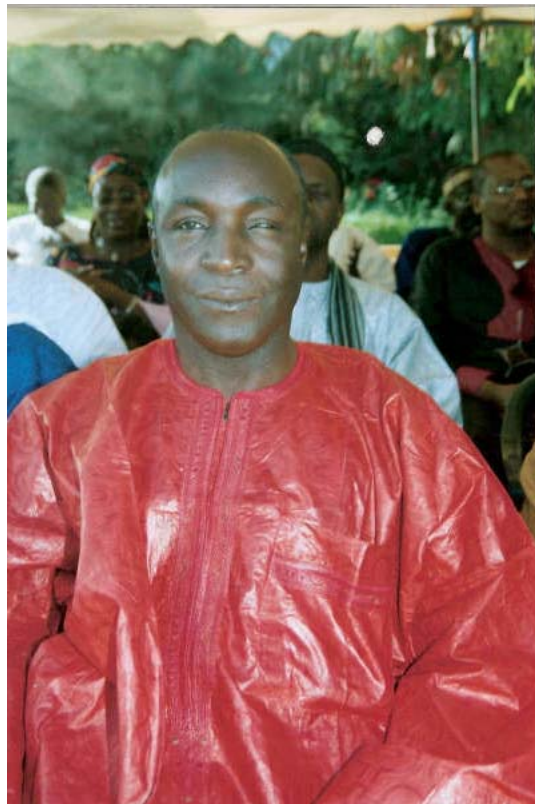


An Interview with Marouba Fall: Premier Senegalese Novelist, Poet and Dramatist

by

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Marouba Fall

Senegalese novelist, poet and dramatist Marouba Fall discusses his latest novel, *Betty Allen*, in the context of his earlier work. The novel addresses various preconceptions about the nature of Islam and African society as well as different perceptions of the idea of liberty.

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Q: *Betty Allen* was published in 2007, yet 9/11 is a major theme in the novel. Why write this book at this time?

A: I got the idea for the book much earlier, when I first traveled to Quebec in 2001. I wanted to address some of the questions preoccupying the world today, from the war in Iraq to the importance of diversity, and I also wanted to correct some misunderstandings about Islam. Sadly, since 9/11, there has been a tendency for people to equate followers of Islam with terrorists, and that is not the case: our religion is one of peace and of tolerance, emphatically *not* one that preaches violence. That is why you will notice that the novel both opens and closes with a prayer for peace.

Q: The story of *Betty Allen* is recounted in the first person. To what extent do you identify with your narrator?

A: The story - probably 75% of it - is based on real events that happened to me, so of course I do identify with the narrator to a large extent. Everything that happened in Morocco is true (including the story of the flower that was given to me and the poem that I composed immediately thereafter), but everything that happened in Canada is invented. I also like to use the first person singular in order to create intimacy with the reader.

Q: You seem to have intimate knowledge of the various settings in your novels. Can you tell us a bit more about this?

A: In my novels, it is very important to me to describe what I know. Realistic descriptions and verisimilitude are key, which is why I use events I have actually experienced, places I know well, such as the area in which I grew up, or the school in which I taught for many years. I am one of the nation's best-known writers because people feel instinctively that the place I write about is truly Senegal. That is what we have missed for so long, you see: a realistic image of ourselves.

Q: That's right, in *Betty Allen* you have that hilarious scene in which one character tells one ignorant woman that Africans enjoy feasting on human flesh.

A: This conversation actually did take place, by the way! An acquaintance from Mali said this to a young German girl. There are so many preconceived notions about Africa; people elsewhere still see us as living in huts. It is important to understand that times have changed: we are now in the 21st century, we can feel at home in business suits as well as in boubous and we are extremely diverse and multicultural.

Q: You said earlier that with globalization, we have all become citizens of the world, meaning that we share the same culture, read the same books, etc. Who are the authors you would say have influenced you most?

A: Without a doubt the French classical playwrights, of course. I particularly love Racine, and I can recite entire passages of Corneille's *Le Cid* off by heart. I like Giraudoux, too. The French poets I love best are Hugo, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and, among the philosophers, it would have to be Sartre.

As for my fellow Senegalese, Senghor appears often in my work as my way of acknowledging my debt to him, and in terms of theater, it is perhaps Aimé Césaire who has exerted the greatest influence upon me. I also used to love to devour mystery novels, but I suppose that's neither here nor there.

Q: Senegalese literature on the whole does not tend to be very sexually explicit, yet in *Betty Allen*, you speak very frankly about relations between men and women. Is this shocking at all to your Senegalese readers?

A: I haven't heard any complaints! Plus, I feel that we have to write about things as they are. We do not live in a Puritan society, we live in a society where people want to show off their bodies, etc. It is true that there is a lot of false modesty, but questions of sexuality concern people the world over, and it serves no purpose to try and beat around the bush. In fact, in another novel of mine, *Entre Dieu et Satan* (Betwixt God and Satan), there are even more explicit references, because a man is torn between two very different women – one is very modest, the other is extremely sexually liberated.

Senegalese literature in general tends to skirt around the topic of sex, but I know from my years as a teacher that even kids were engrossed in reading Harlequin novels and visiting dubious Internet sites, so I am going to express myself freely, without embarrassment – all this is a part of life.

