

„IMPATIENT WOMEN“ OR THE FUTURE OF THE VALUES / VALUES OF THE FUTURE

Magdalena Kostova-Panayotova
Madeleine Danova

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Abstract. The article focuses on the book by Cameroonian writer Djaili Amadou Amal, *Impatient Women*, in which the author addresses the painful issue of women’s rights in certain societies, as well as in modern civilization, which sometimes disregards the double standards prevalent in its practices and does nothing to change the status quo. Among the key themes of the book is the concept of patience, which permeates the female experience from birth to death within the narrative. The book poses unambiguous questions: Do we truly know the people close to us? Are they truly close if they depersonalize us? On the one hand, can there be unimaginable freedoms, and on the other, a demand for complete obedience and depersonalization? Another serious inquiry raised by Amal’s book is whether values change, what those values are, who is responsible for this change, and whether a society can progress if technological advancements cannot liberate it from the spiritual primitivism present in some communities.

Keywords: human rights; women; values; patience; African literature; linguodidactology

Cameroonian writer Djaili Amadou Amal’s book, published in 2020 in France and translated to English in 2023, (Bulgarian edition of 2025 by *Enthusiast Publishing House*) deepens the writer’s search in the field of a hot and familiar topic: women’s rights, social injustice and the difficulties of girls facing forced marriages because of the traditions of their society. But at the same time, this book does not just raise familiar issues, it is a dialogue with the modern reader about the future of African society, but also of all modern humanity that upholds double standards in the practices of their societies. In addition, it does not seem to be doing anything itself to change this.

The three storylines in the book concentrate on the plight of women in the Fulani community of Northern Cameroon. This community comprises of almost three mln. People in Cameroon, 99.95% of which are Muslim. Another 15.5 mln. live in Nigeria and five mln. In Senegal and more in other countries of Central

and West Africa. They are a very significant ethnic group characterized by what anthropologists have called “nomadic pastoralism”. Although pastoralism in literature has often been associated with the celebration of the nomadic lives of the shepherds, in contemporary African literature more and more writers are starting to “bemoan the activities of the Fulani nomadic pastoralists ...[that] include kidnapping, killing, rape, and banditry among other crimes”, as Solomon Awuzie writes (Amal 2025, p. 105). When talking about travel we should also keep in mind that the concept has often been discussed as a specific form of social action within the Muslim religious tradition (Eickelman & Piscatori 1990, p. 3). Another important feature of such societies has been described by Gellner in his study *Muslim Society*, which, although subjected to a lot of criticism, still presents valuable insights in the traditional or modernising Islamic world, especially in his attempt to define the tensions between the two traditions of social organization of Muslim communities, one associated with the trade centers and the other – with the arid areas of Africa and the impact of colonialism and industrialism which have swept away many of the traditions of the nomadic communities, which is the case with many Fulani communities even today. The Fulani, who have given up their nomadic life, live in towns and small settlements across West and Central Africa, with Garoua being the largest and most important of the Fulani settlements in the North Region of Cameroon. Amal’s book describes this kind of community:

We live in what we call a compound in Northern Cameroon. Surrounded by very high walls that prevent people from seeing inside, it houses my father’s estate. Visitors do not enter; They are received at the entrance in a vestibule that, in the tradition of Peul hospitality, we call the zawleru. Behind it opens an immense space in which several buildings stand: first, the imposing villa of my father, the man of the family, then the shed, a sort of portico under which guests are received, and finally, the wives’ dwellings, which men do not enter. To speak to her husband, a wife can only go through the co-wife whose turn it is. (Amal 2025, p. 31)

As it becomes obvious from this description, it is a rigidly patriarchal community, based on several of the six structures of patriarchy as defined by Walby: paid work, housework, culture, sexuality, violence, and the state. For the Fulani communities, the most prominent are: “the spatial separation of the sexes (women and girls in the private sphere and men in the public sphere), male domination in sexual relations and marriage, and women’s domestic work” (Agbessi & Tchao 2024, p. 212). There are scholars, however, today; who insist that patriarchy has changed, giving way to post-patriarchy, but not in the world of Amal’s female characters, who have to live according to the traditions of the Fulani Islamic culture. The major concept of Fulani culture that governs the lives of the Fulani community is *pulaaku*. According to Abdoulahi, „it’s a rational entity composed of four conceptual elements: *fulfulde*, which is not only a language but a way of being for the Fulani; *semteende*, which denotes reserve and modesty; *munyal*, which signifies patience,

strength of soul, courage; and finally the *hakkilo*, which connotes attention and foresight“ (Abdoulahi 2022, p. 59).

