

**CONSTRUCTIONS OF SUBALTERNITY IN AFRICAN WOMEN'S
WRITING IN FRENCH**

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ABSTRACT

The central assumption of this study is that the awareness of a historically constructed, culturally sanctioned condition of subalternity is at the heart of the fictional production of Francophone African women writers. Subalternity here is viewed as a narrative and spatial continuum inside which African women have to negotiate issues relating to subjecthood and identity, both marked by gender and colonialism. Various definitions of 'the subaltern' are relevant, ranging from Antonio Gramsci's to those of the South Asian Subaltern Studies group, and to John Beverley's and Fredric Jameson's discussions. Jameson's emphasis on subalternity as "the feelings of mental inferiority and habits of subservience and obedience which... develop in situations of domination – most dramatically in the experience of colonized peoples" (Jameson, 1981) is crucial, because it demonstrates the constructedness of that ontological condition.

The approach adopted here aims to include gender as a category in a discourse that often excludes it, and to bring social science-oriented concepts into dialogue with literary theory and criticism. Combined with a discussion of Africa-influenced versions of feminist theory (stiwanism, negofeminism, motherism), Subaltern studies provides a space for the emergence of a south-south postcolonial debate that can throw new light on writing by African women. Fictional works by Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, Mariama Bâ, Aminata Maiga Ka, Angèle Rawiri, Philomène Bassek, Evelyne Mpoudi-Ngolle, Régina Yaou, Fatou Keita, and Abibatou Traoré are read as conveying the various stages of consciousness on the part of the subaltern. Kuoh-Moukoury's *Rencontres essentielles* (1969), Maiga Ka's *La voie du salut* (1985), and Bassek's *La tache de sang* (1990) exemplify a first stage of consciousness in which the subaltern woman submits passively

to oppressive patriarchal, cultural and religious prescriptions. Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1979), Mpoudi Ngolle's *Sous La cendre le feu* (1990) and Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes* (1989) present a more assertive, rebellious heroine whose efforts are undermined by a resilient social context. Finally, Traoré's *Sidagamie* (1998), Keïta's *Rebelle* (1998) and Yaou's *Le prix de la révolte* (1997) address the possibility of a sustained African women's struggle resulting not only in transient personal and isolated victories but also in an enduring social transformation governed by the ethos of gender equality.

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DEDICATION

For Alfred Adesanmi, Lois Adesanmi, Iyabo Toluhi and Atinuke Ayeni

INTRODUCTION

The observation of an historically generated, culturally sanctioned condition of subalternity, and the consequent need to rise above it, is at the heart of francophone African women's creative and critical production. Much of the initial reflection on the creative texts of francophone African women writers was constrained by a somewhat simplistic application of the feminist theories which initially informed them. The same argument extends to works such as Awa Thiam's *La parole aux negresses* (1978), which sought to expose the subaltern social conditions women occupied in francophone African societies. These works are considerably weakened by their interpretation of the politics of subalternity solely as a binaristic conundrum in which gender oppression always flows from the male subject to the female object.

The advent of revisionist theories like poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and colonial discourse analysis has underscored the need to move beyond the facile binarisms that were so useful as tools of discursive analysis. With their privileging of the "ambivalence" of the colonial condition, the "hybridity" of the postmodern condition which necessitates a "third space of enunciation" (Bhabha), these new discourses reveal the contingent nature of power and identity. Subjects are therefore never located in a reified, unchanging position in the discourses and structures of power. Identity is fluid and constantly changing. A subaltern in a certain context can become a dominant oppressor in other contexts.

These revelations have obvious implications for francophone African women's writing. While the male-oppressor/female-victim binarism is not totally redundant (and

never will be) in this context, moving beyond it allows one to see that in the sphere of criticism, for instance, male critics are not always responsible for the subalternization of works by francophone African women writers. This study will examine how female critics also sometimes contribute, albeit unwittingly, to the subalternization of African women's creative texts. Furthermore, a post-binarist approach to African women's writing can provide useful insights into the contingent nature of the location(s) of power in those texts and how subjects are positioned in relation to those locations. For instance, traditional criticism often assumed that the position of patriarchy is always occupied by elderly male subjects lording it over female subjects in a typical African family compound. However, as we shall see in some of the novels selected for this study, that location is sometimes occupied by powerful female subjects who wield patriarchal power and also ensure that the women under their control abide by the very traditional codes that subalternize them.

To speak of subalternity is to speak of a certain *rapport de force* between subjects, mediated by relational factors such as dominance, hegemony, subordination, insurgency, resistance, and rebellion. These concepts, derived mainly from the Social Sciences, are central to the work of the members of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Collective led by a historian, Ranajit Guha. Considering the fact that Gyan Prakash has described subaltern studies as a branch of postcolonialism, it is no surprise that the same concepts are also commonplace in the works of postcolonial theorists and analysts of colonial discourse. This study is cognizant of the fact that there is a great deal to be gained by reworking and transforming them into a workable discursive grid for analysing the phenomenon of subalternity in the fiction of a number of francophone African women

writers. The process of adapting them for use here will involve a trans-geographic, cross-disciplinary move in which Indian theory will blend with African versions of feminist theory to elucidate selected novels written by francophone African women.

To achieve these objectives, I have chosen to analyze the following texts: Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury's *Rencontres essentielles* (1969), Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1979), Aminata Maiga Ka's *La voie du salut* (1985), Angèle Rawiri's *Fureurs et cris de femmes* (1989), Philomène Bassek's *La tache de sang* (1990), Evelyne Mpoudi-Ngolle's *Sous la cendre le feu* (1990), Régina Yaou's *Le prix de la révolte* (1997), Fatou Keïta's *Rebelle* (1998) and Abibatou Traoré's *Sidagamie* (1998). This selection straddles three generations of francophone African women's fiction, from the late 1960s (*Rencontres essentielles*) to the late 1990s (*Sidagamie*) and thus underscores the textual trajectories of the female subjects under study within the framework of an historical progression. The selection also covers a geographical space which spreads from west to central Africa. By including the novels of five third-generation writers in my corpus (Bassek, Mpoudi-Ngolle, Yaou, Keïta and Traoré), I hope to overcome the tendency in the criticism of francophone African women's writing to concentrate on the older, established writers at the expense of the newer ones. The five new writers included are novelists whose works have been grossly undertheorized by critics.

Chapter One traces the emergence of African feminist discourses and accounts for why they depart theoretically from some versions of Western feminism. It examines the position of African women's texts and discourses in the context of, and in relation to, an overwhelmingly phallocratic African literary establishment. This examination invites an interrogation of the uneasy politics that comes into play when male critics approach

African women's writing. Finally, the first chapter establishes the modalities through which the largely Social Science-oriented theoretical concepts of Subaltern Studies can be appropriated and transformed into viable hermeneutic tools for approaching African women's texts.

Chapter Two focuses on the issue of the textual conquest of African women in African literary discourses, whether they are produced by men or women. The argument will be advanced that a certain subalternist consciousness undergirds the production of the female subjectivity in all the genres of African literatures. To buttress this assertion, I will trace the textual presence of African women from the representative poetic texts of male Négritude writers to the theoretical texts of African feminists, before zeroing in on *Rencontres essentielles*, *La voie du salut* and *La tache de sang*. I thus hope to establish a homological continuum of subalternity between three genres – poetry, theory and fiction – in accounting for the textual representation of African women. I will argue that African feminist theorists inherited a subalternized and domesticated image of African women from the Négritude poets and from the colonial system in general, and that their theories and fiction have participated unwittingly in sustaining this image.

