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## Blind Devotion, Violence and Trauma in the Works of Ka Maïga, Bassek and Mpoudi-Ngollé

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### Abstract

African women, for too long, have been made to exist in the shadow of African men. Their subordination to men has been mostly achieved by the enactment of societal laws in pre-colonial, colonial and neocolonial African settings which categorize them (women) as the 'other'. The consequence of this subjugation is women's dependence on / and blind acceptance of their inferiority to men. To change the status quo, African feminist writers and critics alike have raised awareness in women about the obduracy of oppressive tendencies of some African cultural mores. These cultural ethos / practices are those that spring from essentially controlling woman's body that practically translate into controlling her mind in order to make her believe the myth that she is inferior to her male counterpart. The reification of the female body invariably leads to African women's blind devotion to their husbands, children and most often, the extended family. Besides, women are also victims of male violence and trauma as evidenced in the works of Philomène Bassek, Aminata Ka Maïga and Evelyne Mpoudi Ngollé.

Much of African women's literature has been concerned with change, overtly or covertly. Indeed, the very process of literary creativity as an aspect of African women's cultural production is about change. Many of the writers have confessed that they are motivated to write by the impulse to change the status quo, interrogate patriarchy, imperialism and Western feminism. This is closely related to the desire to



liberate African women, change their consciousness and recreate a positive self-perception to enhance progress. African women are aware that change cannot take place in vacuum, but within a dynamic cultural crucible. Mary Modupe Kolawole (1997)

### Introduction

The so long epigraph that opens this discourse is borrowed from Mary Kolawole's thought-provoking book entitled *Womanism and Africa Consciousness*, and which we have taken the liberty to use. The question of subalternity of the African woman has generated a lot of debates so much that hardly can we talk of the African woman without looking at the colonial, cultural effects and more especially patriarchal ethos in the subjugation of the African woman. As a result, moving beyond the limitations created for her by the male-oppressor has always been the subject of reflection in the creative texts of francophone African women writers. To speak of subordination is to speak of a *rapport de force* between subjects and oppressors in which case hegemony, insurgence, resistance and rebellion occur. We submit here to Pius Adesanmi (2002)

Subalternity is deeply imbricated in the politics of liberty and cultural production in those ex-centric sites of marginalized discursive formations (Africa, Asia, non-White United States and Canada, Maori New Zealand and Aborigine Australia among others) so brilliantly theorized in the book edited by Abdul Jan Mohammed and Lloyd Brown, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990).

Suffice it to say here that the trope of subalternity in the fiction of a number of francophone African women writers dominates their literary production. Texts such as Aminata Ka Maïga's *La Voie du salut* (1990) Philomène Bassek's *La Tache de sang*

and Evelyne Mpoudi-Ngollé's *Sous la cendre le feu* (1990) that form the corpus of this essay, portray the trajectories of female subjects. Not only that these texts reveal the male-oppressor / female-victim dynamics but, they also show cultural and patriarchal dominance women are subjected to. It must be reminded that Negritude writers and poets did not do a good job about presenting the image of the black woman. Their works often portray African woman as the 'other' even though they seemed to have meant well. This constitutes also a bone of contention which African feminists would pick on in their struggle for the emancipation of the black woman. For African feminists, the "idyllic image of the African woman is a creation of Negritude writers of the thirties and forties especially Léopold Sédar Senghor, the author of the celebrated poem "Femme Noire" in praise of the African woman's beauty and mystic powers" (Aduke Adebayo, 1996: 40). Both feminist writers and critics would therefore launch a counterattack on what they largely describe as an exploitation of women's images and stereotypes in male writings. With reference to Awa Thiam's position on this subject, Rangira Gallimore (1997) notes that woman's image is often exploited by male writers in order to underscore the mythically subordinate position of African women whose image "a été souvent utilisée non pas nécessairement pour défendre les droits féminins mais pour promouvoir une certaine idéologie politique, culturelle ou philosophique (12) [has often been used not necessarily to defend African women's rights but to promote a certain political, cultural or philosophical ideology] (Our translation).

Radical writers like Calixthe Beyala, even though the latter borrows the title of her erotic novel, *Femme nue, femme noire* (2003) from Senghor's poem entitled "Femme nue, femme noire", condemn the essentializing of African women's images by Negritude proponents. Of course, Beyala's reduction of African woman to a mere sex object in this same narrative has been denounced by critics for the latter do not see her painting an authentic image of the African woman (Nicki Hitchcott, 2006). But Beyala defends herself