The key word, as is evident from the title of Amal's novel, is patience (*munya*), a word that women in some societies hear from childhood until death, and which describes the basic virtue of society ascribed to women, a value that is thought of as purely feminine because no marriage can survive without it - this is how the father of one of the novel's heroines sees life and marriage, the quote about patience appearing at both the beginning and the end of the novel. But the father only reiterates what society itself has accepted as truth: it is the woman who endures from birth to death, and if there is any hope, it is to satisfy her husband well and have domestic peace - *pulaaku*. No one ever cares what she wants or dreams of. Society finds it right and normal because it has been so for centuries. And the age-old habits are sanctified by tradition.

The implication of Amal's book moves between several different sayings about patience, two of which touch on the different possibilities of a biographical space: the Fulani saying, "Patience can boil a stone," and another African saying, "At the other end of patience is heaven." Both seem to instruct young women to be submissive and to endure the trials that will follow one after another, no doubt with the promise of (heavenly) reward.

In the context of the plot, however, it turns out that neither of the heroines has a *munya*, for patience is seen as part of the futility of existence, the meaninglessness of life without fulfillment and hope of happiness and sharing, and the 'heaven' at the other end is not a reward for a sinless life, but a projection of death as the only alternative for the unreconciled.

By using the classical model, a narrative about the lives of three women, the narrator presents three different ways of not accepting patience: the first heroine is forcibly married to an old and rich merchant, although she loves and is loved by another young man, to whom her father promises her. The second heroine, against her will, is given to a relative who is a bully and a drunkard and takes revenge on his wife for her unfulfilled life. The third woman is the one who is forced to put up with her rich man's marriage to a young woman after twenty years of marriage. All three, however, do not accept a life in which they are impersonal and unhappy, and try to struggle.

The way they break their submission is different, but all three understand that patience cannot make them happy; they live in fear and terror.

Moreover, the novel shows that the only one whose marriage survives, in one way or another, is the one who seeks to destroy her rival, to destroy other people's lives - with lies, magic, and various subterfuges. The narrative, however, distances itself from direct accusations against the heroine because she is also one of the victims. The implication is that if you keep *munya*, despite the suggestion of the fathers, the reward is total impersonation or death. Nothing good awaits those

who observe age-old traditions. There is only terror and hopelessness at the end of heaven.

The most serious indictment of a society is the lives of the heroines themselves, as the narrative describes them: having lost their aspirations and dreams, they try to survive both spiritually and purely physically in a world in which the fault is always their own, and the right is on the side of the powerful and the rich, whom no one punishes — even if they allow themselves to do what is unacceptable for human communication.

A striking moment in the novel is when Mubarak, the second heroine's husband, comes home drunk, forcibly picks her up to cook his porridge in the middle of the night, and beats her up so hard that she literally pees herself with fear. When she, beaten, flees to her father because she has neither money nor the opportunity to start a life elsewhere, he also whips her for the chastisement of having thought of running away.

The novel paints the world as an anti-world, and the narrative itself is an anti-utopia in which the monsters are among ourselves, very often the people closest to us, the ones who are called to be part of the intimate, their own space of Self.

However, this space turns out to be eviscerated from the inside because the threat, death, and erasure of man does not come from the outside, from the distant unknown world, but is part of his own, seen as external space, in Lotman's terms.

The narrative offers no direct analysis or conclusions. Outside the heartbreaking moments, it is described with restraint and only the necessary details. Relying on the description of cohabitation, the narrator shows how society puts every member within it in place, but it is the women who remain beyond the walls, in the inner space, where they live a predictable and regulated life in which they are not even allowed to see their husband if it is another woman's turn to be with him at the moment.

Thus, the cohabitation is torn by internal conflicts and squabbles but maintains a semblance of understanding because no woman wants to report to her husband unless she has to, lest she anger him and be driven away. The banished wife leaves her children unprotected, at the mercy of another wife of her husband.

Apart from the obvious emphasis on the injustice of a society that is built on the deformation of its members: on the one hand, undue freedoms, on the other, complete submissiveness, the novel brings other issues to the fore. It becomes clear that despite the words inculcated for centuries about the virtues of marriage, any promise can be broken if the girl is claimed by a husband who is richer and more advantageous to the family. Thus, the question of what is of value in a society that claims to want to protect its values through regulated roles comes to the fore. Obviously, these roles in real life do not protect values and contribute to the imposition of a double standard: what one person can do is forbidden for another.

