

**ROMANCE STUDIES:  
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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## ***The Impatient: Djaili Amadou Amal on Tiredness and Waiting***

Djaili Amadou Amal's *The Impatient* (*Les Impatientes*, 2020) follows three Cameroonian women in interlaced and overlapping stories, which are told sequentially, but not chronologically, each in the first person ("I"). Thus we have first Ramla's story, followed by her sister, Hindou's (which repeats some of the same material, but from a new perspective), and finally a version of events—not exactly the same events, but not exactly different, either—as told by Safira, who turns out to be Ramla's co-wife. Each section of the book is self-sufficient, in that it works on its own terms and has its own themes, objectives and aims, as though it were a stand-alone short story, but, put together, the three tales complement, complicate, and at times even contradict each other. Collectively, they constitute a multi-faceted critique of the polygamy and arranged marriage that is a feature of the majority-Moslem Fula (or Fulani, Fulbe) society of the Sahel, on the southern edge of the Sahara. But Amadou Amal refuses to offer a simplistic portrayal of some kind of pre-modern patriarchy. Her polyphonic account, with its focus on women's self-realization and agency, highlights the ways in which women themselves can be complicit in their own (and their fellow women's) subordination and oppression. Similarly, her account of Cameroon's far north shows that far from being merely a regional backwater, it is in fact connected to and even embedded in global flows of money, information, and power. Rather than isolated and far away, it is in the middle of things, and the plight of the women in Amadou Amal's novel comes from the fact that they find themselves in-between: between men and women, family and society, past and present, present and future, tradition and modernity, North and South, difference and repetition, endlessly waiting for a resolution that never comes.

### *1. The Tears of Patience*

What the three protagonists of *The Impatient* have in common, beyond the fact that they are women from more or less well-off families who are caught up in a system of arranged polygamous marriages, is that they are all counselled patience as the best strategy to engage with the world around them. "Patience, my girls!" the novel opens (3), and "patience" is also the first word of each separate section. In the first two cases, the context is the double wedding in which Ramla and Hindou are married off. It is their father who is opining, invoking the Fula word, "*munya*," that gives the novel its original title

(*Munyal: Les larmes de la patience*; it was retitled *Les Impatientes* only when it was republished in France). It is not clear that there is an exact equivalence between the Fula word and the English (or French) "patience." Mohamed Camara suggests that "depending on the context, [*munyal*] can be translated as patience, tolerance, self-control, or spiritual grace. As such, *munyal* is believed to foster unconditional generosity" ("Benediction and Malediction" 52). In fact, as Ramla and Hindou's uncle, Hayatou, expands on the characteristics of wifely *munyal*, it sounds more like fortitude, self-sacrifice, and restraint. Patience is but one element of the much longer and more comprehensive list of matrimonial duties and virtues that *munyal* encompasses: "Be modest. / Be grateful. / Be patient. / Be discreet. / Valorize him so that he will honor you. / Respect his family and submit to them so that they will support you," and so on (5). Indeed, citing the ethnologist Marguerite Dupire, linguist Johanna Breedveld suggests that *munyal* is better translated as "resignation" (*Form and Meaning in Fulfulde* 2). In Amadou Amal's novel, patience is, as much as anything, self-effacement: the subsumption of the self to the husband's desires, as well as to a broader social structure whose tenets should go without question.

Yet the protagonists of *The Impatient* are not prepared to efface themselves. It is in this sense that they are indeed "impatient." Over the course of what is in effect a series of extended monologues, each woman gives a strong and insistent sense of herself, of selves that may struggle to be heard or seen or appreciated by those around them, but that are far from resigned to disappearance. *If anything here it is the male figures who are ghostly, insubstantial, even inscrutable, for all their visibility and volubility.* The fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, and so on are forever talking, telling the women what to do and even how to think and feel, but on the whole we get very little sense of their interiority, of what distinguishes them from each other beyond the outward signs of (for instance) prestige or disgrace. It is as though the men were merely puppets of ideology and tradition, and only the women were substantial and real.