by claiming that, she, by no means, is essentializing African woman, rather, poised to expose the “invented authenticities” imposed on the African woman by mesmerized African and non-African writers (Nicki Hitchcott, 2006). We allude here to the very first sentences with which Beyala commissions her exposition in *Femme nue, femme noire* “Femme nue, femme noire, vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté...” ‘Ces vers ne font pas partie de mon arsenal linguistique. Vous verrez: mes mots à moi tressautent et cliquent comme des chaînes. Des mots qui détonnent, déglissent, dévissent, culbutent, dissèquent, torturent! Des mots qui fessent, giflent, cassent et broient!’ (11). [Naked woman, black woman, clothed in your colour that is life, in your form that is beauty...” These lines do not belong to my linguistic arsenal. You will see: my own words startle and jangle like chains. Words which detonate, wreck, undo, overwhelm, dissect, torture! Words which spank, slap in the face, break and crush!]. (Our translation) With this kind of onslaught launched by the likes of Beyala on Negritude, one realizes that African feminists are not favourably disposed to the message of Negritude as it affects the African woman who seems to give up too much in order for her male counterpart to continue relishing in the myth of male superiority at her expense. In this instance, it would be appropriate to cite Eva Figes (1986) who calls to question Sigmund Freud’s suggestion that woman should renounce her sexuality in order to attain civilization. She in fact goes on to provide what can be regarded as a synopsis of Freudian idea of womanhood which is to be a home keeper and maker, a machinery for child reproduction, a being cut out for passivity in relation to man.

### Theory (Feminism) as a Sign of our Times

Theory has become one of the dominant signs of our time, to the extent that hardly can we engage in a literary work without applying foreign theories. Suffice it to state here that the expression ‘signs of our times,’ is borrowed from Aijaz Ahmad’s ‘Literature

among the Signs of our Times,’ an introductory chapter to his book, *Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Today, expression like subject, minority, gender, identity, center and periphery among others, are commonplace in our literary discourse. In the construction of any minority discourse, especially in this era of postcolonial theory’s attempt to remap margins, African women’s textual productions have provided many theoretical positions. Hence, the concept of African woman as a subaltern, the oppressed and the wretched among other words, have produced many theories, feminism here, being the cornerstone of this writing. In her *Introduction to Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Mohanty (1991) admits the complexity inherent in defining this term. We submit here to Adebayo (1996), the mere mention of feminism brings to mind the idea of challenging male hegemony. It must be noted that mainstream feminism as Ramonu Sanusi (2010) observes, has, on several occasions, tried to project a universal definition of feminism. This universality of feminism however, received an angry charge from feminism in the Third World especially from Africa. The critic’s position is that being a European woman or American woman is different from being an African woman or by extension a Hindu woman (India) for socio-cultural context and values are totally different.

The essence of the fight between the male-oppressor/female-victim is to recreate, reconstruct and redefine the African woman – a new being, a new African woman. It is not out of place that francophone African women writers like Mariama Bâ and Rawiri among others, have set out to deconstruct patriarchal modalities dominant in a majority of African societies through their literary creations/productions. Deconstructing the male-centric orientation in African societies is an enormous task and the more reason these writers arm the protagonists of their novels with determination in order to correct the false image given to women. While colonialism has contributed immensely in the production of African female subjects suffice it to say that it has also altered the socio-cultural life



of Africans where women were rendered irrelevant and ineffective to borrow an expression made famous by Zulu Sofola.

African feminist insurgence against patriarchal oppression therefore has to take a radical dimension if indeed the truth must be told. Hence, with writers like Calixthe Beyala, Ken Bugul, Werewere Liking, Philomène Bassek, it is no longer sufficient to dwell in the periphery of African feminist discourse. This crop of writers, taking a cue from their rather subtle and compromising predecessors, adopt a more radical and stern stance by truly naming what used to be formerly unnamable in order to call a spade a spade. Their own approach to African women liberation cause, apart from bringing the situation of African women to the open, has as well suggested what steps in their own opinion should be taken in order to break the shackles of oppression which hold African women bound to stultifying patriarchal traditions. Calixthe Beyala has been found to be notoriously undaunted in this mission giving the way she launches her arsenal against patriarchal systems in Africa.

Beyala's approach is indeed a mechanism that has adequately called into question African women's blind devotion to oppressive hegemonic practices. The reader can feel the inner tension of oppressed women as portrayed through her protagonists. Using Beyala's protagonists as random representatives of oppressed African, a reader would discover that Patrice Gahungu Ndimubandi (2009) captures very well the debilitating psychological and physical conditions of beyalian protagonists in his detailed exposé on *Assèze l'Africaine* entitled *Angoisses névrotiques et mal-être dans Assèze l'Africaine de Calixthe Beyala*. Ndimubandi posits that:

De fait, s'il existe un thème fédérateur de l'œuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala, c'est bien le mythe de la déchéance, de la dégradation. Si cette corruption de l'être et de l'univers beyalais se révèle dans la décadence sociale et des mœurs, dans une Afrique et un Cameroun en pleine déliquescence, dans un climat

atmosphérique déréglé, où des pluies intempestives se déchaînent en pleine saison sèche et des chaleurs mortelles en celle de la pluie, c'est surtout à travers le corps et la psyché des acteurs, éternels zombies errants, en mal de vivre, dans cet espace aux horizons tragiquement plombés, qu'elle se dévoile le plus dans tout son horreur (6).

