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Gender Relation in National Epics: A Comparative Reading of *Beowulf* and *Sundiata*

Peace Sorochi Longdet, PhD[1]

[1] Department of English, Federal College of Education, Pankshin, Nigeria; peacelongdet2011@gmail.com; +2348036136915

Address for Correspondence:

Dr. Peace Sorochi Longdet, Department of English, Federal College of Education, Pankshin, Nigeria. (peacelongdet2011@gmail.com; +2348036136915)

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Abstract Through the lens of a womanist theoretical framework, an attempt is being made to examine comparatively two national epics; *Beowulf* and *Sundiata* from different geographical backgrounds. The focus is to extrapolate women's depiction in the world of these epics, which demands the re-evaluation of thoughts and involvement of women in the epics. The study reveals that the women's role in *Beowulf* and *Sundiata,* have been underestimated. Many of the women had more power than one would expect during this time. The roles are central to the stories and fostering egalitarian harmonious societies, where all "birds fly freely without colliding". The women in the epics play complementary roles as hostesses; they serve as a political instrument that brings hospitality and order to the land, and as peacemaker, weave themselves between lands to form alliances. Also, as mothers, they are emotionally committed to nurturing and preserving life. The overall objective of the study thus, is to highlight that women are depicted as strong and active characters in a genre otherwise seen as masculine creations.

Keywords Gender, National epics, contrapuntal reading, womanist theory, complementarity

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Introduction

This study argues that 'contrapuntal reading' is essential to a World Literature approach. By 'worlding' two of the well-circulated epics of the Anglo-Saxon and Malian societies, the study explores various ways women have sought to re-evaluate univocal interpretations of epics and counter 'passive identities', through gender solidarity. One way of envisioning the perspective of World Literature might be to consider it as literature that is essentially contrapuntal. Said (2003) presents the idea of 'contrapuntal' reading as a way to reveal the discrepant cultural experiences expressed in the text, and simultaneously as a way out of the essentialist binaries which certain critical reading might enforce:

> A comparative or, better, contrapuntal perspective is required in order to see a connection between [for example] coronation rituals in England and the Indian durbars of the late nineteenth century. That is, we must be able to think through and interpret discrepant experiences together, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others. (36)

Therefore, to find out how women are depicted in these two epics from different geographical settings, contrapuntal or comparative reading is adopted. The reading focuses on the main experiences of women as narrated in the texts with a newer eye to the other experiences it suppresses or alongside which takes place and revisits the past with an eye to the present and future.

There is a general notion that women throughout the history of mankind have been relegated to the background either through design or patriarchal structures. In the field of literary works, the situation had been the same, as women have been left miles apart by their male counterparts. Recently, however, women have immersed themselves in the literary world and started producing works of art with world recognition and laurels. Despite this laudable inclusion, women, have continued to be depicted or presented in works of art as a weaker sex and are always prone to deceit and treachery, unlike the male characters. In oral literature, men are portrayed as being strong both in terms of will and physical strength, and they always come to the help of women characters who because of their weak character, are always prone to treachery from monsters, ogres, and other tricksters. This concept is often common in the epic genre where the totality of the tale and subsequent critical attention focus on the male and their heroic exploits. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the epic also contains several female characters. The role of the female characters has not been given adequate critical attention, due to the primary focus on the male hero and his actions, which has led many scholars to underestimate female roles or wrongly classify them as too passive and suffering.

Molly Steur writes that women are highly involved in this story, yet they are held back from power by men. Furthermore, because the tale was not told to us by women, the female perspective is largely unavailable except through the mouths of men. The women in *Beowulf*, whether illegitimate monsters or pedigreed peace-weaving queens are all marginal, excluded figures. The women have no place in the death-centred, masculine economy of Beowulf; they have no space to occupy, to speak from they must be continually translated by and into the male economy. Scholars such as Overing, Edvard Irving, Michael Enrigh, and Johann Köberl classify women in *Beowulf* as helpless victims of the society they live in. They point out that they are dependent on men, being mere "instruments of the kings" and "extensions of their husbands" (Porter). Subsequently, all their roles are said to be doomed to failure or futile. This study however does not share these sentiments, hinging on the womanist theoretical perspective, the works argue that female characters in the epic genre occupy a position of influence and contribute immensely to the heroic deeds of the heroes in the tales. Chosen for this study, therefore, are two national epics *Beowulf* and *Sundiata* from different geographical settings. Though *Beowulf* and *Sundiata* come from extremely different times and places, both were written by men and for men, so they are decidedly androcentric in perspective. There are common denominators within the ancient Anglo-Saxon and African constructs of masculinity that contributed to the characteristics of these renowned heroes, and an examination of these attributes reveals that heroism is, essentially, constructed masculinity. The study agrees that the world of the epics is masculine, however, the argument of this work is an attempt to extrapolate the depiction of women not as weaklings and passive observers in the tales, but as strong and active participants. This study argues that even though women are not of primary concern in the chosen epics, they are an integral and substantial part of the tales.

The Epics

The two great epics, *Beowulf* of the Old English and *Sundiata* of Mali bristle with irony. Beowulf is the longest and the most outstanding epic poem in Old English literature. Following the principles of heroic poetry, the Beowulf poet

primarily focuses on the deeds of the male hero. The society depicted in the poem reflects heroic values, especially courage, loyalty, and generosity. The primary relationship, which concerns the poet most, exists between men between a lord and his loyal retainers. The poet does not describe those aspects of the Anglo-Saxon society which are beyond the scope of the epic poetry such as peasants or slaves. He is absorbed in the world of warriors. Beowulf, a heroic poem, the highest achievement of Old English literature and the earliest European vernacular epic. It deals with events of the early 6th century and is believed to have been composed between 700 and 750 BC. It did not appear in print until 1815. Although originally untitled, it was later named after the Scandinavian hero Beowulf, whose exploits and character provide its connecting theme. There is no evidence of a historical Beowulf, but some characters, sites, and events in the poem can be historically verified.