I am thus proposing a bicephalous second chapter offering, a hermeneutic critique of creative writing and a metacritical evaluation of the theoretical works of African feminists. The selected novels will consequently be read as fictional extensions of African feminist theory, in line with Julianah Nfah-Abbenyi's exhortation to read African female novels as "fictionalized theory" or "theorized fiction".¹ There is always an intrinsic theoretical underbelly to these creative texts, a position which Gloria Onyeoziri endorses in a review of Nfah-Abbenyi's work². Based on the fact that the representation

of the female subjects in the three novels is consistent with what we find in critical works and in early Negritude poetry, this chapter will conclude with the observation that the textual presence of the African female subject in the early phase of African literature boils down to a question of representation: a representation in which she comes out as muted, caught as it were in the subalternist quagmire of domination and subordination.

Chapter Three will account for the gradual emergence of a recreated female subject in *Une si longue lettre*, *Sous la cendre le feu* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes*. Here, the female persona has moved from a passive acceptance of the condition of subalternity to an active struggle against it. The subaltern woman in these novels has begun to challenge the modalities through which power is held and wielded in the society to which she belongs. The heroines of the three novels – Ramatoulaye, Mina and Emilienne – are gaining power, while the agents of patriarchy are losing it and are being forced into the subaltern subject positions vacated by these women. In essence, the traditional binary opposition, hegemonic-man/subaltern-woman, is being seriously undermined by the textual revisionism of Bâ, Mpoudi Ngolle and Rawiri. But what sort of power are these women gaining? And how are they gaining it? If, as Gramsci asserts, “permanent victory” is the only sure validation of subaltern insurgency against dominance, then it is clear that the heroines in these texts are still far from that objective. I will therefore contend that women’s struggle in these three novels is energized by a “feminism with a small ‘f’”. I borrow this conceptual phrase from Buchi Emecheta, who used it to distinguish her male-tolerant feminist vision from what she sees as the male-bashing politics of some radical, Western, capital ‘F’ feminists.

I will give Emecheta's concept a new meaning, one that is cognizant of the context of feminist articulations in francophone Africa, for the victories of the subaltern woman in the novels under consideration seem to be pyrrhic and personal. They bear no far-reaching consequences for the circumambient patriarchal social and cultural forces responsible for the women's respective ordeals. At this stage of the subaltern woman's struggle for emancipation, her context proves to be resilient and impervious to change. This sort of feminism, which recreates the subaltern woman but has no transformative effect on the surrounding patriarchal society illustrates my own version of the small 'f' phenomenon. The chapter concludes by evaluating how the personal victories of these recreated heroines prepare the ground for the next phase in the episodic movement of the subaltern woman toward the site of agency in francophone African women's fiction.

In Chapter Four, I turn my attention to the ways in which three novels, Abibatou Traoré's *Sidagamie*, Fatou Keïta's *Rebelle* and Régina Yaou's *Le prix de la révolte*, successfully deploy what Mary Kolawole calls "positive heroinism", to create subaltern female subjects who rise above their debilitating conditions to achieve a socio-political revolution in every sense of that word. I will argue that these heroines successfully take us to the peak of the "episodic and fragmented" (Gramsci) march of the subaltern female subject that I have been tracing since Chapter One. Unlike the heroines in Chapter Three, Pauline, Malimouna and Affiba are not content with the victory of personal re-creation. They keep up the struggle until the patriarchal structures surrounding them are undone and transformed. The subalternist politics of insurgency and voicing are in full play here. This is the phase in which feminism successfully spells itself with a capital 'F' by transforming social structure.

The conclusion will provide a synthesis of the discussion that evolves throughout the analysis of this particular selection of texts. It elucidates the thematic and discursive unity of this textual corpus, especially in the domain of the production of postcolonial subjecthood in francophone African women's fiction. Bearing in mind that the first four chapters will have established the incontrovertible fact that subaltern theory is a powerful tool of social and discursive analysis, I will argue very strongly in favour of more widespread use of subalternist approaches to the study of African literature. Indeed, at the risk of sounding prescriptive, I will opine that any feminist approach to the study of African women's writing should, as a matter of necessity, draw insights from subaltern theory. This point is central, because subaltern theory makes no pretence about its bias for minority perspectives. Because it does not conceive of subalternity as an always already constituted ontology, subaltern theory allows for a thorough account of the intersections of social, historical, political, economic and cultural forces which aggregate to produce subaltern subjects and facilitate the continued hegemony of the dominant groups. Finally, from social realism to revolutionary aesthetics, from postcolonialism to feminism, African literary discourse has always sought to find theoretical perspectives capable of highlighting and enhancing the social and political commitment of the African literary text. Subaltern theory, I will argue, offers one of the brightest possible paths in that direction and has particular relevance in reconsidering gender relations and the situation of women.

CHAPTER 1

In Search of a Subalternist Remapping of African Feminist Discourses and Literatures: Retrospect, Prospects and Problems

African Feminisms and the Tradition-Modernity Debate

The emergence and evolution of African women's textual culture³ in the second half of the last century has undoubtedly been a controversial development. As has always been the case with the construction of any minority discourse, especially in the heat of postcolonial theory's attempt at remapping the so-called margins, African women's textual productions have yielded an interesting array of theoretical positions. Initial theoretical articulations on this field of knowledge were as varied and diverse as were the scholars interested in the expanding corpus of texts by African women. Differences in position were tempered by factors relating to the gender of the critic, his/her ideological stance, and the overall ideological orientation of the leading journals in which the theoretical formulations were being made. These were, mainly, *African Literature Today*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Présence Africaine* and *Peuples Noirs*, *Peuples Africains*.⁴

Notwithstanding sometimes acrimonious differences, these early theoretical positions were united by a common urge to historicize their object of critical inquiry: texts by African women. This historicist approach resulted in a situation in which every essay obeyed seemingly pre-determined, formulaic structural rules⁵. Before dealing with

any texts by women, such critiques, mostly by female scholars, gave an historical account of the late coming of African women into writing, usually associated with Africa's pre-colonial patriarchal structures and the consequent exclusion of African women from schools during the colonial period. They went on to evaluate the image of African women in the works of major male African writers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Chinua Achebe, Sembene Ousmane and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. This process culminated in a routine condemnation of the male writers for their biased representation of African women.

One positive legacy of such historicist critiques of the emergent body of African women's writing in Africa and elsewhere was the development of certain key concepts that were to inflect the very nature of the entire field of criticism of African women's writing. Such concepts invariably boil down to the construction of a new being, a new "African woman", by the emerging female writers and their critics. Discursive operations of this nature are energized by the hope that theoretical productions will eventually impact on the social, economic, political and traditional structures that have disempowered African women for so long. The possibility of a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice can be envisaged in an African(ist) context because, as Chris Dunton reminds us, literary discourse in Africa is markedly socialized, and pressure for its socialization constantly increases⁶.