Image: Women in a Fula village, Nigeria

Ramla's story tells of her shattered romantic and professional dreams. "I am different," she tells us. "I always was. [. . .] I explained to the women of the family my ambition to become a pharmacist, which made them burst into laughter. They called me crazy and bragged about the virtues of marriage and the life of a homemaker" (15). Seventeen years old, unlike most of her peers she persists with her high-school education and fobs off suitors: "Invariably, when a man asks for my hand, I tell him to wait" (17). She is teaching the young men that they, too, need to exercise patience. Until "One day, to everyone's surprise. I did not refuse. His name was Aminou. [. . .] Soon, in a few years, at the University of Tunis, he would become an engineer and I would become a pharmacist. We would be happy. Far from everything. Far from here!" (19). But her father and uncle have other ideas, and they arrange for her to become a second wife of one of their business partners. As she tells it, her story ends as she is put in a car, after the wedding, to be taken to his house. Far from docile, however, she continues to protest, at least quietly to herself. Hindou knows little of her younger sister's inner anguish, and indeed when she loudly protests her own husband's sexual violence she is told that "Ramla had been just as pure

as me, but no one had heard a peep from her on her wedding night" (58). Advised to patience by all around her, including her mother ("It's up to you to find a solution to render your life bearable" [74]), she tries to adapt, but cannot stand her husband's drinking and womanizing, let alone his marital rape. She leaves his compound (not once, but twice) and tearfully tells her parents: "I'm tired of enduring. I've tried to bear it but it's just not possible anymore. I don't want to hear *patience* one more time. Never say *munyal* to me again! Never again with that word!" (86). But she is returned to her husband and tied down to her bed. They say she is crazy, possessed by "a malevolent jinn" (93). She feels erased: "I exist without existing" (94). All she can hear are the voices of the men around her, "the voices of all the men in my family. *Munyal, munyal! Patience*" (94). Yet the ghostly chorus demanding her submission includes women's voices, too.

Finally, Safira has been married to her husband for twenty years, but he has just taken a new, much younger, co-wife. . . Ramla. This makes her full of resentment and self-doubt: "I can't stand it! I can't share him. It's even worse with a woman so young" (106). Again, she too is counselled patience, not least by an aunt who passes on the teaching of domestic *realpolitik*: "If you falter for a second, your co-wife will get the upper hand forever. A woman has no worse enemy than another woman!" (99). And so Safira is taught the other side of patience: "cunning. Handle your husband as you would a child. [. . .] Be patient, cunning, intelligent, and he will never leave you" (116). She therefore goes on the offensive towards Ramla, framing her for the theft of jewelry and money: "I've learned cunning and I use it. [. . .] I am the *daada-saaré* [the first wife] and I still hold power" (125). She plants false clues (calling from an untraceable SIM card) that Ramla might be having an affair. But she goes too far, and after her husband beats Ramla up, causing a miscarriage, the two women finally talk "and I discover a sincere, wounded young woman. [. . .] 'I was wrong, Ramla. Forgive me!'" (151). But it is too late for Ramla, who is forced to leave the household and "vanishe[s] into the wilderness" (155). Safira emerges stronger: "I am sure of myself and my place now. [. . .] No matter who comes, I will fight" (157). Despite her fleeting friendship with the younger woman and one-time rival, she remains complicit in the disgrace and banishment inflicted upon her.

I wonder which, if any, of the three women whose stories we read earns your sympathy more. Is it Ramla, who always wanted to escape, and ultimately does so, if only as a result of Safira's vengeful machinations? Or Hindou, who is perhaps most fully the victim, at



the mercy of the most vicious and unpredictable husband? Or perhaps Safira, arguably the strongest of the three, who ends up getting her way, if at the price of treachery, betrayal, and low cunning? Pause the video here, and consider how these women present themselves and are presented to us. While you do that, I'll have a cup of clove tea, but I'll be right back.

#### Drinks Pairing: Clove tea

Ramla and Hindou's father "calmly sips a cup of clove tea" as he gives his daughters parting advice just as they are about to leave his household: "Patience, my girls! *Munyal!* [ . . . ] That is the true value of our religion, of our customs, of *pulaaku*—our Fulani identity." The women's double wedding "is in full swing" (3), but it is a Moslem wedding, and as such free of alcohol and so also a suitable context for the dispensing of sober advice—not least the advice to remain sober, to suppress desire, and to respect boundaries. Cloves lack even the modest stimulant properties of caffeine, though they have been used as a mild analgesic (or painkiller) for minor irritations such as toothache. So although they are a classic spice, long traded and transported from Indonesia's "Spice Islands" (the Moluccas), where they were originally to be found, they are famous more for adding a delicate flavour and aroma than for any "spiciness," in terms of either heat or provocativeness. Both their analgesic qualities and their unobtrusiveness (as well as their rumoured properties as appetite suppressants) might recommend them to the armoury of the ideal wife, as she is envisaged by the father with his clove tea.