De facto, if there exists a unifier theme of Calixthe Beyala's novels, it is the myth of decline and degradation. If this corruption of the beyalian being and universe comes to light in social and moral decadence, in an Africa and a Cameroon falling into utter decline, in an unsettled atmospheric climate, where ill-timed rains rage during dry season and deadly heats during rainy season, it is particularly through the body and psyche of the actors, perpetually wandering zombies, yearning for life, in this space with tragically leaden horizons (Our translation).

Beyala's sense of apt representation of the deplorable condition of African women in patriarchal milieus as described above is by every means a succinct way to obtain a clear picture of violence and trauma the African woman is subjected to.

Any African feminist writer or critic who fails precisely to describe the mental and physical degradation of oppressed African women simply shies away from telling the truth. This ultimately amounts to a compromise on his or her part in order to avoid being vilified. As far as we are concerned with the authors being discussed in this essay, two of them, Kâ Maïga and Mpoudi-Ngollé are among those compromising African feminist writers who decide to dwell in the periphery of African feminist emancipatory struggle by the mere fact that they let their protagonists become enthralled into



patriarchal ethos. They make them negotiate with systematized male domination without offering them adequate voice to transcend and obliterate patriarchal practices. These women resonate those described by Helen Chukuwuma (1989) as female characters who are solely trained to focus on marriage, procreation, keep the hearth busy with cooking family meals, ensure their husbands' sexual satisfaction strictly on invitation (in order not to be seen as sexually wayward), and maintain peace in the home.

They appear to be preaching Buchi Emecheta's feminism with a small 'f'. According to Awa Thiam (1986), this sort of negotiation will not work for she claims, and we quote below:

As far as we are concerned, this human race consists of social classes and two categories of individuals: men and women, whose relationship to each other is that of dominating and dominated. But that is not all. People, or rather men, have often reduced the problem of women to a problem of complementarity. Who defines this complementarity? The men who prescribe it for us. This complementarity has been systematized, giving excuses for all the forms of oppression and exploitation that the patriarchal system imposes on a woman, by virtue of her sex, both in the family and in organized labour. Should this complementarity not only be challenged but also REDEFINED? (13).

Philomène Bassek, although not with the kind of sharpness and acridity of Beyala's parlance, on her part takes a bolder step by imbuing her protagonist, Patricia, with the will power to advance a positive cause against the survival of one of the tools of women oppression, in this case marriage. Patricia is empowered as a well educated and employed modern African woman who ensures that she relates with her husband on equal terms. She equally engages in

feminist movement activities and terminates her mother, Mama Ida's, pregnancy in order to save her life from excessive procreation. Although Mama Ida dies after the evacuation of the foetus from her womb, the reader realizes that she is conscious of her being oppressed by her husband, but for tradition, she would have revolted. However, what she could not achieve as a result of her sense of powerlessness in the face of an overwhelming albatross-like husband, Patricia her daughter achieves on her behalf. Paradoxically, Patricia herself is not totally free from the jinx of patriarchal culture. Patricia's husband, Mandika, in his effort to call the former to order, criticizes her for engaging in feminist enterprises. There again, we see the ambiguity with which Bassek handles her feminist vision and mission.

#### Blind Devotion, Violence and Trauma

Rokhaya and Rabiadou, Mama Ida and Mina in *La Voie du salut* and *La Tache de sang* and *Sous la cendre le feu* respectively have a blind devotion to their husbands and the consequence of their inaction is that they are traumatized while madness and death occur in some cases. Although the traditional binary opposition of male-oppressor / female-victim is being challenged by textual revisionism of Ka Maïga, Bassek and Mpoudi-Ngollé, the struggle for women liberation in these novels is far from being achieved.

The traditional Rokhaya and the modern Rabiadou (*La Voie du salut*) and Mama Ida Patricia (*La Tache de sang*), Mina (in *Sous la cendre le feu*) are characters who occupy problematic positions. Their textual trajectory is that of subalternity. Even though Rabiadou and Mina, models of modernism and female emancipation in the African society try to escape from subjugated condition, they still find themselves trapped in the web of patriarchal oppression. For instance, these two models, cut in the crossroad between tradition and modernity, experience trauma in their marriages as a result of their blind devotion to their husbands and their inability to negotiate their autonomy within the definition of African marriage,



family set up and commitment. The modern Rabiadou in *La Voie du salut*, despite her exposure to occidental culture in France and her determination not to subject herself to stifling African tradition, loses her life leaving behind two little children, when she hears the news of her betrayal by her husband, the latter having clandestinely married a 'drianké' (worldly woman) and buying her a villa. The state of shock that leads to Rabiadou's death as described by Maïga the author is quoted below:

-Racine? Epouser? Villa? Avec l'argent de nos économies! Ah le traître, le misérable!  
Rabiadou se leva, tituba, tomba à la renverse. ... Elle demeurait inerte ... Elle est morte (99).

