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and Nature in Aminata Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail***

Catherine Gardner Guyon van Uitert
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Paradox and Paradise: Conflicting Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Nature
in Aminata Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail*

Catherine Guyon van Uitert

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Paradox and Paradise: Conflicting Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Nature in Aminata Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail*

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Department of Humanities, Classics and Comparative Literature

Master of Arts

In my thesis, I examine Aminata Sow Fall's sixth novel *Douceurs du bercail* "The Sweetness of Home" through three lenses: race, gender, and nature. I analyze the way Sow Fall approaches each of these three areas in terms of paradox to emphasize her understanding of the complexity of these issues and her reluctance to outline them rigidly. Instead of putting forth hard opinions about how race, gender, or nature should be understood, Sow Fall exhibits a propensity to allow each area to remain complicated. I study why she allows racial, gendered, and environmental paradoxes to circulate around one another in her text rather than attempting to resolve them, concluding that she uses this strategy both as an organizing principle and as an invitation to her readers to question the extant theories surrounding these three issues.

Sow Fall's use of language in all three areas signals an underlying fascination with the paradoxes inherent in each. In the chapter on race, I discuss the contrasting narrative styles Sow Fall uses to describe European airport officials versus the protagonist Asta's best friend, a French woman named Anne. Sow Fall's language is significant here because she contrasts two white Europeans, one characterized as systematic and cold, the other warm and open, respectively. I also discuss the way Sow Fall uses an informal and lethargic narrative voice to characterize a black secretary living in Senegal, further highlighting the disconnect between the two racial groups. In the chapter on feminism, I discuss a shift in Asta's language as she becomes more assertive. I also analyze the various aspects of femininity in *Douceurs du bercail* which have led some scholars to carry out feminist readings of the text, such as Asta's decision to leave her domineering and abusive husband, but recognize the more traditional aspects of the novel, such as Asta's marriage to Babou at *Naatangué*, as problematic to a purely feminist reading of the text. In the chapter on nature, I study Sow Fall's problematic use of Westernized language to describe the development of the untouched land of *Naatangué* into a lucrative farm.

Throughout the chapters, I interpret *Naatangué* as the ultimate paradoxical space which is at once wrought with complicated language and conflicting ideals yet acts as a quasi-paradise where Asta and her friends balance the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. *Naatangué* also acts as an organizing principle where all three areas of my study intersect.

Keywords: Aminata Sow Fall, postcolonial, ecocriticism, African literature, feminism, womanism, race, environmentalism, paradise, Eden

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Though French African literature has a brief history by Western standards, it is a literary genre that has moved past its stages of naiveté remarkably quickly and continues to gain critical and academic attention for its wisdom, insight, and distinctly non-Eurocentric mode of examining the world. This literary maturity manifests itself strongly in the fiction of Senegalese author Aminata Sow Fall, most notably in her sixth novel entitled *Douceurs du bercail*. *Douceurs* remains “one of [Sow Fall’s] lesser-known novels” (Hitchcott 238), but its lucid social critiques and valorization of human dignity in an increasingly detached modern world deserves more critical attention than it has heretofore received; at present, no book-length study of *Douceurs du bercail* has been published. Sow Fall’s examination of modern Africa’s continuing search for its identity subsequent to colonialism’s economic, political, and social ravages unearths the complexities of Africa’s post-colonial situation characterized by constant and opposing Western and traditional forces. Sow Fall frames her analysis of competing influences and ideas in modern Africa through three principle lenses: race, gender, and nature.

Douceurs du bercail explores the implications of these three issues’ societal functions principally in order to generate discourse about Africa’s situation in modernity as it continues to negotiate the paradoxes created by the inexorable Westernizing influences of a post-colonial world (globalization, commercialization, mechanization, etc.) clashing with traditional influences (regionalism, animistic beliefs, interdependent communities, etc.) Rather than asserting how Africa should navigate the uncertain results of these post-colonial opposing forces, Sow Fall highlights race, gender and nature in modern Africa as settings in which contrasting influences collide and in which her characters strive to balance them. Although the narrative voice in

Douceurs du bercail strives for objectivity regarding how Africa might successfully navigate the uncertainties of modernity, Sow Fall makes it clear to her audience that a resolution to Africa's challenges necessitates that Africans formulate viable solutions *in Africa* rather than searching for paradise *ailleurs* "elsewhere."¹

In *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall narrates the experiences of Asta Diop over a few months of her life. The novel begins at a French airport, where Asta has come to attend a Worldwide Economic Conference as a journalist. Though she has every possible document to validate her stay in France including her official invitation to the conference, lodging information, and passport, as Asta passes through security multiple airport security guards stop and question her, suspicious that her travel documents are false. Asta becomes frustrated as she is stopped multiple times, telling one airport worker that she knows the only reason they question her is because in her black face they see a future immigrant. Finally, when a female airport official performs a strip-search on Asta and goes too far in an invasion of her privacy, Asta becomes enraged and reaches out to seize the official's neck. Airport security subsequently imprisons Asta in the airport's basement *dépôt* "cell" with others who are not allowed to leave the airport's premises, mostly prospective immigrants with false traveling papers. Although she feels isolated at first, Asta begins to identify with other Africans she meets in the *dépôt* (Yakham, Dianor, and others) and has become close friends with them by the time they are released on a chartered flight back to Africa. While Asta is imprisoned, her best friend, a French woman named Anne who was supposed to meet her when she arrived at the airport, visits the Senegalese embassy in France to plead for help but finds only apathy. While in the *dépôt*, Asta dreams of a place opposite in every way to the windowless cell in which she resides—a place of life, vitality, happiness, and freedom from racial prejudice. She puts her dream into practice

when she returns to Senegal, where she buys a plot of land and creates a cooperative community along with the friends she made in the *dépôt* which they name *Naatangué*.

Sow Fall invites her readers to consider this plot of land named *Naatangué*, which means “happiness, abundance, peace” (*Douceurs du bercail* 197) in Oulof, as exemplary of a space in which the paradoxes of race, gender, and nature intertwine yet remain only partially resolved. It is the problematic nature of *Naatangué* itself—a quasi-paradisiacal space where Asta and her friends regain their dignity—that suggests a significant authorial concern with the relevance of exploring the unresolved conflict between competing Western and African influences. Yet despite its imperfections, *Naatangué* affords its inhabitants the chance to regain lost dignity, a characteristic which Sow Fall seems to suggest is becoming increasingly difficult to cultivate in Western spaces. Sow Fall’s title, *Douceurs du bercail*, reflects both Sow Fall’s insistence that Africans need not leave their homeland to realize success and fulfillment and, more broadly, that all peoples require an edifying and regenerative space that reinforces the dignity of human existence. English-speaking writers have translated the title variously as *The Sweetness of the Fold* (Orlando 49), *Home Sweet Home* (Volet, “Tradition and Modernity are Here to Stay” 183), *Sweet Pleasures of the Fold* (Theis 2), *Comforts of the Fold* (Mortimer 67). Other equally approximate translations such as *The Pleasures of Home*, etc. could be posited since no English translation of the novel as a whole exists at the present.²

In any case, all of these varied translations allude to Sow Fall’s strong belief that Africans must create Africa’s redemption at home and do away with the idea that the only way to better one’s chance of success is to leave African soil. Asta embodies this idea when she says, “L’eldorado n’est pas au bout de l’exode mais dans les entrailles de notre terre” ‘Eldorado is not found at the end of the exodus but within the depths of our land’ (*Douceurs* 87).^{*} Through Asta,

Sow Fall entreats her readers to consider analyzing, understanding, and confronting the paradoxes of modern Africa rather than attempting to escape their presence. Sow Fall's novel, then, champions the worth of Africa itself in terms of its people and its *terre* "earth" and calls for a rebuilding of the continent from within. Sow Fall insists that Africa must reject extremism and resist the tendency either to see the West as a scapegoat to blame for all of Africa's economic, political, and environmental challenges or to idolize it as a concrete paradise where Africans can achieve the success that eludes them in their homeland. Instead, Sow Fall argues Africans must create a new space that neither rejects nor glorifies the West but incorporates its strengths while remaining anchored in their own land. Asta urges her fellow Africans, "ne fuyez pas" 'do not flee' (*Douceurs* 53) and creates *Naatangué* to function as a prototype for a hybridized space where traditional and Western influences begin to coalesce despite the contradictions which arise from their juxtaposition.

The French African Novel and Sow Fall's Literary Significance

Though Sow Fall's fiction remains unfamiliar to non-French disciplines and canons, it has been recognized and praised in the scholarly world of French African literature as some of the most significant African writing of the twentieth century. In her book *The Senegalese Novel By Women*, Susan Stringer writes, "Because of both the quantity and quality of her literary output, [Sow Fall] is now considered the most important living woman novelist from francophone Black Africa" (77). Ironically, however, Sow Fall's work is still rarely known outside of Francophone African literary circles. Sow Fall's writing gained notoriety initially because of her unique place as the first Senegalese woman to publish a book professionally, but critics recognized, almost immediately, the quality of Sow Fall's fiction as writing worthy of note more than simply for its newness. Of the momentous nature of Sow Fall's writing, author

Valérie Orlando writes, “In 1976 Aminata Sow Fall helped break the gender barrier in Senegal by publishing the first major novel in French written by a Senegalese woman” (“Writing New H(er)stories” 47).

The importance of the male-dominated literary historical context from which Sow Fall emerged, then, cannot be overstated. Although the African oral tradition is thousands of years old, West Africans did not begin recording their histories, tales, lineages, recipes, and other relics of the past with the written word until the twentieth century—and even these early strides were all made by male writers. Orlando again emphasizes not only the newness of African writing in general, but especially African *women’s* writing in her article when she states, “Although modern literature (written in French by Africans) took root in Africa in the 1930s, African francophone women did not begin to write until the 1960s” (“H(er)stories” 42). *Douceurs du bercail* was published twenty-two years after Sow Fall’s first novel, granting it a unique place as perhaps the most mature literary work from Senegal’s first female writer. *Douceurs du bercail*, springing from two lineages (the French African novel and the West African female novel) marks a confident step towards an analysis and understanding of ambitious subjects—race, gender, and nature—whose treatment is more complex and sophisticated than those of earlier works in both literary categories.

Sow Fall’s French African literary history is, as mentioned earlier, relatively short but extremely dynamic. In his book *Littérature nègre*, Jacques Chevrier categorizes the French African novel into five distinct categories: *les romans de contestation* “protest novels,” *les romans historiques* “historical novels,” *les romans de formation* “educational novels,” *les romans de l’angoisse* “anxiety novels,” and *les romans du désenchantement* “novels of disillusionment” (99). Though these different categories take on a variety of concerns and

subjects, virtually all French African novels examine the effect of the clash between traditional Africa and the colonizing West, some overtly and others more subtly. Odile Cazenave acknowledges this trend in the history of French African writing in “Gender, Age, and Reeducation: A Changing Emphasis in Recent African Novels in French, as exemplified in *L’appel des arènes* by Aminata Sow Fall” when she writes:

Traditionally, one of the key themes in African literature written in French has been the alienation of blacks when they come in contact with Western society, and their ensuing struggle to find a stable identity and to readjust to their native country. In the 1960s and 70s, the topic of the French educational system inspired a number of “romans de formation” (educational novels) where the protagonist, a black child or teenager, experienced the culture and education of whites either in Africa, at the high school level, or abroad, at the university level. (“Gender, Age, and Reeducation” 54)

Although Cazenave’s article focuses on Sow Fall’s *L’appel des arènes*, the points she makes are pertinent to a study of *Douceurs du bercail* as well.³ The tradition from which Sow Fall’s writing emerges is inarguably suffused with this “key theme” of the clash of traditional African culture with Westernizing influences. Indeed, all of the “romanciers aux noms désormais célèbres, les Mongo Beti, Camara Laye, Cheikh Hamidou Kane ou Sembene Ousmane” ‘novelists now famous, Mongo Beti, Camara Laye, Cheikh Hamidou Kane or Sembene Ousmane’ (Chevrier 97) examine the effects of contact with the West in *Mission terminée* “Mission to Kala,” *L’enfant Noir* “The Black Child,” *L’aventure ambiguë* “The Ambiguous Adventure” and *Les Bouts de bois de dieu* “Bits of God’s Wood,” respectively. These books central to the French African canon characterize the West as a force that produces differing levels of evil: the erosion of

African communal social structures, the alienating effect of European-educated Africans in their own communities, the loss of ancient animistic religious beliefs, etc. And these *are* effects of Westernization in Africa. What Sow Fall does in her writing, though, is to acknowledge the damage the West has done in the past and to acknowledge the way her literary predecessors have expressed the pain of it in their novels, but also to recognize that African literature need not be limited only to voicing the concerns of a marginalized people against its colonizers. Therefore, rather than resorting to extremes such as over-valorizing traditional African life and calling for its complete preservation or embracing the Westernization of Africa as its only hope for progress, *Douceurs du bercail* argues that although Westernization is unavoidable to a certain degree, Africans can balance and guide the extent of its influence.

Race

The second chapter of my thesis will analyze how Sow Fall treats the theme of continuing racism in post-colonial Africa and the West. Sow Fall explores racism and its function in the modern world in a balanced way, offering severe critiques of Africans' shortcomings as well as those of Europeans. Although Sow Fall splinters from the French African literary tradition in her choice to look at the West more objectively rather than as the downfall of African culture, harsh criticisms of the West do exist in *Douceurs du bercail*. In fact, the narrative revolves around one event: the detainment of the protagonist Asta Diop at customs in a French airport. Sow Fall characterizes this detainment as an incredibly racist one, imposed on the professional Senegalese woman with all the right documentation by suspicious white Europeans who both fear and misunderstand the influx of African immigrants into their country. Fall criticizes European security policies by showing that airport security measures seem to be based more on stereotyping than on fact. After handing a policeman her traveling papers, which

he returns “sans les lire, vraiment” ‘without reading them, really’ (*Douceurs* 16) Asta comments, “Tous ces traitements humiliants parce que vous voyez en chacun de nous un futur immigré!” ‘All this humiliating treatment because you see in each one of us a future immigrant!’ (16).

While criticizing how Europeans racially stereotype and discriminate against immigrants, Sow Fall simultaneously critiques Africans’ responses to and promulgation of the characteristics that Europeans see as stereotypical. Laziness, apathy, and crime are highlighted in certain slices of African society that Sow Fall examines in *Douceurs du bercail*. When Asta’s friend Anne calls her office when she realizes that Asta did not exit the airport, Sow Fall portrays this African worker as uninterested, impolite, and rather slothful: “Allô, ô, Mada-ame, j’ai-ê-ê-ê cherché partout mais A-asta Dio-p n’est-ê-ê pas là-a-a . . .” ‘Hello, oooh, Ma’am, I sea-a-a-rched e-e-e-verywhere but A-asta Di-op is no-o-o-o-t he-e-re . . .’ (58). Aminata Sow Fall’s concern with human dignity shapes her critiques of both the West and Africa in term of racial issues. The West seems to strive to dehumanize African “interlocutors” while Africans themselves often fail to recognize or cultivate their own dignity by adhering to the stereotypes that Europeans have set for them. *Douceurs du bercail* marks a distinct and revolutionary turn away from French African literature’s previous tendency to mourn pre-colonial society as a lost Eden; instead, the book looks for realistic solutions to the problems created by the colonial period—solutions that involve accepting Africa’s current situation as a starting point from which to move forward. *Douceurs du bercail* is remarkable in its step toward recognition that continuing to blame Western colonization for all of Africa’s woes is futile in attempting to solve them. Sow Fall makes a bold step in terms of her own literary tradition in choosing to support moderate Westernization in Africa as an inevitable part of its future.

Within Sow Fall's examination of racism, conflicting perspectives on its root causes and its possible solutions arise. First, there is the paradox Sow Fall creates within the airport as its white European workers unravel under their self-imposed system of mechanized protocol. The European space of the airport dictates Asta's behavior as she is forced bring with her an almost absurd amount of paperwork, yet the Europeans themselves disregard the framework they have set up by allowing Asta's race to supersede her adherence to the rules of the European system. At *Naatangué*, the alternative community where Asta and her friends from the airport *dépôt* farm and sell their products, the issue of race becomes even more paradoxical. In the airport scenes, Sow Fall criticizes Europeans for their lack of racial sensitivity, but though *Naatangué* acts as a healing space where Asta and her friends regain the dignity they lost at the airport, it is a place which disregards transracial conflict rather than confronting it. In my chapter, I study what I see as this racially problematic characterization of *Naatangué*—Asta and the other deportees find solace from the dehumanizing effects of racial discrimination there, but to accomplish this separate themselves from the racial "other" just as the European airport officials sought to do.

Gender

My third chapter will discuss the role of women as another lens through which Sow Fall examines the way traditional and modern influences conflict with one another in modern Africa. Sow Fall characterizes Asta as an example of a modern African woman able to carefully measure and incorporate certain aspects of the influx of Western feminist ideas into an African context, aware of the feminine ambiguity caused by competing Western and traditional influences such as women's roles in marriage and independence versus interdependence, yet able to balance the two. Sow Fall Odile Cazenave comments on Sow Fall's rather unique opinion about feminism

when she writes, “Sow Fall has often rejected being labeled as a feminist writer, insisting that she wrote, first and foremost, as a Senegalese citizen” (“Gender, Age” 58) and later:

The author stresses the dangers inherent in emancipation, in the Western sense of the word, for women. Under the pretense of independence, women have in fact become prisoners of a world of appearances. Psychologically, they have given up African criteria of beauty and moral standards, turning to the European model. They have adopted another type of colonization, more subtle, but very much at the center of every one of their acts and gestures. Viewed in this perspective, Aminata Sow Fall is “*stricto sensu*” a feminist, fighting for women’s ultimate recognition, to be fully African. (59)

Though women’s recognition is not to be *fully* African in *Douceurs du bercail* (if fully African is meant to describe complete traditionalism), Cazaneve’s point about Sow Fall’s fight for female recognition is well taken. Sow Fall rejects the “feminist” label insofar as it is a label connoting Western feminism; she does, however, take great interest in the emancipation and recognition of women.

Sow Fall’s strong female protagonists, championing of equality of the sexes, and her less-than-traditional treatment of marriage in her fiction establishes female independence as a primary concern of *Douceurs du bercail*. In her article “Domestic Matters: Representations of Home in the Writings of Mariama Bâ, Calixthe Beyala and Aminata Sow Fall,” Mildred Mortimer sees Sow Fall’s portrayal of Asta Diop in *Douceurs du bercail* as a woman able to transcend the limitations of both traditional and modern womanhood as an assertion of Sow Fall’s feminine ideal. She writes, “Through her portrayal of Asta, the Senegalese novelist subverts the paradigm of the African woman defined in terms of her domestic role; she proposes instead a new female

subjectivity located in a place beyond the double restriction of African patriarchy and European colonialism” (“Domestic Matters” 76). In *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall indeed creates a space “beyond,”—a place where the most complex questions of modern feminine existence are asked and explored even if they are not answered. Asta, for example, asserts her feminine independence by divorcing her controlling husband and later becoming the proprietor and leader of *Naatangué*, but in organizing her alternative community surrenders independence for interdependence. At *Naatangué*, then, Asta grapples with these and other competing ideas about women’s roles society, even choosing to marry a man she met in the *dépôt* though she swore never to marry again when she was a journalist and had just divorced her first husband.

The decisions that Asta makes, which at times seem influenced by Western feminist ideas and at others by African traditionality, as well as the fact that *Douceurs du bercail* is Sow Fall’s first novel to revolve around a female protagonist, create what I term a “feminist paradox” surrounding the novel, which I discuss in my third chapter. There are elements of Western feminism in the novel, such as the female narrative voice and Asta’s assertion of her independent female voice in the public sphere, which have attracted the attention of feminist critics, yet Asta’s choices do not always align with feminist thought. Even Sow Fall herself rejects the feminist label, insisting that a Western framework’s analysis of women’s issues in Africa yields an incomplete understanding of it. This paradox opens up even broader lines of questioning I explore in the chapter on gender, such as the applicability of Western theories in non-Western contexts, the limitations of feminism as a theoretical framework, and Sow Fall’s vision of a theoretical framework beyond feminism.

Nature

Finally, my fourth chapter examines the way in which Aminata Sow Fall addresses environmental issues in *Douceurs du bercail*. Her treatment of nature functions as yet another significant aspect of creating a “place beyond” (Mortimer, “Domestic Matters” 76) that avoids extremes, as she tends to do throughout the novel, representing *Naatangué* neither as prelapsarian nor as fully dominated by European enclosure ideals. Her discussion and commentary on the environment and its role in Africa’s future and, by extension, the world’s, is one of the most complex and subtle in *Douceurs du bercail*. Asta advocates environmental preservation and awareness, writing, “Malgré tout je continuerai à prêcher: aimons notre terre . . .” ‘In spite of everything I will continue to preach: love our earth . . .’ (*Douceurs* 88). Love and respect for the environment play an important role in Sow Fall’s vision, yet ending *Douceurs du bercail* with Asta’s establishment of *Naatangué* is far from Voltaire’s conclusion in *Candide*; along with preaching love for “notre terre,” ‘our land’ (88) there is striking language that does violence to the earth in Sow Fall’s writing as well. When Asta and her friends begin to make plans for *Naatangué*, they decide: “nous pourrions creuser un canal, irriguer les deux hectares, acheter une camionnette tous terrains pour écouler la production” ‘we can dig a canal, irrigate the two hectares, buy an all-terrain truck to sell the goods’ (*Douceurs* 200). This discussion of cutting into the earth and irrigating (or manipulating) its water sources Westernizes the plot of land too much for it to be Edenic, creating a puzzling hybrid where the land is respected yet carefully controlled. The subtlety of how Sow Fall writes about the environment in *Douceurs du bercail* has gone virtually unnoted in scholarship, but her complex and delicate treatment of its place and function in the modern world deserves careful examination. Sow Fall’s seemingly opposing viewpoints on the environment in the novel: that it must be “loved” (*Douceurs* 88) but

also cut, reshaped, and made lucrative, clash with one another at *Naatangué* as Asta and her friends reconnect with their land while developing and Westernizing it. In my fourth chapter, I study Sow Fall's paradoxical characterization of the environment as an organic, regenerative space as well as a medium for financial success and how her use of language complicates nature's role in the novel as a whole.

Aminata Sow Fall holds a unique place in contemporary writing. Her fiction, while significant to her fellow Senegalese and Africans in general, is not limited in its importance racially or nationally. Sow Fall has enlarged the importance and influence of French African writing immensely, incorporating and conflating Africa's concerns with (what she thinks should be) the entire world's. In *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall expands the scope and vision of the West African novel to reach out to a worldwide audience, examining racism, feminism, and environmentalism as the central issues vital to the future of modern existence.

