

The Theme of Marriage in *Dear Ramatoulaye* as a Response to Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*

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Abstract

In this present modern society, it is noted that women writers world over, use their works to expose the ills of patriarchy to womanhood thereby raising gender consciousness in the people. The African women writers are particularly noted for this since the African society generally is gender bias. African male writers project this image of subservient on the woman. This image, the woman writer tries to correct by exposing the experiences of the woman through their works in such society. Mariama Ba in her *So Long a Letter* written from a Senegalese/Muslim socio-cultural milieu has triggered off this campaign although not very much welcome by masculinist or gender bias sexist like Umunnakwe in *Dear Ramatoulaye*. This lively debate between Mariama Ba and Umunnakwe is what is termed gender war, a war of words. An attempt to moderate the powers of patriarchy which is strongly resisted by Umunnakwe is seen through his utterances in his characters in the novel. This paper highlights issues raised in both novels and the response of the masculinist to such issues as polygamy, wife's battering, mental touchor in words and actions etc. Analysis of words and interpretation of their usage is also made.

Introduction

Umunnakwe's *Dear Ramatoulaye* is a reply to Mariama Ba's *So long a letter*. Ba in her novel, *So Long...* exposes the injustices, the inequalities meted to women and the rights denied the female gender in a patriarchal African society. She writes from a Senegalese and a Moslem socio-cultural milieu. The issue raise in this novel by ... Ba is what gave birth to Umunnakwe's *Dear Ramatoulaye*. These issues have resulted to a gender war of words as we see Umunnakwe a masculine gender reacts in his *Dear Ramatoulaye* and Ba represent the feminine gender thus, the masculine and the feminine gender are issues in contention in this study.

Bappa Ibrahim in *Women in Nigeria Today* defines gender as "the socially defined capabilities and attributes assigned to persons on the basis of their sexual characters" (2). This therefore means that gender is a social construct and not a biological category where society assign roles to men and women based on the belief of the society that men are stronger and able to withstand hazardous situation than women who are commonly regarded as the weaker vessels. In this

case, society defines roles for men and women expecting them to conform to these roles. Bene Madunagu continuous with the arguments that Gender is "the socially constructed and culturally viable roles that women and men should play in their daily lives" (4). This assigning of role however, has contributed to the exploitation of women and sex inequality promoted in such society. For example in the political, educational, economical, religious and so forth women are denied the opportunity to function maximally with the men. Any attempt by the feminine gender to transcend the societal circumscribed space for her is a deviant behaviour and she is tagged all kinds of negative names.

Patriarchy on the other hand is regarded as male dominance in the society. *The Encyclopedia Americana* defines patriarchy as "an external paternal form of family in which the authority of the father and husband is so great that, he was practically owner of all persons and property of the family group" (40). This definition now brings to mind why the man and not the woman determine and regulates the activities of women and children who happen to be his subjects. It shows the limitedness of the woman in the African society.

The theory of intertextuality will be used in this work; since it promotes intellectual debates. The term was coined by Julia Kristeva a Bulgarian linguist and theorist. Intertextuality is based on the belief that a text cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system. A writer who is also a reader of texts is influenced as quotations and ideas from a read text are brought into his writings. Intertextuality explains the point that utterance, in addition to its theme always respond in one form or another to other utterance that precedes it. Thus, writing necessarily provokes a response. According to Claudia Gosselin, "intertextuality can be considered as a fulcrum or a bridge which makes meaningful interactive relations between texts or between an author and his literary environment" (4). Gosselin continues that Julia Kristeva the proponent of intertextuality states that:

Intertextuality is the power of written text to impose a re-organization of the corpus of texts that preceded its appearance, creating a modification in the manner in which they are read. The concept is closely related to the generally accepted idea that a literary text is synchronically related to the net work of already written texts and must be situated primarily in relation to them (3).

This simply suggests that no utterance is original. Every utterance provokes a response or series of responses and relations based on one's understanding of the content.