-Racine? Married another wife? Bought her a villa? With our savings! Ah, the traitor! The miserable man!  
Rabiadou stood up, staggered along, fell flat on her back ... She remained static ... She is dead (Our translation).

Mina in her own case in *Sous la cendre le feu* regresses into a state of madness triggered by the news of her husband who rapes her twelve year old daughter with precedence of her husband's misbehaviour – Mohamadou Djibril's attempt to sleep with Essèbé, Mina's younger sister and disruption of the peace in her family by her sister-in-law, Hadja. In the end, Mina is hospitalized and subjected to sessions of psychoanalysis by Dr Lobé in order to reinstate her to a psychologically stable condition. Mina gives a synopsis of the trajectory of her depersonalization disorder saying:

Ce fait, je crois que c'est celui que le docteur Lobé attend. Je l'avais enfoui au plus profond de moi-même, pour ne jamais le révéler à personne, je l'y avais tellement enfermé que ma propre mémoire se

refusait à le laisser remonter à la surface. Et alors c'était réveillée la chose qui hibernait en moi, et que mes responsabilités familiales m'avaient permis d'oublier: ma vieille angoisse avait repris possession de moi, était remontée lentement, envahissant mon être, rongant mon cerveau. Et c'est pourquoi aujourd'hui je suis devenue folle ... Mon mari a violé ma fille ... Et moi pauvre idiote, je le couvre! Comme je l'ai couvert quand il a tenté de le faire avec ma sœur (190-193).

This fact, I believe is what Dr Lobé awaits. I have buried in my most profound part, never to reveal it to anyone, I have so much locked up that my own memory refused to let it resurge to the surface. And then was the thing that hibernated in me, which my domestic responsibilities allowed me to forget, revived: my ancient anguish took possession of me again, it resurged slowly, invading my whole being, devouring my brain. And that is why I have become mad today... My husband raped my daughter... And I, the poor idiot, that I am, I cover it up! Just as I sealed it up when he attempted to do it with my sister (Our translation).

Be that traumatic as it may, Mina will not speak of her chagrin to anyone, especially because it is a taboo that a father should rape his daughter. It is unheard of in Africa, yet it happens often, if one alludes to available statistics of incest in African feminist novels. A ready example is found in Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, where Tanga, the eponymous heroine is raped by her father. However, most African women, whether victims or relatives of victims, prefer to suffer in silence in order to escape being stigmatized, and most importantly, because of their lack of voice.



This attitude of voicelessness eventually boils down to blind devotion on the part of African women because they do not want to tarnish the family name. Rather, they choose to live with their neurotic state.

That Rabiadou and Mina are unable to question their traumatic states and their husbands' absence from home as well as their strangely keeping out of touch with their families is an indication that western education alone is not enough for the oppressed modern women to subvert patriarchy. It is only an arm serving as a means to an end, which if the educated African woman is not skilled in applying to assert her personhood and freedom, still remains in her subjugated arena. In actual fact, colonialism, the progenitor of western civilization in Africa, initially played its own role in boxing African woman into a position of subalternity from whence, her tendency for blind devotion and her vulnerability to trauma. The path charted by the white man's contact with Africa began from when he, the white man, arrived as colonialist in African societies, the first thing he, as a physiocrat, strove to achieve was to appropriate all lands to the colonial government. The matriarchal tradition that promotes communal ownership of land became history. African woman was robbed of a major source of livelihood and self-worth. Secondly, on the white man's pretext of "mission civilisatrice", African women were not given the opportunity to participate in receiving Western education. When they were given access to Western education, it came only as a means of preparing African women as home keepers. What will enable oppressed African women say no to male hegemony then is their own conscious awareness of their otherness and definite effort to confront visible and invisible fields of oppression from where men derive the power to subjugate them.

Theme deployment, narrative style and discursive engagement are common denominators of these novels. The mother-daughter trope is fully deployed. In *La Voie du salut*, Rabiadou overthrows her mother to take the centre stage of the

narrative, but as has been discussed above, Rabiadou does progress into the stage where she is able to fully play the role of a quasi-feminist messiah with which the author intends to charge her. Unfortunately, she falls victim of male deception and unfaithfulness in marriage. Patricia, on the other hand, in *La Tache de sang*, edges out her mother from the centre to the periphery. The latter, not satisfied to be in the periphery, finds her way back to the centre, to remain the effective protagonist of the novel.

Mama Ida's relationship with her husband is a disturbing one for she engages in a politics of invisibility. Her husband is everything to her: the boss, the decider and even more worrisome, the owner of her soul. The more reason, she pleases him with different meals, gives him a child almost every year so as to make him happy. The happiness of Same, her husband, is paramount to her well-being, even though in Mama Ida's subconscious, she is displeased with her state of subalternity which she confesses towards the end of the novel:

Pourtant, il m'est arrivé souvent de penser que ma vie aurait dû se dessiner autrement. Je ne sais comment, mais l'idée était là, dans le secret, sans forme, inexprimable. Elle s'est perdue au fil des années, à force de me taire... Je n'ai jamais voulu te conter mes souffrances, celles de mes semblables encore moins, pour t'épargner peines et ennuis... J'ai lutté moi aussi, Patricia, contrairement à ce que tu as toujours cru, mais dans l'ombre, seule et sans armes, loin des sociétés secrètes féminines de jadis, fortes, puissantes, relativement puissantes... L'admiration que je te témoigne pour tes camarades et toi, en secret, est grande, mais plus grande encore est la peur qui m'étreint (155).



Yet, I happen to think that my life should have been shaped otherwise. I do not know how, but the idea was there, in the secret, without form, inexpressible. It was lost as the years go by, by dint of keeping quiet... I never wanted to tell the story of my sufferings, even less those of my kinds, in order to keep you away from worries and troubles... Patricia, I also fought, contrary to what you have always believed, but in obscurity, solely and armlessly, far away from the strong, powerful, relatively powerful feminine secret societies of those days. Great is the admiration I secretly have for your friends and you, but greater also is the fear that grips me (Our translation).

In Mama Ida's revelations above, the role that silencing plays in subalternizing the « other », the woman in this context, is exposed. In this regard, silencing should be as a phenomenon occurring when women are denied the voice or do not feel the agency to speak, write and publish about themselves, teach, and work at the level that men work and earn income. Awa Thiam, the Malian feminist seems to have felt the need for African women to speak for themselves in order to attain freedom when she strongly heralds in her seminal ethnographical survey on women in some African societies entitled *La Parole aux négresses* (1978), translated into English by Dorothy Blaire in 1986 as *Black Sisters, Speak out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*, (1986). The inner tension she feels about the oppression of women in patriarchal African societies is palpable in her statements below:

Black women have been silent for too long. Are they now beginning to find their voices? Are they claiming the right to speak for themselves? Is it not high time that they discovered their own voices, that –even if they are unused to speaking for themselves –they now

take the floor, if only to say that they exist, that they are human beings –something that is not always immediately obvious –and that, as such, they have a right to liberty, respect and dignity? (11).

JG-J Jester (2003) distinguishes this kind of voice being referred to by Thiam as a metaphorical voice (different from literal voice) having to do with the expression of self. Voicing out women's condition in order to gain independence and be heard is a notion Theresa M. Senft (1995), upholds when she argues in her essay entitled "Writing (and) Independence: Gayatri Spivak and the Dark Continent of *Écriture Féminine*". She opines that:

Continental feminists argue that the only way to move women from a position of objectified servitude to a position of full subjectivity is for women to write the truth of their bodies (1).

Silencing therefore becomes a mechanism by which men enforce their dominance over women, the dominated. Ingrained into their psyche that woman is unequal to man, ultimately, African women become blinded by tradition. This mechanism of silencing women has prevented women from speaking out and has knocked them into a corner of total inexistence or quasi-existence. Through tradition, society/men encrypt oppressive patriarchal practices into the psyche of women who through cultural operant conditioning willingly and or unwillingly subject themselves to nefarious hegemonic cultural injunctions. Naturally, this becomes part of life and most women in such societies see them as the norm without which a society cannot be sustained. Awa Thiam exposes the barbaric mutilation of women's bodies termed excision and infibulations in the name of upholding tradition. It goes without saying that practices such as these are amputative to the human/female body with dangerous health consequences. Thiam



even remarks that these operations as barbaric as they are, some women in Africa still subscribe to the practice of clitoridectomy and infibulations in order to preserve the tradition of ensuring that female sexuality is curtailed to the extent that the

procedures adopted by the old women who carry out these cruel operations differ. In the case of the Afar, they generally remove everything they can, clitoris, hymen, strips of flesh from the labia minora and majora, and, using thorns for sutures, constitute one single narrow aperture, which the young men cannot always succeed in penetrating (5).

