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Authors: Evelyne Delgado-Norris

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Voices of Resistance in the Poetry of Kiné Kirama Fall and Coumba N'Dèye Diakhâté

Evelyne Delgado-Norris, Ph.D.

When we think about pioneer Francophone African poets in general, we think about names such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Birago Diop, or David Diop from the Négritude era at the dawn of independence and in early independence days, a period spanning from the 30s to the 60s and 70s. But Senegalese women poets such as Annette M'Baye d’Erneville were also writing at the same time (she dates some of her poems in the 40s and 50s), making their mark and inscribing their visions in an emerging new Africa. In fact, referring to African women poets, Angèle Bassolé Ouédraogo mentions in an article “c’est à ces dernières que l’on doit les débuts d’une écriture africaine au féminin.” M’Baye d’Erneville’s collection Poèmes africains (1965) later republished in 1966 under the title Kaddu opened an already standing canon of prominent Senegalese male poets. Kiné Kirama Fall and N'Dèye Coumba Diakhâté follow in her footsteps as they bring the Senegalese woman’s personal voice, accents, and concerns in a genre that continues in many ways women’s oral tradition of the word in new literary, social, and political contexts.

Women in Senegal have always expressed resisting discourses in traditional songs and poetry in their indigenous languages. Their visions have often differed from the public patriarchal representations of women, their place in marriage, within the community and society in general. In less public arenas, the Senegalese woman (as well as African women in general) sings about her life, her joys and hardships, but also about social and political issues that affect her and the community. This repertoire of feminine cultural expressions has often remained untapped because of researchers’ lack of knowledge of indigenous African languages or their unwillingness to probe into more private realms. Encouraging the observation of African women “in their various sites,” Molara Ogundipe Leslie writes in Re-Creating Ourselves: “We must look for African women’s voices in women’s spaces and modes such as in ceremonies and work songs” (11). These are, she remarks, sites where women express “emotional rebellions” (11). Following this lead, more and more critics are calling for a more thorough exploration of women’s oral tradition of the word to unveil these resisting and alternative discourses.

1- Angèle Bassolé Ouédraogo, “D’Orphée à Prométhée: La Poésie africaine au féminin.” http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/Bassole.html.
Voices of Resistance in the Poetry

Spontaneous creation of songs by women is an everyday occurrence. African women sing as they work at home and in the fields, drawing strength, but also unveiling many personal accents. As seen in Safi Faye’s film Selbe: One Among Many, the Senegalese rural woman sings her life as she cooks, cleans, draws water, and takes care of the children. In other instances, African women are seen as prominent participants in familial and community rituals. When celebrating important stages of an individual’s life from birth to death, African women are not only in charge of the festivities and meal preparation, they also participate in making these events meaningful through song, prayer, and dance. We can mention weddings, funerals, baptisms, circumcision rites, in this regard, events during which women exhibit their creative abilities through the poetic word. It is well known that in regions of West Africa, the griotte (female praise-singer and entertainer) is present for all important community events and her access to a more public arena enables her to reach a larger audience. The songs she performs may contain personal concerns, criticism, social and political statements as well as moral and ethical considerations. Women’s continual creation of songs in their everyday life highlights a predisposition for the poetic genre. Our women poets have been infused by all of these songs in their childhood and throughout their adult lives. It is not surprising that they have continued this tradition of a feminine World in theme and form in a new literary context, a poetic word in French. When asked about her “coming to poetry,” Kiné Kirama Fall stresses: “Pour moi, c’est l’âme africaine qui chante le monde, et je chante pour toutes les filles et les femmes d’Afrique.” Despite the use of the French language, it is still an African worldview that they share, but also and foremost their hopes and dreams “au féminin.”

A. Kiné Kirama Fall’s Hymns to Love and Poésie de L’Existence

Kiné Kirama Fall is from the Atlantic coast town of Rufisque in Senegal. The name of the town stems from the Portuguese “Rio Fresco,” meaning “Rivière Fraîche” (Fresh River). The title of Fall’s first collection of poems, Chants de la Rivière Fraîche, bears the mark of a personal, familiar space (her hometown) from which she draws herself in rather intimate terms. Located on the Cape Verdian peninsula, her native town offers the beauty of ocean landscapes which Fall fondly recalls. Many of her poems such as “Le Coucher du Soleil”, “Le Lever du Soleil”, “La Forêt”, and “Le Lac de Guiers” evoke this natural environment. The title of the collection contains the term “chant” and echoes the influence of song on Fall’s poetry. In her words, “mes poèmes sont presque tous des chants... Je chante la terre, la mer, le ciel, le vent, le soleil, toute la nature.”

2- Simon Kiba, “Rencontre avec la jeune poétesse sénégalaise Kiné Kirama Fall.” Les Interviews d’Amina. http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINAKiramaFall.html.
3- idem
Kiné Kirama Fall is also known to be a soothing voice for women’s sensual love and desires, a relatively “osé” theme in African written literature in general. The theme of romantic love was not part of the repertoire of previous works by African male writers. In a society strongly influenced by Islam and in which women are taught to be discreet, the public expression of women’s love and sensuality is considered inappropriate. Kiné Kirama Fall writes against these taboos to unveil a hidden side of the Senegalese woman. Her collection of songs constitute a hymn to love where nature and the loved one intertwine. She sings of love in spiritual as well as in physical terms, breaking up what novelist Nafissatou Diallo termed “les tabous de silence qui règnent sur nos émotions.”