CHAPTER II

Forty Years After *Les Indépendances*: Continuing Racial Tensions in *Douceurs du bercail*

Perhaps the most overt of the many themes treated in *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall's examination and analysis of racism (and, by association, immigration, racial prejudice and profiling, etc.) exposes the ways in which post-colonial social structures have transmuted and preserved racist practices and modes of thought from colonial times. Sow Fall strives to maintain balanced critiques and observations of racism throughout the text of *Douceurs du bercail*, treating the racism that Asta Diop experiences at a French airport, immigration issues, and the racial implications of the Europeans' treatment of Africans in a way that is neither wholly condemnatory toward the former European colonizing powers nor apologetic to the formerly colonized African peoples. *Douceurs du bercail* also exhibits Sow Fall's careful effort to avoid an unbalanced allocation of blame on either group. Susan Stringer also recognizes this reluctance to apportion judgment when she writes, "Aminata Sow Fall, writing well after the advent of independence, [is] not interested in indulging in anti-West invective or in looking back into the past so that [she] can apportion blame" ("Cultural Conflict" 37). Therefore, rather than assessing which of either party is (more) at fault, Sow Fall instead hopes to expose the weaknesses in the overall situation of post-colonial racial relations and emphasize the fact that though Senegal gained its political independence from France in 1960, issues of racial inequality created and reinforced during colonization persist, although manifested in altered ways.

Because *Douceurs du bercail* exhibits Sow Fall's sophisticated foresight regarding modern racism and her ability to stretch her writing's racial scope beyond the boundaries of other French African writers before her who were concerned with exposing the ills of racially hierarchical white colonialism, in this chapter I will focus first on the importance of Sow Fall's

uniquely balanced examination of racism in the novel. Her departure from earlier novelistic treatments of racism is significant since she chooses to critique Africans as well as Europeans. I will also discuss the significance of Sow Fall's characterization both of documented and undocumented Africans attempting to travel to France and how the lack of distinction between these two types of *voyageurs* "travelers" reflects the blatant racism of the airport officials. In the next two sections, I implement close readings of the text of *Douceurs du bercail* in order to understand Sow Fall's complex characterization of racist tendencies in both Europeans as well as Africans. Finally, I address *Naatangué* as a racially problematic place where Asta and her friends appear to overcome the damage caused by racist European airport officials by regaining the dignity they lost in France but accomplish this result simply by avoiding contact with the racial "other."

Sow Fall's balanced look at racism in *Douceurs du bercail* exhibits a significant shift in the treatment of racial issues from earlier African literature, much of which sought to vilify white European colonizers as violent interlopers. These twentieth-century French African novels which revolved around vindicating the victimized colonized peoples of Africa or at least giving a voice to marginalized groups of people whose stories went untold in European histories of the colonial age (for example, Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de Boy*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë*, etc.), were and are undeniably significant to the progression of French African literature, but while Sow Fall recognizes their importance, she chooses to move away from a treatment of racial issues that has already been expressed by these and other writers. In other words, Sow Fall respects those works that have gone before but departs from her literary predecessors markedly in the equitable way she examines race relations and post-colonial tensions in her *Douceurs du bercail*.

In her treatment of race in *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall does attempt a more balanced examination of its origins and outcomes than some authors before her have, but at the same time seeks to accomplish similar goals through her literature: voicing the viewpoint of the racial minority, encouraging awareness of racial tensions, and arguing for the literary validity of African texts in a post-colonial society which favors European literary histories. Critic I.T.K. Egonu recognizes a significant shift in Sow Fall's literary vision of race from that of many of her predecessors, but also perceives in her writing a rejection of some of their thematic concerns rather than a fresh look at them. Egonu writes:

[Sow Fall] sees a re-direction of attention as a necessary condition for a relevant and meaningful African literature today. African writers of the preceding generation, she says, were entirely preoccupied with the business of rehabilitating the image of the black man which had been degraded and vilified by slavery and colonialism. That is why, before independence, African literature was noted for its militancy, on account of its preoccupation with racial issues and the need to affirm the dignity and the values of black people . . . It was as a result of these searching reflections that the young writer came to the conclusion that African literature should now abandon some of its early preoccupations in order to tackle current issues of interest . . . African literature, for her, should be a mirror of the cultural soul of the people as well as a means of dealing with the various problems of our changing society. (67-68)

While Egonu is correct in his assertion that Sow Fall has made a conscious choice to focus her attention on current social problems rather than reiterate past authors' thematic concerns regarding racial tensions, he errs in his assumption that this "re-direction" means the

abandonment of what he calls some of African literature's "preoccupations." Pre-independence African literature was certainly preoccupied with racial issues, but Sow Fall's post-independence writing has never abandoned the examination of how race functions in a post-colonial world, nor has she given up on the "need to affirm the dignity and the values of black people" (*ibid*).

Douceurs du bercail has not abandoned the thematic concerns that French African writers have been treating for the last century, it simply looks at racial issues in a contemporary context—in terms of how the colonizer and the colonized have *both* promulgated tension and prejudice. In this examination of racism's effects on both European and formerly colonized societies, Sow Fall appears to agree, at least to a certain degree, with theorist Homi K. Bhabha, who argues that racial interactions produce hybridity in both cultures so that neither remains static, but rather that each influences the other continually.¹

Sow Fall therefore strongly echoes the racial sentiments that writers have expressed before her, criticizing European stereotyping and disdainful treatment of Africans and other racial minorities, yet she also examines Africans' contribution to racial tensions, a bold literary task which earlier African writers eschewed while emphasizing their victimization by the white European colonizing power. Even Sow Fall's literary position as a black African writer highlights the volatility of enduring racial tensions in the post-colonial world; for a white author to posit the same harsh criticisms of African behavior that Sow Fall puts forth would perhaps be considered racist and taboo even today. Yet Sow Fall's unique place as a black female writer enables her to examine racism with candor, and in *Douceurs du bercail* she frankly critiques the way in which Africans propagate the stereotypes placed upon them. Her analysis of continuing racial prejudice in a post-colonial world invites all readers, whether they be associated with the former colonizing power or the formerly colonized subjects, to face the racial problems that

plague modern society. Sow Fall does put forth “the need to affirm the dignity and the values of black people” (*ibid*), a preoccupation that Egonu supposes she rejects, highlighting the fact that the post-colonial world has yet to resolve racial tensions.

The first space Sow Fall uses to exemplify and analyze racism is the airport *dépôt* in which Asta Diop is imprisoned for “huit jours” ‘eight days’ (*Douceurs* 136) simply because the airport officials believe that her travel documents are counterfeit. Since one of the primary themes of *Douceurs du bercail* is immigration itself, the racial issues surrounding the *dépôt* and its detainees are crucial to understanding Sow Fall’s commentary on racism in the novel.² The fact that the airport officials make no distinction between Asta, the professional woman who possesses every possible document that would legitimize her trip to France, and Yakham, for example, who bought forged documents in Africa in order to come to Europe and work illegally, is significant because both types of black Africans are treated with the same disdainful inhumanity, regardless of their non-immigrant or immigrant status. Sow Fall uses this lack of distinction between the types of Africans entering France to emphasize that race is the only factor that dictates the French officials’ discriminatory treatment. Because Asta is a well-educated and successful businesswoman, it is clear that educational and socio-economic status are not factors in the way Europeans perceive their African counterparts.

The fact that the racism of the European airport officials which marginalizes Asta commences the narrative of *Douceurs du bercail* is significant—Sow Fall chooses to present this type of racism (in which the white European former colonizers look down on formerly colonized black persons as inferior and untrustworthy) at the beginning of the novel in order to establish a sense of conventionality consistent with other post-colonial French African novels. In fact, by beginning *Douceurs du bercail* with this racially charged encounter between the white authority

figures of the European airport officials and the lone black working woman, Sow Fall suggests to her reader that the novel will, like others before it, expose the misconduct of white Europeans who consider themselves racially superior to the Africans they had previously colonized and vindicate the marginalized racial minority. Due to the racist encounter at opening to the book which is so condemnatory of the actions of the airport officials, Sow Fall creates a literary environment in which her critiques of Africans become more striking because of the similarities they highlight between European and African racism.

Sow Fall emphasizes that both Europeans and Africans are responsible for the skewed perceptions of race that exist in their post-colonial situation through Asta's second racialized encounter: meeting the other black deportees in the airport *dépôt*. Just as the French airport officials in *Douceurs du bercail* see only "un future immigré" 'a future immigrant' (*Douceurs* 16) in all the black faces that move through the airport space (whether they are immigrants or not), Sow Fall uses Asta's experience meeting the other detainees to mirror rather than challenge this European point of view. Asta initially isolates herself from the other detainees mentally, "Rien dans l'attitude d'Asta ne permettait de penser qu'elle ferait comme les autres" 'Nothing in Asta's attitude permitted the thought that she would do as the others' (*Douceurs* 43), and physically by avoiding conversations, "Asta est restée muette. Elle a même fermé les yeux pour mettre fin à ce dialogue absurde qu'elle ne désire même pas" 'Asta remained silent. She even closed her eyes to bring an end to this absurd dialog she did not even desire to have' (*Douceurs* 44). In this instance, Asta is faced not with white officials determined to marginalize her because of her skin color but with fellow black Africans; nevertheless, she perceives her fellow Africans in the *dépôt* as "other." Through this encounter, Sow Fall suggests that the white racism stemming from the colonial period has not only continued (albeit in a transformed state) but that

Africans themselves have adopted the mentality of “the other” it creates. Over the course of her stay at the *dépôt*, Asta begins to negate this effect of racism and identify herself as part of the group of detainees; by the end of the narrative they become her closest friends and confidants. Even after having spent only days in the *dépôt* and after overcoming her initial aversion to these “others,” Asta begins to use the pronoun *nous* “we” to refer to the other immigrants and herself, signifying racial solidarity within the group without regard to its members’ status as travelers, documented immigrants, or undocumented immigrants.³

Racial Profiling and Immigration

Sow Fall makes a strong argument for the plight of undocumented immigrants in *Douceurs du bercail*, whose inability to obtain papers stems, in large part, from racist social structures.⁴ Even though Asta believes that immigration to Western countries is not the answer to Africa’s problems—that “l’eldorado n’est pas au bout de l’exode mais dans les entrailles de notre terre” ‘Eldorado is not at the end of the exodus but within the depths of our land’ (*Douceurs* 87), she emphasizes the fact that the people in the *dépôt* have been marginalized by society only because of their race. Asta speaks for all Africans as she dreams of freedom from the racial oppression experienced at the airport and declares: “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” ‘The light of our hope will guide us, we will harvest and build. Then only will we be able to take the roads of heaven, of earth, and of water without being chased off like pariahs’ (*Douceurs* 88). Thus Sow Fall uses the lack of distinction on the part of the airport officials between documented travelers or immigrants and *les sans-papiers* “undocumented immigrants” at the airport both as a criticism of European

racism and as an example of African solidarity that is non-exclusionary to so-called “pariahs” or illegal immigrants.

By blurring the social lines between the professional woman Asta and the undocumented travelers such as Yakham at the airport, Sow Fall is explicit in her argument that the situation of *les sans-papiers* merits further scrutiny as to the root causes behind their plight. Author Natalie Edwards recognizes the fact that undocumented immigrants are manipulated by the European racist social system in the novel when she writes, “There follows a succession of unnamed voices, who explain their reasons for leaving the former colony and their disgust at their thwarted dream. No matter what their intention, whether it be to work hard and return rich, to send money to relatives, or to live by illegal means, their fate is invariably decided by somebody else” (53). Thus Sow Fall invites her European readership to examine its perception of African travelers and immigrants, consider the responsibility that the former colonizer has had in creating this group of people, and to do away with the unwarranted racism that is so clearly described in the novel. Sow Fall does not suggest that the illegal immigrants (such as Yakham) in the novel are only victims of circumstance or that their marginalization by European social structures justifies their every action, but again posits that the broken system of race relations itself produces unjust and seemingly irresolvable situations.

White Europeans: Colonizers No Longer?

Sow Fall mounts her harshest criticisms against French society (and, by association, all formerly colonizing European nations) during Asta’s ordeal at the airport through the way that the French security personnel stereotype Asta as a *sans-papiers* because of her dark skin. Sow Fall creates an ugly representation of how deeply this racism can damage human dignity. In the airport scene, the French officials cast a suspicious eye on Asta *only* because she is a woman of

color, completely ignoring her extensive documentation and information regarding her stay in France. In her book *Writing from the Hearth*, Mildred Mortimer emphasizes the continued colonial mindset of racist hierarchy that exists in the modern airport when she writes:

The *dépôt* situated in the bowels of the airport and filled with Africans awaiting forced transport back to Africa bears disquieting affinities to the West African detaining centers that once held African captive scheduled for transport on slaveships to America and the Caribbean. Taking this analogy further, we note that the airport hangar gathers Africans from various nations just as the slave stations collected captives from many different African ethnic groups . . . Referring to the detainees as ‘les naufragés’ (86) [the shipwrecked], the novelist describes a scene that clearly recalls the crowded conditions in the hold of the slaveship . . . ” (157-158)

Mortimer’s analysis of the airport space contributes to the notion that the airport acts symbolically as proof of enduring colonial racial attitudes in the modern West. Her comparison of the *dépôt* and the colonial detaining centers highlights the fact that although the context of racism has changed, its essence not only endures in post-colonial Europe but continues to contribute to the African mentality of inferiority. Sow Fall therefore characterizes the airport in a way that bears such disquieting resemblance to the slaveship in order to hyperbolize the seriousness of contemporary racism.

Sow Fall employs biting irony when Asta encounters the first wave of airport workers who suspect her of illegal activity by highlighting logic, protocol, rules, and orderliness—what would have been considered Western traits during colonialism—as characteristics wholly absent from French airport security. It is almost as if the colonial infrastructure used to impose

Westernization and modernization on colonized nations has broken down at the airport, a space which normally represents order and systematization. Asta's experience there exposes the ills of Western rationality by illustrating that the orderliness so vital to colonization breaks down when it fails to benefit itself. Asta has all her papers and has gone to almost ridiculous lengths to ensure that she will pass the border safely, even obtaining "le certificat d'hébergement, par courrier express" 'the housing certificate, by express mail' (*Douceurs* 19) to prove to the customs officials that she has a place to stay during her sojourn in France.

As Asta follows rules meticulously, they are broken by the French officials themselves because, it seems, Asta is powerless in overcoming the racial stereotyping imposed upon her at the airport. After being singled out from a group of passengers for further examination, an airport official asks Asta, " 'Qu'êtes-vous venue faire?' dit-il en faisant semblant d'examiner les papiers" "What have you come for?" he said while pretending to examine the papers' (*Douceurs* 16). Asta becomes immediately defensive of the situation, noting that the orderly process most travelers go through is being altered for her. She replies, "Vous voyez bien sur l'invitation et sur l'ordre de mission! Je viens assister à une conférence. Et puis, pourquoi suis-je la seule personne parmi ces centaines et centaines de voyageurs, à être interpellée avant même d'arriver à l'endroit où le contrôle doit se faire?" 'You see on the invitation and on the assignment order! I have come to attend a conference. Plus, why am I the only person among hundreds and hundreds of travelers, to be questioned before even arriving at the normal security check?' (*ibid*). Sow Fall continues the narration, "Pas de réponse. Le policier tourne et retourne les documents, dans tous les sens, sans les lire, vraiment" 'No response. The policeman turns and re-turns the documents, in every direction, without reading them, really' (*ibid*). Asta, then, is the victim of an imperfect and racist system at the airport, which reflects upon the grander "system" of Western society.

Protocol, standard procedure, and even efficiency suddenly become unimportant as racial prejudice takes precedence.

With this exchange between Asta and the *policier* “policeman”, Sow Fall makes an interesting commentary on the state of post-colonial society by switching the roles of colonizer and colonized: Asta, a representative of what colonial-era Europe would have considered a backward, disorganized, mystical, primitive society, has conformed to every criteria required by this Western space—has embraced Westernization on this structural level—at the airport but the airport’s system of order breaks down *because* of race, mirroring the supposedly disorderly African societies that colonial Europeans sought to civilize and systematize.

The structure and language Sow Fall uses to describe the former colonizers and formerly colonized reinforces the message that the Western airport symbolizes racial domination. Most of the dialogue spoken by the airport officials speak is short and business-like (one worker asks Asta a series of questions such as “Vous restez combien de temps?”, “Réservation retour?”, and “Réservation hotel?” ‘You are staying how long? Return flight? Hotel reservation?’ (*Douceurs* 18), emphasizing the systematic nature of airport security, but the narrator allows significantly detailed description when depicting one *douanier*’s “customs agent” motivation for questioning Asta well beyond what protocol would normally require. She writes, “Le douanier examine le papier de plus près et le secoue comme pour s’assurer qu’il ne recèle rien. Il le remet ensuite dans le sac à main en même temps que le porte-monnaie. Il lève la tête. Ses yeux cherchent ceux d’Asta. Sourire méchant d’une bête qui piétine sa proie pour mieux l’humilier” ‘The customs agent examines the paper more closely and shakes it to ensure that it is hiding nothing else. Then he put it back in the purse at the same time as the wallet. He lifts his head. His eyes search Asta’s. The malicious smile of a beast that tramples its prey in order to better humiliate it’

(*Douceurs* 26). Sow Fall details the “beastly” behavior of the *douanier*, dedicating significant length to describe his efforts to purposefully humiliate Asta, but then abruptly switches back to short phrasing when he speaks again, “S’il vous plait Madame, venez avec moi” ‘Please, Ma’am, come with me’ (*Douceurs* 27).

In this short episode, Sow Fall uses the novel’s form itself to emphasize the fact that the airport workers—and, by extension, the airport space itself—carry out the rules of the system superficially (by speaking to Asta politely) but on a more fundamental level allow racism to supersede the orderly logicity which would supposedly define such a Westernized system. Additionally, Sow Fall uses the strategy of alternating narrative styles as the subject matter shifts to illustrate that Afro-European racial issues in contemporary society no longer reflect the culprit/victim binary of the colonial or immediate post-colonial period. Through the short exchange between the *douanier* and Asta, Sow Fall posits that racism against Africans in Europe is not only damaging to the marginalized racial minority but, exemplified by the official’s inhumane desire to humiliate Asta, plagues the dignity of the discriminating racial majority as well.

Natalie Edwards’ article “ ‘La terre ne ment pas’: Aminata Sow Fall’s *Douceurs du bercail* as *Bildungsroman*” also recognizes in the airport a figurative encounter between the former colonizer and colonized. Edwards writes about the airport space generally, linking each small step of the narrative together in order to see the airport space as reflective of colonial power. Although Edwards sees the negative exertion of power only in the context as coming *from* the former colonizer upon the formerly colonized and not the other way around, her conclusions about the airport are useful for understanding how Sow Fall uses the space to make racial commentaries. Edwards writes:

Thus Asta's lesson centers upon the instability of cultural relations . . . The airport therefore represents a distinct space, an in-between space that is not a place of cultural exchange, of fluidity or movement, but rather a place of binaries of segregation, of intrusion and of violation. Situated right at the beginning of the text, the space of the airport is a bleak opening comment on the encounter between the French and the Senegalese. Furthermore, it seems to be the prerogative of the text to make the point that the former colonizer has the power to force very negative consequences onto individual formerly colonized subjects. (54-55)

Thus Edwards recognizes the importance of the airport as a problematic and negative space which Sow Fall uses to highlight the idea of violation. Perhaps, though, her assertion that the former colonizer is able to exercise power over *individual* formerly colonized subjects is limiting to the scope of Sow Fall's commentary on racism.

While the narrative itself chronicles one Senegalese citizen's ordeal with the *dépôt* at a French airport, Sow Fall's racial concerns extend well beyond Franco-Senegalese relations. During a discussion between two of Asta's fellow *expulsés* "deportees" in the *dépôt*, Sow Fall makes it clear that one of her principal literary concerns in *Douceurs du bercail* is racism itself, not only how racism functions in a specifically Franco-Senegalese context. Yakhm claims "Je ne crois pas que ça soit un problème de peau, essentiellement . . ." 'I do not believe that it is principally a problem of skin . . .' (*Douceurs* 47) to which Séga responds, "Cesse de jouer à l'intello . . . si c'était le cas, tu aurais bien pigé ceci: la bête immonde, depuis l'aube des temps, bouge dans nos entrailles: l'inquisition, la traite des nègres, l'holocauste juif, pour ne pas trop citer. Et aujourd'hui tu veux nous faire croire que c'est pas à cause de notre faciès qu'on nous

traite come on le fait maintenant!” ‘Stop playing the intellectual . . . if that were the case, you would have understood this: the filthy beast, since the dawn of time, moves within our insides: the Inquisition, the slave trade, the Holocaust, just to name a few. And today you want to make us believe that it’s not because of our facial features that we’re treated the way we are now!’ (*ibid*). The airport space, then, exercises power over Asta individually, but the discussion that takes place within the airport *dépôt* between Yakham and Séga clearly addresses cultural and racial domination on a larger scale. Sow Fall’s attention to racial injustices pertaining to non-African peoples as well is especially notable here as she condemns racism in all forms and historical contexts. Yakham and Séga’s conversation—insofar as Séga’s argument is convincing—proves that racial superiority exercised by former colonizers (or, in the other examples, the racial majority) has not only destroyed dignity on an individual level, but, historically, has damaged the collective mentality of various races and peoples on a deep and abiding level. The *bête immonde* or “filthy beast” to which Séga refers can be read as a personification of racism since it is the driving force behind the racist atrocities that Séga cites as proof of the beast’s existence. Séga’s argument is convincing; his historical examples as well as the current state of exile in the *dépôt* of his fellow Africans and himself prove that the beast of racism has always and continues to stir inside humanity—all because of *faciès* or certain “facial features” that the racial majority deems unacceptable.

Asta recognizes the wounds that continue to fester in the African consciousness long after *les indépendances* “African Independence” began the long process of healing as well, but looks at the damage in a more hopeful light than does Séga. Sow Fall presents a wide range of opinions from the different characters at the *dépôt* (Séga’s, Yakham’s, Dianor’s) but ultimately projects her own voice through the protagonist Asta, who looks at the racism at the airport as an impetus

for change rather than a fixed reality to be mourned. Through Asta, then, Sow Fall endeavors to recognize and begin to understand the most fundamental damage inflicted by racism so that the root causes of Africa's current state can be addressed. Perhaps the most significant injury that Africa continues to deal with because of the racial hierarchy established by colonialism is a malady that Asta refers to as "le parasitisme" 'parasitism' (*Douceurs* 158), or "une mentalité de dépendence" 'a mentality of dependence' (*Douceurs* 154) that afflicts the African mind. This product of racial dominance by white colonizers in times past has, in Asta's opinion, created in Africans a feeling of dependence on *l'autre* "the other" in order to achieve success.

