

Motherism, African Women and Ecological Advocacy: Aminata Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail* in Perspective

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Résumé

Le discours littéraire de l'Afrique francophone a été accusé de passivité écocritique. Pourtant, de nombreux textes littéraires provenant de l'Afrique francophone regorgent de portraits de l'environnement. Bien qu'Aminata Sow Fall, la romancière sénégalaise, fasse partie des auteurs qui sont à la recherche d'un équilibre dans leur traitement des questions postcoloniales africaines, la plupart de ses œuvres expriment des préoccupations écocritiques. A travers le Motherisme, une théorie féministe africaine, cette étude s'oriente vers une perspective écocritique des rôles des personnages féminins dans *Douceurs du bercail* (1998) d'Aminata Sow Fall. Contrairement aux rôles des personnages majeurs immigrés qui drainent la force environnementale dans *Douceurs du bercail*, nous soutenons que les personnages féminins présentent une relation symbiotique avec la nature. En montrant comment les rôles des leaders féminins améliorent l'environnement africain, ces personnages féminins mettent en évidence les avantages de la Terre Mère sur les êtres humains. C'est à cet égard que cette étude soutient que les rôles des personnages féminins suggèrent un plaidoyer pour les idéaux motheristes écologiques comme moyen de contrer les maux sociétaux postcoloniaux. L'article démontre que les personnages féminins sont des défenseurs de l'environnement parce qu'ils adhèrent aux idéaux essentiels au gain écologique. En conclusion, *Douceurs du bercail* fait le portrait des femmes africaines en tant que des mères écologistes. Leurs rôles suggèrent un espoir pour l'humanité en face de la pollution du monde.

Mots-clés : environnement, motherisme, femmes africaines, écosystème, terre, ferme.

Abstract

The literary discourse of francophone Africa has been indicted for ecocritical passivity. Yet, many literary texts emanating from francophone Africa are replete with portraits of the environment. Even though Aminata Sow Fall, the Senegalese novelist falls within the category of authors who seek equilibrium in their treatment of African postcolonial issues, most of her works are laden with ecocritical concerns. Through Motherism, an environmental-inclined African feminist theory, the present article embarks on an ecocritical study of female characters' roles in Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail* (1998). Much against most immigrant characters' roles that drain the African environmental strength in *Douceurs du bercail*, we contend that female characters present a symbiotic relationship with nature. They highlight the advantages of Mother Earth on human beings, displaying how women's leadership roles enhance African environment. It is in this respect that the paper argues that female characters' roles suggest an advocacy for ecological motherist ideals as a means to counter postcolonial societal ills. The paper demonstrates that female characters are advocates of the environment because they embrace African environmental ideals that champion ecological gain. In conclusion, *Douceurs du bercail* showcases African women as environmental motherists. Their roles connote hopes for human beings amid environmental degradation.

Keywords: environment, motherism, african women, ecosystem, land, farm.

Introduction

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 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, non-human ecosystem and climate of Africa. This impasse manifests in the ecocide that the center inflicts on the periphery evident in neocolonial/patriarchal capitalists' roles in the developing world. In most cases, critical works on African environment have chastised western powers' abuse of African ecosystem, not sparing their African collaborators. For this, some writers project desolation and degradation side by side the natural/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 people and offers responses to the resultant issues from the local to the global.

While human beings are often culpable of menacing the peaceful existence of Mother Earth, most fictional works on the environment project only a deplorably degraded ecosystem, thereby ignoring the humane 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 paper seeks to present a distinct argument using Aminata Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail* (1998) (in-text referenced as *Douceurs*) with the theoretical underpinnings of environmental Motherism. Motherism, a multidimensional African feminist theory, campaigns for healing and protecting the natural cohesive essence of the child, the family, the society and the environment (Acholonu, 1994, p. 111). This study concentrates on the symbiotic impact of the interrelations between female characters and the environment. Our point is that the novel speaks

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to Motherism as a theory that showcases rural African ecosystem as not always detrimental, but also capable of constituting environmental treasure. The paper argues further that female characters' roles suggest an advocacy for ecological motherist ideal as a means to counter postcolonial societal ills.

Studies of the depictions of the African environment in the literary texts draw conceptual framework from the 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 depiction 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: Aminata Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail* in Perspective" is thus an attempt to study this Senegalese novel using Acholonu's theory as a robust dialogue that presents environmental Motherism as an ecophilic variant of and parallel voice to ecocriticism.