The Nietzschean project of "willing into being" a new African woman explains why words such as "reinvention", "reinscription", "recreating" and "renaming" have become the cornerstones of critical reflection on African women's writing. In the last two decades, these words have appeared and reappeared in the titles of critical essays and

textbooks dealing with African women's texts to the point of iterative superfluity. What they betray at the ideological level is a deep dissatisfaction with the past and present social condition of African women. The thematic leitmotif of renewal inherent in the calls to "reinvent", "reinscribe", "recreate" or "rename" can therefore be read as an acknowledgement of the asymmetrical power structures that have combined to place the discursive category of 'woman' as well as actual women in an inferior(ized) discursive and social position.

Perhaps no other theorist captured the essence of the universalist trope of woman-as-inferiorized-being better than Simone de Beauvoir. By opening her feminist opus, *Le deuxième sexe* (1949), with the famous dictum, "on ne naît pas femme, on le devient", de Beauvoir captured the very essence of the processes through which the category of woman is ontologized as inferior. 'Woman', according to de Beauvoir, is a *subaltern*(ized) construct into which human beings in the biological category of female are socialized by the patriarchal modalities of existence dominant in the Western European context in which she wrote and, indeed, in most human societies.

Of particular interest is de Beauvoir's deployment of the concept of gender, as opposed to biological sex, which became central to feminist politics and the elaboration of feminist epistemology. Successive generations of Western and non-Western feminists have borrowed insights from her thought to construct a feminist approach to literary criticism. In *Sexual Politics* (1970), for instance, Kate Millet was one of the first to critically examine the age-long conceptualization of women as belonging to the weaker sex or as objects of male sexual pleasure. She went on to uncover how such perceptions governed the depiction of women in Western fiction written by male writers.

Western feminism's generalized conceptualization of women as victims of patriarchal exploitation and oppression in all cultures ran into problems early in the elaboration of an African feminist critical approach to African women's writing. It must be borne in mind that feminist interventions began to make an impact on African(ist) critical discourse in the 1970s and the 1980s. At this time, much of the cross-disciplinary thinking that went into the construction of what the philosopher Valentine Mudimbe calls "African gnosis" was still preoccupied not only with the delegitimization of the discourses of imperialism and colonialism but also with the reconstruction of Africa's chequered history, cultures and traditions. Such tendencies evolved from the discourses of Négritude and cultural nationalism and crystallized into a discursive strand known as traditionalism⁷, which involves a sometimes romanticized evocation of Africa's pre-imperialist cultures and traditions. African exponents of traditionalism saw, and still see, a return to the salutary aspects of Africa's cultural past as the only way out of what Harry Garuba calls the continent's "postcolonial impasse"⁸.

African feminist discourse by men and women developed within this nostalgic ambience and could therefore not escape having a "dual mandate"⁹, to borrow a familiar colonialist axiom. On the one hand, it had to deconstruct the male-centric orientation of modern African literatures in order to carve out an agential space for women and, on the other hand, it had to participate in the pan-African ideological project of deconstructing imperialism. This second mandate meant that African feminist strategies formed part of the continent's oppositional discourses to the West, and therefore had to seek to invalidate the dubious universalism conferred on most of the West's orientalist discursive formations. The fact that Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's book, *African Wo/man Palava*

(1996), is dedicated to “all those, past and present, immersed in the struggle for Nigerian freedom” is a clear indication that many African feminists consider their praxis to be part of the broader struggle against imperialism.

Where mainstream Western feminism had been consistent in trying to project a universalized image of woman as victim of patriarchal oppression (as evidenced in the thematic thrust of most of the essays assembled in *The New Feminist Criticism*, a volume edited in 1986 by Elaine Showalter) African feminist discourse, in its early phase of elaboration, rejected that position. Obviously influenced by the traditionalist strand of African discourse, African feminists turned to the past, excavating images of a strong, free, enterprising and independent African woman. This woman was supposed to have participated in the spiritual, economic, social and political life of her community on an equal footing with men, before certain historical events seriously altered the course of developments in Africa and dealt a disastrous blow to the position of women. Ifi Amadiume’s *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987) has become a major reference text articulating the notion that African women were not always placed in a social position of inferiority. Deidre Badejo and Zulu Sofola have also written representative essays within this traditionalist framework¹⁰. Suffice it to say here that the logical consequence of this discursive strategy lies in the emergence of new and divergent forms of feminism rooted in the African experience.

Naturally, the position of the traditionalists did not go unchallenged. At the other extreme were participants in the fledgling African feminist discourse who rejected the overly romanticized notion of the pre-colonial African woman as an emancipated subject, who became disadvantaged only when imperialism and colonialism set in and imposed a

male-centric, sexist regime on the peoples of Africa. A Dutch Africanist critic, Mineke Schipper, has done considerable work toward proving that the social condition of the precolonial African woman was not as rosy as the traditionalists would have us believe. In her essay "Mother Africa on a Pedestal"¹¹ she draws numerous examples from African myths, folklore and oral tales, in which the woman is either represented as inferior or demonised as the architect of most societal misfortunes. A good number of Schipper's examples are drawn from creation myths from all over Africa, of which she had previously published accounts in 1980 (in Dutch) as a collection of African myths. In most of these myths, men were created first, and lived in harmony until woman arrived bearing ill-luck and misfortune. The recurrence of "the image of woman as a negative force" in most of the myths she gathered through extensive fieldwork leads her to the conclusion that there exists a "mythological pre-phase" in the development of woman's image in African literature.

These two positions are neither entirely right nor entirely wrong. Both contain elements of discursive veracity that have been deployed in the reading of African women's experiences and texts. The issue here will be to de-emphasize the binaristic opposition inherent in the two contending positions, in order to locate a reflection on African women's writing within the interstitial spaces between the two theoretical possibilities. Carving out a space of in-betweeness between the traditionalist and counter-traditionalist articulations of African discourse has enormous advantages, in terms of the possibility it offers of bringing out historical continuities in the African experience, and also of de-essentializing some of the more romanticized perspectives of the traditionalist position. The notion of essentialism is used advisedly here, because one cannot be too

circumspect in deploying it within the context of African discourse. The problems it poses for African Studies will be examined later.

The advantages of locating one's arguments in the space of in-betweeness have been underscored by two African scholars in particular, Harry Garuba and Mahmood Mamdani. While proposing a broad-ranging theory of animist realism as a conceptual prism for African literary and cultural discourse, Garuba resists any temptation to read Africa's animist heritage and the practices of modernity as binary structures of opposition. His exploration of the interstitial spaces and connections between them allows him to identify continuities and structural links between African animism and the contemporary socio-political institutions of modernity¹². What Garuba does in the fields of literature and culture, Mahmood Mamdani does in the field of political discourse. His opinion on interstitial positionality, as expressed in his book, *Citizen and Subject* (1996), is worth quoting in some detail:

The solution to this theoretical impasse – between modernists and communitarians, Eurocentrists and Africanists – does not lie in choosing a side and defending an entrenched position. Because both sides to the debate highlight different aspects of the same African dilemma, I will suggest that the way forward lies in sublating both, through a double move that simultaneously critiques and affirms. To arrive at a creative synthesis transcending both positions, one needs to problematize each.¹³

It is not exactly clear what Mamdani means by a “creative synthesis” of both positions and why such a venture is necessary in the first place. However, his other call to problematize each position is very useful in underscoring the importance of the interstitial space. The focus on possibilities lying between the two positions somewhat weakens the traditionalist viewpoint which attributes the present disadvantaged condition of African women solely to external factors like colonialism and the concomittant Western sexist

ethos it implanted in Africa. African women, one must admit, suffered forms of sexist and patriarchal oppression peculiar to the African cultural situation long before contact with the West. In the same vein, it problematizes the counter-traditionalist position which relies mainly on myths and oral tales (as in the case of Schipper) and downplays the role of imperialism and colonialism in the present predicament of African women. The appropriate discursive move becomes to centralize the historical event of colonialism with a view to determining its role, if any, in the amplification or modification of forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression which were not entirely absent in precolonial African cultures.