Asta herself is subject to this malady since the airport, a European space, acts as a conduit through which she hopes to gain success in her career. Since the space is controlled by colonizing forces—however imperfect they may be—she becomes powerless to pass through this channel towards success. Asta recognizes that she and Africans in general cannot progress socially or economically if this attitude, which stems from colonial racism, persists. In a conversation with Asta, Anne recognizes the same reality when she says, "Je pense que les Africains ne s'en sortiront jamais, tant qu'ils continueront à croire que c'est aux autres de leur offrir les moyens de leur développement" 'I think that Africans will never pull through, as long as they continue believing that it is up to others to offer them the means for their development' (*Douceurs* 159). In Asta's eyes, then, the racial dominance of former colonizers asserted on the formerly colonized impedes Africans' development, and will continue to do so as long as the mentality of *parasitisme* or dependence exists in the African consciousness. Similarly, she recognizes the damage that racial discrimination inflicts on the discriminating party as well. That Asta cites Africans' persistent mentality of dependence on colonial structures and laziness (which promulgates European stereotypes classifying the colonial subject as inferior or

unintelligent) as two fundamental obstacles impeding Africa's progress suggests that Sow Fall engages the post-colonial racial theorist Frantz Fanon in *Douceurs du bercail*.⁵

Although Asta's friend Anne seems to have overcome racism and racial discrimination, she nevertheless symbolizes the collective European mind which has not yet reached that point. Like Asta, she sees that racism cripples her society as well, albeit in a different way than for the Africans. Anne recognizes the same heartlessness characterized by Asta's encounter with the *douanier* on a national level, remarking that (among other aspects of modernity such as technology) racism betrays a lack of respect for human dignity on the part of Europeans. Anne begins a train of thought about the ills of modern European society by remarking on the women who were violated during their stay at the *dépôt* with Asta. After discussing the horrible treatment that the immigrants had all received, including the two violated women, Asta says, "Moi, je crois aussi que le viol est un crime odieux. Un fléau . . . qui fortifie ses racines dans les dérèglements de notre société" 'I also believe that rape is an odious crime. A scourge . . . which strengthens its roots in the dissoluteness of our society' (*Douceurs* 138). Even though Asta grows to identify with the group of strangers after her stay in the *dépôt*, the fact that the women are violated by their fellow detainees emphasizes the fact that European racist social structures contribute to a breakdown in those of the racial minority.

What Anne terms this "dissolute" behavior occurs in the space of the *dépôt* where the deportees resort to abusing others rather than finding solidarity in their common circumstances; she then goes on to recognize the broader implications of this kind of behavior. Referencing the controversy surrounding the violated women she says, "Nous avons sacrifié l'amour, la compassion—et même les adorables faiblesses de notre dimension humaine—à l'illusion d'avoir tout dompté. Resultat: on est devenu les robots de systèmes que notre intelligence a fabriqués et

qui, maintenant nous font un pied de nez” ‘We have sacrificed love, compassion—and even the lovable weaknesses of our human side—to the illusion of having overcome all. Result: we have become the robots of systems that our intelligence has fabricated, which now thumb their noses at us’ (*Douceurs* 139). Thus the *voleurs* “rapists” and the *douanier* that Asta encountered in the airport exemplify Anne’s description of modern European society almost perfectly—both exhibit the tendency to become “robots” in these systems fabricated by society which dehumanize their members. In essence, Anne sees in the mindsets of the *douanier* and the *voleurs* a reflection of cultural values rather than isolated incidents. In other words, *Sow Fall* characterizes the racism of the French system as equally destructive to its own members as to the racial minorities it marginalizes.

Critiques of African Society

While *Sow Fall* exposes the ills of European racism through Asta’s ordeal at the French airport, she contextualizes her study of racism to apply to a contemporary setting which recognizes a need to attribute racial problems to all parties involved rather than relying on simple binaries to place the blame wholly on the racial majority. In this way, *Douceurs du bercail* preserves the tradition in African literature of giving a voice to the racially marginalized but expands the bounds of the racial conversation significantly by looking critically at African society and behavior as well. Natalie Edwards touches on this aspect of *Douceurs du bercail* when she writes, “Aminata Sow Fall is one of several writers in her generation who are critical of both France and Senegal, who look forward to a new, progressive society that is not merely a return to its roots or a celebration of tradition but who have developed specific ideas about the future of Franco-Senegalese relations and Senegalese prosperity” (Edwards 56-57). Again, Edwards’ commentary is valid but *Sow Fall*’s social vision is not limited to Franco-Senegalese

relations. Rather, *Douceurs du bercail* uses the race relations between France and Senegal as a type of microcosm of racism on a global scale. As is customary in Sow Fall's writing, *Douceurs du bercail* does not profess to offer a solution for global racial issues but insists that finding solutions must incorporate introspection rather than the allocation of blame to the Western other.

Sow Fall uses Asta as an almost perfect example of the type of introspection that could lead to progress in terms of resolving racial issues. Asta recognizes that *le parasitisme* stems from the exertion of power of the former colonizer, France, upon its formerly colonized counterpart, Senegal thereby creating an unfortunate mentality of dependence in the African mind. While this social ill grows directly out of a tradition of European dominance and discrimination, Asta recognizes another malady affecting African society—*le laxisme* “laziness”—as a self-inflicted disease. Sow Fall characterizes this attitude of laziness as an unnecessary product of European racism, criticizing Africans for exemplifying this aspect of racial stereotyping applied to them by white Europeans rather than asserting superiority over such base generalizations. What Sow Fall essentially argues is that Africans have consciously chosen to fit into the molds that white Europeans have created for them, failing to realize their own potential to become more than what a racial stereotype would dictate.

The interaction between Anne and a Senegalese secretary at Asta's office illustrates the way in which Sow Fall critiques Africa for contributing to its own negative stereotypes. When Asta fails to meet Anne at the airport Anne becomes frantic and calls Asta's workplace in Senegal in order to obtain information about Asta's whereabouts but her progress is halted by a lazy and careless secretary. Anne politely asks, “Excusez-moi Madame. Pouvez-vous me mettre en contact avec quelqu'un qui peut me renseigner?” ‘Excuse me Ma'am. Could you put me in contact with someone who can give me some information?’ to which the secretary responds,

“Quelqu’un . . . qui peut vous ren . . . sei . . . ê . . . gner. Ça-a-a va être diffici-ile. Attendez . . . Hêêê Bira-ne, tu connais quelqu’un . . . Allôô, Mada-me, je suis en train de demande au planton . . . Bira-ne, tu connais . . .” ‘Someone . . . who can give . . . you . . . infor . . . mation. Thaaaaaaat will be diiiifficult. Wait . . . heyyyyyy, Birane, you know someone . . . Hello, Madam, I’m in the middle of asking the orderly . . . Birane, you know . . .’ (*Douceurs* 58). The secretary is not only unconcerned with doing her job but appears content to be doing so little. The most biting aspect of Sow Fall’s narration of this character is the secretary’s assertion that the task Anne asks of her “will be difficult” and by virtue of its difficulty, highly improbable. Sow Fall comments on this interchange as she writes:

Anne était déçue. Elle avait pensé qu’Asta savait bien de quoi elle parlait lorsqu’elle passait son temps à fustiger le laxisme et la paresse considérés par elle comme des maladies mortelles du continent. Asta se plaisait à dire qu’il n’y a pas de fatalité de la pauvreté là où sont des hommes et des femmes déterminés à lutter contre l’adversité sous toutes ses formes.

Anne was disappointed. She had thought that Asta knew what she was talking about while she passed time criticizing laxity and laziness, considered by her to be the fatal illnesses of the continent. Asta indulged herself in saying that poverty is not fatal where men and women are determined to fight against adversity in all its forms. (*Douceurs* 59)

These types of criticisms directed towards Africans characterize racism’s consequences—not racism itself—as negative outcomes created by the racial majority as well as the racial minority. Sow Fall is therefore clear in her assertion that both sides must take responsibility for racial issues in order to understand how racial tension might be assuaged.

Beyond recognizing faults in the racial understanding of both the former colonizers and the formerly colonized which have led to current racial tension, Sow Fall also argues for mutual responsibility when attempting to understand and repair the failing system. Even though author Odile Cazenave's analysis of *Douceurs du bercail* centers on the mutual responsibility of African leaders and their people to combine efforts in order to "cure" failed systems, she also recognizes the importance of mutual responsibility between various nations—such as France and Senegal in *Douceurs du bercail*—to unite their efforts symbiotically to repair transnational systems. Cazenave writes:

Sow Fall is more genuinely interested in the failure of systems in contemporary Africa, be they political, cultural, and/or social, and how these failures must be cured by a symbiosis of 'political responsibility' between African leaders and the people they lead. Therefore, Asta Diop, heroine of *Douceurs du bercail*, is not only a strong feminine archetype who stands by her responsibility to her country and her people, she is a critic of the myths that surround both Europe and Africa. These myths, she contends, have led people down paths of racism, intolerance, and injustice. ("Of Suffocated Hearts" 172)

This analysis of Sow Fall's global social vision applies especially well to racial systems or, in other words, the way societies interact with one another on a racial level. Cazenave certainly recognizes the importance of what she calls a "symbiotic" approach to healing failed systems in *Douceurs du bercail* and makes an important, though slightly tenuous, connection in her article between the myths of Europe and Africa and these failing systems. *Douceurs du bercail* puts forth the idea that a symbiotic, transnational approach is the only type of solution with a hope of

resolving racial conflict even more strongly than Mortimer suggests, using *Naatangué* as an example of how community solidarity can begin to heal the distress of racial discrimination.

Sow Fall sets up the relationship between the two main protagonists, Asta and Anne, as a sort of model for how the symbiotic relationship between different racial groups can work successfully at eliminating racism, discrimination, and intolerance. Again, Sow Fall remains balanced in her portrayal of African and French women, characterizing both women as sensitive to racial and social issues and willing to make changes in their respective cultures in order to find a solution to the failing system of cultural exchange between different nations rather than demonizing Asta's European counterpart as a figurative representative of the former colonizer's racism and intolerance. Rather, Sow Fall characterizes Anne as a foil to her European counterparts at the airport—as an example of the social direction in which the former colonizers must move in order to preserve their societies' dignity as well as that of the nations they have colonized in the past. Sow Fall reinforces what she sees as two incarnations of *les blancs* “whites:” one racist and reminiscent of colonial domination; the other respectful and open to other races which has moved past the binaries of colonialism. Sow Fall characterizes Anne as the latter category of *blanc* by separating her from racist and intolerant spaces in the novel.

The first instance in which Sow Fall contrasts Anne to the racist majority of Europeans occurs at the French airport where Asta remains until her debarment. When Asta fails to debark the flight she was scheduled to be a passenger on, Anne becomes both concerned and determined to ascertain Asta's location when she receives confirmation that Asta boarded the flight in Senegal. Anne's attempt to find the *dépôt* at the airport illustrates and reinforces the vast divide between Anne's mentality and that of the European space of the airport. After Anne claims that she is “*déterminée à tout faire pour arriver au but*” ‘determined to do anything to arrive at the

goal' (*Douceurs* 67), she begins a journey through the maze-like space of the airport until she passes a white sign with large red letters spelling out the message *interdit* "forbidden." She presses forward, determined to conquer the system of which Asta is a victim. Sow Fall writes :

A la fin, quand rien ne lui semblait plus possible . . . elle avait poussé la porte, les deux mains vigoureusement aplaties au dessous du judas. Un homme en uniforme avait surgi d'une cage invisible et, sans mot dire, lui avait montré l'écriteau d'un doigt ganté de blanc. Enervée mais pas du tout intimidée, Anne avait voulu lui demander si c'était là la police des frontières. Les yeux dans les yeux. Son audace s'était volatilisée sous le regard implacable du monsieur.

At the end, when nothing seemed possible anymore, she pushed the door, her two hands vigorously flattened underneath the peephole. A man in uniform suddenly appeared from an invisible cage and, without a word, pointed to the sign with a white-gloved finger. Unnerved but not at all intimidated, Anne asked him if this place was the border police. Eyes locked. Her audacity was evaporated under the harsh gaze of the man. (*Douceurs* 67)

Through this exchange Sow Fall accentuates the separation between the racist space of the airport and Anne's personal openness to and celebration of racial variety. Sow Fall emphasizes the *policier* as an agent of the colonial-esque airport space, describing him only in terms of his uniform and his white gloves. The uniform emphasizes his authority in the system and the gloves underscore both the dominance of his skin color and the supposed purity of light European skin—on the other side of the door Séga remarks, "Ils ont peur qu'on les contamine" "They fear that we will contaminate them" (*Douceurs* 48). Though Anne and the *policier* are both native to the same culture, not even a word passes between them. Sow Fall stresses the silence of this

interchange, using the lack of communication to posit her argument that racism not only continues to dehumanize victimized racial minorities but also causes splintering and detachment within the racial majority.

There exist multiple instances in *Douceurs du bercail* in which Sow Fall reinforces the disconnect between Europeans that continue thinking in colonial terms with regards to race and those that have achieved a dialogue of respect with other races, such as the scene in which Anne and her husband Didier attempt to meet with France's ambassador to Senegal.⁶ This disintegration of cultural understanding—even within one's own culture and race—is at the crux of how Sow Fall perceives contemporary racism and argues that its effects have rippled perhaps farther than the former colonizing countries or the formerly colonized nations imagined. Edwards recognizes Sow Fall's argument pertaining to widespread cultural deterioration from the racial minority's point of view as she writes, "Perhaps the most significant lesson that Asta learns while in the [*dépôt*] is that the authorities have the power to exclude the other, but also to exclude these others *from each other*, thus pitting the former colonized subjects against one another" (Edwards 56, emphasis my own.) Edwards' reading of the confrontation between the racial majority and minority supports my assertion that Sow Fall studies racism in *Douceurs du bercail* to illustrate the crushing dehumanization and breakdown of dignity that racism causes in the marginalized race; Sow Fall, through Anne's experiences, also argues that the same disintegration occurs in the dominant race.

Though Asta and Anne's relationship exhibits a solution to racism and intolerance on an individual level, Sow Fall highlights the lack of mutual willingness of various nations to engage in the same cultural sharing and understanding that these two women have accomplished on a smaller scale. Mildred Mortimer writes, "To explain [the ancient agrarian traditions at

Naatangué] to her French friend, Anne, Asta takes her to visit the cooperative during the course of her visit to Senegal. As the two women enjoy the beauty of the landscape, Asta relates the legend of Mame Coumba Bang, the river goddess. In this way, she initiates Anne to the oral legacy of matriarchal power . . . ” (“Domestic Matters” 79), thereby allowing the racial “other” into the African space of *Naatangué*. Asta likewise invites Anne to consider the African mentality and culture when they meet at the maternity ward in France.⁷ Likewise, Anne welcomes Asta into her white European sphere—Asta visits the country often and has even allowed her children to live there with Anne’s assistance. The two women forge a strong friendship which celebrates rather than disregards their racial disparity and which fosters respect for and an understanding of the other’s racial and cultural identity. While Sow Fall characterizes this personal relationship as exemplary of the way in which dialogue and respect can dispel racism and intolerance, she stresses that such cultural sensitivity exemplifies the exception rather than the rule.

Exploring Solutions to Racism at *Naatangué*

Although much of Asta’s experience at the airport is negative (she is insulted repeatedly and even subjected to an inappropriate and unnecessary strip search), it also serves as a learning space where Asta changes the direction of her life and career. After her initial confrontations at the airport (while imprisoned in the *dépôt* at the airport), Asta has an epiphany—a glimpse of the potential she and her fellow travelers have to reclaim their dignity lost in detainment center. In essence, this vision posits a world in which black Africans (and other racial minorities) will not be seen *only* racially. She says, “Nous ne serons plus des voyageurs sans bagages. Nos mains calleuses en rencontreront d’autres en de chaudes poignées de respect et de dignité partagée . . . ”

‘We will no longer be travelers without baggage. Our calloused hands will encounter others in

warm handshakes of respect and shared dignity . . . ’ (*Douceurs* 88), envisioning a space in which she and her friends’ identities will no longer be imposed upon them or dictated to them by outside forces. Asta attempts to realize this dream by abandoning her journalism career and former life and creating *Naatangué*, an alternative community where she and her friends make a living by farming and selling their produce under the label *Douceurs du bercail* “the sweetness of home.” In this place, their lost dignity is regained: “C’était aussi la plus belle expression, pour ceux d’entre eux qui avaient vécu les jours affreux du Dépôt et l’infamie du charter, de leur dignité retrouvée. Le rêve, enfin!” ‘It was also that most beautiful expression, for those among them who had gone through the awful days of the Depot and the infamy of the chartered deportee flight, of their recovered dignity. The dream, finally!’ (*Douceurs* 217), but Sow Fall does not go so far as to profess that *Naatangué* represents the solution to racial problems. If anything, the rural African plot of land is a starting point rather than a final solution to resolving these issues.

Asta and her friends regain their dignity in a space they create at *Naatangué*, but only one white person—Asta’s best friend and white Frenchwoman Anne—is allowed to experience this regenerative place. Thus in *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall *emphasizes* rather than rejects African literature’s preoccupation with “racial issues and the need to affirm the dignity and the values of black people” (Egonu 67), highlighting the fact that racism persists with a different face than it had in pre-colonial or colonial times, but that its place in modernity is perhaps even more threatening. Critic Jean-Marie Volet comments, “Skin color determines freedom of movement, and [Sow Fall’s] novel reminds us that while apartheid in South Africa was so stridently condemned a few years ago, today it is reemerging in European countries with devastating effect” (“Tradition and Modernity” 188). Sow Fall posits this argument of racism’s reemergence

through Asta Diop's detainment at the *dépôt* in a French airport where white airport officials restrict her freedom to move beyond the boundaries of the enclosed European space because of her skin color. Through the subsequent relationships Asta forms with fellow detainees and the creation of the racially problematic space of *Naatangué*, Aminata Sow Fall puts forth the assertion that racial issues are among *the* most significant concerns of modern existence because they have the potential to endanger human dignity. Sow Fall uses *Douceurs du bercail* to argue quite strongly that her readers must consider the implications of racial profiling, discrimination, immigration laws, etc., as barriers to human dignity that must be confronted, considered, and ultimately resolved.

While the airport and its officials provide ample illustrations of Sow Fall's idea of the racist majority of Europeans at the beginning of *Douceurs du bercail*, Asta's establishment of *Naatangué* at the end of the novel creates a puzzling commentary on racism in an African context. Although many post-colonial African novels focus on Africans as victims of racism generated from former white colonizers, Sow Fall presents racism as an equally widespread phenomenon among formerly colonized nations—specifically in the novel, in Senegal. The detainees at the *dépôt* in France connect with one another through their racial similarities which enables them to eventually realize their “*dignité retrouvée*” ‘regained dignity’ (*Douceurs* 217), but this racial solidarity also reinforces difference from “the other.” Asta's ex-husband, Diouldé, exhibits a similar attitude of fear and apprehension of the racial “other” to that of the security guard Anne meets on her journey towards the *dépôt*. As Asta begins spending more time with Anne towards the beginning of their friendship, Diouldé says, “J’ai remarqué en toi des changements depuis que tu fréquentes Anne. Ces gens-là n’ont pas les mêmes valeurs que

nous . . . Je veux que tu en finisses avec Anne!” ‘I’ve noticed changes in you since you started associating with Anne. Those people do not have the same values as we do . . . I want you to stop spending time with Anne!’ (*Douceurs*169). Sow Fall inserts rather brief treatments of racism in an African context throughout *Douceurs du bercail*, but presents *Naatangué* as, paradoxically, both the culmination of African racism as well as a space which nurtures and replenishes its inhabitants’ dignity and value as humans.

Naatangué, considered by some critics to be a utopia (Edwards 60), is a healing space where the former *expulsés* regain their dignity and sense of self, but is also problematic because it is also a black space. The fact that only black Africans inhabit a space in rural Senegal is, of course, not surprising—inevitably, not many white people would encounter this corner of the Senegalese countryside, but what is significant is Sow Fall’s choice of setting for the racially marginalized former deportees to rebuild their lives. In light of Sow Fall’s praise of Asta and Anne’s racial sensitivity, cultural understanding, and respective abilities to embrace racial differences and foreign cultures, her choice to cut off Asta and her friends from non-African races and influences (other than Anne) seems perplexing. Asta, Yakham, Séga, and the others find solace and self-worth at *Naatangué* by rejecting the European cultural systems which marginalized and dehumanized them, seeming to take solace in a space where European influences are still present, but subdued, and where conflict with European ways of thinking is indirect rather than confrontational.

Conclusion

Sow Fall’s strong condemnation of racial exclusivity expressed in the early chapters of the novel becomes blurred and her position less clear as the “solution” of *Naatangué* unfolds towards the end of *Douceurs du bercail*. Sow Fall argues for intercultural dialogue and respect at

some points, but *Naatangué* reverts to racial isolation as a solution to the difficulties Asta and the black immigrants face at the commencement of the narrative. As an explanation for this choice, Volet writes, “Salvation cannot come from foreign worlds that are in the grip of racist ideologies, Sow Fall suggests. It can only emerge from the people themselves, as they reinvent alterity and rekindle ancestral links to their land, their friends, their family, their past, and their future” (“Tradition and Modernity” 188). Inasmuch as “salvation” refers only to deliverance from racial oppression, Volet’s reading of *Naatangué* captures its purpose; if, however, Sow Fall’s intention is to explore avenues of racial understanding that will serve not merely to avoid racial conflict but to eliminate it, there must exist more meaning in *Naatangué*’s function. Valérie Orlando reads *Naatangué* as “a place *beyond race*” (“H(er)stories” 176, emphasis original), a “milieu where racial and gender differences are nullified and the pain of human suffering is lifted. Anne’s words mirror Sow Fall’s utopian message which promotes the concept of this *au-delà* as a paradise on Earth in Africa” (*ibid*). Orlando’s assertion that race and gender are themselves somehow nullified completely perhaps an overly ambitious claim, but later in her essay she unlocks a key element of *Naatangué*’s role and function. Orlando writes, “Symbolically, Sow Fall alludes to a global human connection that can be forged even among people who come from different backgrounds” (*ibid*). Orlando recognizes here that *Naatangué* functions not as the ultimate solution to racial problems, but simply as a starting point towards progress in overcoming racism for Africans that have been oppressed for so long by racial discrimination.