Q: Betty at one point rather bluntly accuses the narrator and his fellow Muslims of hypocrisy: so many of them will eat pork or drink alcohol on occasion, so why all this fuss about sleeping together without the sacrament of marriage?

A: In Morocco, our narrator would have been very ready to sleep with Betty, and he still finds her desirable. But now 17 years have passed, and his character has evolved. He has become a more mature man who tries to abide by the rules, by a certain moral code. Ultimately he realizes that Betty is a dream, that there is no foundation for them to think of building a life together, and that sleeping together for the sake of carnal pleasure alone would not be enough to justify the act. And yes, of course we Muslims may sin occasionally, this is true. We are only human in the face of temptation, as I try to acknowledge in my work, but still the ideal remains.

Q: The narrator insists that he is only attracted to Betty, not in love with her. Yet he takes Khoury as his second wife, and Khoury, unless I am very much mistaken, shares a number of characteristics in common with Betty.

A: [Smiling] Indeed she does, they might almost be sisters, it is true. They share the same notions of sexual liberation, as for example when Khoury deliberately falls against the narrator on the bus. Like Betty, Khoury ultimately offers herself to the narrator, but her motive is far more profound than mere sexual gratification. An extremely proud girl, Khoury offers him the gift of her virginity out of love, scorning any offer of marriage he might make just because he is interested in sleeping with her. And you'll note that as enticing as he finds her, he is literally and figuratively unable to consummate their union until they are properly married.

The character Khoury did not actually exist initially, by the way. I added her later on, taking the advice of a female reader of an early draft of the novel who complained that something was missing. The idea was to show that there are emancipated women even here in Africa, women who study law and pursue careers, etc.

And [smiling] yes, I do consider myself a feminist!

Q: On that note, I have to say that I found Mar's marriage to Penda in *La Collégienne* very difficult to digest – both parties seemed so profoundly unhappy! In fact, most of the women in the novel appeared to be victims of a patriarchal society.

A: A marriage in our society is not about the union of two individuals, but the union of two families, two social groups. For us, parents are sacred, and their wishes must be respected. This makes things more complicated. In an endogamous marriage like Penda and Mar's, no deeper feeling ties you to one another. Sharing the same bed does not necessarily mean you love one another.

The caste system is still alive and well in Senegal, although people tend to minimize it, as people everywhere have a tendency to minimize problems.[1] In *La Collégienne*, the character Idrissa chooses to marry a girl from the wrong caste: worse still, she is a single mother. Idrissa thus demonstrates the desire to leave the beaten path and make his own way, struggling against the outmoded prejudices of his society. My character Mar, on the other hand, has much more difficulty breaking out of the mold, perhaps in part because this was my very first novel, written in 1983. Like my characters, I too have grown and evolved as I began to travel extensively, becoming more familiar with countries, customs and cultures outside my own.

Q: In a similar vein, one of the issues you address in the novel is the fact that Africa is almost never shown proudly advancing to meet her destiny and the challenges of the 21st century. Instead, you point out how the West tends to describe all of Africa as a homogenous mass in which AIDS, poverty and corruption dominate a war-filled landscape.

A: All right, let's take poverty as an example. You know, when we speak of poverty here in Senegal, we refer not to economic distress but to *la pauvreté humaine*, or the lack of warmth among people and their self-imposed solitude. Jokes are made frequently among the various ethnicities here in order to break the ice; we do all we can to facilitate relationships among people. It is absolutely inconceivable for a Senegalese that two people should be next to one another for any length of time without exchanging a word. What's more, in Africa, you share your joys as well as your sorrows with those closest to you. The Western concept of not wanting to burden other people with one's problems is foreign to us. I heard a story once about a mother and daughter sharing a house but living on different floors because the daughter did not want her mother to interfere in the way she was bringing up her children. That is unimaginable here.

The solitude we create for ourselves in our quest to have unlimited freedom is one of the central themes in *Betty*. There is a real clash in value systems: on the one hand we have the emancipated American heroine intent on pursuing only her own fleeting personal desires and who worships the idea of independence as one might a deity, whereas on the other, the narrator stops to consider his responsibilities, both to his immediate circle as well in the context of the code of conduct imposed by his religious convictions. Making the choice Betty does can lead to only one conceivable end, namely isolation.

My next novel, entitled *La Casseuse du solitude*, treats this very theme. Unlike *Betty Allen*, it is recounted in the third person and is about a young African who goes to France and there observes a dynamic woman who plans activities such as barbecues and football games to bring the people of her neighborhood closer together.

Q: In a sense, *Betty* is an attempt to try and reconcile very different conceptions of happiness and liberty held by people of different races and genders and religions, which makes you, too, a harmonizing force in the world, or a '*casseur de solitude*,' Marouba! Many thanks to you.

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[1] For those unfamiliar with the caste system in Senegal, the *griots*, or praise singers, tend to be on the lowest rung. Those who work with metal, such as jewelers, wood, such as woodcutters, or leather, such as shoemakers, are not supposed to marry into the 'nobler' castes; this is said to bring ill luck. In Fall's first novel, *La Collégienne*, the issue of caste is addressed when a family protests vehemently against their son's decision to marry because the girl in question stems from a family of jewelers.