It must be noted that the practice of clitoridectomy and infibulations is a means by which women's bodies are prepared for men's domination. In certain African societies, girls are made to receive specialized traditional lessons while in confinement for excision and or infibulations (Thiam, 1986). One of the important lessons they learn during their confinement is the need for them to subdue their sexuality, be submissive, passive and stoic. These are qualities regarded by patriarchal agents, in most cases older women, as quintessential for females. A woman lacking in these qualities is to be found wanting in character and she is most likely to be regarded as a failed woman whose children are unlikely to do well in life either. Having thus been brainwashed, females in patriarchal societies tame themselves in line with such retrogressive societal prescriptions. Odile Cazenave (1996), draws from Rangira Gallimore in this aspect

En Afrique, ... c'est à travers le corps de la femme que la société se maintient et se perpétue. Ainsi ce corps doit-il être façonné, contrôlé et marqué. Le contrôle du corps se traduit d'abord à travers les injonctions

verbales concernant la façon de tenir son corps régi par un code de bonne ou de mauvaise conduite (179).

In Africa, ... it is through woman's body that the society maintains and perpetuates itself. Thus this body should be fashioned, controlled and marked. The control of the body is translated first of all by means of verbal injunctions concerning the manner a woman carries her body regimented by a code of good or bad conduct (Our translation).

Apart from other known tools of oppression used in preparing African women towards blind devotion in marriage, clitoridectomy and infibulations serve as inconsiderate classical barbaric acts of female castration that psychologically prepare victims to accept their inequality to man. Once castrated, her self-esteem is lost and what is left of her is a feeling of inferiority because she has been automatically and psychologically conditioned to a state of permanent incompleteness that she is to live with all her life, not by her choice, but by the dictates of cultural and patriarchal ethos. If one should want to be fair, one should compare an excised and infibulated woman to a castrated male. A castrated male is one without the ability to express his masculine sexuality, one incapable of doing 'what' other men do, one purloined of his self-esteem. Such a man does not exist in the equation of masculine socio-political and cultural equality. He is mere statistic and such is the woman who has been artificially deprived of her sexuality. Excision and infibulations ensure the subtraction of vital organs of self expression from woman's body that makes her feel incomplete and unable to compete with man. This amounts, in essence, to a feeling of inequality with man in her. The loss of her vital organs is metaphorically the psychological loss of her voice. This artificial recreation of the woman's physiognomy is done in order to enforce the myth that woman is less than man in every sense as preached by



Aristotle, Plato, Darwin and Rousseau. In Same's, (Mama Ida's husband in *La Tache de sang*), figment of imagination, a woman is nothing else but a moron. Thinking to himself one day, he summarizes what patriarchal tradition conceives a woman to be:

Que pouvait lui apporter son épouse? N'était-il pas à lui de tout lui apprendre? Comme beaucoup d'hommes de sa génération, Same pensait que les femmes étaient toutes comme ça, qu'elles ne savaient pas grand-chose, et que lorsque même elles faisaient exceptionnellement montre d'une certaine intelligence, il fallait leur faire croire le contraire tout en exploitant leur savoir. Le maintien de la hiérarchie conjugale était à ce prix (47).

What could his wife bring him? Was it not his duty to teach her? Like many other men of his generation, Same thought that all women were like that they knew nothing, and that even when they tried to demonstrate some exceptional intelligence, there was the need to make them believe the contrary by exploiting their knowledge. The maintenance of conjugal hierarchy was at this price (Our translation).

What's more! She has got to submit herself to the 'almightiness and all-knowing' of man. Even the Quran affirms that what is left of the woman is a shameful thing which must condemn her to the position of an object whose face must not be seen publicly but be veiled. By way of digression, one should like to allude to how Calixthe Beyala comically illustrates in *Les Honneurs Perdus* how a female body is transmuted and emptied of its powers and sexual organs in the story that surrounds the birth of Saïda, the protagonist: "Je naquis comme naissent les mythes, avec des on-dit. On raconta qu'en réalité j'étais de sexe masculin et que, par un processus de transmutation des

cellules, effectué par les mains savantes ... par procédé de ponctions multiples sur les ovaires et de transplantation, on m'aurait ôté toutes mes forces mâles ...' (29). [I was born just as myths are born, with hearsays. People recounted that in reality I was male and that, by a process of transmutation of cells, effected by skillful hands ... by a process of multiple punctures on ovaries and transplantation, all my male resources were removed] (Our translation). This is similar to how female sexual organs are extracted in order to control her sexuality and make her inferior to the male specie. In fact Nicki Hitchcott notes that Beyala emphasizes these in her novels set in Africa:

Throughout Beyala's African novels there are references to the ways in which African women are expected to perform their prescribed gender role (including expression of her sexuality – emphasis ours). Saïda's father, horrified that his wife has given birth to a daughter, invents the story of his baby having been magically transformed from a boy into a girl ... However, as soon as her biological sex is established, Saïda is obliged to assume the woman's role of cooking, cleaning and holding on to her virginity (115).