At one point in *Douceurs du bercail*, Asta proclaims, “Quand nous croirons que nous pouvons, les choses changeront” ‘When we believe that we can, things will change’ (*Douceurs* 160). Asta’s mentality—that Africa must address its internal conflicts before it can progress beyond the limitations placed upon it by former colonizers. *Naatangué* represents this liminal

space in which healing can take place—and in which dignity can be regained—to equip Africa with stability and confidence. With this foundation, free from *le parasitisme*, *le laxisme*, and racism, foreshadowed by the warm welcome Anne receives from *Naatangué*'s inhabitants and Yakham's declaration "Notre idée est de régénérer tout ce qui pousse ici et d'implanter d'autres cultures, d'autres espèces pour enrichir le site" 'Our idea is to regenerate everything that grows here and to introduce other cultures, other species to enrich the site' (*Douceurs* 205-206), *Naatangué* looks forward to a future where it can encounter other cultures and races on equal terms. *Naatangué*, then, is not a solution to racism but a vital step towards a solution. Sow Fall does not profess to have the ability to solve a difficulty that has plagued the African continent for centuries, but in *Douceurs du bercail* posits a viable starting point towards Africa's progress beyond the current state of racism which continues to inflict the continent and her former colonizers in innumerable and often unnoticed ways.

CHAPTER III

Women's Roles in *Douceurs du bercail*: A "Place Beyond"

Aminata Sow Fall occupies an important place in Senegalese literary history as the country's first female writer—a title that (almost implausibly) remained unclaimed until Sow Fall's 1976 publication of *Le Revenant*. *Douceurs du bercail*, published in 1998, continues the tradition of social criticism Sow Fall began in 1976 as she examines significant social issues such as immigration and racism. Additionally, *Douceurs du bercail* examines the social significance of women's issues more directly than her previous novels have. Sow Fall speaks through a female protagonist for the first time in *Douceurs du bercail*, thereby bringing issues of feminine identity to the forefront of her social thought in the novel. The combination of Sow Fall's place as female literary pioneer, her use of a female protagonist, and the treatment of women's issues such as equality, independence, motherhood, divorce, etc. in *Douceurs du bercail* have attracted feminist critics to the novel despite Sow Fall's reluctance to associate herself with the term "feminist." The text itself is wrought with paradoxes as Sow Fall addresses feminist concerns through Asta's journalism career, her divorce from an abusive and controlling husband, her establishment of the lucrative alternative community *Naatangué* in rural Senegal, etc. yet distances herself from feminist interpretations and criticism of her fiction. This conflict between content and analysis highlights both the importance of Sow Fall's complex treatment of feminist issues in *Douceurs du bercail* and her profound resolve to accentuate rather than minimize paradoxes throughout the novel.

In this chapter, I will first discuss Sow Fall's historical importance as the first female Senegalese writer and how this unique literary situation accentuates the tension between feminist critics and Sow Fall. That she is reluctant to identify herself with the feminist movement

frustrates critics because her assertion of the first female authorial voice in Senegalese literary history functions as a feminist statement by Western standards. Next, I will discuss how *Douceurs du bercail* approaches feminine issues in a way that some critics interpret as feminist but which Sow Fall sees as outside of the parameters of feminism. After establishing the ambiguousness of feminism in *Douceurs du bercail*, I will analyze how critics' feminist readings of Sow Fall's writing function as only partial analyses of her representations of women's roles in the novel. Sow Fall's own rejection of the Western label of "feminist" indicates that her treatment of feminine issues in *Douceurs du bercail* is more complex than feminist critical readings understand it to be. Feminist readings of Sow Fall's work are certainly significant, but I argue that they provide an incomplete understanding of the way Sow Fall characterizes femininity in *Douceurs du bercail*. In order to better understand Sow Fall's purposefully abstruse treatment of feminine issues in *Douceurs du bercail*, I suggest a new approach to its analysis which focuses on the significance of the possibility of multiple interpretations (feminist, non-feminist, even anti-feminist) rather than on proving whether or not the text exhibits the influence and ideals of Western feminism. Finally, I argue that the expansion and alteration of the tenets of Western feminism by African thinkers into the new framework of "Africana womanism" parallels Sow Fall's expansion of feminine representations beyond the limits of Western feminism's framework, thereby creating a feminine "place beyond" (Mortimer, "Domestic Matters" 76) the boundaries of Euro-centric constructs.

Womanhood: Aminata Sow Fall's Importance As First Female Senegalese Novelist

Sow Fall's significance as the first professional female writer in Senegal cannot be overstated; even apart from the quality and content of her fiction, her historical place in Senegal's literary history alone qualifies her fiction for significant attention from literary critics.

The fact that women were literarily silent in Senegal until Sow Fall's 1976 *Le Revenant* is certainly important not only literarily but socially as well. To Western audiences, this delay in women's West African writing seems to contribute to the idea that African was or is lagging behind Western standards in terms of women's issues, contributing to the ongoing conflict between tradition and modernity that informs so much of the feminine discourse in post-colonial countries. Susan Stringer explains the lack of recognition given to early African women writers in her book *The Senegalese Novel by Women* when she writes:

There were no women among the pre-Independence African novelists. The first women did not appear until well into the sixties and then only in English-speaking countries . . . In French-speaking Black Africa, women began to write about ten years later and remained largely unknown. Roseann Bell in an article published in 1978 entitled "The Absence of the African Woman Writer" says (incorrectly) that there are no francophone women writers. Sonia Lee makes the same claim in a collection entitled *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* which appeared the following year. In 1981, Lloyd Brown maintains in the introduction to his book *Women Writers in Black Africa* that all women writers of any significance write in English and limits his discussion to these women. (3-4)

These examples highlight, ironically, that Western criticism was lagging behind contemporary female African writers and stress that Western critics in the 1970s and 1980s were predisposed to see African thought as trailing that of the West. The perceived "absence" of female African writers only highlights the fact that African women writers like Sow Fall were ahead of the stereotypes placed upon them, both in terms of literary production and sophistication of ideas.

Sow Fall, then, entered a nonexistent field when she began her literary career—Western readers and critics were initially either unaware of her writing or chose to ignore or dismiss it. Peter Hawkins addresses her automatic importance as a writer historically when he writes, “[Sow Fall] was also the first Muslim woman writing in this particular context, and all this gives her work a historical importance whatever the merits of her writing” (Hawkins 419). She has therefore had to prove herself in the literary world in aspects apart from her historical significance: as a francophone African fiction writer, a female writer, and practicing Muslim female professional. While Sow Fall’s fiction has since proved itself worthy of study *apart* from its historical importance, her role as a pioneer in women’s writing in Senegal remains significant in any study of her distinguished literary career. Author Mildred Mortimer emphasizes the male literary space that Sow Fall (and her fellow Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ) encountered as they asserted their female voice through fiction in the 1970s. Mortimer writes, “More than 25 years have passed since the publication of Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*. At that time, few francophone women authors were in print . . . It is not surprising therefore that Arlette Chemain Degrange’s critical text, *Emancipation feminine et roman Africain*, published a year after Bâ . . . examines representation of women only in male-authored texts” (“Domestic Matters” 68). Sow Fall therefore created a new literary genre when she began to publish. The shift from male voices writing *about* women towards women’s assertion of an authorial voice is perhaps one of, if not the most, important advances in the field of French African literature. Mortimer erroneously cites Sow Fall’s first publication date as 1979—the same year as Bâ published *Une si longue lettre*—and while Bâ’s contribution to African women’s writing is incredibly important, it is important to note that Sow Fall was the first Senegalese woman to assert her authorial voice, publishing nearly three years prior to Bâ.

It is significant to note in this study of Sow Fall's historical importance as a writer that she spoke through male protagonists in her first five novels; *Douceurs du bercail* is her first novel to use a feminine narrative voice and which revolves around a female protagonist. Athleen Ellington's 1992 article "Aminata Sow Fall's 'Demon' Women: An Anti-Feminist Social Vision" sees Sow Fall's use of a male narrative voice as representative of an anti-feminine agenda, writing, "This feminine voice is not heard in the novels of Aminata Sow Fall. Her main protagonists are male, the world she projects is a male world, and the narrator's voice is a masculine one" (137). While *Douceurs du bercail* contradicts Ellington's claims, it is nevertheless significant that Sow Fall used male narrative voices in her fiction for twenty-two years beginning with her 1976 publication of *Le Revenant*. Rather than exemplifying an anti-feminist social vision, however, Sow Fall's use of male narrative voices and protagonists instead reflects a realistic perception of her literary influence. Since Sow Fall's writing was still "absent" according to critics in the 1980s, it is likely that she used male narrators and protagonists in order to assert a strong literary voice in a field where women writers were often overlooked. Having established her literary presence in French African literature, Sow Fall was able to focus on, rather than treat secondarily, a distinctly feminine voice and opinion in *Douceurs du bercail*.

As time has passed, the quality of Sow Fall's fiction has surpassed the critical attention she initially received because of her historical role as a female author, now being recognized as "one of the most successful Francophone women writers of West Africa" and "[having] won a host of literary prizes" (Edwards 52). Sow Fall's literary excellence has become a symbol of francophone African women's writing, elevating a genre that, by some standards, is still in its infancy, to one of great significance in its examination some of the most significant questions of modern existence. One of the most fascinating yet puzzling issues that Sow Fall treats in

Douceurs du bercail is the nature of the modern African woman, examining some of the most significant issues of post-colonialism such as identity and the embracing of Western ideas in a specifically female context. Though Sow Fall has been reluctant to embrace the feminist lens through which her critics and audience often read her fiction, both groups insist upon reading her treatment of women as a feminist endeavor. Sow Fall “has often rejected being labeled as a feminist writer, insisting that she wrote, first and foremost, as a Senegalese citizen; the fact that she is a woman was only to be taken as a component” (Cazenave, “Gender, Age, Reeducation” 58), yet her gender continues to shape her critical reception in spite of her disinclination to write categorically as a woman or to women.

Conflict in *Douceurs du bercail*: Feminist or Feminine?

Sow Fall’s continued statements distancing herself from the feminist movement have led critics to struggle to resolve this stance with her seemingly feminist themes and characters. In a 1988 interview Sow Fall said:

I can’t really say that I sympathize or that I reject [the feminist movement]. All I want to say is that the feminist movement as it operates in Western countries, in my opinion, doesn’t correspond to the preoccupations we have here. We don’t have the same ways of expressing ourselves, of demanding our rights . . . As regards Senegal, the country I know best, I don’t think women need to adopt the tactics of feminist militancy. (Hawkins 425)

Sow Fall makes it apparent here that her understanding and portrayal of women in her fiction operates on a level outside of the feminist one; she intends, then, to broaden her range of examination and influence beyond the boundaries created by categorization. In her article “Domestic matters: representations of home,” Mildred Mortimer eloquently describes Sow Fall’s

desire to broaden the definition of modern womanhood when she writes, “Through her portrayal of Asta, the Senegalese novelist subverts the paradigm of the African woman defined in terms of her domestic role; she proposes instead a new female subjectivity located in a place beyond the double restriction of African patriarchy and European colonialism” (76). Mortimer’s description of the way in which Sow Fall approaches women’s issues is compelling since it suggests an extra-feminist aesthetic which seeks to address certain concerns that Western feminism has not, such as the complex questions of identity created by the European colonialism from which it stems. Operating under the assumption that Sow Fall does indeed seek a “new female subjectivity” in *Douceurs du bercail*, it becomes clear that the term “feminism” and its many connotations presents a problem to the author; the boundaries of the distinctly Western feminist model are, in many ways, unsuited for exploring questions of womanhood in a non-European context.

Sow Fall’s characterization of Asta’s relationship and subsequent divorce from her husband Diouldé cements the fact that, if not “feminist,” issues of feminine assertion and identity are paramount in *Douceurs du bercail*. Asta’s use of language in the exchange with Diouldé in which she announces her plans for divorce intimates an assertive, independent (in short, a feminist) mentality. Before Asta reveals that she will submit a request for divorce the following Monday and complete the physical dissolution of her union to Diouldé, the emphasis placed on the first-person pronoun *je* in the latter half of the paragraph reveals that she has already separated herself mentally from his dominant patriarchal grasp. Asta begins with accusations against Diouldé, “Et dis-moi si tu as des leçons à donner sur ce chapitre. Tu as trahi tous les beaux serments que tu m’avais faits et auxquels j’ai cru comme une idiote! Serments d’amour, de fidélité . . . et tu m’as menti sur tous les plans” ‘Aren’t you the one to go preaching about it. You

have broken all the beautiful promises you made to me and in which I believed like an idiot! Promises of love, of fidelity . . . and you lied to me on every level' (*Douceurs* 168) thus emphasizing *his* responsibility in the breakdown of their marriage. She emphasizes the fact that it was he who lied to her, yet this approach only reinforces her function as a victim of patriarchal authority. The next sentence, beginning with "J'ai été stupide au point de laisser tomber mes études . . ." I was stupid to the point of dropping out of my studies . . . (*ibid*) acts as a turning point in which Asta takes responsibility for her naïveté and asserts her feminine independence. Rather than continuing the phrasing used earlier, "tu m'as menti" 'you lied to me' she declares, "Je suis devenue une esclave" 'I have become a slave' (*ibid*). The distinction between the two narrative strategies is crucial for a feminist interpretation of the text: here, Diouldé has not made her a slave, *she* has become a slave. The shift in pronoun emphasis projects a powerful feminine voice which dictates the course of future events rather than being ruled by it. Soon after commenting that she had let herself "become a slave" in her marriage, she declares, "Je n'en peux plus!" 'I can't do it anymore!' (*ibid*), emphasizing her own inability to continue on in the same way of life rather than their ability as a couple. Sow Fall's narration of this critical event in Asta's life with a powerful, influential, and independent feminine voice certainly validates critics such as Holl, who find *Douceurs du bercail* to be "unquestionably feminist" (45).

Because critics and readers identify feminist themes in the fiction of an author who rejects feminism as a component of her thought, a "feminist paradox" exists in *Douceurs du bercail* and the body of criticism which surrounds it. Sow Fall exhibits an almost hyper-awareness of this paradox when she discusses feminine themes in her 2007 interview with Ada Azodo. Sow Fall addresses feminist critics' questions surrounding the principal female character in her first novel, *Le Revenant*, Yama when she says, "Obviously, feminists will say to me, as

always, you have again sacrificed the woman. No, I did not mean to sacrifice the woman. Paradoxically, Yama is a character that I admire very much, for everything is not always the black/white binary . . . One cannot say that all women are good and that all men are bad. Everyone has his or her good or bad qualities” (Azodo 279). Sow Fall, then, refuses to consider Yama in terms of strict binaries and argues that she (and all of her characters, whether they be male or female) *cannot* be understood in such rigidly outlined terms. Sow Fall uses the black/white binary as a parallel to the male/female binary which, she indicates, is merely one dimension of a fictional character rather than its sole defining characteristic. It appears as though Sow Fall has always attempted to ascribe to this anti-categorical way of thinking which rejects the limitation of characters’ abilities based on factors such as gender, age, economic status, etc: in a 1988 interview with Peter Hawkins, Sow Fall said, “I am not committed in the sense that I am a member of a political party, nor do I subscribe to a particular ideology” (423) and later, “I’ve always kept my distance from a certain kind of feminism” (426). Thus Sow Fall exhibits an acute awareness of the feminist view of her fiction but rejects it—or, at least “a certain kind” of it—because a feminist reading of her work will inherently limit the means by which it is understood and its characters’ scope of influence. Sow Fall’s comments suggests that she does not necessarily reject all that feminism represents—in fact, that she agrees with some of its precepts—but rather its white, European, upper-class origins and concerns.

Chaotic Receptions of Sow Fall’s “Feminine”

As mentioned earlier, Sow Fall’s use of Asta Diop as the central female protagonist in *Douceurs du bercail*, her defiant act of leaving an abusive husband, her assertion into the public sphere through her journalism career, and other factors inevitably draw attention from feminist critics. Despite Sow Fall’s disavowal of Western feminism, scholars have formulated various

analyses of her writing which categorize her writing as distinctly feminist. In her article “Socio-Cultural Specificity and Feminist Readings of the Works of Three Francophone Writers,” Joanne Holl asks an important question regarding to the conflict surrounding Mariama Bâ’s disputed feminism which is pertinent to the question of feminism for Sow Fall as well. Holl writes, “This paradox opens questions concerning readings of texts; can a work be feminist even if the author herself states the contrary?” (39). The answer is, inevitably, yes. Sow Fall herself, though not speaking about feminist readings of her work but rather the “Comédie Humaine” framework that some critics postulate connects all of her novels, recognizes the independent role of the reader. When asked if she is “in the process of constructing your own ‘Comédie Humaine?’” she replies, “It is your place as critics to judge” (Azodo 299). Critics have, and rightly so, read Sow Fall’s work in vastly different ways, ranging from Marxist to anti-feminist critiques.¹ Médoune Guèye recognizes Sow Fall’s desire to allow her readers to interpret her work interview when he writes, “L’intention de A. Sow Fall n’est pas de prendre des positions déclarées sur tel ou tel problème social, mais de provoquer des débats sur tous les problèmes importants du jour . . . ” ‘Sow Fall’s intention is not to take affirmed positions on this or that social problem, but to provoke debate on all the important problems of her day . . . ’ (316). Sow Fall *has* provoked much debate about important contemporary challenges, and in no other area than her examination of feminine issues has the debate sparked more divergent opinions and vastly dissimilar interpretations.

Feminist critics have explored elements of Asta’s story in *Douceurs du bercail* as proof of Sow Fall’s feminist leanings despite her denial of it, addressing the issue of Sow Fall’s aversion towards the term feminist simply by qualifying it. Odile Cazenave writes, “Aminata Sow Fall is ‘*stricto sensu*’ a feminist, fighting for women’s ultimate recognition” (“Gender, Age” 59), acknowledging in her article that Sow Fall has rejected the feminist label but removing

some of the connotations that the term has, at least to a Western English-speaking audience, by referring to it only in the strictest—or simplest—sense. Médoune Guèye likewise recognizes: “La majorité des études sur A. Sow Fall soulignent une certaine indifférence de l’auteur à la cause féministe” ‘The majority of studies on A. Sow Fall emphasize a certain indifference on the part of the author towards the feminist cause’ and comes to the conclusion, “En vérité, A. Sow Fall dépeint dans ses romans des personnages qui incarnent un féminisme progressiste. Son œuvre s’intéresse aux mêmes problèmes qui ont valu à Mariama Bâ l’épithète de ‘féministe’” ‘In truth, A. Sow Fall depicts in her novels characters who embody a progressive feminism. Her work is interested in the same problems which brought Mariama Bâ the epithet of “feminist”’ (313). Guèye again acknowledges Sow Fall’s indifference to the feminist cause (although her statements regarding the issue are perhaps stronger than indifference), but perseveres in characterizing her as a “progressive” feminist, citing the *personages* “characters” she creates in her novels as proof. He, like Cazenave, recognizes that Sow Fall’s concept of the feminine does not align perfectly with a typical Western definition of feminism, but both critics nevertheless conclude that “feminist” still functions as a valid term to describe Sow Fall’s treatment of women in her fiction.

These critics, and others who view the feminist paradox in Sow Fall’s fiction similarly, recognize the inadequacy of the use of the term feminism as defined by Western standards in a non-Western context by qualifying the term, which hints at the possibility of a “certain kind of feminism” (Hawkins 426) that Sow Fall may espouse while nevertheless opposing *Western* feminism. Critic Joanne Holl encapsulates this type of thinking and, although she does not mention Sow Fall specifically, her summation of the feminist paradox in other African novelists fits Sow Fall’s situation well. She writes:

Despite the fact that Bâ, Condé, and Gorodé do not publicly consider themselves to be feminist, I would suggest that this attitude is above all due to the fact that they have no desire to be ‘recuperated’ or contained by Western feminism. Their denunciation of the contemporary subordination of women, the use of women as objects, and call for social change are unquestionably feminist. (45)

This conclusion is valid in discussing Sow Fall as well, for her *Douceurs du bercail* undeniably addresses aspects of modern female existence that would be considered by many Western readers to be feminist. In what some feminists may argue to be the most quintessential feminist act in the book, Asta leaves an abusive, controlling husband, returns to school to earn a degree in journalism, and eventually makes a career for herself as the proprietor of *Naatangué*. Asta tells her husband Diouldé, “Je suis devenue une esclave qui vit à ta charge, qui doit accepter tous tes caprices et maintenant, tes violences! Je n’en peux plus!” ‘I have become a slave dependent upon you, who must accept all of your whims and now, your violence! I can’t do it anymore!’ (*Douceurs* 168) and later, “Nous ne pouvons plus vivre comme ça. Ce n’est pas digne, ni pour nous, ni pour les enfants . . . Demain lundi, je déposerai une requête de divorce” ‘We can live this way no longer. There is no dignity, neither for us, nor for the children . . . On Monday, I will submit a request for divorce’ (*Douceurs* 170). This defiant act against a phallogentric social structure constructed around Asta by her husband had become suffocating; consequently, Asta asserted her independence by abandoning that patriarchal context and creating a new feminine space where female influence acts as the catalyst for narrative action in the novel. Using this example alone, it is clear that critics find in *Douceurs du bercail* ample evidence proving that themes and events in the book are “unquestionably feminist” (Holl 45).

One final example of feminist readings of *Douceurs du bercail* is representative of the body of criticism surrounding Sow Fall's sixth novel. Author Mildred Mortimer writes about Asta's decision to divorce and the importance of Asta's subsequent foray into the public sphere in *Douceurs du bercail* as evidentiary of its feminist inclination. She writes, "Asta . . . leaves her offending husband and his home. Thus, the physical and psychological dissolution of a house shared with a flawed husband results in [Asta's] decision to leave the 'house of patriarchy', a choice that grants [her] the freedom to create a new home elsewhere" ("Domestic Matters" 78). Asta's choice to create her own freedom, then, represents an undeniably defiant and rebellious attitude towards the patriarchal system of Diouldé's home. Mortimer also writes, "Sow Fall brings her female protagonist into the public arena, foregrounding the importance of women's presence in public space" ("Domestic Matters" 69), highlighting Sow Fall's departure from a literary tradition in which women have remained associated with domestic spaces as a feminist assertion.² Mortimer's critique is certainly valid; Sow Fall explores new feminine spheres of influence through Asta's situation in public roles and spaces. Such an endeavor possesses feminist attributes, and Mortimer's reading of Sow Fall's characterization of Asta is compelling; however, searching only for these hints at feminism in *Douceurs du bercail* yields an incomplete reading of the deeper issues it endeavors to address.