1. Analysis

To cater for a wholesome evaluation of the environment, Catherine 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 relationship between human and the ecosystem. In *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995), a considerable part of Acholonu's argument borders on environmental Motherism. This theory lays emphasis on motherhood qualities of women and sees "the woman as an extension of the earth mother- the global nurturer of all creation" (Acholonu, 1995, p. 120). The tenet of Motherism flaunts women's peaceful management of the environment. It encourages them

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to search for solution 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 with the Mother Earth. Motherism in itself emblemizes the existence and consciousness of the earth which makes women "revere her and worship her as the goddess of life" (Acholonu, 1995, p. 124).

In Acholonu's words, women, especially mothers, possess strong knowledge of traditional living and the science of nature. They are the greatest users of the environment and because they are closer to the environment, female rural dwellers display hands-down wisdom of the ancestors. Acholonu sums up the intimacy between a motherist and the earth thus:

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. (Acholonu, 1995, p. 124).

Motherism fights against every form of violence and abuse of nature, it accords a hologramatic entity to the survival of Mother Earth. It calls for love, patience, tolerance and cooperation between men and women. Motherism attests to a reciprocal relationship between human and the ecosystem; 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 and Ecofeminism focus on the fruitful procreation of women and the earth. While Ecofeminism studies woman and the environment as co-sufferers under patriarchy, environmental Motherism advocates for the complementarity that establishes humanity in an equilibrium of ecosystem between men and women. In its calls for humanity without barriers, Motherism seeks for peaceful consideration of human diversity that appreciates human and natural environment on the surface of the earth (Acholonu, 1995, p. 119).

The motherist writer is a humanitarian who is not sex-biased, not patriarchal and neither is she or he inclined toward fundamentalism. Therefore, s/he primarily respects each gender and promotes truth and self-affirmation between human and the ecosystem. As an advocate of human

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rights, a motherist writer portrays characters, especially the female ones, as symbolic of the Mother-Earth, a doyen of biological continuity in her roles of procreation of both human and elements of the ecosystem.

2. Background to the Novel

Douceurs du bercail presents a connection between immigration and ecology. It portrays immigration as a depletion of African land symbolized by present-day African youth emigration to the West. The protagonist Asta Diop, a career Senegalese single mother and other characters are humiliated and disappointed with their experience in France. Before her official trip to France, Asta gets all the necessary documents for a legal entry. However, the French immigration control subjects her to the humiliation of wanting to palp Asta for hard drug. 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 in an airport dungeon near Paris. Her's and other characters' detention lays bare their ordeal in France.

2. 1. Women and the Return to African Land

Douceurs highlights place or the environment emblemized by France as a land which becomes significant as it in part constitutes unfavorable ecology for the detained African immigrants. For them, France constitutes the unpromising land to which African characters could hardly adapt. The immigrants' anguish reaches its climax as Asta, Yakham, Codé, Dianor, Segá and other detained immigrants face humiliation, anguish, rape and extreme flood light illumination that denies them sleep and notion of time. In the face of severe suffering as immigrants, which reaches its climax in the dungeon, discussion between Asta and other African detainees demystifies immigration to Europe. The discussion elicits their country as a better place, a veritable option for a return to the source evident in the novel's full title, "DOUCEURS DU BERCAIL, c'était un label de réconciliation avec soi..." (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p. 217 author's emphasis). [DOUCEURS DU BERCAIL, it was a label of reconciliation with oneself].¹ 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 sub plots of hope in which the epistemologies of reform of and return to Africa takes preeminence

¹ In this paper, all translations are mine.

Sow Fall suggests optimistically that the immigrants' return and commitment to their Mother land 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 build their own motherland. Their collective return to Africa reverberates the fulfilment of reinstatement; it implies an attachment and reconciliation with the environment, culture and African values. From this commitment to Motherland comes the protection of African ecosystem seen in Motherism. The novel indicts the abandonment of Motherland Africa for France with its attendant problems such as racism, poverty, anxiety. Leaving Africa for Europe evokes the illusions of contemporary African youth, an antithesis to the watering and increase of one's own land. The duality of land, symbolized by France and the immigrants' African origin, signifies for them a visible notion environmental rejection in France and acceptance in their home country. Their struggle to fit into French land "highlights the sense of environmental longing that migration produces" (D. Mount and S. O'Brien 2013, p. 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 environment. Asta's 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" (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p.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].