The attitude of Mama Ida in another context brilliantly captures Ranajit Guha's postulate for the famous Indian historian and leader of the 'Subaltern Studies Group,' says that consent is the most important ingredient of hegemony. It could be said as a result that in a majority of African societies, men enjoy hegemony over women because they have the consent of their wives. Mama Ida like Rokhaya are perfect examples of traditional women for they successfully carry out the prescriptions of traditional education as mothers, wives and even better put as dominated, battered and uncomplaining wives. In a nutshell, these women are well-educated in the traditional sense for they display very well the 'patriarchal pedagogy,' to borrow an expression made famous by Kate Millett in



her *Sexual Politics*. Their husbands come first, they see themselves solely as wives, mothers and domestic servants and not as individuals with their own identity. In line with the traditional education they received in childhood and puberty, Rokhaya, Mama Ida and Mina apply the traditional education they received to the letter. Rokhaya consciously becomes Baba Kounta's slave instead of wife, for according to her Tante, Aïssé, she must do everything possible to submit to her husband:

Tu as de la chance d'avoir un pareil mari et tout ce confort ! Tu es la seule fille du village à t'être aussi bien mariée. Redouble d'efforts et rends ton mari heureux en souscrivant entièrement à ses moindres désirs (39).

You are lucky to have such a husband and all the comfort he provides you. You are the only girl in the village to be this properly married. Double your efforts and make your husband happy by subscribing entirely to his least desires (Our translation).

What one deduces from Tante Aïssé's counsel to her niece, Rokhaya is that once married, a woman automatically becomes subservient to her husband. Hook, line and sinker, she accepts whatever the man says or does, whether it makes sense or not. Little wonder then that when Baba Kounta keeps late night at work or spends time with his friends, more than with his wife and child, Rokhaya is no longer empowered to question him. Rokhaya is condemned to suffer in silence till death. All that remains of Rokhaya at the end of her life are a body and psyche devoured by hegemonic tradition. Close to her grave, we are told,

L'âge et la souffrance marquaient ses traits d'un réseau de rides qui sillonnaient son visage. Des cernes noirs et

profonds creusaient ses paupières. L'insomnie l'affaiblissait, la douleur comme un animal féroce, la guettait au coucher du soleil, rongant ses entrailles (94).

Age and suffering marked her body with a network of wrinkles which criss-crossed her face. Dark and deep rings furrowed her eyelids. Weakened by insomnia, sorrow like a ferocious animal watched over her at the setting of the sun, devouring her entrails (Our translation).

In like manner, Mama Ida consciously remains a puppet in the hands of Same her husband. Consciously because according to her, she resents her subalternity but lacks the will power to rise above the situation as she declares to Patricia,

Pourtant, il m'est arrivé souvent de penser que ma vie aurait pu se dessiner autrement. Je ne sais comment, mais l'idée était là, dans le secret, sans forme, inexprimable. Elle s'est perdue au fil des années, à force de me taire (155).

Yet, I often think that my life could have been fashioned otherwise. I do not know how, but the idea was there, hidden, without form, inexpressible. It became lost as years went by, because I kept mute (Our translation).

Victim of incessant violence, Mama Ida's love for her husband remains blindly unshaken. Instead of challenging her husband in order to destroy the shackles of oppression and break the emptiness of silence, she resigns herself to fate crying and wishing that her husband is more loving and caring. The narrator explains:



“Il lui arrivait simplement de pleurer quelquefois en s’imaginant comment elle aurait pu être heureuse si Same avait été plus doux. Elle pleurait dans l’ombre et masquait ses souffrances comme toutes les femmes jugées bien éduquées de sa génération » (44).

Sometimes, she wept imagining how happy she would have been if Same had been a loving husband. She wept in the shadow and masked her sufferings like all women adjudged well trained in her generation (Our translation).

As one can deduce from the narrator’s statement, Mama Ida’s complacent attitude towards her oppression is a result of her traditional upbringing.

In patriarchal African societies, marriage is the key space where the woman has no rights of her own and where she is expected to be reduced to a productive body. Marriage is the psychological and physical space within which power relations between man and woman are acutely pronounced, man being the dominator and woman the dominated. It is a space where woman is supposed to be blindly devoted to her husband and children, (without a life of hers), and her sexuality subdued.