Questions Beyond Feminism's Presence in *Douceurs du bercail*

These examples of feminist critiques of Sow Fall's writing are certainly significant in understanding her concept of women's roles and societal functions, but on a global level which these critics seem to be unaware of. As each author endeavors to prove that Sow Fall's fiction indeed reflects a feminist philosophy and to qualify "feminist" to fit un-feminist aberrations in her texts (calling it "*stricto sensu* feminism (Cazenave, "Gender, Age" 59),

“progressive feminism” (Guèye 313), etc.) the body of criticism surrounding her work demonstrates a tendency to interpret her treatment of feminine issues selectively rather than attempting to gain a better understanding of its purposefully problematic complexity. Feminist critiques of the novel are useful in analyzing Sow Fall’s method of characterizing the feminine in her writing to a certain degree, yet to what end does the proving of Sow Fall’s feminism aspire? Indeed, once feminism has been “proven” to exist in a Sow Fall text, the critic’s task, it seems, has been completed. This accomplishment, which suggests a “conquering” of Sow Fall’s text, inhibits further questioning of the author’s philosophy about women’s issues thus masking deeper readings of texts based on the supposition that questions surrounding Sow Fall’s concept of the feminine have already been answered. In other words, *proving* that Sow Fall writes feminist fiction misses the point Sow Fall endeavors to put forward in *Douceurs du bercail*: that the nature of feminism itself must be questioned—its origins, validity, implications, influence, and cultural significance—in an African context in order to explore both its complexities and limitations as a hermeneutical approach.

Sow Fall’s curious and often paradoxical treatment of women in *Douceurs du bercail* therefore cannot be understood solely in terms of whether or not it exhibits Western feminist traits. A deeper understanding of Sow Fall’s perception of women as revealed in *Douceurs du bercail* must, therefore, examine the implications of Sow Fall’s subtle, complex, and often perplexing commentary on women’s place in society itself. In essence, the fact that Sow Fall’s treatment of women can be interpreted in manifold ways is a significant indication that a standard feminist reading of the text is insufficient for understanding its nuanced treatment of women’s issues. The paradoxical narrative elements treating feminine concerns in *Douceurs du bercail*—for example, the fact that “Asta lui avait juré qu’elle ne se marierait plus jamais,” ‘Asta

swore to her that she would never marry again' (*Douceurs* 151) declaring, "Jamais au grand jamais! Une liason quelconque avec un homme, pas question . . ." 'Never ever! A relationship with a man, out of the question . . .' (*Douceurs* 151) but, towards the end of the novel, Asta completes her journey toward recovered dignity only after she marries again.³ Through Asta's own uncertainty about marriage itself, Sow Fall argues that confusion, indecision, and ambiguity characterize the modern African female experience. Asta's hesitations about marriage, independence, her career, and the concept of home foreground the fact that Sow Fall's central focus on women's issues in *Douceurs du bercail* is not whether or not they can be read through a feminist lens (which they certainly can) but questioning the efficacy and applicability of Western feminism to a non-Western text. In other words, Sow Fall intends to question and explore the implications of feminism itself rather than to ascribe to or dismiss it in *Douceurs du bercail*.

Reader-Response Theory and Understanding Interpretive Conflict in *Douceurs du bercail*

To move beyond the limitations of critiques whose goal is to decipher or prove the existence of feminist influences in Sow Fall's writing, her readers need a new perspective and new critical goals for understanding her view of womanhood. Stanley Fish's essay "Interpreting the *Variorum*" addresses the significance of textual conflict and its function as an indicator of the author's ideological breadth, a theoretical approach to literary interpretation that helps explain the conflicting and variegated readings of feminist issues in Sow Fall's writing. Using Fish's reader-response lens, the complications of Sow Fall's treatment of feminine issues in *Douceurs du bercail* become the essence of understanding her concept of the role and function of the modern woman rather than a hindrance to it. Fish writes about conflicting criticism surrounding the works of John Milton, but his observations on that text bear undeniable similarity to the divergent criticism surrounding Sow Fall's disputable feminism. Fish notes that each critics'

opposing interpretations of Milton in the *Variorum Commentary* “are lined up on either side of an interpretive crux” and that “every position taken is supported by wholly convincing evidence” (2072). These remarks parallel the conflict regarding Sow Fall’s use of feminist themes in her novels, where three principal schools of thought assert themselves.

The first critical perspective regarding feminism in Sow Fall’s work is the author’s own, a frank rejection of Western feminism. Sow Fall consistently denies feminism as a source of influence on her female characters and frankly separates herself from the movement. In an interview about her first novel *Le Revenant*, for example, she says, “Obviously, feminists will say to me, as always, you have again sacrificed the woman. No, I did not mean to sacrifice the woman” (Azodo 279). Sow Fall clearly separates herself from “the feminists” in the interview, emphasizing that her understanding of women’s issues need not be grouped with that of the feminist strain. The second critical approach is characterized by the body of critics who insist that Sow Fall is in fact a feminist, reading her treatment of issues such as divorce, professional women, women in the public sphere, and women narrators as proof of Sow Fall’s supposed feminist inclination. Many of these critics acknowledge Sow Fall’s rejection of Western feminism but claim that her literary treatment of feminine issues nonetheless exhibits its influence. The third approach is the least substantial, shaped by the idea that Sow Fall is neither a feminist nor apathetic towards feminism, but an aggressive anti-feminist. Critic Athleen Ellington’s article “Aminata Sow Fall’s ‘Demon’ women: An Anti-Feminist Social Vision” reads Sow Fall’s fiction as reflective of a “social vision that is limiting for the modern African woman and would restrict her to the traditional, submissive role of the African Muslim woman in West African society” (132), a “nostalgic gaze focuse[d] on a rural past that she sees as both

desirable and recoverable” (142), and meant to “indict the women who have turned their back on tradition in their attempt to achieve social, political or professional recognition” (139).⁴

These three viewpoints revolve around Sow Fall’s fiction, all supported by Sow Fall’s texts, but contradictory to one another. This battle of opinions, when approached with an emphasis on proving whether or not Sow Fall is a feminist or that her novels themselves reflect feminist ideologies, therefore becomes circular since no conclusion can completely disprove others. In other words, the critical task of proving the absolute existence or absence of Western feminist influences in *Douceurs du bercail* is not possible; this impossibility itself suggests that Fish’s observations about Milton apply to Sow Fall as well—that the impracticability of solving extant critical challenges suggests a need for new questions to be asked.

Fish’s essay confronts the existence of differing and equally convincing viewpoints by recognizing that a clash of interpretations indicates that critical approaches to an ambiguous issue within a text must be reshaped, not that the task of answering what a text “means” must simply be proven more definitively. He writes:

What I would like to argue is that [disagreements] are not *meant* to be solved but to be experienced (they signify), and that consequently any procedure that attempts to determine which of a number of readings is correct will necessarily fail. What this means is that the commentators and editors have been asking the wrong questions and that a new set of questions based on new assumptions must be formulated. (2072)

Reading women’s issues in *Douceurs du bercail* through Fish’s theoretical lens opens up avenues of understanding the text which current scholarship has not yet explored. Sow Fall’s critics, it seems, focus so intently on solving the mystery that is her novelistic treatment of

women that they have failed to see its ambiguity as a meaningful and fruitful approach to further understanding her authorial intent. Fish pinpoints the limitations that exist when analyzing texts through a narrow lens when he writes, “Evidence brought to bear in the course of formalist analyses—that is, analyses generated by the assumption that meaning is embedded in the artifact—will always point in as many directions as there are interpreters; that is, not only will it prove something, it will prove anything” (2073). This observation parallels the question of feminism in Sow Fall’s writing: the text of *Douceurs du bercail* itself can support each interpretation set forth regarding its treatment of feministic themes and issues.

The first example of the text’s ability to “prove” multiple interpretations comes, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, from author Odile Cazenave who writes that Sow Fall “is ‘*stricto sensu*’ a feminist, fighting for women’s ultimate recognition” (“Gender, Age” 59), a claim easily supported in the text by Asta’s quest for re-affirmation of her personal worth after its loss in the patriarchal space of the airport *dépôt*. A narrative element that the feminist critics of *Douceurs du bercail* I have encountered in my research ignore is the marriage of Asta and Babou in the last chapter, the apparently non-feminist counterpart to Asta’s earlier assertion that she will never marry again (*Douceurs* 151).⁵ This more traditional aspect of the novel, that Asta must marry again before her journey towards human dignity is complete, constitutes a significant event in *Douceurs du bercail* yet feminist critics continually overlook its importance. This short example alone proves that Fish’s observation is relevant in understanding Sow Fall’s writing since her texts can “prove anything” (Fish 2073) about feminism that the reader wishes to prove. Having established that extant scholarly works claiming either to prove or disprove Sow Fall’s feminist leaning are necessarily inconclusive, Fish’s theory establishes the new line of questioning Sow Fall’s readers require regarding women’s issues in *Douceurs du bercail*. By

examining the ambiguity of Sow Fall's use of feminine themes and narrative events as indication of her attempt to question feminism itself, this new reader-response interpretation of Sow Fall's text can examine the validity of the application of Western theory to African texts, the implications of twentieth-century feminism in the twenty-first century, African concepts of womanhood, and others—inquiries which the more simplistic task of proving Sow Fall's feminism cannot generate.

Thus it is a “new set of questions” (Fish 2072) regarding women's issues in *Douceurs du bercail* that can uncover the more profound nuances of Sow Fall's complex representation of feminine concerns in the text. Fish writes, “what if the controversy is *itself* regarded as evidence, not of an ambiguity that must be removed but of an ambiguity that readers have always experienced?” (2073, emphasis original). This shift in perception is vital in understanding Sow Fall's ambiguity regarding feminism and feminist rhetoric as an invitation to readers to consider the implications of feminism itself rather than as an authorial polysemy requiring resolution. In “Interpreting the *Variorum*” Fish illustrates the transference from superficial critical questions to more substantial ones with an example from a disputed line in one of Milton's poems. Fish writes, “What, in other words, if for the question ‘what does “spare” mean?’ we substitute the question ‘what does the fact that the meaning of “spare” has always been an issue mean?’” (2073). To borrow from Fish, a similar shift in focus in the study of feminism in *Douceurs du bercail* can offer new and broader insights into its function in the text. What if for the question “is Sow Fall a feminist?” we substitute the question “what does the fact that the existence of feminist influences in *Douceurs du bercail* is disputed, complex, and ambiguous mean?” This second question offers a new perspective on the issue of feminism in Sow Fall's text, focusing on the significance of its complexity rather than on the unsolvability of its complicated presence.

Viewed in this way, Sow Fall's paradoxical treatment of women in *Douceurs du bercail* becomes a commentary on the concept of feminism itself, the applicability of Western theoretical lenses in non-Western contexts, and the paradoxes African women face as they navigate the influences of tradition and modernity. Jean-Marie Volet describes this tension when he writes, "But modernity and tradition are two sides of the same coin and the abandonment of one can only lead to the death of the other" ("Francophone Women Writing" 194). Sow Fall emphasizes this paradox through Asta's incorporation of both traditional and modern influences at *Naatangué*—their co-existence creates contradiction but Asta recognizes the vitality of the presence of both.

Beyond Feminism

The fact that Sow Fall creates a female protagonist, uses a female narrative voice, characterizes Asta as an independent, professional, and influential woman yet also champions the importance of motherhood, marriage, and the concept of home in *Douceurs du bercail* implies that at least one of her authorial strategies is to emphasize the complications of reading a text as "feminist" and the limitations imposed upon it by this categorization. Sow Fall therefore invites her readers to consider feminist theory itself, its implications, and its applicability in an African context. That she treats feminist issues in *Douceurs du bercail* is undeniable, yet her apathy towards that terminology reflects a desire to question its limitations and boundaries as a theoretical framework. In essence, through her complex and often paradoxical approach to women's issues in *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall posits the notion that Western twentieth-century feminism is inadequate for expressing view of African women whose history, functions, and roles originate from a variant context. While author Kenneth W. Harrow, in his book dedicated to feminist readings of African texts entitled *Less Than One and Double*, argues that

dismissing feminist readings of African texts based on the assumption that opponents to the strategy seek to decide “who has the innate right or correct upbringing that enables that person to understand or speak about African texts” (xi) is “ill-founded” (*ibid*), Sow Fall contends that feminist readings of non-Western texts yield incomplete understanding of (in her case) African modes of thought.

Thus, through her study of women in *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall explores the boundaries of feminism, adopting certain of its tenets such as women’s public importance, independence, equality, and influence, yet refusing to be limited by its framework. In addition to these more progressive topics, Sow Fall also argues for traditionality through Asta’s marriage to Babou and her success in a domestic, agrarian role rather than a public one. Sow Fall mirrors her vision of womanhood in the text of *Douceurs du bercail* when Yakham says of *Naatangué*, “Notre idée est de régénérer tout ce qui pousse ici et d’implanter d’autres cultures, d’autres espèces pour enrichir le site” ‘Our idea is to regenerate everything that grows here and to introduce other cultures, other species to enrich the site’ (*Douceurs* 205-206), emphasizing the need to broaden feminine theoretical frameworks and incorporate aspects of understanding from multiple disciplines. Sow Fall roots her concept of modern womanhood in an African context yet includes aspects of Western feminism which she finds useful, such as the assertion of a uniquely feminine narrative voice, her focus on the strong bond of motherhood which unites Asta and Anne despite their racial and social differences, and Asta’s strong feminine leadership role at *Naatangué*.

Because Sow Fall allows questions about feminism in *Douceurs du bercail* to circulate, remaining ambiguous about its presence or influence, a reader-response analysis of the text is appropriate—even perhaps the type of reading Sow Fall would desire for her audience. Fish

asserts that “this transferring of responsibility from the text to its readers” (2074) expands the text itself, giving it manifold dimensions of interpretation and meaning dependent upon its reader. *Douceurs du bercail* lends itself well to a reader-response interpretation of its treatment of feminist questions—Sow Fall encourages her readers to question how women function in the text, the use of a female narrator, and the usefulness of feminist theory with respect to the text. The question of whether or not Sow Fall is a feminist becomes less important as the implications of her unique and often contradictory treatment of women and women’s issues expose her subtle meta-commentary on expressions of the feminine in literature. Therefore, considering *Douceurs du bercail* as a critique of feminist readings and feminine representations in literature allows for broader interpretations of women’s roles and importance in an African context.

Although critic Mary Kolawole’s 1997 book *Womanism and the African Consciousness* predates Sow Fall’s 1998 *Douceurs du bercail* and therefore cannot take the text into account specifically, her observations about Sow Fall’s representation of feminine issues in the novel are useful, suggesting the broader term “womanist” to describe African women writers’ concepts of the feminine. She writes, “One can see the rejection of the tag ‘feminism’ by women writers like Aidoo, Emecheta, and Aminata Sow Fall as a process of re-definition and a desire for a new mode of self-retrieval” (20). Sow Fall reflects this desire for re-definition and the recovery of personal dignity in *Douceurs du bercail* through her narration of the intertwining female experiences of Asta and Anne. Sow Fall comments on the inadequacy of Western feminism as Asta trades a more feminist lifestyle portrayed at the beginning of the novel (her career in journalism, single motherhood, financial independence) for a hybridized—and perhaps womanist—existence at *Naatangué*. While Asta retains a leadership role as the director of the alternative community, she also marries Babou, leads a more private rather than public existence,

and shares financial liability with others. A feminist reading of the text might suggest that Asta sacrifices her independence or equality at the end of the novel by marrying Babou, yet she rejoices in the “reconciliation avec soi” ‘reconciliation with oneself’ (*Douceurs* 217) achieved through a new existence which is characterized neither by Western feminism nor a feminine vision that would “restrict her to the traditional, submissive role of the African Muslim woman in West African society” (Ellington 132). Rather than adhering to predetermined criteria for writing a feminist (or distinctly non-feminist text), Sow Fall questions the boundaries of such categorization and encourages readers to explore women’s issues independently of the narrative—the text of *Douceurs du bercail* is therefore prompts further consideration about feminism, womanism, etc. more than it offers solid conclusions.

The language that Sow Fall uses in chapter two of *Douceurs du bercail* mirrors her narrative structure regarding women’s roles as Asta and Anne slowly re-invent their womanhood throughout the novel with Asta renouncing her journalism career in order to oversee *Naatangué* and Anne learning about and incorporating African ideologies into her Western lifestyle. Anne recalls her parents’ advice when they told her long ago, “Faut voir les gens et leur diversité pour comprendre le monde . . .” ‘You must see people and their diversity in order to understand the world . . .’ (*Douceurs* 31). The novel itself experiments with this advice, following both Asta and Anne through a series of encounters with European airport officials, government workers, and expectant mothers as well as African undocumented immigrants, office secretaries, rural Senegalese “locals” and countless others. It is the encounters with diverse peoples and spaces that shape the creation of Asta’s transcultural and transnational womanhood at *Naatangué*. It seems fitting, then, that Asta combines elements from two religious traditions (the legend of

Mame Coumba Bang and pieces of the Garden of Eden narrative concerning Eve) to shape her hybridized view of womanhood.

Author Clenora Hudson-Weems expounds upon the idea of stretching women's issues in an African context beyond the boundaries of Western feminism—an idea that Asta embraces in *Douceurs du bercail*. Hudson-Weems prefers to use the term “Africana womanism” to describe a new theoretical framework emerging among Africana women writers. Hudson-Weems writes, “Most Africana women in general do not identify with the concept [of feminism] in its entirety and thus cannot see themselves as feminists,” recognizing “the absence of a suitable framework for their individual needs as Africana women” (153). Africana womanism, she argues, “is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women” (155-158). While *Sow Fall* seeks to resist the inherent categorization created by labeling her fiction as womanist, it is the widening of scope and the attention to specifically African concerns that Africana womanist scholars seek which is pertinent to *Douceurs du bercail*. Though *Sow Fall* might choose to resist the term “womanist” as much as she resists the term “feminist,” it is the expansion beyond feminism towards new ideological frameworks that mirrors Asta's journey towards “place beyond” (Mortimer, “Domestic Matters” 76) feminist boundaries at *Naatangué*. Asta refuses to be limited by one set of ideological rules, thus eschewing unqualified Western feminism, “which has been viewed by many as historically alienating women of color along lines of race and class” (Orlando, “The Afrocentric Paradigm” 214) and replacing it with a feminine ideology informed by a myriad of influences.

Conclusion

While the womanist philosophy represents a significant step forward for African woman writers and critics who acknowledge that the Western model of feminism is not universal and cannot address with specificity African women's ideas, it is nonetheless a limiting term which sets up certain boundaries (i.e. its focus on women of color limits its universality, that it is closely related to geographical boundaries, etc.). Reading texts through an African womanist lens is certainly a valid strategy for better understanding women's issues in African literature, but for Sow Fall's social vision, even this way of considering womanhood that spreads beyond the limits of feminism remains inadequate in explaining its scope. If Sow Fall means for her readers to question feminism as a theoretical framework and expand their view of the feminine itself, then there can exist no "framework" encompassing this idea of womanhood—its boundaries are defined and understood by readers and are therefore infinite.

Sow Fall's treatment of women in *Douceurs du bercail* parallels this expansion of feminism's scope towards womanism, but strives to create a mode of understanding womanhood that is universal—that avoids the limitations that categorical terminology inevitably imposes on an idea. Critic I.T.K. Egonu sees this universal quality in Sow Fall's novels, writing, "Although Sow Fall's works are inspired by Senegalese social realities, they are not meant for Senegalese or indeed Africans alone. They are intended to be of universal relevance and appeal" (69). Sow Fall's social vision for the modern woman is universal in that her literary commentary on women applies to all women, as exemplified by the relationship between the black Senegalese journalist Asta and the white French professional Anne. Motherhood, the most traditional role of women, brings Asta and Anne together but they continue their friendship throughout schooling,

careers, divorce, and other “modern” challenges. It is through their friendship, on which Sow Fall has commented,

“Les rapports supérieurs d’amitié entre Anne et Asta sont précisément le thème fondamental de mon livre” ‘the great connections of friendship between Asta and Anne are precisely the fundamental theme of my book’ (Aas-Rouxparis 206) that *Douceurs du bercail* studies, observes, and asks readers to widen their understanding of modern womanhood.

Sow Fall remains consistent in delegating the determination of meaning and conclusions to her readers as she creates *Naatangué*, an ideal that in practice is equally problematic as the spaces her readers encounter. Egonu recognizes in Asta’s creation of *Naatangué* Sow Fall’s desire to prompt further thought and consideration rather than arrive at conclusions about womanhood herself. He writes, “[Sow Fall] admits, however, that it would be pretentious for her as a writer to claim to provide answers to the societal problems she raises in her work” (68). Sow Fall sets up Asta (and Anne) as examples of African and Western women, respectively, who navigate the ambiguities of modern womanhood by expanding their interactions with women to those of different nationalities, social classes, and opinions. Although Asta finds fulfillment in her creation of *Naatangué*, Sow Fall uses Anne as an example of a woman who understands the importance of tradition and culture and one who likewise finds dignity in the social milieu of modern France. Through her narration of the interlacing stories of these two women, Sow Fall creates a feminine ideology in *Douceurs du bercail* that is more expansive than her critics have heretofore recognized. Sow Fall refuses the appellation feminist because her writing identifies its inadequacies in an African context. Through the lives of Asta and Anne, Sow Fall asks her readers to participate in this redefinition of understanding modern womanhood; Sow Fall does

not give concrete answers in *Douceurs du bercail* about what this new feminine philosophy is or should be, but instead prods her audience to explore its possibilities.

CHAPTER IV

‘La terre ne ment pas’: Environmental Concerns in *Douceurs du bercail*

As I have discussed in other chapters, Aminata Sow Fall’s *Douceurs du bercail* has garnered assorted literary criticism from diverse critical frameworks: feminist, post-colonial, racial readings, and others.¹ Yet despite the significant amount of environmental allusions and references in the text, no scholarship concerned specifically with environmental issues in *Douceurs du bercail* exists. Because I argue that Sow Fall’s representation and use of nature in *Douceurs du bercail* is one of three principal lenses through which her fiction can be analyzed (along with race and gender), this chapter will explore the implications of Sow Fall’s paradoxical and often troubling treatment of environmental issues in the text. First I will discuss the deficiency of scholarship regarding representations of the environment in Sow Fall’s novel and the few scholars who have mentioned nature in *Douceurs du bercail* only as utopian. After having established the importance of nature as a significant scholarly concern in Sow Fall’s novel, I will examine the aggressive Westernized language the author uses in her discussions of the environment which complicates its function as a regenerative force. Additionally, I will address *Naatangué*’s function as an Edenic, quasi-paradisiacal space despite the problematic way Asta and her friends conceive of its value in terms of productivity. This duality of *Naatangué*’s function, adopting Western ideas yet preserving certain aspects of traditional African land ethics, points to Sow Fall’s ability to blur the boundaries of theoretical frameworks, which I analyze using Rob Nixon’s essay “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism.” Finally, I will explore Sow Fall’s use of the adage “la terre ne ment pas” ‘the land does not lie’ as a declaration of Sow Fall’s belief that the environment teaches humanity truths despite the troubled relationship they share. In essence, Asta creates the agricultural farming community in rural Senegal to exemplify

a hybridized space where she and her friends accept, to a certain degree, the inevitability of Westernization and the complications it creates in their African context while simultaneously reconnecting with their ancestral lands and the truths that it teaches them about “happiness, abundance, and peace” (*Douceurs* 197): the Oulof word for their community, *Naatangué*.