The poem falls into two parts. It opens in Denmark, where King Hrothgar's splendid mead hall, Heorot, has been ravaged for 12 years by nightly visits from an evil monster, Grendel, who carries off Hrothgar's warriors and devours them. Unexpectedly, young Beowulf, a prince of the Geats of southern Sweden, arrives with a small band of retainers and offers to cleanse Heorot of its monster. The King is astonished at the little-known hero's daring but welcomes him, and after an evening of feasting, much courtesy, and some discourtesy, the King retires, leaving Beowulf in charge. During the night Grendel comes from the moors, tears open the heavy doors, and devours one of the sleeping Geats. He then grapples with Beowulf, whose powerful grip he cannot escape. He wrenches himself free, tearing off his arm, and leaves, mortally wounded.

The next day is one of rejoicing in Heorot. But at night as the warriors sleep, Grendel's mother comes to avenge her son, killing one of Hrothgar's men. In the morning Beowulf seeks her out in her cave at the bottom of a mere and kills her. He cuts the head from Grendel's corpse and returns to Heorot. The Danes rejoice once more. Hrothgar makes a farewell speech about the character of the true hero, as Beowulf, enriched with honours and princely gifts, returns home to King Hygelac of the Geats.

The second part passes rapidly over King Hygelac's subsequent death in a battle (of historical record), the death of his son, and Beowulf's succession to the kingship and his peaceful rule of 50 years. But now a fire-breathing dragon ravages his land and the doughty but aging Beowulf engages it. The fight is long and terrible and a painful contrast to the battles of his youth. Painful, too, is the desertion of his retainers except for his young kinsman Wiglaf. Beowulf kills the dragon but is mortally wounded. The poem ends with his funeral rites and a lament.

Beowulf belongs metrically, stylistically, and thematically to the inherited Germanic heroic tradition. Many incidents, such as Beowulf's tearing off the monster's arm and his descent into the mere, are familiar motifs from folklore. The ethical values are manifestly the Germanic code of loyalty to chief and tribe and vengeance to enemies. Beowulf himself seems more altruistic than other Germanic heroes or the heroes of the *Iliad.* Significantly, his three battles are not against men, which would entail the retaliation of the blood feud, but against evil monsters, enemies of the whole community, and of civilization itself. Many critics have seen the poem as a Christian allegory, with Beowulf as the champion of goodness and light against the forces of evil and darkness. His sacrificial death is not seen as tragic but as the fitting end of a good (some would say "too good") hero's life.

On the other hand, the Sundiata's story comes in various versions and shapes. This plurality may be explained by both the bard's allegiance or taste and the geographical spot where the story unfolds. The story comprises slight differences according to one who listens to it in Gambia, Mali, or Guinea. This work focuses on Tamsir Niane's version, which is in French and the first recorded account of the story taken to scholarly attention. Niane's account is mostly a narrative, unlike the later versions which have Western poetical patterns. Originally handed down through the generations orally, *The Epic of Sundiata* is the story of Sundiata Keita and the building of the Empire of Mali in the thirteenth century. Based on history, the epic was undoubtedly embellished to forge a dramatic entity. The *Sundiata*, tells the story of the rise of Sundiata from the position of a despised cripple to that of the king of Niani and founder of the Mali empire. Maghan, king of Niani, received the gift of a woman by the name of Sogolon from two hunter-brothers, who had got her as their prize for killing a buffalo, which had been causing considerable havoc in Do and its vicinity. She was a very ugly woman with a hunchback to boot, but, influenced by the assurance of soothsayers that she would be the mother of a great son, Maghan accepted the unusual present and they got married. Their son proved to be a colossal disappointment, indeed a veritable embarrassment to his parents. He was a cripple with an insatiable appetite and an unroyal personality. This notwithstanding, Maghan persisted in his optimism and designated him his successor to the throne, but by the time of his demise, Sundiata was still a cripple. Maghan's wish to be succeeded by Sundiata was not respected and Dankaran Touman, Sundiata's senior half-brother, was elevated to the throne. Sundiata's problems were compounded by the hostility of his stepmother, who relegated Sundiata and

his mother to an obscure part of the palace. Sundiata, however, was not to remain a cripple *ad infinitum*. At the age of seven, on a day when his step-mother callously humiliated his mother by taunting her with his physical disability, he rose, supporting himself with a huge iron bar, began to walk and, in a remarkable display of superhuman strength, transplanted a baobab tree, root and branch, to a point close to his mother's residence so that Sogolon would have a ready supply of baobab leaves, the source of her humiliation. Sundiata and Sogolon were subsequently banished from Niani and they wandered from kingdom to kingdom. Generally, they received warm hospitality. Eventually, the people of Niani offered Sundiata kingship, and he clashed in arms with Soumaoro, who had subjugated Niani and incorporated her into his domains, defeated him, and became the founder of the Mali empire.

The epic closes with a gathering of kings near the town of Ka-ba. Here, king after king pays homage to Sundiata as the Empire of Mali is formed. In the glorious celebration that follows, all look to Sundiata to establish a period of peace, justice, and prosperity on the broad grasslands of northwestern Africa. The hero has overcome personal and public adversity to fulfil the prophecy made by the original hunters who visited the court of Maghan Kon Fatta.