Roger Webster explains that the concept of intertext is replaced with the writer and the author as a synthesizer or one who draws together and orchestrates linguistics raw materials. The theory sees literature as a form of repetition to some extent. For instance, *Dear Ramatoulaye* and *So Long a Letter*, *Oedipus Rex* and *The Gods are not to Blame*. In this case, some texts are therefore a remarking or echoes of earlier texts which indicates that texts borrow and revise issues already used. This

reminds us of Thomas Hardy's views as quoted by Webster that "What has been written cannot be wiped. Each new style of novel must be the old with added ideas and not an ignoring or an avoidance of the old" (98). In *Theory of Text* Roland Barthes affirms that "Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of codes, formulae, social languages ... pass into the text..."(97). This simply means that intertextuality provides room for cross referencing which makes for richer experiences, hence what the writer and the reader brings into the text must be of importance to the readers.

All that are being said aptly describes the relationship between Umuunnakwe's *Dear Ramatoulaye* and *So Long a Letter* Umuunnakwe draws experiences and references from *So Long...* to produce *Dear Ramatoulaye*. Ba's *So long...* is a letter from Ramatoulaye to a close friend Aissatou, just as *Dear Ramatoulaye* is a letter from Andrew to Ramatoulaye both letters have a beginning and an end. Through this letter, all the hazardous experiences and inequalities Ramatoulaye experiences in her marriage is exposed not to Aissatou alone but to all women especially of the Moslem world. Gender problem as it affects the Moslem woman in the Senegalese environment is highlighted. -Umuunnakwe in turn reacts to these issues raised by Ramatoulaye in *So Long...*

The reactions of Umuunnakwe are characteristic and traditional. These are grand designs to impose male Chauvinism. The female must play to their status quo and any deviation from that is seen as an offence. The male writers tell the woman's story in their own understanding which in most cases depicts the woman as a silent observer or partner. This is why women characters are hardly seen in African Literature particularly in men's work playing important and dignified roles, rather, the female characters are portrayed in terms of how they fit into the male world, not as individuals with positive personality but as objects. Ama Ata Aidoo in "Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves" suggests, this negative portraiture is an attempt by the male writers to say no to the female writers' coming into their world of writing.

The image of woman in African Literature has been that of one who is happy within her polygamous setting, if she is not, at least her protest is not made public. Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* illuminates this tenet which she traces to the perpetration of male dominance or patriarchy in most cultures. She emphasizes that the society recognizes women as "the second sex" which gives them the status of second class citizen.

Umuunnakwe, the author of *Dear Ramatoulaye* is a male chauvinist. He lacks the artistic sensitivity in regard to the psychology of the woman in a polygamous set up. To him, marriage is beneficial to only the woman and not to both partners because men are the sufferers in marriage:

We just get hooked before we know it. There is no knowing love history of the women who hook us. We cannot help being hooked. Women fix the wedding day,

decide the main issues, wed us and that is it, our hands are tied most times, we are like sheep led to the altar (55).

Andrew in the above passage talks about knowing the past of the women they marry the women are also interested in knowing that past history of the men that 'hooks' them. It is men like Andrew that will insist on the virginity of a girl before marriage and nobody talks of or questions male virginity before marriage. Andrew's statement also talks about women gaining in marriage and not the men. This statement elicits a sexist support from a man to his fellow man as Chinweizu a male critic attests "The sensible male has to admit that the bridegroom is the one person with every reason to be unhappy at wedding. Everyone else is usually genuinely happy, the bride, the officiating priest, the parents of the bride... and other hopeful brides to be" (63).

This kind of thoughtless advice and support can only come from a myopic, traditional mind like Chinweizu, it is suggested that Chinweizu's inexperience of marriage has a direct bearing in his dealings with issues related to women and marriage in his work otherwise, every person in African Society, young and old know that the society vested so much power on the male to the extent some of the men act as demi gods in their domains. Chinweizu could not reason further to ask what becomes of the bride after the wedding day. This kind of shallow knowledge of the woman's agony in marriage provokes a counter statement by a renowned traditional male novelist, Elechi Amadi in his *Ethics in Nigerian Culture* when he attests that:

In ancient Nigeria a wife was regarded as a husband's property. The man paid a certain amount as bride price and the woman became his... She bore his name and her children belonged to him. If for any reason she divorced him, she or her people would have to pay back the bride price in full, inspite of the fact that she might have spent the best part of her life in the man's service and might have born him children. The inequity is obvious (75).