Naatangué, the alternative community where Asta and her friends cultivate and sell produce, serves both as a space which exemplifies and magnifies Sow Fall’s environmental thought and as the narrative apex of *Douceurs du bercail* where questions of race and gender intersect with one another and with environmental issues. It is at *Naatangué* that Asta creates the space she dreams of while imprisoned in the *dépôt*, but her ideals become problematic when put into practice. The narrator of *Douceurs du bercail* describes *Naatangué* as a place where racial tensions are largely avoided but not resolved, where Asta’s role as a woman and a leader undergoes a transformation when she marries Babou, and where Asta and her friends cultivate virgin land into a productive plot that begins to resemble the mechanized, artificial airport *dépôt* in an unsettling way. Although I use *Naatangué* primarily as a medium for studying Sow Fall’s characterization of the environment, its creation towards the end of *Douceurs du bercail* brings together the issues of race, gender, and nature as interrelated topics that weave in and out of one another as the community moves forward.

Environmental Literary Studies

In order to understand Sow Fall’s complicated use of nature in *Douceurs du bercail*, it is useful to study the 1990s context of environmental literary studies, which was almost non-existent when Sow Fall published her sixth novel. Cheryl Glotfelty, co-editor of the 1996 anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, interprets the general paucity of literary scholarship dedicated to environmental concerns in the 1990s as a reflection

of a startling disconnect between literature—including its writers, readers, and critics—and its context. This assertion is significant to a discussion of the function of the environment in *Douceurs du bercail* since, although Glotfelty's study focuses on American, English-speaking environmental studies for the most part, her assertions provide a useful method for further understanding Sow Fall's treatment of nature in *Douceurs du bercail*. Glotfelty writes:

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you . . . might never know that there was an earth at all. (xvi)

Glotfelty's statements are acutely significant for an environmental discussion of *Douceurs du bercail* since the body of criticism surrounding the text asserts the importance of race and gender but fails even to acknowledge that the environment's function is complex and troubled rather than obviously utopian. Glotfelty's analysis prompts inquiries as to why the environment is all but ignored as a major issue (together with race and gender) in *Douceurs du bercail*. To borrow from Glotfelty's scenario, if one were to read only secondary literature about *Douceurs du bercail* it would fail to inform the reader of the strong presence of environmental discussion in the text, which indeed suggests the existence of a disconnect between literature and the environment. The text of *Douceurs du bercail* underscores the existence of this disconnect multiple times, highlighted especially by Sow Fall's use of the environment as both a healing and regenerative agent but also a valueless expanse which only gains importance if it is made productive. That *Naatangué* can embody both of these roles indicates that Sow Fall's treatment of the environment in *Douceurs du bercail* exhibits this disconnected quality about which Glotfelty writes.

While scholars have studied what Glotfelty calls the “hot topics” (*ibid*) of race and gender in *Douceurs du bercail*, their almost non-existent attention to environmental issues in the text has so far been limited to understanding the “paradise” of *Naatangué* as a utopia. Valérie Orlando writes, “It is in the need to explore this *beyond*, this *au-delà* (which the author describes as a place where racial and gender differences are nullified and the pain of human suffering is lifted), that brings out the utopian message of Sow Fall’s novel. The *au-delà*, a paradise on earth in Africa, is possible and is created by Asta and her companions” (“H(er)stories” 49). In Orlando’s view, this life-giving utopia embodies absolute perfection: a place free from all possible ills caused by the contrastingly unnatural space of the airport *dépôt*, (suffering, racism, lost dignity, etc.) However, as I have discussed in a previous chapter, *Naatangué* does not “conquer” racism but exacerbates its influence through its lack of racial diversity (with Anne as the one exception.) This racial misreading of *Naatangué* points toward an environmental misunderstanding as well, suggesting that *Naatangué* may be more complicated than early critics recognized, not only racially but environmentally as well. In Orlando’s reading, the environment acts as an inherent component of the African “paradise on earth” (*ibid*) but fails to be unacknowledged as representative of Sow Fall’s conception of environmental issues in general.

Other scholars have read *Naatangué* similarly, taking into account its positive, regenerative qualities but failing to acknowledge its disturbing environmental attribute: the exploitation of the virginal landscape for productivity’s sake. In her article “The Myth of the Garden of Eden,” Chantal P. Thompson writes, “If [the creation of *Naatangué*] is not a recipe for re-creating the lost paradise, what is?” (99). *Naatangué* does provide Asta and her friends with a regenerative space where they recover their lost dignity, yet Thompson’s reading is incomplete; *Naatangué* may function as a type of paradise for Asta and the others, but it is not a simplistic,

utopian paradise in which all ills and difficulties vanish and ambiguities become resolved. If it can be called a paradise, then it is a deeply conflicted and paradoxical one. Similarly, Natalie Edwards treats the environment as a metaphor for “natural” paradise as well, referring to the final chapters of the novel as “the utopian happy ending” (60). Edwards does hint at complications with this ending, calling it “questionable, since returning to the land necessarily involves a national boundary in addition to the precarious situation of relying upon natural elements” (60-61) but pursues the environmental issues no further. Finally, Catherine Mazauric sees *Naatangué* simply as a reincarnation of Voltaire’s counsel in *Candide* to cultivate one’s garden when she writes, “Les derniers pages du roman célèbrent au rebours l’authentique douceur d’un bercail retrouvé où l’on a appris à ‘cultivar son jardin’ dans une utopie constructive” “The last pages of the novel celebrate, on the other hand, the authentic sweetness of a recovered home where one learns to “cultivate his garden” in a constructive utopia’ (239).² These critics overlook Sow Fall’s troubling and complex treatment of the natural environment as one of the principal structural components of the novel.

Reading *Naatangué* as a utopia in *Douceurs du bercail*—a “place, state, or condition ideally perfect in respect of politics, laws, customs, and conditions” by definition—therefore underestimates the complexity of the environment’s function in the novel and provides an inadequate understanding of its troubled role in the closing chapters of the novel.³ A utopian reading of *Naatangué* does not account for the violent language Sow Fall uses to describe the aggressive Westernization of the land. When Asta and her friends encounter it, the plot of land is “vierges comme le jour de la Création” ‘virginal as the day of the Creation (*Douceurs* 195) but they make plans to “mettre en valeur” ‘develop’ (*Douceurs* 188) the land and thereby transform it through digging, sowing, irrigation, sectioning, and harvesting. Viewed from an environmental

perspective, the development of *Naatangué* contradicts its own ideals fundamentally: Asta and her friends seek a place of refuge from the colonial system of racism and discrimination they were subjected to at the *dépôt* in their natural native landscape yet perpetuate the colonial mentality of domination with respect to their land by organizing, systematizing, modernizing, and mechanizing it. Even the term “mettre en valeur” betrays Asta and her friends’ Western conception of environmental value since it implies that undeveloped land has no inherent value and must be productivized in order to acquire its *valeur* “value.” While Asta and the others attempt to overcome the effects of colonial oppression they experienced in France, they simultaneously coerce the natural landscape of *Naatangué* into a productive system using quasi-colonial methods. Rather than undoing the effects of colonialism, Asta et al. seem to transplant the colonial mentality, at least to a certain extent, to rural African soil. This is not to say that the act of farming inherently implies environmental insensitivity, but the language Asta and her friends use to describe their experience developing the land at *Naatangué* does indicate that they view unprocessed land as less valuable than “productive” land.

The Paradoxical “Paradise” of *Naatangué*

The paradoxical way in which the environment functions in *Douceurs du bercail*—both as a symbol of African traditionalism and as a victim of Western colonialism—raises a myriad questions about nature’s role in the novel. Because Asta’s plot of land is wrought with racial tension (the black Africans deported from the French airport have created a space which avoids interracial contact) and complex gender issues (Asta, who divorced her first husband and vowed never to marry again, achieves the recovery of her lost dignity when she marries fellow *expulsé* Babou), it becomes apparent that *Naatangué* cannot function as a perfect utopia. In fact, it is nature’s paradoxical characterization at *Naatangué* that brings to light Sow Fall’s complicated

treatment of racial and gender issues there as well. Sow Fall's concluding chapters in *Douceurs du bercail* are not reminiscent of Voltaire except superficially: her ending does not advocate a return to the prelapsarian garden as a solution for Africa's ills but suggests that a connection to the land, even one modified by Westernization and hybridization, is key to future success for the continent. In this way, Sow Fall also argues for hybridization regarding race, perhaps alluding to further transracial understanding in the future with Anne's visit, and gender, with Asta herself acting both as proprietor and leader of a lucrative business and as a woman dedicated to family life and the establishment of a stable home for her children.

Still, the environment's function in the novel remains ambiguous throughout the novel, again pointing to Sow Fall's possible nescience regarding the problematic clash of the aggressive language Asta and her friends use to describe the development of the virgin land and the peaceful regeneration they glean from it. Of the environment's role in *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall comments:

The African situation is explained by our colonial past. Colonization is not only about the black person, etc. It is about all that has made us all suffer mentally. Many among us Africans believed in our inability to change our fate. The mind was colonized. We came to believe that we cannot of our own be free from colonization. The reference to the earth is therefore symbolical . . . The earth symbolizes that place from which we sprouted. It is the symbol of what has nourished the primordial being. (Azodo 290)

It appears, then, that Sow Fall wishes the environment to function as a symbol of regeneration, freedom, or even of what constitutes one's humanity. In fact, Sow Fall sets up nature as contradictory to the damaging effects of colonization. This idea that nature can heal the wounds

of colonialism comes from Yakham, one of the undocumented immigrants Asta met at the *dépôt*. Yakham says, “Notre idée est de régénérer tout ce qui pousse ici et d’implanter d’autres cultures, d’autres espèces pour enrichir le site” ‘Our idea is to regenerate everything that grows here and to implant from other cultures and species to enrich the site’ (*Douceurs* 206). This is a convincing interpretation of the environment’s regenerative and humanity-confirming influence, but inconsistent with some of the language Sow Fall uses to describe its transformation from virginal to productive.

Using an ecocritical lens to further explore the way in which Sow Fall describes and characterizes *Naatangué*, its positivity becomes more and more problematic. Sow Fall seeks to characterize Africa as a continent with great potential symbolized by the richness of the land and the valuable goods it produces—a noble and significant pursuit. Yet in *Douceurs du bercail* the land only becomes valuable when it becomes economically productive; the unprofitable land, though “natural,” is of no use to Asta and her friends. Sow Fall accepts the inevitability of Western influences in Africa but argues that some of the negative effects of colonialism (such as the African mentality of dependence) can be countered by reconnecting with the earth. Sow Fall evinces this counteracting environmental force when she juxtaposes Asta’s new bucolic lifestyle at *Naatangué* with Anne’s more modern, fast-paced existence in France. Anne comments, “Seulement . . . notre monde est de plus en plus un monde du concret, du pragmatique, du réalisme . . .” ‘Only, our world is more and more a world of concrete, of pragmatism, of Realism . . .’ (*Douceurs* 181), emphasizing through the concrete the complete disconnect from nature in Western cities. Asta’s worldview contrasts sharply: “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 . . . C'est très profond dans mon cœur . . . ” ‘Anne my friend, you know [it] well but I feel so much pleasure to tell you again: it is ineffable Happiness to smell the earth, to commune with her when, from within her, life gushes out, food which gives life and stability . . . I feel it deep within my heart . . . ’ (*Douceurs* 200). It is clear, then, that Asta feels a deep connection to the land that Anne presumably cannot feel living in a modern city so far removed from nature.

It is significant to note here not only the contrasting content but the contradictory language Sow Fall uses to juxtapose the large European city against the small African farming community. Sow Fall uses the term “concret” ‘concrete’ to describe the European world of mechanization and orderliness, suggesting that the idea of concreteness functions both literally and symbolically in *Douceurs du bercail*. Throughout the novel, Sow Fall does characterize European spaces as more rational, material, and objective than African ones. Even in the example above, Sow Fall uses more abstract, emotional imagery to describe *Naatangué* when Asta describes her connection to the land as “profond dans mon coeur” ‘deep within my heart’ (*ibid*). Highlighting this contrast between concrete and abstract thinking, paralleling each to European and African spaces, respectively, reinforces linguistically the clash of concepts of nature in both societies that Sow Fall calls attention to throughout the novel.

Yet Sow Fall’s contrast of European and African spaces is itself problematic. While *Naatangué* undisputedly affords its inhabitants more closeness to nature than does the concrete metropolis of Paris, what Sow Fall appears unaware of is the fact that the small agricultural community in rural Senegal is perhaps not as different as a European city as she wants it to be. Although it is possible that Sow Fall treats the environment in a purposefully contradictory manner in order to generate deeper consideration of its meaning and function (as she has with feminist concerns) in *Douceurs du bercail*, it is probable that she herself remained unaware of

the Westernized characterization of *Naatangué*. According to Cheryl Glotfelty, “in the mid-eighties . . . the field of environmental literary studies was planted, and in the early nineties it grew” (xvii), but in these beginning stages, “critics rarely cited one another’s work; they didn’t know that it existed. In a sense, each critic was inventing an environmental approach to literature in isolation” (*ibid*). This history of environmental literary studies, as well as the fact that the foremost ecocritical journals and studies have emerged mainly from an American context in the last thirty years, increases the likelihood that Sow Fall was, somewhat ironically, unaware of the Western influences affecting her characterization of the environment in *Douceurs du bercail*.⁴ Glotfelty even writes, “Ecocriticism has been predominantly a white movement. It will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice, and when a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion” (xxv). By extension, Sow Fall’s characters—Asta and her friends—likewise appear unaware that while planning their alternative community on the beautiful virgin land of rural Senegal, the Westernization they wish so desperately to control has already pervaded the space.

Despite the fact that many critics have overlooked the complexity of nature’s function in *Douceurs du bercail*, the text’s forthright references to nature and its often unclear role in both traditional and modern societies necessitates its further critical study. Asta speaks about the environment in a direct manner throughout the novel, highlighting not only its thematic importance but its complicated existence in *Douceurs du bercail*. While in the airport *dépôt*, she speaks of nature when she says:

Le plus dur aujourd’hui est que l’espoir s’en va . . . Malgré tout je continuerai à prêcher: aimons notre terre; nous l’arroserons 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.

The hardest thing today is that hope has gone away . . . In spite of everything I will continue to preach: let's love our earth, we will water it with our sweat and dig it with all our strength, with courage. The light of our hope will guide us, we will harvest and build. Then only we will be able to take the roads of heaven, of earth and of water without being chased as pariahs. (Sow Fall 88)

In Asta's opinion, then, the recovery of hope and dignity taken away from the detainees within the inhuman space of the *dépôt* is tied to an intimate experience with nature. Even this single pithy excerpt, which at once accentuates the importance of nature as well as the troubling way in which Sow Fall discusses it (that one must love the land but in doing so, will dig it, harvest it, and construct it), demands questioning regarding nature's paradoxical function in *Douceurs du bercail*.

Violent Language and Western Influences on Environmental Thought

The language Asta uses to describe her plot of land before it is named *Naatangué* (a turning point which marks the first act of Westernization performed on it) reflects a more traditionally African view of land stewardship compared to the more aggressive, European, and even violent way it is characterized after it has been "baptisée" 'baptized' (*Douceurs* 197) and named.⁵ Sow Fall narrates their reaction:

Les yeux sont fixés sur la vaste étendue de terre déployée comme un tapis multicolore avec des teintes noires, ocres, grisâtres ou dorées. Le fleuve y court sur son empire moiré; selon ses caprices, il s'allonge à perte de vue, grossit, se ramifie dans toutes les directions, disparaît et réapparaît, majestueux . . .

Their eyes are fixed on the vast expanse of land displayed like a multicolored carpet with black, ochre, grayish, and golden tints. The river runs through its shimmering empire; according to its whim, it stretches as far as the eye could see, swelling, branching in all directions, disappearing and reappearing, majestic . . . (*Douceurs* 193).

It is significant that Asta uses the word “vast” to describe the land since the term evokes a sense of freedom from restriction and unbounded space; this stands in contrast to the way Asta later describes it in objective, measured terms which refer to its productive capacity, “deux hectares” ‘two hectares’ (*Douceurs* 200) as plans are put into place to develop the land. Important also is the way Asta describes the river before and after the land is named *Naatangué*. On page 193, she refers to the land as “son empire” ‘its empire’, implying that the river governs its landscape as the supreme life-giving force. Later, Asta comments, “Le fleuve est à deux cents mètres du terrain, je te l’ai déjà dit. Avec le prêt, nous pourrions creuser un canal, irriguer les deux hectares, acheter une camionnette tous terrains pour écouler la production,” ‘The river is two hundred meters from the plot of land, I already told you that. With the loan, we can dig a canal, irrigate the two hectares, buy an all-terrain truck to sell the goods’ (*Douceurs* 200), suggesting that the governance of the land has transitioned in ownership from the river—a natural force—to a group of humans—an outside, non-organic force.

This transition in the way that Asta, Yakham, Séga, Dianor, and the others conceive of the land exemplifies the way that Westernization creeps into *Naatangué* subtly and complicates its function as a haven from the suffering its inhabitants experienced in Europe. The impact Western concepts of land ownership have had on Asta and the other inhabitants of *Naatangué* is striking. C.K. Omari’s article “Traditional African Land Ethics” helps to contextualize the extent

to which *Naatangué*'s inhabitants' concept of land ownership reflects Western influence. Omari's article studies the differences in how Africans have traditionally treated land and land stewardship versus the characteristic European colonial concept of land ownership and his analysis demonstrates that *Naatangué* certainly exhibits African roots but heavy Western influences as well. Of Western land ownership mentalities Omari writes, "Wherever in the world the capitalist mode of production is predominant, ownership of land and access to its natural resources is based on individual rights . . . [the resources] belong to someone and are commodities. Profit and exploitation of water, forests, minerals, and animals for the benefit of the individual are explicit motives for land ownership" (97-98). This mentality of individual ownership is reflected in *Douceurs du bercail* in multiple ways: Asta refers to *Naatangué* as "mon terrain" 'my plot of land' (*Douceurs* 187), the narrator refers to Asta's fellow inhabitant as "sa bande" 'her group' (*Douceurs* 204), and one of Asta's titles is "notre cheftaine" 'our leader' (*Douceurs* 220). Asta's legal ownership of the land and role as leader of the former *expulsés* exhibits a Western emphasis on individuality and shows that the ideology has, at least partially, affected the way the land is understood at *Naatangué* by its stewards.

While elements of Western ways of understanding land ownership are present at *Naatangué*, Asta's alternative community is not a Western space by any means; there are elements of traditional African attitudes about land present as well. Omari explains, "The important thing which united all African societies with regard to ownership of land was that land was considered a communal property belonging to both the living and the dead" (98). At *Naatangué*, even though Asta is the legal owner of the plot of land, a strong communal sentiment exists. Asta refers to Dianor—complete stranger and fellow deportee just seven months prior—"Maître Dianor, le comédien, le griot, le poète, l'ancêtre" 'Master Dianor, the comedian, the

griot, the poet, the ancestor' (*Douceurs* 197), thus honoring him as a co-owner or “master” of the land and as a vital spiritual and artistic leader for the community. Likewise, each member of *Naatangué* seems to enjoy partial ownership of the land even if it legally belongs solely to Asta. The label the community uses to sell its products—*Douceurs du bercail*—reflects this sense of collective ownership of the land as well. The label is described as “la plus belle expression, pour ceux d’entre eux qui avaient vécu les jours affreux du Dépôt et l’infamie du charter, de leur dignité retrouvée” ‘the most beautiful expression, for those among them who had gone through the dreadful days of the *dépôt* and the infamy of the chartered deportation flight, of their recovered dignity’ (*Douceurs* 217), emphasizing the importance of the words to a group of people who have shared in common the pain of humiliation and exile as well as the joy of recovered dignity.

In addition to questions of land ownership, descriptions of land’s importance, value, and function in *Douceurs du bercail* also exhibit strong Western influence at *Naatangué* despite its apparent role as a refuge from the ills of modern Western society. While the language Asta and her friends use to describe their experiences at *Naatangué* is straightforwardly positive, subtle hints of aggressive and colonial attitudes toward the land lurk within the narrative as well. When Asta brings Anne to her plot of land before it is developed, Dianor makes a significant comment about the land that alludes to its impending exploitation. He says, “Je m’arrêterai au milieu du terrain, là où j’ai planté un poteau, tu te souviens . . . , près du *séane* desséché” ‘I will stop in the middle of the [plot of] land, there where I drove in a post, you remember. . . , close to the dried up natural spring’ (*Douceurs* 194).⁶ The fact that Dianor uses the natural landform of the well only as a referent to the man-made marker—the *poteau*—intimates that the creators of

Naatangué exhibit elements of a European land mentality which Robert Marzec refers to as the “Robinson Crusoe syndrome.”⁷

Dianor’s marking and mapping out of the land with posts as well as Asta’s measurements in hectares and plans to irrigate and redirect another natural landform, the river, suggest that the land’s worth is connected to the acts of measuring and enclosure (symptoms of the Crusoe syndrome.) Marzec explains: “[Crusoe] uncontrollably thrown into the space of uncultivated land . . . is unable to immediately establish a frame of references . . . and gradually eases his dread by setting up a series of enclosures that slowly cover the landscape” (2). This strategy of conquering the land through enclosure is significant to *Naatangué*: while Asta and the others do not fear the vast, unmeasured landscape, they surely employ this strategy of enclosure in order to control it. Marzec’s definition of enclosure bears striking resemblance to Dianor’s placing of landmark posts on the land and Asta’s plans to manipulate the land’s natural resources. He writes:

An enclosure is the turning of open, communal land into private property. It involves the surrounding of that land with barriers designed to close off the free passage of people and animals: large, open fields formerly devoid of physical territorial boundaries are brought into a system in which land is ‘held in severalty’ (by individuals) through the erection of stone walls, fences, ditches, and hedges that separate one person’s land from one’s neighbors. (9)

This process of enclosing and measuring the land in order to exploit its natural resources for financial gain exists subtly in *Douceurs du bercail*—its presence tempered by surrounding language lauding the beauty of the untouched landscape—but the enclosure mentality is expressed in the narration, however deftly. Just as for Crusoe “the land must become *English* (enclosed) land before he can connect to it in any substantial fashion” (Marzec 3), *Naatangué*

must become Westernized (measured, evaluated, marked) land before Asta, Yakham, Dianor, and the others find their “dignité retrouvée” ‘recovered dignity’ (*Douceurs* 217) in the process of producing goods under the label “Douceurs du bercail.”