2.2. Women and Bountiful African Land

Motherist message becomes glaring here as it is through, a woman, Asta Diop's ingenuity that the returnees become reinstated in African land to secure her survival. After repatriation back to her country, Asta settles the young men and women on a ten hectares farmland that she purchased (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p. 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, 2011, 139). Naatangué is thus a setting that creates refuge

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for the returnees as “Les moissons avaient été bonnes. Naatangué avait vibré avec tous les villageois pour remercier Dieu et la terre de leur avoir prodigué tant d’abondance” (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p. 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 her resources; she 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 of life and hope for their future breakthrough in Africa.

Asta’s message is that immigration destroys the fabric of attachment between man and his Mother land. Her focus underlines the rural African land’s capacity, innovation and establishment. It predicts the 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 étendu de terre déployée comme un tapis multicolores avec de teintes noires (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p. 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, of dignity and peace (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p. 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 land 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. (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p.200, emphasis mine). [The whole team, the people in the corner, and many others will live off this land that *hides so many wonders inside her breast* 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

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to feel the land, to communicate with her when, from her breast, spurts the food
that give life and consistency].

Land takes on a metaphor of woman with breast here, through the allusion to land's hiding so much resources within her breast– 'sein'. As such the resources within the land is likened to the sweetness and nourishing freshness of mothers' breast milk which reminds one of, Sow Fall's other female motherist characters, Coumba Dado and Coura's ideals in *L'ex-père de la nation* (1987). 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 such that depicts happy women as they are busy with culinary activities. "Ça et là, des groupes de femmes ... s'activent autour de gros mortier en chantant à la cadence des pilons" (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p.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 (W. Maathai, qtd. in Namulundah, 2014, n.p).

Also, within Naatangué, the hard labor of the returnees leads to the discovery of a mysterious herb, 'gouwê', by Yakham (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p. 214). This plant allows Asta's team to hit "énormes profits" (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p.215), [enormous profits] that rescue Asta from her wasted efforts of securing a bank loan (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, pp. 209-210). What is more, part of the proceeds from vending gouwê 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 (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, pp. 191-201) to Naatangué to encourage Asta and her team.

Asta calls for an embrace with African land and ecosystem in order to solve Africans' problems; she strongly affirms that "la terre ne ment pas" (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, pp. 188, 214). [the

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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 (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p. 192), the rural setting that has been hitherto abandoned. 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 – the rural 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” (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p. 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’” (2007, p. 711). Thus 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’arrosérons 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*. (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p.88 emphasis mine). [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. The intimacy between the female characters and environment is not restricted to the land alone; it covers other forms of nature, for example, the waters – be it the river or the sea.

2.3. Women and the Waters.

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:

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... 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 symboles 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. (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p.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 river when she prepares the ground before her daughter takes over Bakhna. In her veneration of African river, Fanta, had "versé du lait et des pièces d'argent dans le fleuve pour saluer la 'grande dame invisible'" (*Douceurs*, Sow Fall, p.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 for spirituality which gets them closer to the natural environment and their ancestors (Acholonu, 1995, pp. 119, 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, 1998, pp. 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.

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Conclusion

Aminata Sow Fall's environmental versatility comes to the fore as she not only portrays ecocritical issues in *Douceurs du bercail*, but also emphasizes Acholonu's motherist concept of peaceful relationship between African women and their environment in the novel. Her literary imagination in *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 novel. In particular, *Douceurs* underscores environmental Motherism, thereby highlighting women's sterling environmental qualities which could be positively deployed towards the enhancement of improved ecosystem. Our study of the novel reveals that women may not always be co-sufferers with the environment. They could be explorers of nature to liberate human on the one hand, and outright protectors of the ecology on the other. The bond between women and the environment ensures peaceful coexistence between nature and man 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 female characters, Sow Fall proffers solutions to various ills that accompany the ecological plague in neocolonial Africa, such as immigration and its attendant suffering, disregard for African land and its rich resources, and rural exodus. Above all, she highlights the joy and harmony that the environment exudes towards human. 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 dregs and dirt of contact with capitalism and excessive modernism that run counter to advancement. Given that women are the spiritual foundation of their family, community and nation, *Douceurs du bercail*, accentuates 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 lifestyle in contemporary Africa.

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