In the light of the above, the intimidation and the inequity the woman experiences in this kind of society is much. In this case, Andrew and Chinweizu must be hallucinating in their prognosis that the woman is all powerful and all dominating in this society of men. It is suggested that they are only acting out their imaginations of the female world for ... Ba, polygamy should not be encouraged, hence Ramatoulaye's refusal to marry Dauda Dieng a young promising husband to be (68). ... Ba in this sense is suggesting that women should protect the interest of one another, yes, she is right, but, in a society that theorises polygamy, it might be difficult for the woman and even the man to maintain monogamy. However, it may not be wrong to state that men are the cause of the enmity that exist among women they decide what happens in the society. Elechi Amadi's *Estrangement* has Alekiri, Oya and Ibia who were wives of Ibekwe the male protagonist in the novel whose marriage did not last. The author through the statements of the characters condemns polygamy due to its negative effects. However, Ibekwe did not show any concern to stop the quarrel that exists amongst his wives, instead, at

the end we see the women move out on their own. This action to me is a statement that, the woman and not the man should resist polygamy, it is her duty to do so because she is the most sufferer, keeping quiet and enduring the pains of polygamy induces a mental disorder if not death on the woman. It is only men of Andrew's like, who will make such statements as polygamy is the best to curb spinsterhood in the community "I recommend polygamy. I joined in the belief that if men marry many wives the problem of women would be minimized. ... The Old Testament church did not oppose polygamy. Islam is for it too. My grand-father lived successfully with his seven wives. He beat up those who needed beating ..." (16).

Andrew in the above uses tradition to justify polygamy. If Umunnakwe a contemporary man can project this image of the archaic mentality in Andrew his mouth piece then the society is in trouble. At this point and time Andrew believes in not just his own father's type of marriage but that of his grand-father where several women surround and rally round one man all in the name of polygamy and he batters them at will, one wonders the kind of society Andrew is opting for in this modern times, definitely not the present Nigerian society because his psychic cannot fit in. If Amadi of the old generation condemns polygamy which he states through Ibekwe that such system does not fit into the modern society then, there is a need for Umunnakwe to rethink about his statements through Andrew in regard to polygamy. It is a shame that Andrew is insensitive to the negative effect of this kind of marriage. This explains Emelia Oko's remark that "men lack the skill to understand...the female character" (68) she further affirms "even the most sympathetic male writer is apt to oversimplify a woman's predicament..." (61), the very reason for this over simplification is that they cannot experience what Simon de Beauviour describes as "a whole genetic and cultural complex of being a woman" (67). Ebele Eko continues with this argument that "men cannot claim to know something they cannot experience" (219).

Therefore, it will not be wrong to suggest that no woman in polygamy is fully happy neither is the man, whereas marriage is supposed to be a union of both parties fully happy and unsuspecting of the other, but polygamy makes for suspicion. Also, women in polygamy are reduced to an object without a soul or a mind. This is what Oko may be meaning when she refers to the woman as a "man's plaything".

Women writers would rather not agree with Umunnakwe's views as expressed by Andrew, the case of Amaka of Emecheta's *One is Enough* comes to mind rather than stay back with a first runner up or a second best in her marriage, she opts out in order to have her peace. Mireille in *The Scarlet Song* kills her husband as a result of the pressure from polygamy and also went mad. In Okpewho's *The Victims*, polygamy is condemned Nwabunnon is a victim, just as Mireille mistakenly kills her only son instead of Ougwa's children as she had planned. Rose Acholonu further attests that in *The Victims* we are given another fact of the dehumanized female. In this novel one gets a vivid picture of the potential dangers of mismanaged polygamy, as well as a glimpse of a deadly jealousy that works in the dark recesses of a female psyche. Obinua a foolish, indolent and drunken

weaking (husband) cannot cope with the disastrous and tragic end which he generates between his rival wives (46).

The woman suffers more in this kind of marital relationship. It is however, important to note that in this kind of society in the words of De Beauvoir "the woman is considered a slave, serving the pleasure of man, her testimony counts only half as much as that of the man she could be divorced without her consent" (11). Perhaps *The Holy Bible's* description of the creation of woman (Eve) from one rib of man (Adam) confirms why man see the woman as an extraction from man that must be controlled, dominated and exploited at any given opportunity and not as that partner *The Holy Bible* meant it to be.