Despite the presence of this mentality of enclosure, Sow Fall’s treatment of the land is not one solely of domination; Asta and her friends experience the land *as nature* but not *only* as nature. It is this combination of aggressive and tender language that makes the environment’s role in *Douceurs du bercail* so complex and labyrinthine. While *Naatangué*’s inhabitants “travailler les mains nue avec seulement quelques râdeaux, des pelles, des haches, deux brouettes et une paire de cisailles pour commencer à défricher les deux hectares à mettre en valeur . . . ” ‘working bare-handed with only some rakes, shovels, axes, two wheelbarrows and a pair of shears to begin to clear the two hectares for production . . . ’ (*Douceurs* 209), they also connect with the land as a site of peaceful stability seemingly removed from the aggressiveness of making the land productive. Yet even these moments of tranquil appreciation of the land itself are colored by Western ideas about enclosure and systematization. The narrator describes a tranquil moment of communal reaffirmation as Asta and her friends recommit to realizing their dream of happiness and dignity through success at *Naatangué*. This scene takes place “à l’ombre du grand tamarinier,” ‘in the shadow of the large tamarind tree (*Douceurs* 210), an object that the group appreciates for its natural beauty and symbolism of abundance. Yet the tree’s natural role is subjugated as it becomes part of “la configuration d’une maison avec une seule case et une grande cour au-dessus de laquelle se déployaient généreusement les branches du tamarinier” ‘the configuration of a house with only one hut and a large courtyard above which the branches of the tamarind tree spread generously’ (*ibid*). The tamarind tree’s presence represents raw nature’s continued presence at *Naatangué*, but shows that its role has been mitigated by manmade,

constricting forces. It is, then, a space deeply conflicted by its natural roots and its constructed, “productive” existence.

Africa as Eden

While the language Sow Fall employs in describing the way Asta and her friends wish to “mettre en valeur” ‘make productive’ (*Douceurs* 209) their land precludes *Naatangué* from functioning as a utopia, as some critics have suggested, the presence of Edenic and mythic paradisiacal references in the text suggest that some degree of divinity exists in the space Asta and her compatriots create. That the tension between the natural beauty of the land and its usefulness defined in terms of productivity and development excludes utopian interpretations of *Naatangué* is certain; however, Sow Fall’s use of Edenic imagery in her description of the land implies that despite its problematic nature, it does possess the regenerative qualities of a paradisiacal space. Sow Fall thus creates at *Naatangué* a space that comments on, combines, and questions both Western and traditional African concepts of paradise. Through intermingling Christian and mythic references—Asta mentions Adam, Eve, and the Garden of Eden as well as the African myth of the river goddess Mame Coumba Bang—Sow Fall reinforces the idea that *Naatangué* is a place wrought with a duality of influence. By using these two religious references, one representative of the Western Christian tradition and the other of traditional African animist beliefs, Sow Fall posits that belief in the spirituality of nature exists in both traditions. Through this spiritual avenue, the duality of *Naatangué* again presents itself as paradoxical: the Edenic and traditional African religious narratives become complicated by perturbing, extra-natural influences (such as tools, irrigation, enclosure, etc.) that infringe upon the land-centric perspective which both traditions espouse. Asta declares, “Je voulais le convaincre que le Paradis n’est pas forcément ailleurs” ‘I wanted to convince him that paradise is

not necessarily elsewhere' (*Douceurs* 201), yet in so doing creates a type of "paradise" that contends with its own Edenic and animist ideological roots. Even the wording that Sow Fall uses to put forth this assertion reveals an underlying use of Western discourse—to insist that paradise is *not* "elsewhere" emphasizes the importance of the Western referent in defining an African space.

It is significant that religious symbols of "pure" natural landscapes shape the way that Asta (and Sow Fall) conceive of *Naatangué* despite the non-natural elements that also shape the space. The references to Adam and Eve and to Mame Coumba Bang occur at a significant place in the narrative: when Anne (Asta's white, European friend) comes to visit *Naatangué*. Since Anne is the only white European person to visit Asta's alternative community in the book, it is meaningful that the fusion of the Eden narrative as well as that of Mame Coumba Bang occurs at a place in the narrative when Anne is present at *Naatangué*. The Western religious reference and Anne's presence itself suggest that Western modes of thought are essential at *Naatangué*—that colonial modes of discourse lend legitimacy to the African space. Because of this welcoming of Western influence, Sow Fall undercuts the purity of the natural spirituality of Eden, negating its paradisiacal function by its very mention in the Westerner's presence. By including the Garden of Eden references in her discussion of pure nature, Asta suggests that the traditional African legend alone is insufficient, and must be bolstered and combined with the Western religious tradition in order to function in a legitimate manner.

Sow Fall approaches the religiosity of *Naatangué* by first relating to Anne the traditional African legend of the river goddess and then blending in the Garden of Eden story, possibly in order to contextualize the situation for her European friend. After Anne's exclamation that the land seems "vierges comme le jour de la Création" 'as virginal as the day of Creation' (*Douceurs*

195), Asta relates a part of the animist creation myth revolving around rivers or water sources. Asta describes the river goddess, who “est toujours une femme” ‘is always a woman’ (*ibid*) as “omniprésente, belle, charmeuse et impitoyable contre ceux qui seraient tentés de semer le désordre dans les eaux et tout autour du fleuve” ‘omnipresent, beautiful, charming, and merciless towards those who would be tempted to sow disorder within the waters and around the river’ (*ibid*). Asta characterizes this river goddess in an interesting way, as god-like (in a Western sense) due to her omnipresence and intolerance of “sowing disorder” in the world. Asta goes on to describe the spiritual connection between the river and femininity when she says, “le fleuve et la femme ont en commun le privilège d’être dotés d’une force prodigieuse cachée dans leur tréfonds, sans que rien, à la surface, ne le laisse soupçonner” ‘the river and woman have in common the privilege to be endowed with a prodigious force hidden in their very depths, that nothing on the surface would allow one to suspect’ (*Douceurs* 196). Asta supports this idea by introducing the story of Adam and Eve, which furthers Asta’s assertion that women’s power and influence have been “hidden” or lost since the antediluvian contexts of both myths. Asta explains that after Eve had eaten the apple, men “ont inventé tous les subterfuges possible en usant même de la magie, pour faire perdre à la femme la conscience de sa propre force” ‘have invented all possible subterfuges, even using magic, to make woman lose awareness of her own strength’ (*Douceurs* 196). Sow Fall, then, interprets the story of Adam and Eve selectively so that it supports the African legend’s assertion that women’s strength is hidden, creating a perhaps tenuous but significant link between the Western and African paradisiacal myths. In addition, this emphasis on the power of femininity again reinforces the study of gender issues as one of Sow Fall’s principle concerns at *Naatangué*.

The goal of Sow Fall's interesting combination of these two religious narratives remains elusive in context of the situational presentation of the two accounts. The stories share a strong argument for the innate strength of womankind, especially emphasized by the powerful river goddess, yet diverge ideologically in terms of the environment's function. The legend of Mame Coumba Bang acts as an attestation to the intimate connection between land and humankind that Asta seeks at *Naatangué* but the inclusion of the Garden of Eden narrative counteracts this liaison. Eden symbolizes pure, undefiled nature created by a divine force, which diminishes rather than accentuates *Naatangué*'s similarities to either tradition's paradisiacal ideal—the fact that it is constructed by human thought processes rather than God's highlights its dissimilarity to the pure and sacred space of Eden. Thus Sow Fall forges a connection in both stories between women and pure nature, but from an environmental perspective the connection between the two religious narratives becomes tenuous. The Garden of Eden narrative as Asta tells it exudes an almost nostalgic longing for the purity of nature Adam and Eve experienced before the Fall—a purity that continues to exist in the relationship between Mame Coumba Bang and the idea of the spiritual river. What prevents the intimate relationship between natural land and its inhabitants, however, is the “fallen” garden of *Naatangué* itself. In essence, Asta and her friends create what they see as a paradise, but the constructed and irrigated non-paradisiacal space of *Naatangué* strips Mame Coumba Bang of her spiritual influence: once the river is irrigated, Asta et al. assume its authority. Thus *Naatangué* becomes a more complicated “paradise” as its numerous paradoxes present themselves upon close readings of the text.

In spite of the fact that *Naatangué* cannot function as the majuscule Paradise that Asta longs for due to its hybridized, Westernized, and constructed existence, the alternative community does, almost curiously, function quasi-paradisiacally for its residents who obtain

their “dignité retrouvée” ‘reclaimed dignity’ (*Douceurs* 217). Problematic though *Naatangué* may be, its inhabitants nevertheless find a measure of success therein. The Western influences on their success (the fact that they grow produce not for subsistence but for profit, the desire to “exploit” the land, etc.) problematize Sow Fall’s presentation of *Naatangué* as an African paradisiacal space, but Asta still sees the endeavor as a distinctly African one. In a moment of reminiscence while enduring her detainment at the airport *dépôt*, Asta recalled a conversation she had with Anne at the beginning of their friendship regarding Africa’s largely unrealized dream of development and success that she would later put into place with *Naatangué*. Asta said to Anne :

C’est vrai que personne ne pourra nous offrir les moyens de notre développement.

C’est même irréaliste de le penser, mais tant que vous autres ne cesserez de toujours nous asservir économiquement sans en avoir l’air, et de nous enfermer dans un cycle infernal en donnant un de la main droite en grande pompe, et en reprenant cent de la main gauche en toute discrétion . . .

It is true that nobody can offer us the means for our development. It is even unrealistic to think it, but as long as you others do not stop always enslaving us economically without appearing to do so, and to confine us in an infernal cycle, giving something with the right hand with pomp and circumstance while taking back secretly a hundred fold with the left hand, . . . (*Douceurs* 159-160)

In this sense, *Naatangué* functions as a successful space only insofar as its inhabitants incorporate rather than espouse Western ideas unchanged by African reception. Thus while *Naatangué* does not—and, indeed, cannot—operate as an Edenic paradise, it does offer its inhabitants the opportunity to regain their dignity. Sow Fall highlights *Naatangué* as a place which allows Asta and her friends to regain their lost dignity through her characterization of their

alternative community as a place which avoids racial confrontation—a choice which is puzzling on one level since she spends such a large part of *Douceurs du bercail* to the analysis of racial tensions between black Africans and white Europeans and how they might be resolved. With the absence of racial confrontation, though, *Naatangué* becomes a healing space where the former *expulsés* can reestablish their dignity fully before attempting to resolve the racial conflicts which robbed them of their dignity initially at the French airport.

The paradox of Western influences at *Naatangué* does not become unimportant simply because its inhabitants are able to find fulfillment and success despite their problematic treatment of land, nor are the spiritual or ideological paradoxes of the space resolved because positive economic outcomes exist, but Sow Fall nevertheless makes an important commentary on successfully navigating the unavoidable complexities of a post-colonial African existence. Inconsistencies surround and penetrate *Naatangué*, yet Asta and her fellow deportees find there “le rêve enfin” ‘the dream, finally’ and “réconciliation avec soi” ‘reconciliation with oneself’ (*Douceurs* 217). Consciously or not, the workers at *Naatangué* begin a fusion of Western and African thinking that Sow Fall sees as a viable hybridized philosophy that may function well in modern Africa. While the implications of adopting Western ideas about land ownership, productivity and enclosure are wrought with complication, Sow Fall argues that hybridization is necessary for Africa’s future.

Rob Nixon’s essay, “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism,” is useful in better understanding Sow Fall’s use of hybridization as a literary strategy as she combines tradition and modernity, European and African thought, and even the precepts of environmental and postcolonial studies. In his essay, Nixon identifies four main divisions that have engendered “mutual reluctance” (233) between environmental literature and postcolonial literature—two of

which do not exist in Sow Fall's West African text. The first "schism" Nixon identifies is that "postcolonialists have tended to foreground hybridity and cross-culturation. Ecocritics, on the other hand, have historically been drawn more to discourses of purity: virgin wilderness and the preservation of 'uncorrupted' last great places" (235). In *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall melds hybridity and preservation together at *Naatangué* as Yakham explains that its inhabitants will "implanter d'autres cultures" (205) into a space which aspires to preserve elements of tradition *through* hybridization. In other words, on a symbolic level, the accepting of foreign plants into the ancestral soil at *Naatangué* represents a willingness on Asta's part to allow traditionalism pliability rather than insist on its rigidity. Asta, even though she appears unaware of the extent to which her thinking (especially about land ownership) has been influenced by Western philosophies, realizes that traditionality in Africa must be malleable to a certain extent since its unchanged preservation has already proved unrealistic. It is significant that *Douceurs du bercail* navigates both hybridization and preservation since the text bridges a gap, at least to some degree, which Nixon sees between environmental and postcolonial literary efforts. Even if hybridization and the preservation of "pure" places are not necessarily resolved in the text, their presence suggests a literary sophistication in Sow Fall's work that anticipates the expansion of postcolonial literary thought.

Douceurs du bercail also approaches both subjects of Nixon's second distinction between ecocritical and postcolonial literary concerns. Nixon writes, "Second, postcolonial writing and criticism largely concern themselves with displacement, while environmental literary studies has tended to give priority to the literature of place" (235). *Douceurs du bercail* broaches the subject of displacement explicitly with Asta's unlawful detainment in the airport *dépôt* and subsequent deportation, with Sow Fall dedicating eight of eleven chapters to this incident and its

repercussions. Yet Sow Fall also exhibits a concern for Nixon's "literature of place." The novel's title, *Douceurs du bercail*, serves as a slogan for the goods produced at *Naatangué* but more importantly as an affirmation of the importance of place. The sweetness of home, for Asta and the other deportees, is inextricably connected to an African space. Complicated though it may be by Western influences, it is still significant that Sow Fall ends her novel on African soil at *Naatangué*. Contrasted to the opening of the novel in the harsh, unforgiving European space of the airport, *Naatangué* offers hope for the future progress of Africa despite its unstable grounding on traditional and modern modes of thought. *Naatangué* does not function as a perfect solution to Africa's problems, but through it Sow Fall suggests that although Westernization will inevitably affect Africa's future, it is in an African space that success will come for Africans, not abroad where "Au bout de l'aventure, il n'y a que le mirage" 'At the end of the adventure, there is nothing but a mirage' (*Douceurs* 53). In a discussion between Asta and Anne, Sow Fall reinforces the importance of place in terms of Africa's future success. Asta has noticed a propensity in Senegal's young people to search for success anywhere but Africa, to look to other places for fulfillment. Yet Asta declares, "L'eldorado n'est pas au bout de l'exode mais dans les entrailles de notre terre" 'Eldorado is not at the end of the exodus but within the depths of our land' (*Douceurs* 87), reinforcing the importance of place for Africa's future success. Again Sow Fall treats both displacement and place as significant issues in *Douceurs du bercail*, further emphasizing the novel's prescient ability to encompass wide-ranging themes from ecocritical and postcolonial frameworks—branches of literary criticism that were not yet, according to Nixon, at odds with each other when Sow Fall published the book in 1998. *Douceurs du bercail* therefore exemplifies Sow Fall's focus on hybridization in terms of content as well as structure, reinforcing through her writing style the importance of cultural blending at *Naatangué*.

La Terre Ne Ment Pas

Asta's adage "la terre ne ment pas" 'the land does not lie' (*Douceurs* 188) provides yet another avenue of study into the treatment of environmental issues in *Douceurs du bercail*. Sow Fall presents this phrase as central to Asta's environmental ideology, referring to the creation of *Naatangué* as "l'occasion . . . de tester l'adage" 'the opportunity . . . to test the adage' (*ibid*). If *Naatangué* is, then, at least on one level, an experiment to determine whether or not the aphorism is true, the situation begs the question of why it necessitates experimentation. While my translation of the phrase is literal and therefore exactly alike Natalie Edwards', *la terre* has many definitions and connotations, such as "*surface du sol*" 'ground,' *matière* 'earth or soil,' *campagne* 'countryside,' *terrain* 'plot of land,' *région* 'region of land,' *où vit l'humanité* 'where humanity lives,' and others (Oxford-Hachette 806).⁸ Sow Fall refrains from elaborating further on the phrase itself, thereby allowing for multiple interpretations of its meaning, though she does hint at its meaning elsewhere in *Douceurs du bercail*.

While *la terre* could refer figuratively to the world itself, suggesting that one's context or surroundings reveal truth, there are indications elsewhere in the text which imply that the definition of *la terre* in the context of Asta's adage connotes a narrower meaning, restricted perhaps even to soil, earth, or ground. The most telling implication in the text that points toward a narrow, earthy definition of the word *la terre* emerges from a comparison to *Naatangué*'s opposite space: the French airport. In this space, the "world" of the airport lies to Asta repeatedly. While in the *dépôt*, Asta's surroundings fail to reveal even the simplest truths such as the time of day or the weather conditions: "Le jour . . . ou la nuit? Rien ne permet de le savoir. Il n'y a plus de cycle, plus de jour, plus de nuit. Plus d'ombre, plus d'heure, mais l'omniprésence de cette lumière blanche qui frappe, mord au plus profond de la chair, et tape sur les nerfs" 'Day

. . . or night? Nothing enabled her to know. There was no more cycle, no more day, no more night. No more shadow, no more hours, but the omnipresence of this white light that strikes, bites to the very core of the flesh, frays the nerves' (*Douceurs* 83). In this airport space, everything lies to Asta. The "insolente lumière blanche" 'insolent white light' (*Douceurs* 40) conceals the reality of the time of day, but even more importantly Asta's surroundings lie to her about her identity: her situation tells her she is an undocumented immigrant caught without her papers when the opposite is true. Natalie Edwards sees a similar dichotomy between the land which does not lie and the (European) land which does. She writes, "As Asta remarks of their new existence, living off the land in a new community, 'la terre ne ment pas'; officials may lie, one's countrymen may lie, and images of mono-cultural and mono-national blocks may be delusory, so one should link oneself to one's land through stories" (60), recognizing the elements of untruthfulness that abound in the airport as well as the significance of the stories of Mame Coumba Bang and Adam and Eve that teach similar truths. In other words, if the land of artificial light and time is untruthful, then the natural, inartificial space of *Naatangué* is *la terre* which imparts truth. Standing in opposition to the arrogant artificial lights of the *dépôt*, at *Naatangué* "le soleil étale sa somptuosité sur la bourgade paisible" 'the sun spreads his sumptuousness over the peaceful little town' (*Douceurs* 192).

Operating under the assumption that *Naatangué* embodies the fact that the earth or soil does not lie, the adage implies that "real" land (not the artificial, concretized, technologized land of European airports) communicates truth. But what is the truth that *Naatangué* imparts to its inhabitants—or, by extension, Sow Fall's readers? For Sow Fall, some aspect of the natural landscape enlightens its residents with truths about the human condition that unnatural landscapes cannot. The truth that the land speaks is revealed in the closing pages of *Douceurs du*

bercail as Asta and her fellow workers at *Naatangué* celebrate the success of their “aventure” ‘adventure’ (*Douceurs* 216). Sow Fall writes:

Leur grand Bonheur avait été de s’identifier à un label: **DOUCEURS DU BERCAIL. DOUCEURS DU BERCAIL!** L’heureuse trouvaille de Dianor n’était pas seulement une manière de nommer les produits ainsi étiquetés qui, de *Naatangué*, convoiaient partout dans le pays et ailleurs l’idée d’une terre généreuse et hospitalière capable de donner plus qu’on lui a offert.

Their great happiness had been to identify with a label: ***The Sweetness of Home. The Sweetness of Home!*** Dianor’s happy discovery was not only a way of naming the products thus labeled which, from *Naatangué*, transported all over the country and elsewhere the idea of a generous and hospitable land capable of giving more than was given it. (*Douceurs* 217)

This passage begins to unlock the truth that nature tells by recognizing that unlike the “monde du concret” ‘world of concrete’ (*Douceurs* 181), a phrase Anne uses to refer to Europe, which takes everything away from Asta, the land of natural sunlight, open air, and rich soil of *Naatangué* gives freely. As discussed earlier, the fact that *Naatangué*’s inhabitants take from it at all—its pristine condition, its rich nutrients, its valuable *guêwe*—is problematic, but in spite of their Western treatment of the land, it functions as a continual source of richness, growth, and progress.⁹

Recognizing the importance of nature’s freely imparted abundance, Sow Fall continues to reveal truths that nature reveals to those who experience it. She writes, “Le Bonheur, au fond, c’est comme le Savoir: il n’est pas loin, il faut savoir le trouver: ‘*kham kham soré woul, dafa lakhou. DOUCEURS DU BERCAIL*, c’était un label de réconciliation avec soi . . .”

‘Happiness, at its heart, is like Knowledge: it is not far away, one must know how to find it: Knowledge is not far away, it is only hidden. *The Sweetness of Home*, it was a label of reconciliation with oneself’ (*Douceurs* 217).¹⁰ Through this series of statements, Sow Fall posits that a relationship with *la terre* enables humankind to gain wisdom or knowledge about themselves that other, artificial landscapes keep hidden. This parallels the narrative progression from *dépôt* to *Naatangué*, where first the deportees are faced with self-doubt and confusion but recover their lost dignity and sense of worth through an intimate relationship with the inartificial landscape of Senegal. Author David Abram’s work also studies the differences between Western and traditional cultures and the impact of the latter’s close relationship with inartificial landscapes. Although Abram focuses mainly on oral societies rather than traditional peoples that have been Westernized to some extent, his observations of cultures which remain intimately connected to nature are pertinent for discussing the more organic aspects of *Naatangué*. Abram writes:

But for those indigenous cultures still participant with the more-than-human life-world, for those peoples that have not yet shifted their synaesthetic focus from the animate earth to a purely human set of signs, the riddles of the under-the-ground and the beyond-the-horizon (the inside of things and the other side of things) are felt as vast and powerful mysteries . . . (217)

Asta and her friends cannot be categorized as part of the indigenous peoples of which Abram writes, but their rejection of a wholly Western landscape in exchange for one more closely connected with natural surroundings provides valid evidence for an analysis using Abram’s interpretation. Though *Naatangué* is not an African paradise free from Western influence, its

inhabitants' proximity to more natural land enables them to unlock the "mine d'or sans le savoir" 'a gold mine without knowing it' (*Douceurs* 213) beneath the soil, the richness of the earth.