The great epic *Beowulf* and *Sundiata*, each representing two different cultures, *Beowulf* forms the background of Paganism and Christianity, and *Sundiata* Muslim culture of Mali, teaches lessons to the whole of humanity of societal harmony and interpersonal relations where everyone lives for the other, unlike the case of individual self-centered humans. In both societies, women are often considered unimportant. However, the women in both epics manage to stand out because they portray themselves as important through the roles they perform. They use the power of womanhood in their culture to remain important.

Theoretical Framework

This study is located within the African womanist research theoretical perspectives. The study posits that the depiction of women in national epics is not gender-neutral/blind. The study is informed by African womanist concerns over the experiences of ordinary women. Womanism as a literary theory, was introduced in literary studies by Alice Walker. It is dedicated to the survival and completeness of a whole people, male or female. According to Walker (1983), a womanist is a woman who "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strength... [and is] committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (xi).

A womanist, therefore, has a holistic approach to the struggles of the community. Womanism derives from womanists' concern with the reification that results from the misrepresentation of women and the male-female relationships in creative works of art. Clenora Hudson-Weems has also expounded on the theory of Africana womanism. She also emphasizes the complementary roles of women and men. Women and men need each other for a meaningful existence. She explains how Africana womanism came into being:

> Africana womanism emerged from the acknowledgement of a long-standing authentic agenda for that group of women of African descent who needed only to be properly named and officially defined according to their own unique historical and cultural matrix, one that would reflect the co-existence of men and women in a concerted struggle for the survival of their entire family/community. (1).

Walker's womanism and Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism both seek to promote the reciprocity of women and men. Armah (1979) captures this vision concisely when he maintains that it is not a question of which sex rules, but that the way is reciprocity. Principally, womanism differs from other forms of feminism that promote gender discrimination. As a philosophy, womanism celebrates black roots and insists on complementarity between women and men, if racial and social prejudices are to be adequately addressed. Nevertheless, there is a subtle difference between Walker's womanism and Hudson-Weems' African womanism. Although Walker appreciates the need for women and men of colour to work together within their communities, she is first and foremost concerned with the experiences of women of colour. This is different from Hudson-Weems who emphasises the interrelationship of women and men within their communities.

The theory of womanism is critical to this research as it facilitates an awareness of the status and contribution of women to society. More critically, it recognizes the need to engage men in the (re) construction of society. Agreeing with this submission, Kolawole (1997) claims that womanism does not reject the nurturing of life and motherhood, nor does it repudiate the family unit. She writes;

> It does not seek to achieve emancipation by hating men. … Womanism is centred on the need for positive gender self-definition with historical, geographical and cultural contexts (203).

The point emphasized here, is that womanism is not an association of male antipathy, but embraces men in their quest for a better society. Also, the liberation praxis of women must seek to build and nurture a healthy egalitarian society. As a Yoruba proverb when translated says, "The sky is so vast that all birds can fly without colliding". Women critics in interpreting and (re) reading creative works need to learn from the birds. The context within which they are is elastic enough to give women critics, possibilities, and choices. The fight for the rights of women need not diminish the rights of men because the planet is large enough for everybody to play their roles and build a healthy society, according to an Igbo proverb- "*Egbe bere ugo bere, nkesi ibe ya belie, nku kwaa ya"* (let the kite perch and let the eagle perch, but the one that hinders the other from perching loses its wings). The proverb emphasizes the recognition of the roles of men, women, and children.

Enriched by other different perspectives, the womanist agenda seeks to retrieve the multiple meanings of gender within socially defined relations between women and men (Gaidzanwa 1985). The research is, therefore, grounded in womanist theory, with a firm commitment to the re-evaluation of women's roles in epics bearing in mind that epic beyond the tale of heroism represents the culture and social norms of the community which it reflects. It is inspired by the realisation that literature is a key resource in unpacking gender values and norms that are influenced by cultural beliefs.

The Role of Women in National Epics

Women characters play various roles in national epics, including heroic roles, but audiences and scholars generally fail to note and appreciate the full extent of these roles, focusing instead, on male characters and their actions. The experiences and actions of men get more attention than those of women. Notions such as heroism are seen and understood from a masculine perspective. These biases are built into research tools such as the motif indexes and the hero pattern.

Mashindano (2000) in his article gives an example of the Ananse in the Ashanti tale "How Spider Obtained Sky-God Stories." The trickster Ananse goes on a quest to obtain Nyankonpon, Sky-God stories (25-27). Sky- God has declared that anyone who wants those stories must bring Onini, the python; Osebo, the leopard; Mmotia, the fairy; and Mmoboro, the hornets. Now these are tough creatures to capture, and everybody who has tried has failed, including powerful towns like Kokofu, Bekwai, Asumengya! So, what does Anansi do? He consults his wife Aso, who teaches Ananse how to accomplish each task, enabling Ananse to capture all creatures and present them to Sky-God, one after another. That is how Ananse obtained Sky-God stories. The problem, however, as Mbele noted is that researchers; have always focused attention on the male figure: and do not pay much attention to the role of the woman. We do not value the women's role as much as we do the men's roles. The stories may talk explicitly about women's roles, actions, and contributions, but these do not register in the readers' minds the same way men's roles, actions, and contributions do. We indeed have eyes and ears but we are conditioned neither to fully see nor fully hear the female characters, within the fabric of these texts. He further argues that in oral literature circles, scholars tend to view the epic as a male genre, concerned with and revolving around male heroes. Published epic songs and narratives tend to centre around male heroes, and studies of the epic have created and perpetuated the image of the hero as a male figure." (1).

