same token, she chastises any infiltrator that seeks to abuse the rivers and the seas.

Conclusion

Aminata Sow Fall's environmental versatility comes to the fore as she not only portrays ecocritical issues in *L'ex-père* and *Douceurs*, but also promotes Acholonu's Motherist concept of peaceful relationships between African women and their environment. Her literary imagination in *L'ex-père* and *Douceurs* transcends the daily experience of women in the domestic realm to the arena of environmental concerns. This study, an addition to a vibrant ongoing discourse on environmental/ecocritical inquiry in Francophone African literary studies, has presented a rarely explored form of environmental Motherism through Aminata Sow Fall's works. In particular, *Douceurs* and *L'Ex-père* underscore environmental Motherism, thereby highlighting women's sterling environmental qualities which could be positively deployed towards the enhancement of improved ecosystems. Our study of the two novels reveals that women may not always be co-sufferers with the environment. They can also be explorers of nature to liberate humans on the one hand, and outright protectors of the ecology on the other. The bond between women and the environment ensures balanced coexistence between nature and humans regardless of gender. It is in this respect that the much sought-after environmentally healthy society must incorporate women's advocacy in order to stem the problems of ecological degradation.

Using Motherist characters, Sow Fall proffers solutions to various ills that accompany the ecological plague in neocolonial Africa, such as drought, immigration and its attendant suffering, disregard for the land and its rich resources, and rural exodus. Above all, she highlights the joy and harmony that the environment exudes towards humans. While the entire world dreads the aftermath of a broken down environment that may cease to support humanity, Sow Fall's Motherist depiction of women and their closeness to the environment invests hope in a renewed African society devoid of the dregs and dirt of contact with colonialism, capitalism, and excessive modernism that run counter to societal progress. Given that women are the spiritual foundation of their family, community, and nation, *L'ex-père* and *Douceurs* accentuate the need to incorporate rural women in the political/environmental decisions of African nations. Women's roles as advocates of the environment call for the need to heed Sow Fall's warnings about the importance of incorporating Motherist ways of living in contemporary Africa. Thus, Sow Fall uses *L'Ex-père* and *Douceurs* as a call to see the wisdom and beauty within Motherist Africa and to invest in those imaginaries, rather than in tropes of degradation alone.

Works Cited

- Acholonu, Catherine Obianuju. *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1995.
- Babatunde, Abosede Omowumi. "Promoting Peace and Justice Through African Indigenous Social Norms and Values: An Exposition of the Omoluabi Philosophy in Yoruba (African) Societies." *Connecting Contemporary African-Asian Peacemaking and Nonviolence: From Satagraha to Ujamaa*, edited by Jain Vidya and Meyer Matt, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2018, pp. 427-440.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Byron and Garth A. Myers, editors. *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*. Ohio U P, 2011.
- D'Avanzo, Carolyn Erikson. *Mosby's Pocket Guide to Cultural Health Assessment*, E-Book 4th Edition, Mosby Elsevier, 2003. 5, Oct. 2020. <https://www.ebooks.com/en-us/book/1905490/mosby-s-pocket-guide-to-cultural-health-assessment-e-book/carolyn-d-avanzo/>.
- Head, Bessie. *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Simon and Schuster, 1968.
- Maathai, Wangari. "On Forestry for People, Livelihoods and Poverty Eradication. United Nations Forest Forum and the Launch of the International Year of Forests 2011. New York, NY, February 2, 2011." Keynote Address. *Wangari Maathai: Visionary, Environmental Leader, Political Activist*, by Florence Namulundah, Lantern Books, 2014. 28, Nov. 2020
- Mount, Dana and O'Brien Susie. "Postcolonialism and the Environment." *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Graham Huggan, Oxford U P, 2013, pp. 521-539.
- Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. "Ecological Postcolonialism in African Women's Literature." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, pp. 707-714.
- Okuyade, Ogaga, editor. *Eco-Critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes*. African Heritage Press, 2013.
- Olaniyan, Tejumola and Ato Quayson, editors. *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Porselvi, Mary Vidya. *Nature, Culture and Gender: Re-reading the Folktale*. Routledge, 2019.
- Sow Fall, Aminata. *L'ex-père de la nation*. L'Harmattan, 1987.
- , *Douceurs du bercail*. Nouvelles Editions Ivoiriennes, 1998.

Stringer, Susan. *The Senegalese Novel by Women*. Peter Lang, 1999.

Wenzel, Jennifer. "Forest Fictions and Ecological Crisis: Reading the Politics of Survival in Mahasweta Devi's 'Dhowli'." *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, Oxford U P, 2011 pp. 136-155.

OLUBUNMI O. ASHAOLU holds a Ph.D. in French Francophone literature and film from the University of California, Davis, USA. Her research publication centers on Postcolonial Studies with a focus on Gender, Environment and Violence in French/Francophone fiction and cinema. She taught French/Francophone African literature and cinema at some universities in the United States; currently she teaches at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.