Closeness to nature therefore becomes the key to understanding its truths. The "sweetness" of one's home, homeland, or home soil, is the realization of this truth—the ability to gain knowledge and wisdom about oneself through connecting with one's environmental context. At the airport, Asta refers to the treatment she endured from one of the officials "une insulte à l'intelligence et à la dignité humaine" 'an insult to intelligence and to human dignity' (*Douceurs* 62), but the natural setting of *Naatangué* teaches her (and the others) to reclaim knowledge and dignity. Author Mildred Mortimer writes, "In *Douceurs du bercail*, her protagonist, Asta, is a woman who, like the writer herself, believes in the land and its people, her optimism rooted in a solid appraisal of human capabilities" (*Writing from the Hearth* 152), a correct interpretation, but to further Mortimer's words, I add that Sow Fall believes not just in the land, but in the land's ability to teach its people about the magnificence of human existence. Towards the end of *Douceurs du bercail*, Anne recognizes that *Naatangué* has proved the adage "la terre ne ment pas" 'the land does not lie' (*Douceurs* 188) to be true. She affirms its ability to teach its residents truths about human existence when she says:

Je reviendrai avec Didier pour lui faire découvrir ce qu'il y a de sublime chez vous: cette chaleur venue du cœur, cette manière de sentir l'autre, de le respecter, de le soutenir moralement, ces gestes, ces paroles, ces rires francs, ces bonheurs qui sauvent de la désolation d'un monde de détresse où grondent la misère et l'angoisse . . .

I will come back with Didier to make him aware of what is sublime here: this warmth that comes from the heart, this way of being conscious of others, of

respecting them, of supporting them morally, these gestures, these words, these honest laughs, these pleasures that save a world of distress, where misery and anxiety rumble, from desolation . . . (*Douceurs* 198)

It is significant that Anne recognizes the truths that *Naatangué* teaches when she visits since she comes from the European land that does not always tell the truth about existence. Anne's summation of what the land at *Naatangué* accomplishes for its inhabitants supports Asta's belief that natural landscapes heal and teach in a way that more artificial contexts cannot.

The power of the land at *Naatangué* to reshape, enrich, and teach its inhabitants and the fact that it "does not lie" as the European space of the airport does not free it from the complications arising from Sow Fall's problematic use of environmental thought and language in *Douceurs du bercail*. *Naatangué* provides positive outcomes for its inhabitants, but the way they conceive of it in Western terms blurs the contrast between the European world of cold concrete with the quasi-paradisiacal "natural" land in Senegal. Yet even with as *Naatangué*'s inhabitants shape, measure, irrigate, and construct it, the elements of its original natural purity (growth, abundance, fertility, immanence of deities) survive in the African space, having vanished from European landscapes. In this way, Sow Fall argues through *Naatangué* that a space able to accommodate or adapt to inevitable Western influences is perhaps more realistically viable for Africa's future than a Voltairian garden would be.

Conclusion

Sow Fall's descriptions both of the airport and *Naatangué* reveal a paradoxical environmental conception of these spaces. While the language used to describe the airport consistently characterizes it as a place of order and artificiality, "Asta est dans les caves de l'aéroport. Un espace rectangulaire surpeuplé d'hommes, de femmes et d'enfants" 'Asta is in the

cellar of the airport. A rectangular space overcrowded with men, women and children' (*Douceurs* 39), the description of *Naatangué* shifts in the course of the narrative. The first description of the landscape Sow Fall offers emphasizes its difference from the measured, rectangular space of the airport. She writes, "Paysage nu, silencieux, énigmatique sous la ronde des oiseaux" 'Bare landscape, silent, enigmatic under the round dance of the birds' (*Douceurs* 193). Initially, then, *Naatangué* acts as a natural, unbounded space which contrasts the calculated concrete corners of the Western city. Even the roundness of the birds' flight contrasts the rectangular space of the airport. Sow Fall indeed intends for *Naatangué* to stand in opposition to the airport, but as Asta and her fellow deportees from the airport begin to shape the land through the implementation of Western ideas espousing exploitation of landscapes at the expense of natural growth, the initially stark difference between the two spaces becomes increasingly blurred and complex. The outcomes that Anne mentions in her impressions of *Naatangué*: respect, morality, close relationships, etc., are only complicated by the land's simultaneous natural character and modern Western influence.

Thus *Naatangué* appears neither as a haven from the modern world of concrete nor as a wholly Western space disconnected from its rural environmental context, but as a perplexing hybrid of both worlds. Illustrative of this fact is the question the local *Sénégalais* ask to Asta and her friends when they move to the rural of Bakhna, "Quand vous allez exploiter ce terrain, est-ce que vous allez tout raser pour y mettre d'autres choses à la place, des choses qui rapportent de l'argent?" 'When you develop this plot of land, are you going to cut down everything to put other things in place, things which bring in money?' (*Douceurs* 205). These more traditional Africans recognize in Asta and her companions pronounced Western influences, exhibiting a protective attitude towards the land they fear will be demolished by these "*Waa Reewu Takh*"

‘those who come from concrete villages’ (*Douceurs* 203).¹¹ Yakham assures the local residents that a complete demolition of the landscape will not occur, that they rather wish to “enrichir le site” ‘enrich the site’ (*Douceurs* 206). While enriching or improving the site appears to be a noble pursuit, it is important to note that this attitude implies that the undeveloped land needs improvement and is unprofitable in such a state. Thus while *Naatangué* functions as a regenerative space, restoring to Asta and the other detainees their lost dignity, an environmental reading of *Naatangué* reveals instability and ideological contradictions in the land which in Oulof means “bonheur, abundance, paix” ‘happiness, abundance, and peace’ (*Douceurs* 197). This attention to the environmental language in *Douceurs du bercail* proves that *Naatangué* acts as a hybridized space influenced both by traditional and modern forces, and while its positive effect on Asta and her friends need not be devalued, its aggressive and sometimes violent transformation of the virgin landscape cannot be ignored.

This duality of conflicting cultural forces at *Naatangué* exhibits Sow Fall’s sophisticated treatment of the environment in *Douceurs du bercail*. Oblivious though she may have been to environmental literary criticism while writing the book (indeed, early ecocritical texts, such as those mentioned by Glotfelty, might not have even been available in French at the time), the environment’s function in *Douceurs du bercail* contributes important transnational breadth to ecocritical studies—a branch of criticism which has itself admitted that its narrowly American scope needs widening.¹² Sow Fall’s paradoxical treatment of the environment in *Douceurs du bercail*, puzzling as it may be, exhibits not only a hybridization of traditional and modern land ethics, but exemplifies Sow Fall’s blurring of genres.

The environmental paradoxes which abound in *Douceurs du bercail* adumbrate significant complications existing between literature and the environment—complications that

ecocriticism began to address in the latter decades of the twentieth century, many of which have yet to be explored—but the problematic nature of Sow Fall’s representations and descriptions of the environmental in the novel also alludes to the complexity of thought and analysis in her fiction. Sow Fall seems to remain purposely abstruse in her treatment of various topics in an effort to compel her readers to draw personal, and therefore idiosyncratic, conclusions. As evidenced by Nixon’s article, Sow Fall aggregates diverse environmental themes in *Douceurs du bercail*, combining hybridity and purity, displacement and place, and others, evidencing the incredible breadth of concepts which Sow Fall approaches in the novel. Within the broad range of her discussion, Sow Fall contradicts herself at times, especially when she uses aggressive, production-driven language to describe the development of the land at *Naatangué*. The mechanical, violent, and Western language she uses to describe the process by which the community becomes productive, “En quelques mois Asta et compagnie avaient vendu assez de *guewê* pour acheter d’autres outils et payer des manœuvres expérimentés pour creuser, depuis le fleuve, un canal” ‘Within a few months Asta and company had sold enough *guewê* to buy other tools and to pay seasoned workers to dig, from the river, a canal’ (*Douceurs* 216), encumbers Sow Fall’s argument that the space offers its residents an alternative to the mechanized, rectangular, concrete world of Western civilization. Despite its complications, however, *Naatangué* does provide Asta and her friends with a healing context wherein dignity is regained. In this way, the Western ideologies that subtly permeate *Naatangué* reinforce its ability to encompass various modes of thought while retaining, to a certain degree, its “natural” character.

Thus in *Douceurs du bercail*, *Naatangué* embodies Sow Fall’s complex and often puzzling treatment of environmental issues. In the novel, nature becomes both a personified character who imparts truths to its inhabitants as well as a site for hybridization and progress.

Since Asta fears that Africans (especially the younger generations) “ne sentent plus de lien avec notre terre” ‘no longer feel a connection to our land’ (*Douceurs* 185), she sees the establishment of *Naatangué* not as a cultural regression to a prelapsarian past which avoids confrontation with Western influences, but as an effort to move forward towards a future which must inevitably cope with and understand Western modes of thought. Sow Fall compromises the purity of the natural land at *Naatangué* by developing and Westernizing it, and in so doing argues on a symbolic level that Africa must exchange nostalgia for pre-colonial traditional life for hybridization and compromise if it is to progress towards success, fulfillment, and the recovery of human dignity lost during colonization. In *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall chooses to explore the paradoxes of modern African existence and search for plausible solutions to Africa’s challenges; in doing so, her writing becomes contradictory and vague at points, but her narrative mirrors the difficulty her African characters face as they search for meaning and direction in a paradoxical post-colonial world. *Naatangué* epitomizes this search for meaning as it incorporates questions not only regarding its inhabitants’ relationship to nature and the truths that it teaches them, but also those concerning the healing of racial tensions and the significance of feminine influence. Sow Fall’s writing perhaps raises more questions about its use of the environment than it answers, but her willingness to explore the ambiguities of nature’s role in literature makes *Naatangué* an intriguing and thought-provoking liminal space which incorporates aspects of both tradition and modernity.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

What I have argued in this study is that Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail* does not profess to offer any eschatological pronouncement on Africa's fate, but rather a viable method towards achieving real progress. Sow Fall argues throughout the novel that both tradition and modernity are vital, and that the complete rejection of Western influences will only further inhibit African progress. Sow Fall's subtle but constant acknowledgment of paradox in *Douceurs du bercail* proves that the unresolved complications of modern African existence reflect the need for understanding and compromise between the former colonizing European powers and the formerly colonized African nations. Through the examination of the complications race, gender, and nature, Sow Fall argues that hybridization is, at least abstractly, the key to Africa's future progression. Sow Fall sets up *Naatangué* as one embodiment of this mentality of hybridization where Asta and the other former deportees mix Western and African ideas about race, womanhood, and the environment despite the complications created by their juxtaposition. This confrontation rather than avoidance of paradoxes is central to understanding Sow Fall's novel as she posits multiple times the idea that the rejection of a conflicting influence will only prolong a static state.

In my chapter on race, I interpret Sow Fall's creation of racially problematic situations as indicative of both the persistence of racism in the post-colonial societies of Africa and Europe and the viability of its dissolution in the future. At *Naatangué*, for example, Yakham suggests that the inhabitants of the alternative community "Implanter d'autres cultures, d'autres espèces pour enrichir le site" 'introduce other cultures, other species to enrich the site' (*Douceurs* 206). Here Sow Fall hints that although *Naatangué* begins as a space wrought with racial anxiety

where its inhabitants reject the white social structures that humiliated them in France, the implanting of foreign plant life alludes to the expansion of racial diversity and understanding in the future. Sow Fall's rendering of racial conflict at *Naatangué* therefore argues that any viable solution to racism must be gradual but persistent. Thus, although *Naatangué* is problematic in terms of race since its inhabitants are all of African descent, Yakham's idea to implant from other cultures as well as Anne's visit point towards a future where racial tension at the site can be resolved. By characterizing *Naatangué* in this way, Sow Fall implicitly reinforces the idea that she views racism as a fault of Africans as well as Europeans—she places responsibility on the black inhabitants of *Naatangué* to explore racial and cultural sensitivity rather than apportioning all racist culpability on the white Europeans. In this way, Sow Fall's objective study of racism and possible solutions to it evinces her propensity towards hybridization as an essential element in combating contemporary racism.

In my chapter on gender, I focus on the expansion of feminine ideologies as part of Sow Fall's vision for African progress. My discussion of the inadequacies of feminist readings of *Douceurs du bercail* argues that in Sow Fall's opinion, the modern African woman must search for self-understanding not within the boundaries of the Western ideological framework called "feminism," but in a "place beyond" (Mortimer, "Domestic Matters" 76) those limitations. Sow Fall crafts an interesting place beyond feminist ideologies for her protagonist Asta Diop, who exhibits some feminist tendencies but who values traditionalism as well. For example, Asta asserts her independence by divorcing her suffocating and what she calls "enslaving" husband, yet later in the narrative chooses an interdependent, communal lifestyle rather than one of complete independence.¹ Throughout the novel, Sow Fall exhibits an awareness of what some critics would consider feminist tendencies in her narration and characterizations, but

purposefully contradicts them in order to comment on the practicality of using a Western critical framework to interpret a non-Western text. In this way, Sow Fall again emphasizes the paradoxes of modern feminine existence as indicative of an opportunity to expand the boundaries of understanding womanhood. Again, Sow Fall uses *Naatangué* as an example of a space in which Asta, or in which any woman, can explore the vastness of feminine existence without the constraints of feminist precepts. At *Naatangué*, Asta trades independence for interdependence, reneges on her promise not to marry again, asserts her feminine influence in a leadership role, and regains her lost dignity, a combination of events that defies categorization as feminist, non-feminist, or even womanist. Through Asta, Sow Fall argues that the role gender will play in Africa's future must be expansive rather than restricted—and that African women cannot and should not be understood only in terms of Western feminist ideologies.

Finally, in my chapter on nature I recognize Sow Fall's paradoxical—and most likely inadvertent—characterization of the environment both as a regenerative paradise and a vehicle for the spread of Western conceptions of land ownership. While Sow Fall may have been ignorant of environmental literary criticism while writing *Douceurs du bercail*, her treatment of nature in the novel reinforces her fascination with paradox and proves that she herself may be more influenced by Western modes of thinking than she has considered. In fact, the aggressively Westernized language that Asta and her friends use to describe the act of developing the virgin land at *Naatangué* only cements the idea that Western thinking has already influenced their African space to a degree that, were they aware of it, may be disquieting. In any case, the duality of *Naatangué*, both as a paradise and as an untamed site that Robinson Crusoe must partition and enclose, again reinforces the idea that nature's function cannot be only one or the other but a combination of both. Sow Fall does not argue that Africa must regress, rejecting the concrete

mentality of Western society, nor that it must adopt Westernization absolutely. Rather, *Naatangué* acts symbolically as a beginning for Africa's future continued progression by embracing the inevitability of Westernization but preserving a closer connection to nature than the concrete cities experience. Sow Fall argues that although it is vital economically for Africa to adopt Westernization to a certain extent, ties with nature must also be preserved or the truths that they teach humanity about its own existence will be lost.

While Sow Fall's fiction remains rather obscure to Western scholars, her sophisticated treatment of race, gender, and nature in *Douceurs du bercail* proves that her literature is significant not only for her African audiences, but for Western readers as well. Her tendency to reject categorization allows her fiction a greater breadth of scholarly study than Western critics have perhaps afforded it. Her commentary on feminism's questionable place in African context especially emphasizes her invitation to readers to re-think the way they approach her texts. Indeed, Sow Fall's use of paradoxical thematic and narrative elements throughout *Douceurs du bercail* demands flexibility in terms of interpretation; the text refuses to mean only one thing or to put forth concrete conclusions. Instead, Sow Fall invites paradox into the text, using the contradictions inherent in the clash between white and black, feminist and feminine, virgin nature and developed land to expand the boundaries of the theoretical strategies her readers use to interpret it.

As an American critic, I necessarily approach *Douceurs du bercail* from a Westernized background, my reading influenced by extant Western critical theories on race, gender, and nature. Mirroring the textual paradoxes I analyze in Sow Fall's text, my own examination of the text functions paradoxically as I use Western theories to aid my study while recognizing the complications of applying these theoretical frameworks in a non-Western context. This

recognition is perhaps one of the most important lessons that *Douceurs du bercail* has taught me—not that Western modes of thought are inapplicable to non-Western texts, but that they must be questioned, analyzed, and expanded rather than simply accepted as true. Sow Fall invites her readers to examine their own strategies of literary judgment and analysis as the narrative of *Douceurs du bercail* unfolds, presenting conflicting perspectives about racial issues, feminism, and environmental thought throughout. More than presenting to her audience a fixed opinion on any of these issues, in *Douceurs du bercail* Sow Fall instead celebrates their complexity.

Through my study of the novel, I have learned, above all, to practice in my own reading Sow Fall's openness to various ways of understanding and analyzing significant social issues. Moving forward, it is Sow Fall's ability to maintain flexibility and adaptability in her arguments that I hope to incorporate in my own thinking, writing, and criticism.

Notes - Chapter I

¹See *Douceurs du bercail* pg. 201. Asta says, “Je voulais le convaincre que le Paradis n’est pas forcément ailleurs” ‘I want to convince him that paradise is not necessarily elsewhere.’

² In her book *Emerging Perspectives* Azodo mentions an English translation forthcoming on pg. 290.

³Sow Fall, Aminata. *L’appel des arènes*. Dakar: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1982.

Notes – Chapter II

¹See Bhabha, Homi K. in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* for further discussion. Bhabha essentially argues against the idea that racial groups, nationalities, cultures etc. are cohesive or that they are defined by set guidelines. Rather, Bhabha argues that all such groups are in a constant state of flux, constantly influencing and influenced by one another.

²See Azodo, 293

³See especially *Douceurs* pg. 88 where Asta emphasizes that the *group* will accomplish its goal of “shared dignity,” and that it will not be an individual endeavor.

⁴Chapter 6 of *Douceurs du bercail* chronicles Yakham’s story of how he arrived at the *dépôt*. After his scholarship to study abroad was “lost” and transferred to a student with better connections, Yakham obtained false papers in order to work in France. He tells of the backbreaking labor he performed there and the racial profiling he experienced on a regular basis.

⁵See *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon. Fanon discusses the creation of what he calls the “national bourgeoisie” in post-colonial countries where the native middle class takes over and then emulates the structures set up by its former colonizers. This idea that post-independence nations promulgate the social, racial, and economic systems set up by their colonizers is

important to Sow Fall's treatment of race since she characterizes a dependence on European societal models as detrimental to Africans' belief in their own capacity for progress and success.

⁶On page 76 of *Douceurs du bercail*, Anne and Didier are turned away from the *premier secrétaire*'s "executive secretary" office with the explanation that only the ambassador can attend to this issue. Anne argues that something must be done, but the people at the ambassador's office turn them away, assuring them that they will "attempt something" to help Asta's situation.

⁷See page 158- of *Douceurs du bercail*. Asta explains that there exists "une autre Afrique" 'another Africa' which outsiders do not see on the television coverage of poverty and war. Asta explains her belief in Africa's potential, although she admits that it is inhibited by *le parasitisme*.

Notes – Chapter III

¹ See Beeman, Mark for Marxist criticism of Sow Fall's *La grève des battus* and Ellington, Athleen for an anti-feminist critique of Sow Fall.

² For further discussion of African women and domesticity in literature, see Mortimer's article "Domestic Matters: Representations of Home."

³ The *griot* of *Naatangué*, Dianor, "sees" a connection between Asta and Babou and informs Asta, "Tu crois que je n'ai pas remarqué le manière dont Babou te regarde? 'You think I haven't noticed the way Babou looks at you?' on pg. 222 of *Douceurs du bercail*. On pg. 223, Sow Fall narrates, "Peu de temps après Asta avait épousé Babou" 'Not long after, Asta had married Babou.'

⁴It must be noted that Ellington's article was published long before *Douceurs du bercail*, in 1992, and therefore cannot take into account the more progressive female figures in Sow Fall's 1998 novel. However, Ellington's argument is pertinent to a discussion of conflicting views

about Sow Fall's treatment of women because it examines the author's work in general terms, drawing conclusions about her opinion of feminism and women's issues.

⁵In my research, I found no references to or discussion of Asta's marriage with Babou in the last chapter of *Douceurs du bercail*.

Notes – Chapter IV

¹For feminist readings, see Guèye, Hall, Mortimer, and Orlando's *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls*; for post-colonial readings see Edwards; for racial readings see Orlando's "Writing New H(er)stories For Francophone Women of Africa and the Caribbean."

²See Voltaire's novella "Candide, or Optimism" in *The Complete Tales of Voltaire*, trans by William Walton, 3 vols., New York: Howard Fertig, 1990. "When they all retire together to a simple life on a small farm, they discover that the secret of happiness is to 'cultivate one's garden,' a practical philosophy that excludes excessive idealism and nebulous metaphysics" from *Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, 1995.

³The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that the term "utopia" was first coined by English author Sir Thomas More as an imaginary island enjoying a perfect social, legal, and political system. Other definitions include "an impossibly idea scheme, esp. for social improvement" and "any imaginary, indefinitely-remote region, country, or locality."

⁴Glotfelty mentions two journals, *ASLE: Association for the Study of Literature and Environment* and *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* as the major scholarly periodicals treating environmental issues in literature.

⁵In his book *An Ecocritical and Postcolonial Study of Literature* Robert Marzec discusses the importance of naming land as a way of mechanizing and controlling land in his subchapter entitled “The Material Mechanism That Holds It All Together: Adam Naming the Land,” 65-71.

⁶On pg. 194 of *Douceurs du bercail*, Sow Fall provides a footnoted translation for the Oulof word *séane* as “puits naturel,” which I have translated to “natural spring.”

⁷See Marzec’s *An Ecological and Postcolonial Study of Literature* for an in-depth discussion of what he calls the “Robinson Crusoe Syndrome.” Essentially, he sets up Defoe’s character Crusoe, who cannot comprehend the untamed landscape of a strange island until he encloses, plots out, measures, and apportions it, as symbolic of the European land mentality.

⁸On pg. 60, Edwards translates “la terre ne ment pas” as [the land does not lie], using the same wording I have chosen to render the French phrase into English.

⁹*Guêwe* is a rare and expensive herb used for incense and decoration that Asta and her friends discover growing on their land at *Naatangué*. It becomes their most profitable product and its sales enable them to buy tools and irrigation equipment to further develop the land. See page 211 in *Douceurs du bercail*.

¹⁰On page 217 of *Douceurs du bercail* Sow Fall footnotes her translation of the Oulof *kham kham sore woul, dafa lakhou* as “le Savoir n’est pas loin, il est seulement caché,” which I have translated as “Knowledge is not far away, it is only hidden.”

¹¹On page 203, Sow Fall footnotes the phrase *Waa Reewu Takh* as “ceux des villes en béton,” which I translate, ‘those who come from concrete villages.’

¹²Both Glotfelty and Deloughrey et al. recognize the limitations of a body of criticism that has been dominated by American, English-speaking writers and hope that the field will continue to expand transnationally.

Notes – Chapter V

¹On pg. 168 of *Douceurs du bercail*, Asta declares, “Je suis devenue une esclave qui vit à ta charge . . .” ‘I have become a slave dependent upon you . . .’

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