Even though the open expression of romantic love in Senegalese society is considered too bold, women have always found discreet spaces and occasions to sing the power of love. For example, in the following song recorded by Raphaël N’Diaye, a young Senegalese woman sings about her lost love while washing clothes at the stream.

In a spontaneous manner, she expresses her disillusionment and the regret of being forced to marry someone she did not truly love:

Si je n’avais peur de faire outrage à mère et père,
Je me serais mariée avec un piroguier voyageur du fleuve
Et j’aurais préparé du riz au karité!
Si je n’avais peur de faire outrage à mère et père,
Je me serais avec un piroguier voyageur du fleuve,
Et j’aurais préparé du riz au karité,
Mais alors, pauvre de moi, qui donc mère s’occuperait de toi? (90)

Pascal Couloubaly notes in his study of women’s songs in Bambara society that “les soirées récréatives de groupes folkloriques ne sont pas pour plaire à tout le monde, et notamment aux maris jaloux qui affirment que sont là autant de pretexts pour les tromper.” During such an event, a female dancer lets out rather openly a declaration of love directed to one of the musicians:

Je lui déclarerai mon amour au balafoniste oh
Advienne que pourra
Je cuisinerai un plat pour lui
Je cuisinerai un pal plat pour moi
Et même si cela devait soulever la jalousie
Plat d’amie pour l’ami fidèle
Advienne que pourra. (62)

4- Pascal Couloubaly, Une Société rurale à travers des chants de femmes (Dakar: Editions IFAN, 1990) 62.
Voices of Resistance in the Poetry

Many instances can be found in which women at work or at play compose such love songs. Through written poetry, Kiné Kirama Fall unveils a woman’s heart and portrays her as a living being with feelings and desires.

In her poem entitled “Donne-moi”, Fall composes a catchy song for her lover. The joyful tone of the poem brings out a woman’s happiness and state of ecstasy of being loved:

Quand je suis avec toi,
Quand je sens le feu de ton regard,
Quand tu me parles avec chaleur, tendresse,
Je me sens emportée de bonheur.
C’est avec tes caresses,
La douceur de tes mains
Que j’ai toujours mon printemps. (22)

Even though hints of sensual and physical pleasure are mentioned through words such as “chaleur”, “baisers”, “caresses”, and “la douceur de tes mains”, the poem is mostly about the moving of the soul and the communion of two beings as they walk through nature and, in a larger sense, as they walk through this world. Rather than a discourse of domination or gender objectification, it is a discourse of soulful unity and equality between the two lovers that is expressed in the following verses:

Quand nous nous promenons
La main dans la main,
Marchant à pas égaux
Et regardant la nature,
Nous soufflant d’air et d’aise,
Je me sens emportée de bonheur. (23)

In “Je T’aime”, a Senegalese woman’s sensuality is more obvious than in the previous poem, but always tempered by subtle discretion and tact referred to as kersa in Wolof society:

Quand tu as posé ta main
Sur mes hanches,
Suivant le rythme des fibres de mon corps,
Nos autres mains se sont croisées. (44)

Finally, the Loved Woman gives herself fully in times of despair and trouble. The image of the lover/protector/healer is particularly developed in “Dans ce grand lit” and “Jusqu’à toi” with a stress on woman’s ability to empathize with the other/the loved one.
It is less a discourse about woman’s submission to man than a discourse of giving, less a discourse of appropriation of the other than one of symbiosis with the other as shown in the following lines from “Dans ce grand lit”:

Dans ce grand lit,
Couchee a cote de toi
J’ai senti ta douleur,
J’ai senti la tristesse te gagner
Jusqu’au fond de l’ame.

Mon coeur, mon amour,
Dis-toi que je suis a toi.

Quand, dans le creux de ta main,
J’ai posé la mienne,
Et ma tête au creux de ton épaule,
J’ai senti un peu de paix entrer en toi.
L’on se regardait en se fouillant
Jusqu’au fond de l’ame. (48)

The title “Jusqu’a toi” suggests a woman reaching out to the loved one, illustrating a gesture of dispossession, which is by no means synonymous with death of the female subject, but rather synonymous with expansion and transformation. Hélène Cixous points to such an economy of giving tied to what she views as a feminine economy. In such giving, “there is non-closure, that is not submission but confidence and comprehension; that is not an opportunity for destruction but for wonderful expansion.”

Mon amour,
Jusqu’a toi je viendrai un jour,
Même si tu es au bout du monde.
Si ton coeur a des souffrances,
   Je te soignera,
Si désespérée est ton âme,
   Je la panscrai.
Attends-moi mon amour, attends-moi,
Je saurai soigner tes blessures.