There are several themes in the novel, and all are woven around marriage – polygamy which is the central theme of the novel presents Ramatoulaye as the one who betrays Jude Modou Fall. According to Andrew, she neglects and abandons Jude so that Jude now sought for a first runner up in the person of Binetou. To further buttress his hatred for Ramatoulaye, Andrew supports child marriage as long as it was meant to break the back of Ramatoulaye "a wicked and heartless" wife of Jude Modou Fall.

The theme of abandonment is another gender problem which Umunnakwe refuses to tackle. To him, widowhood practice should be encouraged in the African society since it favours the men. Andrew accuses Azuanuka of not being emotionally involved during her late husband's funeral. "All we saw was that when he was being lowered into the grave you came out briefly, peeped into the grave and shed your deceitful tears, your taciturnity unbroken, your fine face expressionless" (17). This expression reminds us of Shakespeare's statement that "there is no art to find the mind's construction on the face". If this is so, then Andrew cannot judge the gravity of Azuanuka's grief from her facial expression because Azuanuka's inability to "wail like a local woman" during her late husband's burial must not be used to measure her level of sorrow and trauma over the lost of her husband. Binetou is commended because she satisfies the traditional way of mourning "shaving her hair and crying profusely".

To the masculinist Binetou's method stands for all that is required of a woman to show her true love to the dead. But in a situation where the woman dies first the man is spared this traumatic experience, what remains for Andrew is to ask for the sacrifice of Azuanuka at her late husband's tomb since he claims, she is the cause of his untimely death.

The attitude of Binetou the submissive wife who mourns her husband for one year is an applause for her in the tradition of the man. The good woman in this society of men is the one who conforms to the society's expectations of the woman. Philip Rive and Patricia Waugh illuminate this fact that some male critics naturalize women's victimization by making it inevitable. Therefore, female victimhood is often taken for granted and taken as normal.

Andrew in *Dear Ramatoulaye* states: "It is a forbidden thing for the living to tell lies against the dead" (76), this is because Ramatoulaye exposes her late husband in her letter to her friend, she is now tagged a liar and as someone who has committed abomination for telling the truth. Whereas, she has every right to do what she has done as a human person, to relieve herself of the psychological trauma inflicted upon her in a polygamous marriage. In this kind of society the widow is muted even in issues that directly affect her existence. Okereke continues with the argument that:

To be able to face the future in a healthy, mental, emotional and psychic state, Rama... needs to exercise the bitterness, the trauma in her soul inflicted by Modou's betrayal of her love. Few men can really apprehend the emotional and psychic hemorrhage a woman experiences when the man she loves rejects her not just for a separate life, but for another younger woman who at that point is a reflection of herself when he came counting her (158).

This statement simply suggests that only a woman can appreciate Ramatoulaye or Azuanuka's psychological trauma, Andrew is only acting on what he cannot experience in life. Umunnakwe through Andrew attempts to indict and smear the urban wife and exalt the local culture against modernity, he prefers the local girl to the modern sophisticated woman. This is a common trend amongst the male writers. If *Dear Ramatoulaye* is a reply to ... Ba's *So Long*... then, all the quarrelling and accusation labelled against Ramatoulaye by Andrew is uncalled for. A progressing urban wife is always regarded as a harlot by the men especially if she is a widow, otherwise, the letter Rama ... wrote to her friend Aissatou is so real and convincing in it's content compared to *Dear Ramatoulaye*. Akachi Ezeigbo illuminates this view when she states:

Whether she is railing against the injustices resulting from gender expression or decrying the nation's neglect of women's education and emancipation or condemning the economic and political marginalization of women, or eulogising the benefits of close relationship, Ramatoulaye's voice rings strongly and convincingly. Her courage, maturity and dynamism are all brought out beautifully through Mariama Ba's competent and creative handling of the epistolary modes and resource of language (120).

What *Dear Ramatoulaye* brings to mind as expressed by Andrew is the views of Kristeva Holst Peterson in her assertion that, "prostitutes are the pioneers of a new and independent way of life for women" (140). At this point, Victor Uchendu's contribution is very relevant as he affirms that, "A working woman cannot be a prostitute. She may have many male friends, but that does not make her a prostitute. If it does, then the same appellation should be applied to men who have many girl friends. The fact is that prostitutes exist only because there are men who patronize them. It is hypocritical and unfair for men to condemn prostitutes without first condemning themselves"(16).