"Odyssey" is the second (after the "Iliad") Greek epic poem, written by the ancient Greek poet Homer. It was written in the 8th century BC and talks about the adventures of a mythical hero named Odysseus during his trip home after the Trojan War, as well as the adventures of his wife, Penelope, who was waiting for Odysseus in Ithaca. For the Greeks, the epic of Homer was more than just an entertaining tale about gods, monsters, and people, it was some kind of cultural paradigm that showed human relationships. The Odyssey allows understanding of what is proper or improper in relationships between god and mortal, father and son, servant and master, guest and host, and man and woman. Women's role is vital in the development of this epic. The women in the Odyssey are unique in their personalities, intentions, and relationships with men. All women in this epic are different, but all of them help to define the role of the ideal woman.

The author depicts women as strong subjects; they are real substantive characters. Most women in this epic poem are tough, strong-willed, and are treated with the respect and seriousness they deserve. Despite traditions of ancient society, the author characterizes the women as the real counterparts of men: they have real feelings, and real plans and can accomplish men on their own.

The women form an important part of the folk epic "The Odyssey". Within the story, there are three main types of women: the goddess, the seductress, and the good hostess/wife. Each particular female character adds a different element and is essential to the telling of the story. In "The Odyssey" women played very important roles. Women were not meek little structures blended into the background, they were powerful and wise. They charmed and controlled the men, and took care of them; they provided submission, loyalty, and advice. Women were very wise in The Odyssey and it was rather different to the roles women most often played in other stories of that time. Characters of women in the poem help to understand the degree mortal women were respected and regarded in Ancient Greece.

In the ancient tale of *Gilgamesh,* women represent not only great wisdom and power but also temptation and ruin. In the ancient epic *Gilgamesh,* two women convey learning and wisdom. The Priestess Shamhat is the first woman who is sent to tame the wild man, Enkidu. She does this by going out into the wilderness where she "stripped off her robe and lay there naked [….] For seven days / [Enkidu] stayed erect and made love with her" (79). The sex act leads Enkidu into masculine manhood and signals a break with the uncivilized, animal world he has formerly inhabited. It is the beginning of the civilization process which continues to involve eating "human food," hygiene, and civic responsibility (85-6). Of course, before he goes with Shamhat to live with people, Enkidu tries to rejoin the wild animals, "But the gazelles / saw him and scattered" (79). His union with the priestess has brought Enkidu into domesticated life, for Enkidu comes to realize "that his mind had somehow grown larger, / he knew things now that an animal can't know" (79). Shamhat, in her role as a stand-in goddess, is a benevolent force that brings knowledge and civilization to a great hero, preparing him for the trials ahead.

The second prominent woman in *Gilgamesh* is the tavern keeper, Shiduri. Gilgamesh meets her while he is wandering after Enkidu's death looking for a means of immortality. When the King of Uruk explains himself and the nature of his journey, Shiduri questions his judgment, and explains what seems best to her:

> Humans are born, they live, then they die,
> This is the order that the gods have decreed.
> But until the end comes, enjoy your life,
> Spend it in happiness, not despair [….]
> That is the best way for a man to live. (168-9)

She encourages him to put away his grief and get on enjoying all the things he has in his life. Otherwise, he is just trying to run away from death. Though at the time Gilgamesh does not heed her, Shiduri offers him a treasure of practical wisdom in the way Campbell describes a woman who symbolizes the goddess. Of course, by rejecting her knowledge and her help, Gilgamesh suffers greatly and even fails in his attempt to make himself immortal.

Campbell (2016) in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, women play an integral role in the hero's progress on his journey. A meeting with her often occurs close to if not at the apex of the heroic quest. Campbell explains, "Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know" (116). It is a woman, then, who is the greatest aid to the hero since she can provide him with the information, he requires to change himself and the world. She becomes a stand-in for the mother goddess, a symbol of all the splendour and strength of the natural world. As Campbell describes, "She is the incarnation of the promise of perfection" (111). By joining with her, the hero is freed from the illusion of opposites and becomes the lord and knower of his fate. This union is achieved through a representational marriage with this goddess figure, and this is how the hero displays his "mastery over life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master" (120). It is through the woman that the hero understands himself and his quest.

At the same time, a woman with all her mystery, knowledge, and power can be threatening and beguiling. Campbell warns, "Fully to behold her would be a terrible accident for any person not spiritually prepared" (115). Just as nature can be dangerous and treacherous to those who travel in the wild with correct preparations, the goddess can be an agent of destruction. Campbell writes that the goddess-figure "is also the death of everything that dies" (114). The hero must recognize this aspect of the feminine and treat it appropriately by either rejecting her temptations or harnessing the power she represents.

In the Indian Epic Ramayana, women also play vital roles. Hazarika, (2014) writes that women in this epic *Ramayana* desire to achieve what they lack, revolt against the patriarchy and male dominance, enslave the male ego, and demolish culture and tradition anticipating transformation in the outlook of the male-dominated society. They are

passionate, lustrous, and philosophical and take emotional intelligence in their strive for survival and in search of identity in society. In the patriarchal era of *Ramayana*, women are struggling to establish their identity and space of honour. Depicting the patriarchal nature of Indian society, Valmiki's *Ramayana* represents 'Sita' as the ideal wife who follows her husband when he is exiled for fourteen years, upholds her chastity when she is abducted by the 'Rakshasa' king Ravana, goes through the ring of fire or the' Agnipariksha' to prove her chastity during the tenure of the abduction and even after passing all these tests quietly leaves her husband Lord Rama when he forces her to leave him after hearing the general public of his kingdom casting doubts on her character.