The husbands, the women revere alas, see themselves as lords and maintain the order of things as they are for they enjoy that status quo. In order for the husbands to maintain their masculine dominance, they result to violence as clearly noted with Same, Mama Ida’s husband. Mama Ida and Rokhaya, who are protectors of patriarchal pedagogy inherited from their mothers, introduce the education to their daughters. In the case of Mama Ida, she encroaches on her daughter’s domestic space when she visits her in town. Mother-daughter relationship suffers a serious setback here. Mama Ida sees herself as a failure for not successfully giving her daughter the patriarchal pedagogy she received from her own

mother Véronique. Patricia’s freedom in her domestic space puts Mama Ida in a problematic position for her daughter is deconstructing the saying ‘like mother, like daughter’. Patricia, simply put, is opposed to her mother’s sheepish adherence to patriarchal pedagogy, which constitutes the architectural fabric of especially *La Tache de sang*. In both *La Tache de sang* and *La Voie du salut*, one observes, to borrow Ify Amadiume’s expressions, the ‘daughters of imperialism’ trying to liberate the ‘daughters of the goddess’ but they end up alienating them.

Besides, the patriarchal, religious and traditional prescriptions that are used to subjectivize the protagonists of *La Tache de sang* and *La Voie du salut*, it is worthy of note that these novels are allegorizing traumatic experience of the protagonists, hence the writers present trauma in a shocking literary way. While in *La Voie du salut* both mother and daughter (Rokhaya and Rabiadou) suffer the same fate and are traumatized by their respective husbands’ behavior; trauma is also ubiquitous in *La Tache de sang* but it should be noted that it affects Mama Ida (the mother) more than Patricia (the daughter). Their traumatic experience is reminiscent of that of Mina, in another context with her diabolical husband (Djibril) in Mpoudi Ngolle’s *Sous la cendre le feu*. The difference between *La Tache de sang* and *La Voie du salut* is that the former concludes on a more optimistic note. Though, the fact still remains that there is no effective deconstruction of male dominance or hegemony in both narratives for the protagonists perspectivize Gautam Bhadra’s notion of subaltern mentality which is submissiveness to domination. The authors’ alter egos are those who essentially bear the message of male deconstruction. Patricia, Rabiadou and Essèbé are juxtaposed with oppressed traditional African women represented by Mama Ida, Rokhaya and Mina, by the authors of each of the novels to act as feminist agents to debunk the myth of patriarchy. Unfortunately two of these feminist agents do not develop to a stage where they can subvert male hegemony. Rabiadou dies of a heart attack having learnt about her husband, Racine’s, surreptitious marriage to a



drianké. Essèbé disappears from the scene the moment her sister, Mina, discovers the unhealthy attempt her husband makes to rape her. However, Patricia, succeeds in stamping out male hegemony making sure that herself and her husband relate to each other on an egalitarian basis. The height of her feminist emancipatory mission is witnessed when she facilitates the abortion of her mother's pregnancy.

### Conclusion

Blind devotion to patriarchal and cultural practices has not and will not enhance African women's liberation from oppressive patriarchal practices. Rather, it has often aided women's oppression by way of making the latter accomplices to their own oppression by men. If African women must be fully liberated then, it is of necessity that they realize that they must do away with the practice of docilely accepting oppressive cultural practices as the norm. In this wise, they need to stand up against oppression as advocated by Awa Thiam (1986) and whose words we take the liberty to use: "women can and must take up their stance against the condition which is imposed on them. It may seem easier to back down in the face of all their problems, but in reality this will not pay dividends. If they do not challenge the patriarchal society, if they leave everything to be decided by men, they will continue to fulfill the roles that have always been attributed to them: both as ornamental figures and as maids-of-all-work (73). Adetunji Helen Adekunbi (2001), in her paper entitled "Re-Orientating the African Woman Today" lucidly rejoins Awa Thiam's opinion. Calling out all circumscribed women, Adekunbi, argues that the African woman has to discard the negative beliefs about life and about herself which she has been made to live with... It is time for women to move out of the circumscribed limits which corrupt culture and tradition have marked out for them into the enlarged sphere which their Creator has assigned for them (103-111).

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## Capitalization Errors in Undergraduates' Essays and the Way Forward

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### Abstract

This study investigates errors in second language users' writing activities. This undertaking was motivated by the needs to (i) verify the claim that errors in ESL learners are largely traceable to their first language interference and (ii) re-examine the overdependence on assumed previous knowledge in English Language teaching. Thus, this study focuses on the use of capital letters in L2 learners' (undergraduates) write-ups. Essays written by 150 undergraduates in response to examination questions in a university in Nigeria were used as our data and errors in the use of capitalization were identified and categorized before subjecting the results to quantitative analysis. Findings show that most of our subjects are prone to capitalizations error especially indiscriminate use of capitalization which suggests that teachers' assumption that certain elementary topics might have been taken care of in learners' previous education; and errors in L2 learners are not always traceable to their first language interference.

### 1.0 Introduction

The status of English in Nigeria is underscored by the important place it occupies in the educational sector and the daily life of the people in the cities whether formal or informal purposes. Consequently, both private and government schools in Nigeria start the teaching of English from the kindergarten while some parents start from the cradle. In fact, the English language is the medium of instruction at the various levels of the educational system, aside from