Whichever way our sympathies are led, what emerges is a complex picture of complicity as well as oppression. None of the women are exactly passive, and they each reject (if only at times) the philosophy of *munyal* or patience that is forced upon them. . . and forced upon them, it is worth repeating, by aunts and mothers as much as by fathers or uncles. Some of these women find ways to work the system, most obviously Safira who, by taking on board cunning, the other side of patience, achieves her objectives and ends the novel with a "complicit wink" exchanged with her sister-and-law and mother as a new co-wife is inducted into her household, "more brazen than the last," and as she listens "with a smile [ . . . ] to the women of the family harp on with the usual advice" (157). She has discovered that she can turn *munyal* to her advantage, not least when her husband

tried to divorce her, only to receive a ticking off from his sister: “You too must show patience. I am honestly scandalized by your attitude” (135). And now Ramla has long gone, having prepared her escape with her own form of cunning, by continuing her education via “online classes in secret” (156). It is only Hindou, whose expectations were the lowest of all—she had no former fiancé to give up; she had no great dreams of living elsewhere; she never held out for the rewards due to a first wife—who ends up “simply oppressed” (92), driven to madness and surrounded by phantoms.

## 2. *The Scars of Hope*

There is, however, another side to patience, though it is not often immediately evident in Amadou Amal’s novel. In English at least, patience implies an attitude towards the future: a willingness to wait for what will come. And in French, “*patienter*” similarly means “to wait.” Patience here is the realization that things will change, that we are at a turning point, that better times are to come. But in *The Impatient*, those who counsel patience do not generally do so on the grounds that the future will be different, but rather with the conviction that it is better to reconcile yourself to the present, determined always by its continuities with the past. Ramla and Hindou’s father references “customs” and an enduring “Fulani identity” (3). Seeking to show her patience, Hindou “adhered to the familial habits, immutable since the dawn of time” (59). Safira’s (also Ramla’s) husband insists that his “house is to remain a place of quiet and serenity as it always has been” (107). And Safira herself ultimately concludes that “the same scenarios would play out indefinitely. [. . .] I would make sure of it” (156). The patience that is urged on so many characters throughout the book looks towards the past, rather than to what may come. But beneath that discourse of continuity, Fula habits show discontinuity and change; bodies are shaped by waiting for the new as well as by tiredness with the old. The Sahel is on the verge of something.

The book shows that this is in fact a society in transition. The Far North Region, where the novel is set, may be a long way from Cameroon’s capital (Yaoundé), and indeed it is geographically almost cut off by a spur of Chad that comes in from the East around the Mayo Kébbi river and lakes Léré and Tréné. But its Fula inhabitants are traditionally nomadic pastoralists and herders—the largest nomadic pastoralist group in the world in fact—and are distributed across the southern Sahara and the Sahel, the savanna that crosses Africa from West to East, from the Atlantic Coast to the Red Sea. There are Fula

in Senegal, Guinea, and Mali in the West, as well as Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan and South Sudan. It is not clear where they came from—perhaps the Kingdom of Takrur in the Senegal Valley. They are predominantly Moslem, but not Arabs, and historically spread Islam through West Africa and beyond. They travelled trade routes that passed through cities such as Mali's Timbuktu as early as the thirteenth century. They were always already in motion, vectors of communication and connection across the continent.