Also in another Indian epic Mahabharata, although the tale resonates around the male world; yet the few female characters are powerful indeed: the goddess Ganga, the Pandava's mother Kunti, the Princess Amba, and Pandava's common wife, Draupadi. In their roles as wives the female characters are described in these words:

> The wife is half the man. The best of friends.... the roots of the three ends of life, and of all that will help him in the other world. With a wife a man does mighty deeds...with a wife a man finds courage...a wife is the safest refuge...a man if lame with sorrow in his soul...or sick with disease, finds comfort in his wife...as a man parched with heat...finds relief in water...even a man in the grip of rage...will not be harsh to a woman...remembering that on her depend...the joys of love, happiness, and virtue...for woman is the everlasting field...in which the Self is born. (Devdutt, qtd in Challa 2015.)

In a similar vein, the Ozidi Saga tells the story of a cultural hero, (Ozidi) of the Ijaw people Niger Delta in southern Nigeria. The Ozidi Saga essentially narrates the successive fights, fourteen in all, between the hero Ozidi and some powerful figures that constitute a menace to life and leadership in his society. However, these heroic exploits were facilitated by his grandmother, Oreame, a woman of unequalled mystical powers. It was his grandmother that fortified him mythical to succeed in his heroic quest. Similarly in the Zaire Epic Mwindo, Iyangura, Mwindo's aunt. Provides Mwindo with motherly love, and a home-cooked meal, and helps him return home from the underworld.

From the above examples of women's roles in national epics across the globe it is pertinent to state that if viewed from a womanist lens, women do play complementary roles with the men's heroic characters. In concluding his paper, Muigai wa Gachanja noted that women and girls are not depicted negatively in folklore. We share in these sentiments. They are depicted as protectors of life. They also appear as carriers of wisdom, wit, and intelligence. And unlike men, they are not violent, rather they are compassionate and courageous, where courage is required. And through their wits have been able to achieve what the sword alone cannot attain.

The Place of Women in the Heroic Societies of Beowulf and Sundiata

Female characters, as well, seem to be inconspicuous at first sight. However, at a closer look, we realize that the Beowulf poet and the groit of Sundiata did not neglect them entirely. Most often, on the surface, it only appears that the women of *Beowulf* and Sundiata have only minor roles because their significance is either glossed over or specifically looked down upon by scholars and analysts. To look at the epics from this perspective degrades them of context and power, thus lessening their importance and connection to the Anglo-Saxon and Malian worlds. On the contrary, in early Anglo-Saxon and Oral African literature, there is a stern representation of the strong women in *Beowulf and Sundiata.* We are shown several female roles within the text, but none are more telling than those of Wealhtheow and Hygd, Sassouma, Sogolon Massiran, and Magnouma. Although it can be assumed that these women have a lesser position given the little that is said about them in comparison to Hrothgar and Beowulf, Sundiata, and other warrior Kings, they nevertheless have imperative roles within the tale whether positive or negative.

Epic narratives such as Beowulf and Sundiata are based on the principles of heroic society. The world of Beowulf and Sundiata is full of "heroic campaigns" (3), which are accomplished with daring courage and bravery. Beowulf and Sundiata have to go through many dangerous situations to win their glory and crowns. For Beowulf, the ultimate concern was to, live and die bravely. Personal fame and courage are among the main values of the society depicted in the poem. He strives for the glory because he does not want to be forgotten and that is why he tells Hrothgar: "For every one of us, living in this world / means waiting for our end. Let whoever can / win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, / that will be his best and only bulwark" (1386-1389). However, in contrast to personal fame, fame in Sundiata was not an individual quest but a collective one with the ultimate goal of salvaging the entire community from injustice and evil reign perpetrated by Soumaoro Kante "a great sorcerer" (38). The actions in the epics resonate around the male epic heroes, which ordinarily constitute the centre of the epic narration.

However, the influence of gender studies and feminist theories has incited scholars like Dorothy Carr Porter, Marijane Osborn, and Brian McFadden to assign women a more significant position. It was especially the role of a

peace weaver, which became a crucial term in their analysis since all the queens in Beowulf are shown to function in this role. The discussion of peace weaving has brought a new insight into the question of feminine power in Beowulf. This paper argues for these ideas and presents female figures in Beowulf and Sundiata as indispensable components of the epic structure. Therefore, the next segment is an analysis of the unseen roles of female characters in the epics.

The Unseen Roles of Women in Beowulf and Sundiata

"Beowulf," an Old English epic poem, centres on the heroic deeds of its eponymous protagonist. The narrative is steeped in themes of bravery, loyalty, and honour, which are predominantly associated with male characters. Beowulf himself embodies the ideal warrior, displaying physical strength, courage, and a sense of duty. Within the fabric of these masculinised heroic exploits, the woman plays the role of weaver of peace. The peacemaker is a pivotal role played by the women in the epic of "Beowulf" and Sundiata. As a peacemaker, the woman is responsible for uniting tribes (warring or not) and maintaining solid relations between these groups. The strongest model of the peacemaker in "Beowulf," is Hildeburh, the Danish princess who was married off to the King of Jutes. Hildeburh is a gift from the Danes to the Jutes in hopes of bringing peace between the countries and establishing an alliance. Nicole Smith, claims that Hildeburh's main job as a "happily confined" queen is to act as a "mediator and a departure from male-dominated activities and relationships," which means that she eases tensions that may arise between men. Furthermore, when Hildeburh's brother of Danes and son of Jutes perish in a battle in which they are enemies, she stresses that they are burned together (Beowulf lines 1070-1185). Her desire to burn enemies together demonstrates an act of joining the opposed forces regardless of the alliances. Although the marriage did not bring peace to these groups of people, Hildeburh fulfilled her duty as a peace weaver by maintaining loyalties to her homeland and the land of her husband.