Colonialism and the Production of African Female Subjects

This study takes the colonial experience as a principal discursive marker in African women's writing, but not because of a conviction that another inventory of the consequences of colonialism is still necessary. Rather, this emphasis is to acknowledge the fact that no enduring analysis of the socio-historical trajectory of the subject can be envisaged in places like Africa, Asia or Latin America, without taking into account the central role of colonialism in the vitiation of that subject. The necessary enterprise of making an inventory of the consequences of the colonial encounter has already been amply performed in the case of Africa by, among others, Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Chinweizu in *The West and the Rest of Us* (1975). The same task has been accomplished for the Caribbean in such works as Edouard Glissant's *Le discours antillais* (1981) and Antonio Benitez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island* (1996). Eduardo Galeano undertakes a similar analysis for Latin America in *The Open Veins of*

Latin America (1973). The consequences of colonialism in the Indian context can be found in the works of scholars like Ashis Nandy and Homi Bhabha, and in the reflections of the Indian subalternists whose work a major part of the theoretical framework for this study.

Suffice it to say here, then, that my interest in the dynamics of colonialism goes beyond the conceptualization of that event in terms of the political domination and economic exploitation of the colonized, as amply investigated in some of the works cited above. I am mainly interested in colonialism as a transformative event which fundamentally altered the social and cultural life of the colonized societies of Africa for good. Through its brutal insertion into the socio-cultural scheme of things in Africa and its eventual domination of that terrain, colonialism wittingly¹⁴ ascribed to itself the cardinal role of being the sole producer of new and subservient African subjectivities. In essence, colonialism not only affected what Biodun Jeyifo calls “the nature of things”¹⁵ but also became the main determiner of the very process of being in Africa. It is within this broad perspective that Eloise Briere’s description of colonial contact as generative of “une nouvelle organisation sociale”¹⁶ becomes particularly pertinent. My position on colonialism’s investment in the construction of novel and subservient African subjectivities is also informed by Briere’s telling description of colonialism as having affected “le psychisme profond du colonisé et de la colonisée, lui volant – au moins en partie – ses structures d’insertion et d’équilibre social, sa langue, son imaginaire et son Dieu.”¹⁷

Nowhere is colonialism’s production of subservient subjectivities more manifest than in the domain of gender politics in Africa. While it is true that contact with the West

cannot be said to be solely responsible for the introduction of sexism and an oppressive patriarchal ethos into African cultures, it is also true that colonialism inscribed hitherto unknown forms of sexism and male-centrism within the African worldview, thereby taking existing gender asymmetries to new heights. Mamdani has provided some illuminating insights into this aspect of the colonial experience:

Like all colonial powers, the British - I add the French and the Portuguese - worked with a single model of customary authority in precolonial Africa. That model was monarchical, patriarchal, and authoritarian. It presumed a king at the center of every polity, a chief on every piece of administrative ground, a patriarch in every homestead or kraal. Whether in the homestead, the village, or the kingdom, authority was considered an attribute of a personal despotism.¹⁸

It is easy to see that woman is absent in the picture painted above. The consequences of the patriarchal assumptions of the colonial authorities were predictably disastrous in matriarchal societies – as in Ghana – where central social authority was not vested in a male member of the extended family. Colonialism, being a masculinist ideology, automatically masculinized any space upon which it inflicted itself. It thus dismantled the matriarchal systems that had coexisted with patriarchy in certain precolonial African societies, and those who lost out in that power game were, of course, women. Reacting to Ifi Amadiume's viewpoint¹⁹ in this respect, Mamdani argues that

Matriarchy... was a system of autonomous female organization and an associated ideology that crystallized and defended this autonomy – and so coexisted with similarly autonomous forms of male organization, as in Igboland. This autonomous space was uniformly destroyed by colonial rule. And in this sense the “world historical defeat” of the female gender was experienced in Africa not as much with the onset of state organization as with the consolidation of the colonial state.²⁰

Perhaps Oyeronke Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women* (1997) provides one of the most illuminating accounts of how the social process of colonialism “invented” what

she sees as a hitherto unknown category of “woman” (as inferiorized, silenced, devalued and subordinated to the category of man) in Africa. This work’s thought-provoking subtitle indicates that the author is “making an African sense of Western gender discourses”, many of which she finds irrelevant in the African context. Oyewumi explores how the masculinized and sexist ethos of the colonial machine eroded the presence of African women from such valorizing sites as politics, administration, religion, education, labour, and property ownership, especially of land. So thorough were the colonial masters in their self-assigned duty of sexist social engineering that African women were eventually forced into the conundrum of what is now referred to in African feminist scholarship as “double colonization”. As Oyewumi puts it:

African females were colonized by Europeans as Africans and as African women. They were dominated, exploited and inferiorized as Africans together with African men and then separately inferiorized and marginalized as African women.²¹

The situation Oyewumi described here is what another Nigerian feminist scholar and writer, Zulu Sofola, terms the “de-womanization”²² of African women by the combined effects of Arab and European imperialism. Like Sofola, Oyewumi takes great pains to analyze the logical outcome of the colonial devalorization of African womanhood. The crucial point to be retained is that colonialism’s most disastrous legacy lies in the dismantling of the traditional African public sphere and the subsequent erosion of the cultural ethos that governed social relations within it. In its place was constructed a new, “civilized” public sphere within which all the structures and institutions of power, agency and upward social mobility were located. African women were systematically excluded from this new site.

This situation led to the inevitable muting of African women and also to their progressive invisibility. It is true that there is no basis to hold that forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression did not exist in pre-colonial Africa. But it is equally true that nowhere in pre-colonial Africa did women constitute a "muted group"²³, nor were they socially invisible. Pre-colonial African cultures had complex and democratic socio-political structures evolved in which women were active participants as agents. For instance, in the case of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, social positioning was determined mostly by seniority and not by gender. The sexist categorization of some professions as feminine, hence inferior, was also largely unknown in several pre-colonial African societies where women and men alike indulged in such activities as farming and trading.

Consequently, it can be argued that in view of colonialism's complete and radical transformation of social, economic, political and cultural space in the entire African continent, no single African woman escaped its inferiorizing effects. Whether she lived in the city or in the countryside, she was subject to the same process of generalized sexist subservience by the colonial regime. A contrary argument might be made in some quarters, that more than thirty years after the attainment of formal independence by African countries, it is no longer safe to assume that the modern African woman is still subject to the effects of colonialism. This argument can be countered with the obvious fact that colonialism withdrew from Africa only after putting in place structures that would replace it with a no less pernicious heir: neo-colonialism. It is even more pertinent to remember that all over Africa today, the subjectivity and the social position of every newly born girl is still being determined by the most sexist, subalternizing political

legacy of colonialism: the modern African state, appropriately defined by Oyewumi as “the state of patriarchy”²⁴.