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5- Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, The Newly Born Woman. Translated by Betsy Wing. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 86.
Dans l'attente est aussi mon cœur,
Mais berçé dans l'espoir de Toi
Infiniment. Les nuits plus longues que le jour
Et cette attente que nous vole le temps
Me font perdre la raison,
Mais aussi longue que soit l'attente,
Rappelle-toi toujours
Que j'existe pour Toi. (16)

Contrary to many of the traditional scripts embedded in Western, African, or even Asian collective consciousness with the woman waiting to be rescued by him, Kiné Kirama Fall places man in wait in this poem. But what must be noted is that relations of power are erased as the poet/woman also places herself within the same space of waiting as she longs to see the loved one once again and expresses their invisible ties.

In previous literatures by male Senegalese writers, the African woman was presented as a one-dimensional creature of beauty and grace, the idealized Mother/Mother Africa, the poet’s muse, or the fragmented object of male desire. Renée Larrier notes, for example, that “the son’s memory and representation of the mother as ‘corporeally scattered’ accentuates metonymically the physical, and temporal distance.”

A discourse of power in regards to male/female relationships is sensed as the poet uses a language of territorial and physical conquest. Senghor’s seminal poem “Femme Noire” can be used to illustrate these points. Senghor’s Black Woman is first presented as the mother/protector as this verse suggests: “J'ai grandi à ton ombre, la douceur de tes mains bandait mes yeux.” The strong image of the mother as Africa then emerges in a nostalgic tone, the poet seemingly torn away from its body (in exile); she becomes in this instance the “Terre Promise.” Finally, images of the Black Woman as the poet’s lover and object of desire are evoked through sensual language and connotations of male sexual domination: “Fruit mûr à la chair ferme, sombres extases du vin noir, bouche qui fait lyrique ma bouche... Tam-tam sculpté, tam-tam tendu qui gronde sous les doigts du Vainqueur.” Kiné Kirama Fall alters such master texts to portray the African woman as a living being with feelings and desires, offers a vision of new relationships, and a different prism on reality.

6- Renée Larrier, “Reconstructing Motherhood: Francophone Women Autobiographers” in Obioma, Nnaemeka, ed. Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature (New York: Routledge, 1997) 192-203.

7- Verses are taken from Senghor’s poem as reproduced in Jacque Chévrier’s Littérature africaine. (Paris: Hatier, 1990) 57.
What also emerges from the poetry of Kiné Kirama Fall is, in the words of Dorothy Blair, “the voice of a woman who can draw inspiration from even the practical realities that govern her everyday existence.” Poems such as “Un Matin” capture a frozen moment in time, a particular feeling (grief that remains unexplained), and words said casually:

Un matin, après le flot noir de ma nuit
Mon coeur ploie comme une branche.
J’ai enterré ma douleur sous mon oreiller.

Heye! Dis-moi?
Toi qui me dis Assalamalikoume?
As-tu lu mon tourment sur mon visage?
Dans mes yeux?
Sentie la paume de ma main moite?
As-tu entendu ma voix se fêler
Quand je t’ai dit Malikoumsalam?
Ah qu’il est dur de retenir
Dans un sourire, la douleur d’un sanglot. (13)

At the end, in an effort to formulate a poetics “at the conjunction of poetry and philosophy”, Fall reflects upon suffering, solitude, and death:

Quand au detour d’un chemin
Quelqu’un pleure sa misère
J’ai coutume de demander à la vie
Pourquoi?
Chacun promène sa solitude.
Chacun passe
Avec ses drames et ses magies
Pour finir dans la poussière. (13)

Beyond a woman’s individual pain and solitude, Fall finds points of contact with the rest of humanity, projecting her/self into the other, the “chacun” of the poem. In “Un Jour de brume”, it is a moment of tenderness with l’Aimé that is evoked in quick strokes. Fall’s economy of words serves to distill nature and her lover in time and space:

8- Dorothy Blair, Senegalese Literature: A Critical History (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984) 109.
9- Expression used by Mireille Caille-Gruber in Cixous, Hélène, Rootprints, Memory, and Life Writing. (New York: Routledge, 1997) 79.
C'était à la plage,
Au bord de l'eau,
Par un jour de brume.

Le soleil hésitait,
Me tenant dans ses bras,
Il me berçait avec tendresse.
Le blanc de ses yeux
   Etait ma lumière du jour,
Le bleu du ciel
   Etait mon printemps,
L'éclat de son sourire
   Mon rayon de soleil. (22)

Through such existential poetry, Fall represents life in all its facets: simple and complex, acknowledging the exceptional moment, the pain and the heights of joy and sublimation. Some of the primary concerns of Négritude poets such as Senghor, Birago Diop, and David Diop were resistance against colonial forces of domination, the preservation of African culture and deep-rooted traditions, the unveiling of an African worldview, the creation of a new language in poetry, one close to an African aesthetics fused with symbolism and rhythm, and the restoration of the poet as the mouthpiece for his people (in the tradition of the griot). Even though Senghor can be viewed as engaging in both collective and individual discourses (personal accents and increased lyricism can be noted in Lettres d'Hivermager, contemplative and melancholic tones are found in his Elégies Majeures), it can be said that most of his male compatriots relegated the personal to the shadows. Kiné Kirama Fall does not disengage herself totally from some of the characteristics of her predecessors. She remains indeed faithful to the terroir (the native land) in inspiration, but she significantly alters the discourse and the language of the poetry that came before her. Kiné Kirama's personal lyrical touch as well as her existential tones celebrating the moment bring to her work a particular feminine sensibility previously lost.