The influence that women have transcends the queen of Hrothgar, specifically in the case of the peace-weaver wives as portrayed by Freawaru. Peace or discord due to a peace-weaver's influence on politics and the amount of gravity that is bestowed upon this position cannot be overstated. The pace-weaver existed as a woman who was married to a man of position in a different clan to create a bond between the two families. War is something to be avoided in *Beowulf*, something that nearly every character treats heavily: Hrothgar speaks of Beowulf's father instigating a feud between clans and they conceded to him to forgo invasion as well as recalling with sorrow the days when his houses and other were bathed in blood and the poet comments on Hildeburh's loss as being a sorrowful circumstance that no one would wish another kinsman to endure. The entire purpose of the *Beowulf* epic is to show how he restored calm to the kingdom of Hrothgar from the monsters who kill without distinction. The deaths of any members of the clan are taken seriously because every life is worth something and the figures that can stave off feuds and death are women as peace-weavers. Nevertheless, the pristine argument for peace-weavers is that they exist in a patriarchal system that only allows women a pretence of authority, or that they are just figureheads of peace without doing anything significant to ensure it. However, this stance greatly diminishes the valued role of a peace-weaver. Since women serve as the central power that can determine peace or discord, even Beowulf exalts:

> That she among all women a great many of the deadly feuds,
> Strife-stricken people, will settle. Too seldom when
> After the fall of a people curtails awhile
> A spear bends down, through that bride gifts.

Without the position of these women, some feuds must be fought, and people die because a treaty cannot be established. Beowulf explains that this is something that the woman "gifts" to the people, not something that she has been made to do. A woman is the key to mending these disputes. They are far from background ornamentation, but characters who carry the weight of their social and political positions both symbolically and realistically.

Interestingly, juxtaposing Beowulf and Sundiata, we state that this practice of "peace weaving" is not an exclusive preserve of the Anglo-Saxon or German societies. In Sundiata which depicts a warring society similar to the Anglo-Saxon, Nana Triban is offered to King Soumaoro Kante by her brother Dankaran Touman as a peace weaver. This was to appease the dreaded sorcerer and stop him from attacking Niani. According to Edward Irving, this practice evolved from the effort to find a satisfactory solution to long-lasting feuds between clans, tribes, nations, and other groups (24).

Women Depicted as Hostess to Men

On the surface, the epic is largely male-centric, with male characters occupying positions of power and influence. Kings, warriors, and heroes dominate the narrative, reinforcing a patriarchal social structure. The male characters are often depicted as protectors and providers, responsible for the safety and prosperity of their people. While the Kings play these roles, the queen in "Beowulf" and the female characters in Sundiata act as hostesses to the men of the land. It is important to note that the hostess does not solely serve the men; rather she is the instrument that reaffirms social customs and publicly establishes the status of the men who are in the presence of the king. Wealhtheow, the queen of Daneland and wife of Hrothgar completes these duties in the mead hall when the warriors are dining with the king. For example, Wealhtheow establishes a warrior's status by using the cup of mead. She carries the cup of mead starting with the king and then to the warriors. In the first scene, she serves Beowulf last since he has just arrived in Daneland. However, in lines 1162-1231, she serves Beowulf directly after serving her husband. The act of the cup demonstrates that Beowulf has earned his right to sit beside the king, as though he were a Dane himself. Furthermore, the hostess holds political power in the hall. Wealhtheow demonstrates this power by publicly requesting to the King that he not allow Beowulf to be the heir to the throne, but to remember that her sons are the rightful heirs to such a position (lines 1180-1191). She is confident that the King will abide by these social customs and there is no reprimand or indication in the poem that her wishes will not be granted. Beowulf does become the king; however, he only holds the place until the sons are old enough to fulfil their duty as a king. The hostess becomes the voice of reason; she is responsible for upholding the social customs of her country when all of the warriors have forgotten the importance of these codes.

In the epic Sundiata, King Moussa Tounkara's sister in his absence welcomed Sogolon and her son at Mema. She wields the power to command the "Archers and spearmen" (35) to organize a royal welcome for the King's guest in his absence. The narration reads, "It was his sister who had organized this great reception… The King's sister received Sogolon and her children in the palace" (35). This denotes those women played significant roles in palace matters in the absence of the kings. The narrator further states that Sogolon and her children were lodged in the "wing of the Palace "(36)" and when the king returns home, she hands over the letter from the king of Ghana.

In the above depiction, therefore, we see the woman playing a vital diplomatic role to strengthen the relationship between nations. The epics allow understanding of what is proper or improper in relationships between nations and also man and woman. Women's role is vital in the development of this relationship as depicted in both epics. The women in Beowulf and Sundiata are unique in their personalities, intentions, and relationships with men. All women in these epics are different, but all of them help to define the role of the ideal woman.

Women's Salient Roles in the Political World of *Beowulf* and *Sundiata*

Women's influence in wielding political power is as old as time. From the Biblical point of view to the ancient world, women have participated actively alongside men in political matters. Whether as queens or queen mothers, their influence is greatly felt both on the positive and negative spectrum. The epics Beowulf and Sundiata describe the world of women in ancient societies, detecting apparent social dynamics, roles, and views held of the second sex. The epics were written at a time when women were taken a subservient and fawning position among men; their roles were almost limited to childbirth and domestic duties, so the facts of the epics allow readers to support and at the same time refute that common belief of women's reality in Old English and African (Malian) societies. At that time the whole structure of civilization was organized and controlled by men and women held an inferior position in society. As it is known, societies were formed as if women were there only to serve the men, and the involvement of women in any circumstance was almost totally dominated by what the men allowed. Those women were certainly valued in society, but they were not given important roles or any decision-making power. That is why the epics chosen for this study are so unique; the narrators in both epics put women into roles that were previously unheard of for women to possess.