Trying not to hurt the feelings of the uncle, the father of the bride feels no remorse or regret at all for his child's failed life, nor does he care if the child can continue to live with a man who will not change and will continue to beat her, in all likelihood, until he finally kills her. In many variations, the plot implies the same thing concerning the other two heroines and their families.

Among the novel's strongest messages is the questioning of what values nurture a society in which some members are condemned to excruciating patience and never have a chance to realize themselves as people and individuals.

The strength of this novel can be seen in another way: not only does it reveal, without make-up, the unbearable existence of women in an all-male world, which is the world of cohabitation.

It raises the question of whether we can survive as humans knowing what is happening elsewhere. Can we talk about multiculturalism and overcoming borders if we disregard the gross violation of human rights and the reduction of human beings to the level of animals?

As part of contemporary cosmopolitanism, the ideas of multiculturalism postulate a drive to overcome the boundaries between East and West to put nations, genders, and religions on an equal footing. Among the ideas of 21st-century comparativism is the idea that cultures that maintain a balance of acceptance and surrender are healthy and evolving. Hence, most literary scholars of the new century insist on interaction between different cultures based on equality and mutual respect. However, books like *Women Lacking Patience* show that many of these ideas are just social propaganda because there are different models of a divided world. In some, human life is seen only as an appendage, as a service machine, not above a thing providing some comfort.

This novel raises issues not only about a woman's place in society and her rights but also about values in a society, whether they change and when, who is responsible for the change, and the conditions under which society sets out on its revolution.

Because if these age-old values are, in fact, a disguised form of violence and injustice, does it make sense to uphold them? Does it make sense to have values that crush the very weak members of society - women and children? Here, we can recall Andrei Platonov's conjecture in his novel *The Foundation Pit* - that no society has a future if it costs a child's life. This alludes to Dostoyevsky, for whom nothing is worth as much as a child's teardrop.

In this sense, can we, as a human society, be proud of the progress in the sciences if, in terms of the humane, we remain behind in history in a stagnant spiritual primitivism? Moreover, who is to change this divided world where supposedly boundaries are gradually disappearing, but not those within us?

The hidden questions in this book are far more than the answers. Nevertheless, the best books do not always offer ready answers; they speak of freedom and overcoming boundaries precisely when they show the desperate struggle for those timeless values worth trying to share with our children.

REFERENCES:

- ABDOULAH, A., 2022. L'œuvre de Djaili Amadou Amal. Un miroir de la condition de la femme au Nord-Cameroon. In: LEQUELLEC COTTIER, CHRISTINE, AND COSSY, VALÉRIE (eds.), *Africana. Figures de femmes et formes de pouvoir*, pp. 473 – 487.
- AGBESSI, A.D., TCHAO, E., 2024. Les impatientes de Djaili Amadou Amal: entre énonciation et dénonciation du patriarcat. *Revue internationale des lettres, langues et sciences sociales*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 209 – 223. <https://doi.org/10.59384/uirtus.2024.2638>.
- AMAL, D., 2025. Zheni, lisheni ot tarpenie. Sofia: Entusiast.
- AWUZIE, S., 2021. Nomadic pastoralism and social conflict in the third-generation Nigerian poetry. In: RICHARD OLANIYAN, OLUKAYODE A. FALEYE, INOCENT MOYO (eds.), *Transborder Pastoral Nomadism and Human Security in Africa: Focus on West Africa*. New York: Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003231042-7>.
- EICKELMAN, D.F., PISCATORI, J.P. (eds.), 1990. *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- GELLNER, E., 1983. *Muslim Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PLATONOV, A., 1975. *The Foundation Pit*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.
- TODOROVA, Tz., 2015. Women's Literary Salons World at a Glance. *Foreign Language Teaching*, vol. 42, no. 5, p. 505. Sofia: Azbuki.
- WALBY, S., 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

✉ **Prof. Magdalena Kostova-Panayotova, DSc.**

WoS ResearcherID: E-1046-2014

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-5174-7679

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

E-mail: kostovapan@uni-sofia.bg

✉ **Prof. Dr. Madeleine Danova**

WoS ResearcherID: AAZ-3649-2020

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-4081-3722

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

E-mail: mdanova@vice-rector.uni-sofia.bg