In any case, no moral woman would like to be associated with the tag "prostitute" whether she is urban or rural woman. The fact still remains that the society frowns at a resourceful, self assertive, educated woman either openly or silently operating as in Ramatoulaye.

The modern woman who holds a job is capable of maintaining herself without reducing herself to sleeping around or to the extent of sharing men with her daughter as Umunnakwe's *Dear Rama ...* reveals. This kind of image is a common trend in male authored works, Rose Acholonu agrees with this view that "male novelists are in constant depiction of the female as a whore, a scorn or a butt" (39). It gives the male writers joy to create an image of the suffering woman in their works.

The creation of Ramatoulaye or Azuanuka as "a useless rotten woman" is the author's own understanding and interpretation of *So Long...* this calls for a pity on the author otherwise ... Ba depicts Rama... as a caring, admirable and hardworking wife and in-law to her husband and her in-laws respectively. The attitude of the author in this rejoinder agrees with Yinka Shoga's views "he is affected by the climate of mind suitable for propaganda rather than for creative work" (44). Perhaps Andrew is arguing for those who believe that gender consciousness is a product of the city woman who wishes to abandon the rural, neglecting their relations in the name of freedom.

Women's education is trivialized by the author who sees it as a tool for destruction, hence the image of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye as conspiring to harm their husband. Conversely, to a female writer, education is an asset to the woman. Li in Alkali's *The Still Born* becomes the "man of the house", Alkali is saying here that female education is a sine qua non for social success and economic emancipation, whereas Fakuand and Awa of same novel conform to the old system of a docile woman.

The author's distrust for the female gender and all it stands for is his castigation of SEWON the women's Association. To Andrew it was in one of the association's meeting that Rama... seduced Jude. This bias behaviour over female friendship is countered by Okereke in her assertion that: Female friendship serves as a balm over the wounds of marital abuse and betrayal for women. It also opens up new vistas of life for the brutalized women whose narrow vision in the domestic hearth had bereft in meaningful communication and growth outside the home (145).

This simply suggests that female friendship affords psychological upliftment and a relief from injuries. Emeheta in *Double Yoke* displays this through Nko and her room-mate. In *One is Enough*, we also see female solidarity through Ayo, Adaobi and Amaka's mother during Amaka's trying moment. In *The Still Born* Li, Fakuand and Awa were support on each other whereas in *The Scarlet Song* Mireille suffers and is battered by her depression all alone because she had nobody

to share with. This simply suggests that female friendship is a requisite for the purpose of continuity.

The novel has various stylistic devices, like the narrative technique and tone of language to mention this few. The author uses this form of letter to challenge Ba on the issues raised in *So Long...* He recreates and transfers the situation from the Senegalese Muslim setting to the Nigerian / Igbo Christian setting. He brings it home to prove that his environment is not devoid of such act by women especially the educated women. Andrew abuses Ramatoulaye of not having a "legacy to pass unto her children, except for immorality and prostitution". In reacting to this accusation, Emecheta attests; "it is a curse to be an orphan, a double curse to be a black one... an unforgiveable calamity to be a woman with kids but without a husband" (81).

Thus, if Jude Modou Fall were to be alive, Andrew his brother will dare not say and do all that he has said and done to Azuanuka his wife, it is obvious that Rama... is rained all the abuses and accusation because she is a widow, thus the death of a husband exposes the woman to all kinds of harassment and abuse by in-laws and friends sometimes. This is why Emelia Oko states: "men writers lack the capacity to make woman the centre of sustained meaningful inquiry" (68). Rose Acholonu continues with the argument that "Going by many Nigeria novels (most of which are hitherto written by male)... at best, a woman who is highly endowed with noble qualities like goodness of heart, industry, moral rectitude and physical beauty, is easily turned into an accursed victim of a powerful man..." (38).

The original Rama... is the reverse of Umunnakwe's Ramatoulaye, his, is an epitome of evil, who suffers the man to death. Because Ramatoulaye has refused to conform to the traditional demands to remarry her brother-in-law, Andrew, that is one of the many counts against her.

You said I came with a friend and a religious minister in quest of your hands when Jude was no more. The village sent me to bring you and the children home and possess my possession, so that Jude's wealth for which he laboured and died did not all go for nothing. It is our tradition so to do. I sought for you, you rejected me (97).

The widow in this kind of society has no right to her husband's property, including ownership of her children this is why she must not be consulted on any crucial matter that concerns her, otherwise Andrew's going to Lagos to 'collect' Ramatoulaye and her children as his "possession" according to him without consulting Rama... is an insult on the woman, on crucial issue as this she should be consulted but to Andrew, there is no need to consult her because the society makes it clearly that the woman has no right to herself.

The language of the novel is harsh, emotion laden and heart provoking. It is also highly exaggerated to effectively drive the message home. According to Okereke "language in society is a cultural product. It is gender specific and therefore

creates a dichotomy between men and women especially in a traditional patriarchal society..." (141).

This simply summarizes the author's impetus in his use of language. Umunnakwe's language is masculinist. Most glaring in his diction is his use of proverbs e.g. "sweet orange fruits cannot be found on a lime tree" (3) is used to explain Jude's sudden rising up from poverty to wealth. "You stuck... Rama... stuck to Jude like the evostic adhesive" (38). This means that Rama ... got so close to Jude that it became impossible for Jude to move away from her. "who would have believe that the mortar could beat the pestle" (6). This is used to describe the reversal of roles by Rama... and Jude. Rama... a symbol of mortar rules over Jude a symbol of pestle. We also see the use of proverbs in *Arrow of God, Things Fall Apart, The Gods are not to Blame*, to mention these few.

There is also the use of imagery. Imagery is used to describe the level of mal-handling of the man by the woman e.g "Azuanuka continued to scheme to possess you as handkerchief" (5). This reveals the extent to which Andrew sees the fall of Jude, which to me is unrealistic and an exaggeration of a fallen African man in an African society, where has the man thrown all the powers vested on him by the society? When it comes to evil, the man suddenly becomes hypnotised, he throws all the powers vested on him in order to castigate the woman as the source and cause of his failure.

In trying to equate the life of Rama... in Lagos to that of industrial waste the words "rancid odour, garbage landfills, rickety motor exhaust pipes" were used to show the degree of condemnation, decay and rottenness of Rama... that represents the educated woman. He continues, "the images reminds us of an outright waste and hopelessness. A sense of incompleteness ... the image of doom for habitations of the city like Rama..." (163).

The tone of the novel is filled with anger, bitterness, regret and vengeance. The author in an attempt to prove that Azuanuka (the woman) is the problem in the society and not the man pours out his venom in words against Ramatoulaye. It is amazing to observe that Andrew the authorial voice lacks self control in his manner of approach in this novel. The kind of African man presented in the form of Jude is yet to be born into the Nigerian/Ibo society. Suddenly, the man becomes an imbecile very naïve and innocent just to project the woman as evil in the society which to me is a mockery to the patriarchal society which Jude represents.

There is also the use of simile in the novel. For example, "I made my bed and slumped down like a sack of weevil infested beans" (11). This depicts Andrew's state of shock and weakness after Jude's death.

Dialectically, there is a struggle by the author to prove that women oppress men as he replies to Mariama Ba's *So Long...* but, unfortunately for him most of the issue raised in his reply were out of context, his maleness and over bias nature has made it impossible for him to realistically and artistically come to a meaningful and

successful conclusion. The woman through Rama... exposes the double standards of the men who run away from their responsibilities and want to still maintain their status as heads and leaders in the home and society. I'd like to borrow Andrew's words here "men cannot eat their cake and have it".

Conclusion

Finally, it may not be wrong to state that Umuonnakwe in this novel is engaged in a political discourse of sexual politics. He seeks to consolidate the patriarchy position as head of the family and heads of the larger society. In doing this, he renounces the assertiveness of the woman as an abomination while authenticating the male superiority over the female inferiority in the society. It is therefore, suggested that the earlier the male writers carry along their female colleagues the better – this is because, they are in a better position to understand the whole psychology of what it takes to be an African woman in an African patriarchal society. They have a better knowledge about the woman and can make a better presentation of the female characters in the African literature. This paper therefore, is a call on the male writers to appreciate the works of their female counterpart especially in the presentation of their female characters.

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