In his postface from Ethiopiques, Senghor describes what he views as an African poetic art, a particular way of seeing and speaking the world. He mentions the power of the word, le pouvoir du verbe, to call into being an African world populated with both the meaning and the sign of things: "Le mot y est plus qu'image, il est image analogique sans même le secours de la métaphore ou de la comparaison. Il suffit de nommer la chose pour qu'apparaisse le sens sous le signe" (57). He speaks of a language that is close to the realities of the African environment. Outsiders may view the projected world as
“pittoresque”, but it corresponds, stresses Senghor, to Africans’ lived realities: “Quand nous disons kòras, balafongs, tams-tams, et non harpes, pianos et tambours, nous n’entendons pas faire du pittoresque; nous appelons ‘un chat un chat’” (57). Kiné Kirama Fall remains faithful to her terroir by singing her land. She also reproduces the spoken language (Wolof) of her people in some of her poems and uses Wolof in titles such as “Sa ma Khole” (my heart). Senghor also points to rhythm as an essential element in African poetry, reflecting the strong ties that remain between African orature and song and the new forms of African literature in French. In Poèmes, Senghor notes: “Je persiste à penser que le poème n’est accompli que s’il se fait chant, parole et musique en même temps” (168). Other poets of the Négritude era such as Damas have also mentioned rhythm as an important characteristic of African poetry. Damas once said: “I am not afraid to say that in my poetry you find rhythm. My poems can be danced. They can be sung.” Kiné Kirama Fall subscribes to many of these characteristics. She has stressed her ties to song. African rhythm and musicality can be felt in her use of a recurrent refrain in many of her poems: in “Demain”, for example, the repetition throughout the poem of “je te réchaufferai” (24). A great number of her poems use such a structure. Fall’s exploitation of sonorities also accentuates rhythmic effects in her poetry. Certain sonorities may express, in one poem, contained violence and pain such as in “La Lumière viendra”:

\[
\begin{align*}
J'ai & \ \text{longtemps} \ \text{marché}, J'ai \ \text{longtemps} \ \text{gémi}, \\
& \ \text{Comme une aveugle} \\
& \ \text{Sur ce chemin plein d'épines, de souffrances,} \\
& \ \text{Plein d'attentes et de déceptions.} \\
& \ \text{J'ai eu froid, j'ai eu soif comme une enfant} \\
& \ \text{Qui a perdu sa mère.} (32)
\end{align*}
\]

The use of hard consonants such as \(t\), \(d\), and \(p\) stresses hardship and frustration. Short \(é\) and \(i\) as well as long sounds \(-an\), \(-en\) and in the word \(mère\) allow vocal emphasis and are reminiscent of tones of complaints (such as in the blues). In other poems, Fall’s use of rhythms and sonorities suggests peace and serenity tied to a certain well-being; the beauty and the swaying movement of nature are also suggested. In the following verses from “Le Lac de Guiers”, the repetition of fluid \(l\) and long sounds in \(-ou\), \(-ant\), \(-eux\), or \(-ai\) contribute to an impression of suaveness:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Le Lac courtise la Lune,} \\
& \text{Ondulant du corps et dansant pour lui plaire.} (18)
\end{align*}
\]

10- In Keith Warner, “Négritude Revisited. An Interview with Léon Damas.” Manna, No.3 (March 1973): 18
The mention of musical instruments in the poem stresses even further musicality and dance:

Ah! S’il m’était possible
De convier Kora et Balafon,
Et de vous inviter à participer à mon bonheur! (18)

In many ways, then, Kiné Kirama Fall kept some of the characteristics of her predecessors. But unlike her male counterparts, Fall’s language remains simpler, more direct, cleansed of sophisticated figures of speech and complex grammatical structures dear to “grammairiens” such as Senghor. He reminds us in the Préface to Fall’s poems: “Il ne faut pas l’oublier, Kiné Kirama Fall n’est pas allée loins dans ses études. Elle a peu lu. Ses livres, ce sont les rues de Dakar et ces ‘thés’ du week-end où l’on cause comme dans un salon. D’où les prosaïsmes que l’on trouve, de temps en temps, dans ses poèmes.” (6). He further adds: “il est vrai que le premier conseil que je donne à nos jeunes écrivains, c’est de savoir maîtriser leur langue, comme un cavalier son cheval” (7). Senghor’s preoccupation with mastering the French language, taming the Word as a horseman would tame his animal gives way, in the case of Kiné Kirama Fall, to a more flexible, direct, and creative use of the Word: a word closer to orality, the tangible world around her, and the people who live within it. Fall’s quality and the strength of her poetry lie precisely in the way she un·ties the French language to give it directness and authenticity to express situations, moods, and relationships. Despite his remarks on the mastery of language, Senghor recognizes Fall’s strength and difference when he concludes: “elle écrit des poèmes comme nos poetesses populaires du village, seulement inspirée par l’amour des êtres, des choses, surtout de l’homme qu’elle a élu” (7).