*The Impatient* registers other, more recent changes. Ramla points out that her (and Hindou's) father "belongs to the generation of Fulani who left their native village and came to live in the town, thus diversifying their opportunities," even though at the same time "he kept in Danki, his home village, a herd of oxen that he entrusted to the shepherds who still practice traditional transhumance" (12). He has, in short, outsourced his fidelity to tradition. Meanwhile, both women and men watch TV, though there is conflict as to who is permitted to watch what amid a glut of global choices: at Hindou's uncle's house, the wives are forbidden to watch "Western and African channels," because they had been found to be too absorbed in "a series in which kissing took up the majority of the plot," but for a time they are still able to watch "Bollywood films, whose romantic love stories enchanted us when the master of the house was absent" (61); Hindou's husband "watched whatever he desired. He had cable and accessed all the available Western channels," as well as watching "X-rated films" on DVD (61-2). The women also have cellphones and Internet access; their houses have freezers and air conditioning; they buy cosmetics sold door-to-door that come from neighbouring countries. Their husbands have sufficient money to buy cars from Dubai and to pay chauffeurs to drive them, to fly first class to the capital, or to take their wives on trips to Paris—Ramla comes back "with bags full to bursting" (126). The Fula have always been well-connected, in the middle of things, transient nomads, but the extent and speed of that connectivity, and the shape and paths of their nomadism, take on new qualities, at least for the business elite and their households as depicted in this novel.

Amadou Amal herself is part of and has helped to promote such changes. Her novel, under its original title of *Munyal*, was a bestseller published as part of a pan-African co-publishing agreement with eight different publishers (winning the inaugural Orange Book Award in Africa), and then when republished in France went on to win the prestigious Prix Goncourt des Lycéens literary prize and was shortlisted for the still more



prestigious Prix Goncourt itself, the first book written by a sub-Saharan African woman writer to receive such recognition. Meanwhile, in 2012 Amadou Amal founded “Femmes du Sahel,” a non-profit organization and activist group dedicated to “education and development” for women in northern Cameroon, and not least also to campaigns against “underage arranged marriage and every form of violence against women” (“Femmes du Sahel”). However much her novel is based on her own autobiography—she, too, was married at seventeen to a much older, rich husband—it is clear that she is determined to avoid the fates allotted to its characters, and that she believes that change can come.

Of course, there can be nothing crueller than hope! The promise that things will change can itself be a mode of subjugation. The Argentine anthropologist, Jorge Auyero, for instance, points to the ways in which the poor are forced to wait for the benefits promised to them by others, whether it be for housing or healthcare, pensions or potholes to be fixed. Often despite themselves, they have to learn to be patient—making a fuss can bring its own problems—as they “*patiently comply with* the seemingly arbitrary, ambiguous, and always changing state requirements. [. . .] The urban poor, in their frequent encounters with politicians, bureaucrats, and officials, *learn to be patients of the state* [. . . and] thereby receive a subtle, and usually not explicit, daily lesson in political subordination” (*Patients of the State* 9). Auyero is describing the waiting enforced by the bureaucracy typical of the modern welfare state—the web of forms and declarations, appeals and certifications, hurdles that poor people have to jump to receive the resources that they often rely upon to survive. But the global discourse of “development” similarly promises change to those who wait, subject to the equally labyrinthine complexities of (say) debt relief, liberalization, and democratization. Many Africans are unsure about the trade-offs involved: writing about Mali, but also about the Sahel more generally, political historian Rahmane Idrissa notes that “The most persistent criticism of electoral democracy in the region [. . .] is that it breeds exclusion, barring the defeated from any share in the spoils or decisions, while the winners rejoice in victory for ‘notre régime, notre pouvoir’” (“In Bamako”). More perniciously still, sub-Saharan Africans (and many others throughout the Global South) have already been waiting a long time for the putative benefits of development. It would not be surprising if they were losing patience. Amadou Amal’s book does not mention the impact of the Islamic terror group, Boko Haram, in northern Cameroon (birthplace of the controversial cleric, Mohamed Marwa or Maitatsine, who

inspired them), but the fact that they have managed to earn some support in the region is also a sign of impatience with Western promises.

“Tiredness and waiting,” Gilles Deleuze observes, “even despair are the attitudes of the body” (*Cinema 2* 189). In other words, neither patience nor impatience depend on ideology or discourse. If anything, they undermine such discourse, just as Amadou Amal’s novel shows that the boredom and pain, ambition and desire of the women it portrays reveal the vacuousness of endlessly repeated injunctions to patience. Just as the novel’s overlapping polyphony opens up fractures and contradictions that are never fully resolved, so more broadly the novel ends without real resolution. Something may happen, but in the meantime these women find themselves in an unsatisfactory limbo, betwixt and between nomadic flows of disillusion and disquiet whose scars mark their flesh, while the henna applied for their wedding ceremonies fades.

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Song: Billy Bragg, "Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards"