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Writing the Woman's Body in Francophone African Literature: Taxonomy Issues and Challenges

This work originated from the absence of a critical discourse on literary writings of the woman's body in Francophone African novels. So far, critics have focused on narratives about African women written by African women. My research allowed me to redress a major inadequacy of current approaches to African literature, which see the African female figure either as a symbol of gendered oppression, or of liberation from gendered oppression, yet without looking at the meanings of the body as it is inscribed. Much of the contemporary research has demonstrated a commitment to representing women's lived experiences through a questioning of patriarchal customs and women's yearnings for freedom (D'Almeida 1994). However the corporeity of the women is not discussed. Female figures mainly operate as abstract bodies. I argue that rather than being a stable signifier of female oppression and resistance to patriarchy, the woman's body signifies a number of potentially conflicting political projects and positions in postcolonial African societies. In this regard, there is a need to problematise the ways in which Francophone African writers represent the female body as a sign and a bearer of social and political ideologies embedded in discourses of patriarchy, nationalism, violence and desire. I contend that ways of writing the woman's body are also ways of creating, performing and transmitting ideologies. They are processes through which writers and readers construct representations of social realities.

Following Michel Foucault's analyses of the body as a locus of power (Foucault 1975), I was able to look at the transgressive ways in which the woman's body becomes the battleground of conflicting discourses on nationalism, identity and

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sexuality. In so doing, one sees how the body becomes the figure through which many political and social claims are mediated. The novels I studied portray a conflicting woman's body, torn between docility and resistance. Most of the narratives describe a process of liberation instead of a total liberation. African writers create a complex body whose fictional itinerary takes the path of subversion, transgression and negotiation. The attempts to challenge social and cultural practices that legitimate the idea of a docile body do not lead to its erasure. The act of writing cannot destroy rites, traditions and ways of thinking that have been prevailing for centuries. Therefore, the woman's body becomes the ground on which different discourses on social practices, beliefs and free will merge. Far from being a self-evident entity, the woman's body is a locus of tension, contestation and assertion. The challenge is to read the woman's body as a social text to decipher in a postcolonial context fraught with dictatorship, neocolonialism, gender issues and the emergence of sexual behaviours which were once forbidden, and taboo.

My research pursues these considerations by establishing a taxonomy that discloses the dichotomies and the ambiguities inherent to literary representations of the woman's body in Francophone African literature. The mediating body, the resisting body and the captive body are the three major categories that resulted from my research. I elaborated these three cat-

egories not because I am expecting to provide a final and single explanation of literary representations of the woman's body in Francophone African literature, but to underline the need of a critical inquiry. What makes the categories previously mentioned theoretically relevant is the fact that they constantly overlap. I use them as analytical devices. Trying to define the woman's body thus becomes a hermeneutical endeavour which aims at understanding the struggle for change within social, cultural and political boundaries.

In *La Petite Peule* (2000), Mariama Barry reveals how the woman's body works as a mediator that finds a compromise between a need for freedom and sociocultural mechanisms that regulate the life of the individual. In this compelling narrative about female sexual mutilation, we found that Barry's writing of the suffering body is suffocated because of her inability to escape from traditional ways of thinking which repress any display of emotion. The taboo surrounding this social practice is lifted but the pain undergone by the little girl is silenced. In so doing, the Guinean writer does not totally infringe the law. The young female character attempts to free herself by reappropriating a body that her community wants to possess, are narrated in full details. However, the community performs the female sexual mutilation. This mutilation is described with a disconcerting briefness:

'je perçus entre mes jambes le contact glacial de quelque chose de tranchant. Sur le coup je n'ai pas réalisé la douleur'/'I felt a cold contact between my legs, something sharp. At the moment I did not realize the pain' (13), 'je ne voulais plus penser à mon mal'/'I did not want to think about my pain anymore' (15).

The knife or the razor blade used to cut the clitoris is not named. The emphasis is placed on the attempt to resist and to forget. Writing about forgetfulness still shows the constant work of a memory marked by psychological traumas. The memory of the refusal to submit to the mutilation mirrors the repression of the memory of the act of mutilation itself. This oppositional memory dynamic reveals mediation. The language describing the mediating woman's body silences the suffering according to the traditional education: 'vous devez étouffer vos cris, maîtrisez votre corps'/'you must stifle your cries; you must have control over your bodies' (17). But it also voices a desire for freedom through a description of the effort to resist: 'Je me redressai [...] je voulais rentrer chez moi. Mais je fus rattrappée [...] Je me débattis comme un diable'/'I sat up [...] I wanted to go home. But they caught me again [...] I fought like a devil' (13). Barry negotiates a literary space in which it is possible to tell a traumatising individual experience when you belong to a society where female sexual mutilation is first and foremost understood as a cultural practice that helps in maintaining traditional values and social cohesion.

Female sexual mutilation is not the only violence women have to deal with. Rape is another one. *C'est le Soleil Qui m'a Brûlée* by Calixthe Beyala (1987) offers a depiction of a raped body from an activist point of view. The novel narrates the tribulations of Ateba, a young woman whose life in the slums oscillates between violence, poverty and solitude. The Cameroonian author displays the strategic importance of sexuality in contemporary African societies. Under her pen, rape becomes emblematic of unbalanced relationships existing between men and women. In *Sexual Politics* (1990), Kate Millet explains how sexual relations can be viewed as political acts:

The term 'politics' shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of person is controlled by another [...] sex is a status category with political implications (23-24).

In Beyala's novel, the writing of a coerced sexual intercourse textualises the equation between sexual relations and social relations, sexual oppression and social oppression. The sexual positions that are forced upon Ateba: on her knees, underneath the man, operate an analogy be-

tween the woman's humiliations during the sexual act and the female subject inferiority within society: 'Rape is thus a political act rather than a sexual one, because the goal is to enforce men's power over women. Rape is about Power and Domination' (Baumeister & Tice 2001: 163). Rape symbolises the type of violence women have been enduring for centuries: 'La tête dans les odeurs de l'homme, la bouche contre son sexe [...] Et si elle arrêterait le cours de l'histoire en arrachant son sexe à coup de dents?./'Her head in the man's odours, her mouth against his genitalia [...] What if she could stop the course of history by cutting his sex with her teeth?' (46). The female subject has no voice. Her mouth invaded by a male organ represents the phallic order. The act of castration is the only solution. It also expresses an attempt by women to resist reification and patriarchy. The initial violence suffered by the woman turns into a liberating force when she exercises her agency. The study of this novel shows a possible rebellion and liberation of the rape victim through the murder of her assailant. The resisting body fights back and reverses the power struggle. Under Beyala's pen heterosexuality is oppressive. However, same sex relationships among women are not openly addressed. The woman's body resists rape but does not totally break free from the compulsory heterosexuality that it tries to challenge.

Beyala and Barry are two women whose writings on the woman's body explore the meaning of femininity and provide a deep understanding of gender patterns and dynamics in postcolonial African societies. Unlike his female counterparts, Sony Labou Tansi uses the woman's body in connection with the nationalist struggle. In his novel *La Vie et Demie* (1979), the woman's body is only depicted as a machine of war, which helps to achieve revolutionary objectives. Chaidana's mission is to get rid of the Katamalanasi's dictatorship by having its corrupted members drink poisoned champagne before engaging in sexual intercourse with them. Chaidana's body is a lethal weapon that ensures a successful revolution. She advocates an ideal of liberty and justice by overthrowing the dictatorship. The extreme reification of the woman's body leads to her erasure as a subject. The woman is objectified. Her ontological sociality is sexualised. Her subjectivity denied. Due to the controversial nature

of Labou Tansi's portrayal of Chaidana, one must ask if a woman's involvement in the collective fate at the expense of her personal fate is not a negation of her own individuality. Beyond the apparent discourse that castigates a corrupted and tyrannical state underlies another one that determines female identity through ideas of sexuality and lustfulness. The Congolese writer perfectly succeeds in criticising the failure of the postcolonial state but the reality of the African woman's life is never addressed. Chaidana's gender only matters as long as she accomplishes 'sexual terrorism' (Ananissah 1997: 18). Against this background, I argue that it is not enough to sing the praise of woman warriorship. We must question the literary use of her sexuality and 'we must guard against a simple celebration of female militancy or political participation, because the key question is for what purpose it is used. The question becomes especially urgent in postcolonial societies' (Loomba 1998: 226). The ideological implications of the woman's body in Labou Tansi's novel are conflicting. The woman's body is a sexual weapon, a catalyst for political change. By the same token, it is also prisoner of a wide range of stereotypes that define women by their sexuality. The female subjectivity is totally erased. The social condition of the female postcolonial subject is inexistent. Labou Tansi's depiction of the woman's body is problematic. Depending on your ideological stance, you could either read *La Vie et Demie* as a powerful and original novel advocating the end of postcolonial dictatorships or as a misogynistic narrative that promotes the reification of woman's sexuality.

Perpetue et l'Habitude du Malheur by Mongo Beti also deals with the national fate but from a different perspective. The Cameroonian writer narrates the tragic life of a young woman named Perpetue. Her life story mirrors Africa's predicament after independence. Beti's leading character is dead at the beginning of the novel. Essola, the narrator is her brother. He investigates the circumstances of her death after few years spent in jail for subversive political activities. Perpetue becomes an allegory of the failure of the postcolonial state. By trying to find out what happened to his sister, Essola discovers what has become of the newly independent Cameroon: corruption, neocolonialism and deception. Perpetue was a smart young student who was

forced to marry an abusive man. And she died pregnant. Her brother was a member of the UPC. Um Nyobe the leader of this communist party was killed during the nationalist struggle. Unlike Labou Tansi's Chaidana, Beti's Perpetue is not an Amazon. She is the victim *par excellence* of a patriarchal system that echoes the neocolonial system. In Beti's novel, Perpetue embodies the Cameroonian quest for freedom. The writer establishes a filiation between Perpetue (the female character) and Ruben Um Nyobe (a historical figure). His depiction of the woman's body is rooted in the debacle of the nationalist movement. The selling of the woman's body through the custom of the dowry, the death of Perpetue with the infant she is bearing are reflections of the postcolonial uneasiness. Beti uses the woman's body as a means to express the failure of the postcolonial state and its incapacity to provide democracy, progress, justice and a welfare state to its citizens. Perpetue's individual tragedy becomes the collective tragedy of the Cameroonian people. The decade between Um Nyobe's assassination, the independence of Cameroon and the death of Perpetue are a temporal marker pivotal to the understanding of the plot. This decade authorises a sociopolitical analysis, which starts with the destruction of the social ideal carried by Um Nyobe and ends with the death of Perpetue and her newborn baby. This double death represents the state of hopelessness in the newly independent Cameroon. Due to the absence of his national hero, the state is doomed to fail. The promise of a better future is uncertain. Perpetue and Ruben are an inseparable couple: 'nous vengerons Ruben, nous vengerons Perpetue'/'we will seek revenge for Ruben; we will seek revenge for Perpetue' (83), says one of the characters. The nationalist discourse is implemented through a communitarian rhetoric, which reunites the historical hero and the fictitious heroine. In front of the challenges facing Cameroon, they are one. The dead woman's body and the dead revolutionary are both present *in absentia*. Perpetue's death and her failure to give birth are symbolic of the postcolonial situation. The aborted maternity reflects the aborted revolution. In Beti's story, the woman's body is a medium through which the writer mourns and expresses discontent, disenchantment and melancholia. The mediating woman's body becomes a convenient narrative device that examines

the predicament of postcolonial Cameroon. But it can also be read as non-existent since Perpetue's story is not her story but the history of the newly independent Cameroon. As Florence Stratton aptly observes:

Women's oppression in text [...] is used as a paradigm for the fate of Africa since colonialism. This fact raises the question whether the interest of these writers really lies in exposing the injustices done to women, for they seem to have been attracted primarily by metaphorical potential of the situation of women (Stratton 1990: 124).

It is my conviction that literary critics, whose only focus is the political realm, should take a closer look at gender issues by questioning the allegorical and metaphorical uses of the woman's body in African literature. It is not our duty to tell writers how to write. However, we can contribute to a better understanding of the African woman trope by re-examining narrative situations in which the politics of representation of the woman's body are characterised by patterns of gender role stereotyping (sexuality, maternity). What we are concerned with are the ways in which ideas about gender and sexuality shape social roles and identities within a culture.

The taxonomy previously mentioned—mediating body, resisting body, captive body—is efficient at unravelling the complexities of the woman's body involvements in discourses on identity, violence and nationalism. One also needs to address the discourse on desire, lesbian desire in particular because of its controversial nature in the African context. The existing body of literary criticism is almost entirely silent on this subject. According to Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi:

most African literary critics are not concerned with lesbian or gay issues because this topic is very sensitive and often controversial, or because they view other issues as more pressing. Or, they fall back on the excuse that homosexuality is shunned or repressed by their culture and thought by many not to exist (Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi 1997: 30).

In this regard, female homosexuality becomes a crucial category of analysis. Studying the lesbian body challenges the taboo surrounding this sexual practice while examining the various ways intimacies and sexual experiences are con-

structed and perceived. African societies are heterosexual and against homosexuality. According to the International Lesbian and Gay Association Report published in 2000:

The silence from LGBT people in Africa is deafening. It indicates that LGBT people are being silenced by cultural constraint and government restriction. Many African countries outlaw homosexuality outright, while others, though not mentioning it specifically criminalize the lives of LGBT people through cultural convention (Sharia laws in Islamic countries).

Producing a lesbian discourse in such a hostile environment is a perilous adventure. Facing that critical situation, writers are forced to find a narrative voice that will express a forbidden desire while acknowledging the compulsory nature of heterosexuality. Female homosexuality is never openly addressed. It works as a narrative lure. The study of the lesbian body forces us to question the intrinsic contradictions of African women's writing of lesbian desire within a predominantly heterosexual society. These contradictions appear through depictions of a discursive woman's body that oscillates between rupture and conformism. Beyala's and Barry's takes on lesbian eroticism are rooted in the social interdiction that they are trying to avoid. In *La Petite Peule* (2000), Mariama Barry is very self-conscious when speaking of sexuality. When she dares to make any comment about heterosexual intercourse, she says: 'c'était une corvée que de faire l'amour',/'lovemaking was such a chore' (254). The text never portrays a love scene between a man and a woman. Female desire only appears when the young girl finds herself staring at naked women who are bathing in a river. The narration of women bathing becomes an erotic scene. The young girl dwells on descriptive details that show the intoxicating beauty of the female bodies that she observes. The chimerical exploration of lesbianism also appears in excerpts, which express woman's sex appeal as well as the impossibility to fully enjoy same sex love. The text only portrays lesbian desire as a fantasy. Two levels of narration are at work. On the one hand, the narrative is an account of the amazing scene observed by the young girl. On the other hand, it is an imaginary representation of lesbian yearnings marked by the internalisation of sensations that the female character

would feel if given the chance to experience forbidden sexuality. Although she does not describe physical attraction between women *per se*, Calixthe Beyala also writes about lesbianism in *C'est le Soleil qui m'a Brûlée* (1987). Unlike Barry, she does not use fantasy as a narrative device or disguise. She has a subtle approach to female homosexuality, which is symptomatic of self-conscious literary writings of lesbian desire by African women writers. She sets up an ambivalent plot that blurs the opposition between heterosexuality and female homosexuality. Ateba, the main character, uses the word *woman* in its generic and absolute sense. The 'Woman' is the essential other that means the world to her. She also appears as a Goddess. This is a strategic move that enables Beyala to mention a lesbian desire within a heterosexual society. Towards the end of the story this abstract Goddess becomes an object of desire. After killing a man who was trying to rape her, Ateba hallucinates. In her delirium, the man she killed becomes her best friend: Irène. The metamorphosis of the man into a woman leads to a peaceful love scene. The lesbian desire is fulfilled through a dead man. Ateba's quest for lesbian love is achieved through the opposite sex. Male and female genders are confused. The notion of normative sexuality and gender are destabilised through a queer way of writing. The text produces a referential blurring that prevents the reader from labelling the heroine, even if a cluster of clues could allow a lesbian reading.

In Francophone African literature the lesbian body constantly navigates between the three categories: resisting body, captive body and mediating body. Beyala and Barry do not use the literary text as a true expression of eroticism, which according to Audre Lorde (1984) ceases to be a denial of the self and becomes an affirmation of the self. Their literary approach still struggles with social taboos and prejudice. Speaking of the presence of the narrative scheme of homosexuality, Odile Cazenave says: 'female writing will come to progressively include and overtly approach this other dimension of love' (Cazenave 2000: 147). So far, African women's writings of lesbian desire have yet to meet Cazenave's predictions. They show that despite their transgressive dimension they nevertheless conform to the dominant heterosexual ideology. The taboo on voicing homosexual tendencies/fantasies is lifted. The one on the act re-

mains, because the narration of explicit sexual acts between two women is avoided and totally inexistent. Under these circumstances, saying is not doing. The woman's erotic subjectivity is a site of a tension between the wish to write a lesbian desire and the internalisation of a social heterosexual imperative. Hence, the omnipresence of an oneiric approach to female homosexuality that undermines the realisation of forbidden sexual behaviour. Francophone African women writers are torn between their desire to voice their individual lesbian yearnings and their compulsory collective obedience to the dominant heterosexual law. This antagonistic situation is revealed through narrative subterfuges and stratagems that give birth to a textual space where the taboo of female homosexuality and the assertion of a lesbian desire can coexist.

As we have mentioned earlier, our goal is not to define the woman's body as a mediating body, resisting body or captive body. Such an approach denies the dualistic polysemy that characterises African writings of the woman's body. The woman's body involvement in discourses on nationalism, violence, identity and desire displays an inherent dualism opposing collectivity and individuality. However, this apparent Manichaeism is not absolute. Our main concern was to show that the categories previously mentioned are not strictly marked out. They do not necessarily clash. They permeate each other and help us to understand what is at stake in literary representations of the woman's body. In order to avoid an analytical impasse that confines the text to a system of binary opposition, I propose to shift from the dualistic polysemy of the woman's body to the dissemination of the woman's body. Following in the footsteps of Jacques Derrida (1972), I came to the conclusion that the space existing between the intentionality of the text and the narrative tension, which characterises the text, is where the dissemination of the woman's body takes place. The writing subject undertakes a literary project, which is altered by discourses that he/she tries to challenge. Therefore, the main interest of the texts studied here does not lie in what they describe, advocate or denounce but in the fuzzy areas and discrepancies which result from a dialogical situation: the written text encounters pre-existing social discourses. The interdiscursive relation reveals itself through fissures and antagonisms lead-

ing to internal/ (intra) textual transformations that give birth to an evasive female body. This evasiveness is rather a challenge than a failure. Francophone African writings on the woman's body express a will for rupture, change and transformation within social, cultural and political boundaries.

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