Poetry is finally viewed by Kiné Kirama Fall as having the power to transcend our existence and heal: “Avec la poésie, même si on rencontre des difficultés on peut s’élever au-dessus en partant au-delà et quand on revient sur terre, c’est avec calme et sérénité et on reprend sa marche d’un pied assuré.” This explains the importance of dream and the flight of the spirit in Fall’s poetry. In “Qui es-tu?, she writes:

Quand je suis plongée dans mes rêves,
Il n’y a pas de limites.
Là, nulle ne peut m’atteindre. (53)

In the song entitled “Rêve”, the role of dream is developed more fully. The dream world is first presented as a space of refuge:

Quand la réalité trop cruelle
Me couvre de nuages,
Que la douleur s’installe en moi à pas de géant,
J’ai besoin d’un poids qui m’étouffe,
Et c’est toi, ô Rêve,
Qui m’amène dans le pays des songes. (33)

It is also an opportunity for the poetess to reach for a more godly and spiritual plane, take flight from the “cruel reality” of the world to attain beauty and purity:
Quand ayant longtemps plané
Dans ce monde
Parmi tout ce qui est beau,
Tout ce qui est pur,
Monté d’autres escaliers, nuées de mes songes,
C’est encore toi
Qui m’amène dans l’univers de Dieu. (33)

But for Kiné Kirama Fall, the dream world is far from being just a momentary escape, it is also and foremost a space of renewal and creation of other dreams, prerequisites for action and the transformation of the world below:
O Rêve, ne tue plus mes rêves.
Quand avorté, tu loges la douleur
Au coin de mon âme,
C’est encore vers toi
Que je me tourne
Pour d’autres rêves, nouveaux. (33)

Such a process of distanciation allows for the contemplation and a deeper understanding of the world, but also of self and its position therein. In the poem “Qui est-tu?,” Fall attempts to answer the question “who are you?” as a Senegalese woman and a multifaceted individual. Clearly, no single answer can be given as the poetess recognizes her never ending shifting identities; her other “Moi-s”:
Je ne peux pas te dire qui
Je ne me connais pas
Il y a plusieurs moi dans moi,
Futile, réaliste, rêveuse
Profonde, faible ou forte? (52)

And further,
Dans la vérité que j’accepte,
Je cherche encore la vérité.
Mais qui peut dire qui je suis?
Je suis un mystère pour moi. (52)

Unlike the efforts of many male poets from the Négritude era to “fix for eternity” the image of the African woman, Kiné Kirama Fall’s poem suggests an identity that is fashioned and refashioned: one instant, she is a realist and is engaged in the struggles of everyday life: “Quand mes rêves brisés se meurent...réveuse lucide, je me tourne vers le réel” (52); the next, she writes: “je quitte ;a raison pour aller à l’innocence et devient futile” (53) and thinks only of “rire, jouer comme un enfant” (53). Fall’s quest is an ongoing process as the phrase “Je me cherche” (52-53), recurrent throughout the poem, reflects. It is only at the end of the road, Fall suggests, that some degree of certitude will be reached. Fall turns her thoughts to a higher being in the final lines of the poem:

Je me cherche, tendue vers Lui.
Quand Dieu viendra à mon secours,
De mon obscurité,
Il fera une aurore.
Ma vie plus radieuse que le soleil,
Mon âme épanouie,
Je saurai qui je suis. (53)

Deeply religious, Kiné Kirama Fall’s hope for a final answer will come when her earthly voyage is over. The final lines may indeed suggest the end of the poetess’ life. Before that, identity is always in the making, wandering “comme s’il n’avait pas trouvé ses terres” (52). Similarly to other Senegalese women writers such as Mariama Bâ and Nafissatou Fall, Kiné Kirama Fall, in the genre of poetry, challenges simplistic attempts to circumscribe the African woman and particularly to answer the open-ended question of her identity.

Kiné Kirama Fall’s existential poetry and hymns to love are deeply soul-centered and seek the interpretation of poetic image and everyday life. Her songs express a Senegalese woman’s life, emotions, and aspirations with simplicity, directness, and a particular feminine sensibility to the sacredness of the moment and the movements of the soul. Her work constitutes an essential contribution to African women’s literature. These women continue to seize the pen to explore, in the words of Angèle Bassolé Ouédraogo, “les espaces ouverts...en s’aventurant bien au-delà de l’univers éthéré où on a trop souvent essayé de les enfermer.”

12- Angèle B. Ouédraogo in “D’Orphée à Prométhée”. See note 1.
B. The Militant Poetry of N'Dèye Coumba Diakhâte

The poetry of N'Dèye Coumba Diakhâte differs greatly from that of her compatriot Kiné Kirama Fall. Whereas Fall’s songs mostly focus on the personal, Diakhâte’s poetry acquires more collective and political accents. N’Dèye Coumba Diakhâte is known for her militant poetry. She is the voice of the African woman, formulating with force and clarity the African woman’s struggle for recognition and emancipation, but she is also the voice of the disenfranchised in general: children, exploited workers, the disabled, and the poor. As a modern day griotte, N’Dèye Coumba Diakhâte assigns herself the active role of breaking the chains of silence. She stresses this aspect in “Griot de ma race”:

Et voici que je romps les chaînes,
Et le silence menteur
Que tu jetas sur moi.  

A study of the poems in her first collection Filles du Soleil will unveil and inclusive ideology that incorporates not only gender-specific issues, but also broader issues of oppression, economic despair in Africa, and the need to rekindle what she calls “L’Afrique-Coeur”.

In her collection Filles du Soleil, Diakhâte’s first poems are dedicated to African women and delineate some of the complex experiences of womanhood in an African context. Poems such as her personal message to Daba as well as the next few poems: “Ceinture d’Amour”, “A Toutes les Mères”, and “Jigéen Reck” [You are but a Woman] affirm Diakhâte’s commitment to write about the experience of African women as women, the many ways they feel and know the world, and their aspirations and hopes for the future. The first poem is addressed to Daba whom she calls “sister”. In short, elliptic sentences and veiled words, the reader discovers that Daba lost her life giving birth:

Ma soeur si douce!
Fleur à peine épanouie,
Mais très tôt perdit la vie,
Car voulant la donner. (9)

The poem becomes thereafter an hymn to all mothers, “filles de Râ, génitrices de chaleur” (9). Diakhâte uses the ancestry of the Egyptian god Râ to tie the African woman to the sun. One of the legends attached to Râ in ancient Egypt is that he was believed to

13- All quotes will be from Coumba N’Dèye Diakhâte’s collection Filles du Soleil (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1980).
journey across the sky by day, die, and then embark on a night journey to the underworld to illuminate the souls of the dead as he passed through their realm. In the poetry of Diakhaté, the daughters of Râ bring in the same fashion light, life, and “heart” to Africa and the world. Diakhaté’s image of “L’Afrique-Cœur” is significant in the poem. It can be seen as a recasting and a reconceptualization of the Négritude poets’ “L’Afrique-Mère”, giving Africa a more living and palpitating aspect. Diakhaté indeed replaces some of the standard tropes of her male predecessors to offer an alternative vision of the continent, but also of women. In another poem, “Libération”, the expression “L’Afrique-Cœur” (24) is repeated. In this particular text, Diakhaté associates more clearly the heart with the African woman and an economy of love, compassion, and giving, so drastically opposed to the cold world of men described in “Le Rire Volé” with its “états de granit” and “coeurs gelés” (24). Presenting Africa as “Cœur”, a living and dynamic organ and not as “Mère” (in the eyes of Senghor and Diop merely a static Madonna figure), Diakhaté calls upon more profound ethical and emotional qualities needed to revive the continent and human relations.

N’Deye Coumba Diakhaté’s first poem to Daba also reveals the writer’s effort to bring to the forefront a new mythology of Senegalese women. This effort is sustained throughout the collection, creating a new pantheon of women: a strong female genealogy from which women can draw inspiration and pride. More than just “the daughters of Râ”, Senegalese women are also, and foremost, descendants of a community of foremothers who have carved a space in history and in the hearts of their people. The poetess mentions African female figures such as “N’Diare, nymphe des clairs de lune” (9) and “Coumbam’lamb” (9). In Senegalese mythology, these are protective female spirits (turr or rab in Wolof) who have played decisive roles in the history of groups such as the Lébous (inhabitants of the Cape-Verdian peninsula). Stemming from the supernatural world, these genies or sacred ancestors possessed unique powers that sent enemy armies running. This practice of naming a community of female ancestors contributes in restoring a matrilineal consciousness. An important African feminist practice of myth-making is at work in these poems as power and responsibility are associated with female figures. Critics such as Alicia Ostriker have stressed female poets’ revisionist myth-making as positive acts of self-definition and possible vessels of change. The introduction of a matrilineal consciousness can be viewed in Diakhaté’s works as a deeply political act. In “Négresse en Laisse”, Diakhaté brings forth female

14- Mame NDiare is the protective tur of the village of Yoff. She is said to have led her people to victory against the inhabitants of Cayor. Yoff still holds annual ceremonies in her name.
15- Alicia Ostriker, “Thieves of Language: Female Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking.” Signs 8 (1982): 72.
personages such as NDaté, “la reine sereine”, Njimbot Mboj, “la sublime”, and the “linguère Laama” as strong reminders and models of “jom” (20) which corresponds in Wolof culture to the values of pride, righteousness, and sacrifice.

The poem entitled “Jigéen Reck Nga” [You are But a Woman] constitutes a powerful reformulation of a Self in search for affirmation. The pejorative expression which serves as the title of the piece is used in Wolof to refer to women’s limitations and inferiority to men. When asked about the inspiration for this poem, Diakhâte answered that she wrote the piece in reaction to a scene she had witnessed on the street:

J’étais à mon balcon et voyais un bus duquel descendait beaucoup de monde. Il y a eu une bousculade et altercation entre une femme d’un âge respectable et un jeune homme. Le jeune a dit à la femme de façon désinvolte: “Je n’ai rien à faire avec toi. Tu n’es qu’une femme. Puis il partit. J’ai trouvé ces mots remplis d’injustice. Cela m’a inspiré le poème.”

Diakhâte writes back with contained rage, recurrently punctuating her stanzas with the expression imprinted in her mind, “Jigéen reck!” Most importantly, she proceeds to present the African woman in her various roles: the Mother, the Sister, and the Wife. Far from rejecting these identities, Diakhâte’s strategy is rather to remind the son, the brother, and the spouse that even within these traditional roles, the African woman remains an essential actor in the development and well-being of her male counterparts and deserves recognition. Immediately following the expression “jigéen reck” appears the strong affirmation: “Je suis ta MÈRE... Je suis ta SOEUR jolie... Je suis l’ÉPOUSE fidèle” (18-19). Diakhâte goes on to describe the fullness of each role and ends the poem with the image of a “flame éternelle” (19), the woman once again providing light and life and exploding both the label jigéen [woman] and the exclusive reck [only] used in her regard.

N’Dève Coumba Diakhâte’s more militant feminist accents come forcefully through in the poem “Libération”. In this piece, the poet speaks of the difficulty of being both a mother and a writer in a society where certain traditions weigh heavily on women’s freedom. In Diakhâte’s terms:

Aimer toute la terre, aimer tous ses fils,
Etre femme, mais ne pouvoir crêer;
Crêer, non seulement procréer. (28)

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16- Alioune Touré Dia, “N’Dève Coumba Diakhâte, la Césaire sénégalaise.” http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINADiakhâte.html
The African woman's struggle for subjecthood and agency does not mean a total rejection of African traditions and ways of life. It involves rather the rejection of those practices that are oppressive and restrictive to women.

Et pourtant!
Rester Femme africaine, mais gagner l'autre. (28)

Beyond gender-specific issues, the African woman's struggle does not separate itself from larger issues of oppression of African people as a whole. "La botte qui écrase" (28) refers to political, religious as well as economic domination from inside and outside forces:
Et femme africaine, lutter.
Encore lutter, pour s'élever plutôt.
Lutter pour effacer l'empreinte de la botte qui écrase.
Seigneur!...lutter
Contre les interdits, les préjugés, leur poids.
Lutter encore, toujours, contre soi, contre tout. (28)

In “Female Writer and her Commitment”, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie states that the African woman writer should be committed in three ways: “as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person” (63). These commitments are simultaneously inscribed in the poem “Libération”. As a woman, the writer delineates her desire for a more complete womanhood: in her eyes, it involves the recognition of her biological experience, which the verb “procréer” suggests; it also extends to woman’s freedom to use her creative abilities in life’s various arenas (as a writer, in the case of Diakhâté); finally, the poet formulates a commitment to her Third World reality. As Ogundipe-Leslie writes: “being aware of oneself as a Third World person implies political consciousness, offering readers perspectives on and perceptions of colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism as they affect and shape our lives and historical destinies” (64). N'Déye Coumba Diakhâté clearly brings these insights in full view. Can one, then, characterize Diakhâté’s poetry as engagée? She answers in these words: “En quelque sorte. C'est une invite, une prière discrète à mes compatriots, et à tous les autres... Du côté féminin, nous devons nous retrouver dans un code qui nous incite discrètement à mieux nous ancrer dans notre développement national”. It is in this vein that Diakhâté also speaks out for the disadvantaged in African societies: children, particularly the orphans, and the disabled.

17- idem
In “L’Aveugle-Mère”, a blind beggar woman is depicted. People pass her by, throw in a coin, but never really acknowledge her existence. In this poem, N’Dèye Coumba Diakhaté reverses the roles. In reality, it is the passerby who is blind. The beggar woman’s words point to our indifference and to the act of charity as becoming routine and meaningless:

Une aveugle au petit matin, par la faim traquée,
Une aveugle sous le vent, lacérée dans son corps,
Une main décharnée, tremblante et suppliant,
Pour la pièce qu’on y pose, et l’on passé sans la voir...
C’est encore que routine: une aveugle, c’est pour ça.
...
On me fait bien l’aumône, sans même voir qui je suis,
Moi qui vois dans le noir. (16)

When the passerby finally sees her, she discovers the beggar’s humanity and womanhood as a mother. The blind woman’s mysterious “paquet” underneath her cloth is a small child. The “paquet” symbolizes a hidden treasure, this hidden something to be unveiled. The small child is linked to her humanity as a mother:

Ses yeux morts regardaient...
Sur ses jambes repliées,
Un paquet...quelque chose...
Dépassant de son pagne;
Et alors je compris que l’aveugle était mère. (16)

The last lines of the poem formulate a request to the passerby:
Toi qui parle comme une soeur,
Regarde, toi qui vois, et dis-moi
Si l’enfant que je tiens
A des yeux comme les autres. (16)

Beyond the physical and mental disabilities of some of the personages of Diakhaté’s poems, she urges the reader to find “l’or enfoui dans le coeur” (26). In the poem “Le Fou”, Diakhaté views the mad man of the street as an important figure within the community. His creative abilities and visionary talents are stressed. Rather than fear, he inspires joy and playfulness as children and adults gather around him: “on se groupe tout autour; et l’ambiance se recrée” (40). Rather than nonsense, he speaks the truth:

Sa sentence cinglante nargue et se gausse...
Elle confond le mesquin; dénonce l’hypocrite,
Désigne le coupable. (41)
In the final lines, the mad man’s essentiality is stressed:
Que serait le village, le marché, on son fou?
Le grand fou aux pieds nus, par le peuple entouré?
Lui qui vient en chantant.
Et s’en va marmonnant. (41)

The mad man must be viewed as an integral part of the community. Diakhaté’s repetitive use of “nous” and “notre” reflects this sense of inclusion:
Fou à nous, parmi nous!
Notre fou de la rue, notre fou du marché!
Notre fou du tam-tam, du baptême, du deuil! (40)

Finally, children in Africa are amongst the most disadvantaged in society and Coumba N’Dèye Diakhate’s poem entitled “Supplice pour les Petits” constitutes a powerful call for action to relieve the suffering of the innocent ones. In a realistic tone and in counterpoint to Senghor’s idealistic “Royaume de l’Enfance” characterized by love, dream, and a charming world inhabited by supernatural creatures, Coumba N’Dèye Diakhate describes a child’s world which is filled with hunger, disease, and death:
Des enfants affamés, tout pérclus de pain.
...
Des enfants en guenilles, grelottant sous le froid.
...
De tout petits corps, gémissant de souffrance.
...
De tout petits cercueils,
Qu’on s’en va déposant, dans le champs du silence. (22)

These are the harsh realities of contemporary African societies affected by a neo-colonial political economy and the constitution, particularly in the urban centers, of a “lumpenproletariat”. For emotional impact on the reader, Diakhaté uses images which increase in severity and finally end in death. The mention of “le champ du silence” accentuates the idea of indifference, the shock effect of the last line constituting a call for action.

“Soupir de l’Orphelin” is more personal as it leaves out any allusions to poverty and hunger of children to concentrate on the emotional hardship of losing a mother. The centrality of the mother figure is stressed as the term “Maman” begins each stanza of the poem. When “Mansour” the orphan is named, Diakhaté aims to show how the world of the male child is first given shape and meaning through a mother’s love. As the poet
whispers his name, “Pleure encore Mansour” (23), the poem becomes an invitation to love softly addressed to this male child, and through him, to all men. Patriarchal thinking has often sanctioned the work of love, reduced it to a demonstration of weakness and futility. In All About Love, bell hooks notes in this regard that “most males are not told that they need to be upheld by love every day. Sexist thinking usually prevents them from acknowledging their longing for love or their acceptance of a female as their guide to love’s path” (156). “Soupir de l’Orphelin” reminds the male child of the existence of an economy of love and caring which, in the end, is all that is left. Such a realization is reached in the final lines:

Maman est donc si près de moi! Dieu que c’est merveilleux!
Que ne savais-je que son amour est le plus fort?
Toute l’eau de la terre, tous les vents triomphants,
Ni même le froid du trépas, n’éteindront son amour,
Tant que vit la fibre de sa chair. (23)

From these representative poems in Filles du Soleil, the voices of resistance that emerge in Coumba N’Deye Diakhaté’s work are those that call for an appreciation of the African woman’s worth and humanity, the recognition of her central role in society and her need to break the chains that limit her creative potential and her freedom; finally, Coumba N’Deye Diakhaté’s ambition is to also become a porte-parole for the disenfranchised, those who have no voice such as children the disabled. In her writings, these concerns subscribe to an inclusive ideology which promotes not only women’s issues, but is also concerned with the well-being of African societies.

Kiné Kirama Fall and Coumba N’Deye Diakhaté are considered the “grandes dames” of Senegalese poetry. They have continued in their own specific genre the work of carving their names next to those of their male counterparts, producing works that are not mere additions to an African canon, but rather alterations and other texts which open up to a different language and a different prism on reality. But as Angèle Ouédraogo reminds us:

Bien qu’ayant des raisons d’être amères, les africaines n’abondent pas dans la voie d’une écriture vindicative. Si elles se servent de la plume comme d’une arme, c’est dans le sens de la construction. En dénonçant le silence qui les entoure mais aussi l’atmosphère malsaine qui mine tout l’espace social dans lequel elles vivent, elles apportent leur pierre à l’édifice d’une société où le soleil brillera enfin pour tous.18

Such is the mission and the commitment of Senegalese women poets.

18- Angèle Ouédraogo, “Et les Africaines prirent la plume! Histoire d’une Conquête”.
http://www.refer.fr/miroirs/camer_ct/motspluriels/MPPP898abo.html