African women, oppressed by tradition and religion in the pre-colonial setting before being muted and rendered invisible by the historical event of colonialism, will constitute the focus of reflection throughout this study. Approaching the African female subject from the standpoint of her objectification by the combined, sometimes mutually reinforcing, effects of tradition and colonialism opens up very useful possibilities for a revisionist reading of the texts of francophone African women writers and the criticism they have so far generated. These writers, like their male counterparts, are mostly products of the *école coloniale*. Their texts are therefore irrevocably marked by that experience. Furthermore, one of the strategies deployed by colonialism to inferiorize women was to exclude them from educational institutions. This explains why, for its first two decades, the production of modern African literatures was an exclusively male affair.

The late coming to writing of African women in general, and francophone African women in particular, ensured that their writing, when it eventually emerged, was born into a subalternized ambiance. In other words, by the time pioneer African women's texts like Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury's *Rencontres essentielles* (1969) were published, there was already a dominant male tradition constructed by critics as the norm. The writings of male authors like J.P. Clark, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ferdinand Oyono, Camara Laye and Mongo Beti had become synonymous with the expression “African literatures.” In this context, it is not surprising that the African critical establishment, also a male-dominated structure, classified the emergent women's writing as an inferior appendage of the male tradition. For instance,

Ogunyemi reminds us, in *African Wo/man Palava*, that two of five influential early books devoted exclusively to African women writers were authored by men and consequently not free from male bias: Lloyd Brown's *Women Writers in Black Africa* (1981) and Oladele Taiwo's *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (1984). Adeola James' 1971 review (in *African Literature Today*) of *Idu*, Flora Nwapa's second novel, and Ernest Emenyonu's rejoinder to this review (in the same journal) are also indicative of the existence of an early intra-male flow of usually condescending discourse on African women writers.

African women's writing was therefore born into a pre-determined position of subalternity. In view of the positioning and ontologizing, by male critics, of francophone African women's texts as somewhat "inferior" to the dominant male African texts, it is not surprising that the female characters in those works, usually alter egos of the authors, mostly occupy spaces of absence, silence or subordination. We shall examine the textual trajectory of those characters, mindful at all times of the extra-textual significance of their *herstories*.

African Studies and The West

Africa, Mudimbe reminds us, is an "invention" of the West. Apart from Mudimbe's own work²⁵, the literature justifying the philosophical and historical foundation of that statement is vast and cannot possibly receive an exhaustive review here. However, it is worthwhile examining a relatively representative position on how that process of invention was effected. Reflecting on the broader situation of spaces invented by the West all over the world, Gayatri Spivak states:

I am thinking about the imperialist project which had to assume that the earth it territorialised was in fact previously uninscribed. So then a world, on a simple level of cartography, inscribed what was presumed to be uninscribed. Now this worlding actually is also a texting, a textualising, a making into art, *a making into an object to be understood*.²⁶ (emphasis added)

This statement sufficiently shows that Africa was not only invented by the West, it was also made into an object of epistemological inquiry, to be approached almost exclusively from the standpoint of Western-spawned discursive models. Consequently, modern African Studies (as an academic field straddling disciplines like literature, political science, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and history) is essentially an invention of the West. In literature, apart from having to write in the master's language, pioneer African writers relied very heavily on Western models in terms of form and narrative structure. And the critics who emerged to elaborate a critical tradition for the emergent African literatures in the sixties were mostly Western critics using necessarily Eurocentric critical tools. Whatever the weaknesses of their initial reflections on African literatures, the point remains that thinkers like Ulli Beier, Gerald Moore, Paul Theroux, Bernth Lindfors, Charles Larson, Jacques Chevrier, Bernard Mouralis, Jean-Paul Sartre²⁷, and Lilyan Kesteloot can be said to be the 'founders' of modern African literary criticism.²⁸

By the time the first African thinkers arrived from their formative bases in Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale and the Sorbonne to join what they condemned as the Western monologue on African discourse, they could only maneuver within already existing Western paradigms of African Studies. The politics and the subterranean ideological tensions that characterized the transfer of the editorial and discursive control of *Black Orpheus* from the Western guard (Beier, Moore, Theroux) to an African guard

(Abiola Irele, J.P. Clark) in 1967 are good indications of how determined the emergent African literati were to wrest control of African discourse from Western participants. For instance, Clark published an essay, "The Legacy of Caliban", in the very first issue of *Black Orpheus* he co-edited with Irele, and he frowned at the idea of Westerners setting the standards in African literature:

For a variety of reasons the European sector has been more articulate and of overwhelming influence upon African writers. Jealously, it holds fast to its claim of being the original owner and therefore the natural custodian of the European language the African is using in his works. These in turn belong to the tradition of literate literature which again goes back to Europe. The very machinery for publication and distribution of African works is to be found chiefly in the capital cities of Europe. Then, of course, there is the old economic supremacy... Finally, there are the agents of this ubiquitous complex operating right in the midst of the African sector, and ironically the scouts and promoters of new talents are often to be found among their ranks. *The net effect is the imposition of their standards upon African writing.*²⁹ (my emphasis)

The intrigues which characterized this interesting phase in the evolution of anglophone African literatures are admirably documented and analysed in Peter Benson's book, *Black Orpheus, Transition and Modern Cultural Awakening in Africa* (1986). Suffice it to say, however, that while dismissing their Western colleagues as meddlesome outsiders who inflicted their Western neuroses and biases on African discourse³⁰, African scholars and writers unwittingly erected their opposition on the same Western models they sought to deconstruct.

These, then, are the conditions in which the much talked-about African theoretical dependence on the West emerged. So pervasive was this dependence that it came to be perceived as another kind of colonization; hence the urgency with which Chinweizu, Onwucheka Jemie and Chris Madubuike argued for a reversal of that trend in their

provocative book, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980). Their heady rejection of every Western theoretical contribution to the understanding of African literatures was amplified by Udentia Udentia in his *Revolutionary Aesthetics and the African Literary Process* (1993) and Niyi Osundare in his powerful monograph, *African Literature and the Crisis of Post-Structuralist Theorizing* (1993). Nevertheless, part of the problem posed to African studies by the reality of theoretical dependence is what I will refer to as the crisis of authority in African production of knowledge. The situation has been created in which every African essay or critical book must seek the blessing of certain stock Western authorities before being reckoned with. The situation is worse for the African thinker operating in the context of the Euro-American Academy. S/he can hardly expect to be taken seriously in this context if s/he cannot frequently drop names like Bakhtin, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, or Cixous.

So intense is the pressure to draw on the authority of these thinkers that African critics sometimes unwittingly attribute the dialogic in African novels to Bakhtin: as if Africa had waited for Bakhtin before evolving age-long communalist polities structured around the very principles of dialogue and social polyphony. Dialogism's immense success stems from the fact that it had the good fortune of being propounded in the context of Western individualistic monologism. It is really nothing new for the African. What has happened in the last couple of decades has been a progressive transatlantic alliance between Europe and North America to constitute the behemoth now loosely referred to, in Third World oppositional scholarship, as Euro-American high theory. *Michel Foucault*, Didier Eribon's biography, provides insights into the workings of this theoretical alliance. In most instances, Europe produces the thinker whose ideas are later

adopted, canonized and “globalized” by the North American academy. Eribon rightly suggests that the likes of Foucault, Baudrillard, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze became world intellectual figures only after making the transatlantic pilgrimage. When the ideas of Europe are received and canonized on the other side of the Atlantic, the Euro-American behemoth emerges.

This behemoth is the well-oiled validating and authorizing machine that produces the situation of “asymmetric ignorance”³¹ which Gyan Prakash decries. While near or complete ignorance of Third World literatures and discourses takes nothing away from the status and scholarship of Western intellectuals (Harold Bloom and Terry Eagleton are good examples), the non-Western scholar is not only expected to be well grounded in Western theory, s/he must also seek the authority of Western thinkers to legitimize her/his work. By “asymmetric ignorance”, therefore, Prakash means that the Third World scholar cannot afford (or is not allowed) to be as ignorant of Western theories as his Western colleagues can afford (or are allowed) to be of Third World theories. Oyewumi sums up the situation thus:

The point is that the West is at the center of African knowledge-production... It is clear that the West is the norm against which Africans continue to be measured by others and often by themselves. The questions that inform research are developed in the West, and the operative theories and concepts are derived from Western experiences... Consequently, African studies continue to be “Westocentric.”³²

My reflections here, authorized by and participating in Third World oppositional scholarship, will not be Westocentric. Even if, as Prakash opines, one’s criticism must acknowledge the fact that “it inhabits the structures of Western domination that it seeks to undo”³³, I will no less attempt to study the textual trajectory of the African female subject in the works of francophone African women writers, drawing theoretical authority

essentially from subaltern studies in India, and from Africa-influenced versions of feminism. An Afro-Asiatic theoretical cross-fertilization will be the logical outcome of my discursive strategies. To put it in the language of international political economy, what I hope will emerge is a South-South cultural and theoretical contact that will be open to insights from the West without necessarily centralizing them. I am therefore not proposing an insular theoretical framework similar to the Euro-American behemoth.

In trying to understand the location of francophone African women writers within the inferiorizing socio-cultural legacies of colonialism, and to account for how that position has impacted on their texts, it will be useful to deploy the revisionist exegesis of subaltern theory as proposed and elaborated by thinkers of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Collective, led by an Indian historian, Ranajit Guha. Etymologically, the term subaltern belongs to the military register, where the “subaltern” is a low rank subordinate to higher-grade officers. However, the initiative of transforming the term into a theoretical concept and investing it with latent ideological connotations belongs to the Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci. In his “Notes on Italian History”³⁴, Gramsci variously uses the expressions “subaltern classes”, “subaltern groups” and “subaltern social groups” to conceptualize the discursive spaces inhabited by subjects (the peasantry and the people) on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. The Gramscian subaltern is Marxism’s *hoi polloi*, Fanon’s “wretched of the earth” and Paulo Freire’s “the oppressed” rolled into one.

Gramsci’s project is to map out “methodological criteria” for studying the history of the subaltern classes. In the process, concepts such as the State, hegemony, dominance and subordination emerge to characterize the relationship between the ruling and the

subaltern classes. The State is not only the mechanism through which the historical unity of the ruling classes is materialized, it is also largely responsible for the subordination of the subaltern classes who, in Gramsci's opinion, are "always subject to the activities of the ruling groups"³⁵. The point should be stressed that Gramsci's Marxist orientation is largely responsible for his seeing the subaltern's subordination to the ruling élites as a consequence of the historical victory of capitalism.

This is where the fundamental difference between Gramsci's use of the term and its consequent reconceptualization by the Indian subalternists appears. In the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective – a group which boasts members such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyan Prakash – the condition of subalternity is essentially a consequence of colonialism and what Edward Said calls "its derivatives and heirs in the present"³⁶. The subaltern in that discursive context is therefore a product of imperialism/colonialism. San Juan buttresses this point when he observes that

From the perspective of the Indian Subaltern Studies group, the term "subaltern" has been redefined to encompass all subordinated populations oppressed by colonial/postcolonial regimes.³⁷

For the Indian theorists, the subaltern subject was doubly inferiorized by colonialism and the historical narratives it authorized. As was the case in Africa and the Americas, colonialism engineered a massive social, political and economic subalternization of the dominated peoples. And in the process of writing Indian historiography, British historians and their elitist Indian allies simply recorded the oppositional processes that culminated in Indian independence as the handiwork of Indian élites. After being inferiorized by colonialism, the Indian subaltern was in turn

erased from official narratives of Indian history. The need to offer a revisionist history of India that would account for the historical agency of the subaltern classes in the struggle against imperialism therefore constitutes the central theme of the Indian subaltern studies project.

The most illuminating defining statements on the scope and thematic thrust of a subalternist re-reading of Indian historiography are to be found in the pioneering essays by Guha, notably, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", and his engaging preface to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*³⁸. My study will start from the working definitions of the subaltern found in the writings of the Indian subalternists: minorities, disadvantaged and dispossessed groups, immigrants, women, or people "of colour". It will also validate, as the Indians have done, the Gramscian injunction that "every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian"³⁹.

It is, however, necessary to observe that a crucial shortcoming of the Indian project lies in a certain male-centric approach to defining the subaltern. Like that of Gramsci, the subaltern whose historiography the Indian theorists sought to reconstruct is very obviously male. Even if the category of 'woman' is usually to be found in their definitions of the subaltern, their essays, with very few exceptions, almost always narrow down the argument to a reconstruction of the historiography of the male subaltern. Woman, as a discursive category, is usually dissolved into phallogocentric categories like 'people', 'rural gentry' or 'peasants'. Consider, for instance, Guha's definition of the subaltern:

The terms 'people' and 'subaltern classes' have been used as synonymous throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as 'elite'. Some of these classes and groups such as the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants who 'naturally' ranked among the 'people' and the 'subaltern', could under certain circumstances act for the 'elite', as explained above, and therefore be classified as such in some local or regional situations.⁴⁰

It is clear that women are an invisible mass in Guha's classificatory terminologies. Fredric Jameson also provides an interesting definition of subalternity (and by implication, the subaltern) which makes no specific reference to women. According to Jameson, subalternity can be understood as "the feelings of mental inferiority and habits of subservience and obedience which necessarily and structurally develop in situations of domination – most dramatically in the experience of colonized peoples".⁴¹ The applicability of a modified version of Jameson's definition to African feminist discourse is obvious. The subaltern female characters we shall come across in francophone African women's novels have been socialized into "feelings of mental inferiority and habits of subservience" by the combined forces of patriarchy, tradition, religion and colonialism. Against the backdrop of masculinized conceptions of subalternity by scholars like Guha and Jameson, Gayatri Spivak offers illuminating subalternist engagements with the position of woman. Indeed, it is in Spivak's work that the masculinized categories of 'people', 'subaltern classes' or 'subaltern social groups' preferred by her male colleagues are refigured as the 'subaltern woman'. Spivak's 'subaltern woman' is at the centre of a theoretical supersyncretism (to borrow Benitez-Rojo's term) straddling Marxism, postcolonialism, deconstruction, Third World feminism, and subalternist historiography. In what is rightfully considered as her most

polemical contribution to subalternist epistemology, Spivak offers a searing critique of the effacement of sexual difference in much of subaltern studies theorizing:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is "evidence." It is rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow.⁴²

Consequently, part of Spivak's project is "to question the unquestioned muting of the subaltern woman even within the anti-imperialist project of subaltern studies."⁴³ However, this process of questioning the strategies of her own constituency led her to conclusions that ruffled not a few feathers in the critical world. Spivak begins what one might call an analysis of the existential impasse of the subaltern woman (read Third World woman) with the following pertinent observations:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization.⁴⁴

The obdurate nature of these impediments makes Spivak conclude that "the subaltern cannot speak."⁴⁵ This conclusion caused an uproar. Although Spivak subsequently clarified her position by submitting that the subaltern sexed subject cannot speak, because her utterances are always neutralized beforehand by the forces we know too well, the point remains that her conclusion essentializes (again I use this word reluctantly) the condition of subalternity as a fatalistic ontology. Another interpretation of Spivak's statement that has gained currency is that the subaltern cannot speak because the moment s/he is able to speak and to be heard, s/he has vacated the identity of subalternity.

Bill Ashcroft proposes a somewhat modified version of this interpretation of Spivak's question in his recent book, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001). While acknowledging the fact that Spivak's question is open to multiple interpretations, Ashcroft nonetheless asks:

Can 'colonized subjects' be effective and, indeed, 'meaningful' only if they speak in the 'voice of their own experience', the language of their own culture? If they 'translate' that experience into the discourse of the dominant power in order to be heard, are they somehow reshaped or co-opted by that discourse, able to speak only in terms of the dominant culture?⁴⁶

My position on this interpretation is that 'the colonized', 'the subaltern', 'woman' always have to 'translate' their experience into the discourse of the dominant power in order to be heard and in order for their articulations of resistance to be effective. History hardly allows for any other possibility. Every oppressed entity has been acted upon and reshaped by the culture and discourses of the oppressor and this reality need not be a weakness. Seizure of the oppressors' discourses, signs and symbols and their subsequent re-deployment as instruments of liberation are at the very centre of the postcolonial transformation Ashcroft speaks of. The 'violence' that Achebe and Kourouma have so famously visited on the English and French languages in their respective novels are irrefutable examples of the colonized translating his experience into the language/discourse of the oppressor in a subversive manner. Salman Rushdie sums up this argument very neatly in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991):

I hope all of us share the view that we can't simply use the language in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free.⁴⁷

The subversive use of the oppressor's discourses and symbols is therefore not at variance with the emancipation project of the subaltern. The power of textual representation, wielded exclusively by men in the early phase of modern African literatures, played a significant part in the subalternization of women. By literally seizing the text from men in order to tell their own herstories, African women now engage in a subversive translation of their experiences into what used to be the 'language'/symbol of their oppressor.

One of the implications of the Spivakian position is that the subaltern woman has never spoken, cannot speak and may never speak. She is therefore to be spoken to and for, or must speak through someone else in order for any possibility of agency to occur.⁴⁸ Linda Alcoff, among others, has reminded us that there are serious problems involved in speaking for others⁴⁹ and I will explore those problems later as they relate to my own location and politics within African feminist discourse. Suffice it to assert for now that in Africa the subaltern woman, despite her positional disadvantages, has always spoken. Whenever necessary, she has always "inflicted" her voice on the social space, as evidenced in the Senegalese concept of *sani-baat* or voice-throwing, a process through which women intrude into, interrupt, alter or disrupt discourse by literally "throwing in" their voices. The problem of the subaltern woman in Africa is therefore related more to how we, male and female cultural scholars/students in the academy, listen or do not listen to her, as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie opines: "Are African women voiceless or do we fail to look for their voices where we may find them, in the sites and forms in which these voices are uttered?"⁵⁰ Ogundipe-Leslie provides the following answers to her own questions:

We neither look for their voices [read African women's] where they utter them nor do we think it worthwhile to listen to their voices. We sometimes substitute our voices for their own and we do not even know when we do this nor are we able to recognise the differences in the mixed or substituted voices. Women of European descent are most prone to these ventriloquisms, frequently calling on African women to play the role of ventriloquists' puppets, speaking to other people's agenda.⁵¹

Here again we encounter the problems of speaking for others as discussed by Linda Alcoff. Ogunديpe-Leslie also introduces here one of the reasons responsible for the discursive insurgency of Third World women against feminist discourses authorized by women of European descent. The centralization of the privileged White, Western, middle-class woman as the Subject of second-wave feminist discourses, and the inability of Western feminist paradigms to engage with imperialism and neo-colonialism as they affect non-Western women, have been recognized for some time now in third-wave feminisms that attempt to include race and class in relation to gender. The exclusion of non-Western and Western women of colour, the pretentious universalism of initial Western second-wave feminisms and the insufferable arrogance of some of the self-proclaimed spokespersons of Western feminisms in their articulation of that dubious universalism, are some of the familiar arguments in support of the emergence of alternative feminisms in all parts of the Third World. Ifi Amadiume's experience with the arrogance of some mainstream Western feminists in the United States illustrates these attitudes:

Once, in such a seminar, I asked a young White woman why she was studying social anthropology. She replied that she was hoping to go to Zimbabwe, and felt that she could help women there by advising them how to organize. The Black women in the audience gasped in astonishment. Here was someone scarcely past girlhood, who had just started university and had never fought a war in her life. She was planning to go to Africa to teach female veterans of a liberation struggle how to organize! This is the kind of arrogant, if not absurd attitude we encounter repeatedly.⁵²

Such hubristic attitudes on the part of certain Western feminists explains Chandra Mohanty's call for the deconstruction "of hegemonic 'Western' feminisms, and the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically and culturally grounded feminist concerns"⁵³, in an essay that has become one of the foundational texts of Third World feminist theory. It also accounts for the emergence of African and Africa-influenced versions of feminist epistemology that can, in my view, be contrapuntally deployed with subaltern theory in the reading of francophone African women's writing.

A vast body of work now exists in which the scope, meaning and strategies of African feminist theories have been established. Filomena Steady's edited volume, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981) and Carole Boyce Davies' "Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism" stand out in this respect⁵⁴. The latter, which serves as the introduction to *Ngambika* (1986), a landmark collection of critical essays on African women's writing, articulates six major characteristics of what constitutes, in Boyce Davies' words, "a genuine African feminism."⁵⁵ There hardly exists a version of African feminist thought that does not agree with at least the first two items on Boyce Davies' agenda. The two stand out as common tropes in a largely heterogeneous African feminist discourse and deserve to be cited in detail:

Firstly, it (African feminism) recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples. Secondly, an African feminist consciousness recognizes that certain inequities and limitations existed/exist in traditional societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others. As such, it acknowledges its affinities with international feminism, but delineates a specific African feminism with certain specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies.⁵⁶

Within the range of theoretical possibilities offered by African feminist thinkers for the reading of African women's creative texts, I have chosen to focus on three which are not only compatible with Boyce Davies' definitions above but are also amenable to, and deployable within, the scope of my South-South subalternist agenda. These are: Ogundipe-Leslie's 'stiwanism', Obioma Nnaemeka's 'negofeminism', and Rose Acholonu's 'motherism'. Derived from "STIWA", an acronym for 'Social Transformation including Women in Africa', stiwanism recognizes that contemporary African women operate from a subaltern position of social exclusion. This in itself is no surprise, since the discourses and the political modalities of "nation building" in virtually every African country have been constructed as male, and consequently, superior domains.