In *Beowulf* and *Sundiata*, women wield political power and influence. In the "Geatish part" of the story, we encounter Queen Hygd, the daughter of Haereth, even though this figure is not as elaborate as that of the Danish queen. The poet describes that she passes the cup but the order in which she distributes it is not mentioned. Above all, she is praised for excellent manners, wisdom (despite her youth) and generosity (1928-29) quite noticeably, all these qualities are typical of Wealhtheow, as well. The exchange of gifts is a joyous and festive occasion, which underlines Beowulf's triumph. Hygd herself is given three horses and the famous Brosingamen necklace, which Beowulf received from Wealhtheow (2172-74). Like Wealhtheow, Hygd holds considerable power. She can influence such

matters as a choice of successor to the throne. After Hygelac's death, she offers the throne to Beowulf at the expense of her son Heardred. Even though queens are expected to promote their sons, Hygd knows that Heardred is not able to save the kingdom from the Swedes. Thus, Hygd is shown as holding power when she delivers the kingdom of the Geats to Beowulf: "There Hygd bade him hoard and kingdom, ring and throne; she did not trust in her child with the ancestral seat to keep steadfast when Hygelac was dead." (1928)

Doubting her own son's ability, she offers the position to Beowulf of her own volition to keep her kin safe. In *Beowulf*, Wealtheow and Hygd exemplify this ideal of a woman as a relative equal to men, a peacemaker, and a wise leader. Her decision to prefer Beowulf proves her devotion to the Geatish people, whose welfare is more important to her than her son.

Also, through the narration, we can see the central positions that women hold within the society and the hall. Wealhtheow is Hrothgar's wife and as such is expected to act as her position requires. She is known as "The woman of the Helmings", "clan host" and the "great gold-adorned lady of the hall" "Her wisdom and ability to weave through the etiquette of court is central to the liquidity of the kingdom as seen during the passing of the cup. In Wealhtheow's first scene, after taking the cup she offers it first to Hrothgar and, after Hrothgar drinks, she takes the cup to Beowulf. She asserts her power in this scene by visually displaying that Hrothgar is of the highest status in the court since he is given the cup first and that Beowulf has risen to a higher place by Wealhtheow offering the cup after the king drinks. Not just anyone can wield the mead cup in such a manner, especially when used in a socially significant circumstance, and is thus described as the "trusted lady with the cup". She carries the ability to make decisions for the court, bestowing Beowulf with the grace and trust of Hrothgar.

Beowulf understands the significance of the gesture and thereafter promises that he will complete the task set before him, or else die in battle. His proclamation does not go unnoticed, as he is held to his words by those in the hall, particularly Wealtheow who "pleased with those words, / With the boastful speech of the Geat; the gold-adorned lady went/ Glorious queen to sit with her lord." With the symbolic passing of the cup, Wealtheow places a great responsibility on Beowulf that he should do as he has been commanded to protect her people. Her position as the ring-giver, the gift-giver, places her in a unique place because it is she who has the power to bestow Beowulf with the rewards that come from his killing of Grendel. Though Hrothgar is the one who promises Beowulf riches if he should be successful, it is Wealtheow who decides what gifts he will receive and if he will receive them at all. It is insinuated that she can choose to not grant him any favours because she is Hrothgar's consort. However, the strongest display of Wealtheow's power comes during the celebration of Grendel's death. Independent of counsel, the queen rises in the hall to address the warriors and hail Beowulf for keeping his bargain. Again, this is done visually with Beowulf seated next to Wealtheow and Hrothgar's sons and a cup being passed to him along with ornaments and pieces of jewellery. She is the supreme gift-giver, but does not reveal her true autonomy until she delivers a commanding speech to the company in the hall:

> I who am the ring-giver
> Commanded you, my son, to action
> and death. Revelry-keeper!
> Here of every glorious warrior, courageous, merciful, lord-gracious.
> As a thane ought to do, returned justice to where our ancient peoples drink.
> All men will do that which I bid.

She makes a very powerful assertion that they will obey her desires because she is in just as high of a status as Hrothgar, and her command of speech confirms this. Moreover, she displays the value of doing as she says by rewarding Beowulf for protecting their people after she had laid the responsibility on him, but she also warns him that with his new status, he is expected to behave in a certain way and she will hold him accountable if he wavers from this role. She acts of her own accord in this section, as she does often during the prose, without the influence of Hrothgar or any man. To suggest that Wealtheow is acting as a mere instrument of Hrothgar is to ignore the weight of her words and her clear authority over Beowulf and the other warriors in the hall.

Similarly, in Sundiata Sassouma Berete influences the choice of her son Dankaran Touman against the wish of her husband. However, unlike Hygd who showed her devotion to the Geatish people by her choice of Beowulf, Sassouma Berete's choice was influenced by her selfishness. The griot narrates, "With the help of Sassouma Berete's intrigues, Dankaran Touman was proclaimed king, and a regency council was formed in which the queen mother was all-powerful" (18). Although, from the onset, Dankaran Touman proves to be a weak king, his mother the queen mother

"becomes all-powerful" influencing both mortal forces and supernatural forces. The narrator describes the relationship between her and her son as thus: "Dankaran Touman was the most retiring of men. At the age of eighteen he was still under the influence of his mother…It was Sassouma Berete who reigned in his name" (24).

Her influence gives her the liberty to seek to destroy those she considers enemies. For instance, when Sundiata's popularity is so great, Sassouma becomes apprehensive and seeks to destroy him by commanding the nine witches to do her bidding. The witches ask, "Oh queen, tell us what is to be done, on whom must we turn the fatal blade" (24). Also, she seeks the help of King Mansa Konkon to get rid of Sundiata. "The truth was that the queen mother of Niani had sent gold to Mansa Konkon so that he would get rid of Sundiata" (31).

The authors depict women as strong subjects; they are real substantive characters. Most women in these epics are tough, strong-willed, and are treated with the respect and seriousness they deserve. Despite traditions of ancient societies, the authors characterize the women as the real counterparts of men: they have real feelings, and real plans and can accomplish them on their own. Also, at the time Mali came under the attack of King Sosso Soumaoro, Magnouma was a woman sent along with men as a search party to find Sundiata who had been in exile for seven years. "Among the people included … a woman Magnouma" (43). Through her ingenuity in trading food stuff from Mali in Mema, she helps the men locate Sundiata's sister, and through her they find Sundiata.

The Virtues of Motherhood in the *Beowulf* and *Sundiata*

The role of women as a wife, mothers, and stepmothers, or the relation between queens, controlling the destiny of their sons, is of emphasis in these epics of two different cultures. Women in Beowulf and Sundiata stand out because of how they portray themselves as important, towards their children.

In Beowulf, the mother figure is depicted as Grendel's mother. Although a monster, many scholars have read her as the violent archetypal feminine figure, who exerts physical strength and violence over less aggressive means. She is seen as hostile, does not welcome guests, and uses irrational violence to settle disputes in contrast to the other female peace weavers. Grendel's mother also attacks without discrimination, as she does with Beowulf, in a bid to seek vengeance over her son's murder. It is clear that there is a great weight placed on human life and even the most antagonistic member of society would still be expected to function and perform their part within the community. Life was not taken lightly, and someone who died before their time was grieved for. Thus, Grendel's mother's attack on Hrothgar's Hall is her attempt to gain retribution for Beowulf killing her son:

> Grendel's mother,
> Journeyed in sorrow; her son's death consumed
> Her need to bring hate. The fierce woman
> Took toll for her child, she daringly killed in blindness

Radical feminists view Grendel's mother's fight with Beowulf as a fight against the masculine world and dictate. However, we do not share this sentiment, our point of deviation lies within the framework of the womanist, here motherhood is celebrated and the woman goes all out in defence of her child. Thus, accentuating the argument that womanist seeks for egalitarian society.

In the same manner, Sogolon Kedjou goes through the peril of exile to watch over her son Sundiata. The role of the woman as a life nurturer is depicted in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, he says, "Your mother is there to protect you …. And that is why we say that mother is supreme" (94). As she accomplishes this task Sogolon tells her son:

> Do not deceive yourself. Your destiny lies not here but in Mali. The moment has come. I have finished my task and it is yours that is going to begin, my son. But you must be able to wait. Everything in its own good time. (38).

While Grendel's mother loses her life to avenge her son's death, Sundiata's mother loses her life to watch over him and ensure he is ready to fulfil his destiny. For his life must begin where her ends. Indeed, the woman serves as a shield for the child right from conception till the child can fend for himself and survive on his own. Thus, in both texts' motherhood is not repulsive as many radical feminists propagate. But it is celebrated as an ideal institution, which the female characters risk their lives to protect.

Leadership and Matriarchy

Unlike "Beowulf," "Sundiata" features strong female characters who play pivotal roles in the protagonist's journey. Sogolon, Sundiata's mother, is a central figure whose wisdom and resilience guide Sundiata through his trials. Her influence underscores the importance of maternal figures in the epic. The epic presents a more balanced view of gender relations, with both male and female characters contributing to the narrative's progression. Women such as Sogolon and Nana Triban are depicted as intelligent and resourceful, actively participating in the political and social spheres.

Conclusion

The differences in gender portrayal between "Beowulf" and "Sundiata" can be attributed to their distinct cultural contexts. "Beowulf" reflects the warrior culture of Anglo-Saxon England, where male heroism and martial prowess were highly valued. In contrast, "Sundiata" reflects the matrilineal traditions of the Mali Empire, where women held significant social and political influence. In both epics, women play essential roles, though their influence manifests differently. In "Beowulf," women are peace-weavers and hostesses, while in "Sundiata," they are advisors and leaders. This contrast highlights the varying degrees of agency afforded to women in different cultural settings. The heroic ideals in each epic are also shaped by gender dynamics. "Beowulf" emphasizes physical strength and bravery, traits traditionally associated with masculinity. "Sundiata," on the other hand, emphasizes wisdom, resilience, and the ability to navigate complex social networks, traits that are not exclusively tied to one gender.

While women in "Beowulf" are not the central focus, they play crucial roles in the social and political spheres. Queens such as Wealhtheow and Hygd are portrayed as peace-weavers and hostesses, facilitating alliances through marriage and diplomacy. Their influence, though indirect, is significant in maintaining social harmony. The women in *Beowulf* and *Sundiata* are the representatives of Anglo-Saxon and Mali cultures that put value upon all members of the community regardless of gender. As the revaluation shows, the perspective that the men have of the women is especially favourable and not at all as dominant as would be believed. It is thus that a reading of *Beowulf* and *Sundiata* should warrant a contextual judgment about the role of women rather than relying solely on liberal modern adaptations.

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