Exclusion from the social arena in Africa translates into confinement to and subordination within marginal sites of powerlessness. Stiwanism therefore proposes setting in motion regenerative processes that will result in gender equality within the African social space. The keyword here is "inclusion", which presupposes collaboration between the two sexes to attain this gender equality and is also indicative of African feminists' reluctance to accept certain separatist or isolationist trends in mainstream Western feminism which encourage women to create a room of their own. Given the fact that tradition and the sexist modernity introduced by colonialism are both responsible for the exclusion of women in Africa, social practices that subalternize women have become so deeply rooted that fighting to eradicate them in a context as volatile as Africa, without appearing to privilege certain Western concepts over African values, is a delicate task that demands the shrewdness and astuteness associated with the process of political

negotiation. And this is where Nnaemeka's concept of negofeminism (feminism of negotiation) can be instrumental to achieving the aims of stiwanism.

Cultural differences between Africa and the West obviously affect feminist politics on the continent. Katherine Frank, a prominent Western feminist critic of African literatures, has suggested that

Feminism, by definition, is a profoundly individualistic philosophy: it values personal growth and individual fulfilment over any larger communal needs or good. African society, of course, even in its most westernized modern forms, places the values of the group over those of the individual with the result that the notion of an African feminist almost seems a contradiction in terms.⁵⁷

These assertions are very instructive indeed. The rational thinking, Cartesian individual is at the core of the construction of subjectivity in the West. Notwithstanding the onslaught of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and various models of Western feminism against his hegemonic status, this male subject remains the supreme subject of Western philosophies and discourses. Tension was unavoidable wherever imperialism foisted masculinist Western individualistic ethos and discourses on communalistic spaces, as was the case in Africa and the Americas. Now, African feminists have struggled over the years to formulate their own discourses and differentiate themselves from Western feminists. The more historically minded of them have foraged in Africa's past to excavate traditional 'feminist' strategies of African women and to reconceptualize them for the present struggle.

These efforts, however, cannot erase the fact that the spectre of Western individualism still looms largely over feminist practice and strategies in Africa. This is made all the more pertinent by the fact that liberal and radical feminism, both presented as exclusionist and individualistic by Rosemarie Tong in her *Feminist Thought* (1989),

are the versions of Western feminism that have been imposed on the African context. It must be borne in mind that those involved in African feminist practice - writers, critics, professionals and activists in the private sector - are mostly the privileged, Westernized actors that Ifi Amadiume refers to in her recently published book as the “daughters of imperialism”⁵⁸. The African feminist is therefore constantly torn between the traditional pull of communalism and the modernist individualism of Western liberal and radical feminisms. She must consequently deploy negofeminist strategies if her struggle is to have any meaning in the African context.

Admittedly, in her essay, “Feminism, Rebellious Women and Cultural Boundaries”, Nnaemeka deploys her concept of negofeminism within the limited context of African women’s subtle negotiations to overcome the limitations of their cultural boundaries, and actually eschews the possibility of extending the concept to African feminist negotiations governed by the tradition/modernity binarism. However, such a unidirectional deployment of the concept, even by its proponent, can hardly work in the case of francophone Africa, where the French colonial policy of assimilation and the concomitant pervasive influence of French culture on everyday life have transformed the tradition/modernity dilemma into an inescapable fact of life. Indeed, my reading of the novels of Abibatou Traoré, Fatou Keïta and Régina Yaou in Chapter Four will underscore the fact that the negofeminist strategies of the heroine in francophone African women’s novels are governed to a large extent by the tensions between tradition and modernity.

The valorization of African women’s status as mother and the need to turn motherhood into a liberationist instrument, inform Rose Acholonu’s concept of “motherism”, which she describes as “the Afrocentric alternative to feminism”. In her

book, *Motherism* (1995), Acholonu takes issue with the negative perception of motherhood as an impediment to women's emancipation in certain second-wave Western feminist discussions, and posits that wifehood and motherhood have historically represented different experiences for Western and African women. What African feminists particularly find problematic are the arguments made against biological motherhood by such Western feminists as Ann Oakley in *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (1974) and Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). Admittedly, not all Western feminists agree with the deconstruction of biological motherhood by Oakley and Firestone. For instance, Adrienne Rich is critical of Firestone in her book *Of Woman Born* (1979) and makes a number of pro-biological motherhood submissions that are largely precursive of Acholonu's subsequent contentions in *Motherism*, as well as reminiscent of earlier first-wave debates over "maternal feminism".

Acholonu's originality lies in the peculiar African dimension she introduces into the pro-motherhood argument, based essentially on an Igbo world view. Contextual and cultural variations notwithstanding, the perception of motherhood in most African societies can be illustrated by the Igbo language of eastern Nigeria. In Igbo culture, 'Nneka' (meaning "mother is supreme") is a very common name given to girls. That supremacy was eroded by imperialism, as African feminists are wont to argue. The task for some, therefore, is to develop an emancipatory agenda for African women, with a revitalization of her status as mother as the point of departure. These three concepts – stiwanism, negofeminism and motherism - are workable within a subalternist paradigm, because they locate African women in the purview of the subalternist concepts of

subordination, domination and hegemony, while proposing liberationist strategies cognizant of the peculiarities of African history and cultures.

*From Subaltern Studies to African Feminisms:
The Cross-Disciplinary Imperative*

Some qualifications must be made with regard to my own deployment of the major operative concepts of subaltern theory before proceeding further. Because of the Marxist orientation of the thinkers in the Subaltern Studies Collective and the precursive influence of Gramsci's thought on their work, the subjects described as subalterns are invariably approached as a class, hence the recurrence of the expression 'subaltern classes'. If the Indian subalternists have encountered very few problems with their approach, it is because their objects of enquiry are overwhelmingly male. Conceptualizing subalterns as a class is bound to be a counter-productive approach, however, when one focuses the argument on women.

Apart from the familiar arguments regarding the issue of class analysis as problematic for feminist strategies, because women straddle different hierarchical classes and can therefore not be approached as a homogeneously oppressed class, class analysis is made all the more problematic by the rigid connotations the word 'class' has come to acquire owing to its Marxist antecedents. From Marx to Lukacs, from Gramsci to Althusser, the notion of class has come to denote the location of subjects within the capitalist mode of production and also within the political apparatus of the state. This rigidity is most apparent in Engels' definition of historical materialism:

Historical materialism is that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all historical events in the economic development of society, in changes of the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another.⁵⁹

Consequently, terms like the 'working class', 'labour', 'the peasantry', the 'ruling class', the 'bourgeoisie', and the 'comprador class' relate to specific positionalities within the mode of production. These terms are commonplace in the works of the Indian subalternists. The problem with this type of analysis lies in its unidirectional tone, when *Homo sapiens* is reduced to *Homo economicus*, which justifies Shulamith Firestone's critique of the Marxist reality as "a *partial* reality".⁶⁰ Whether s/he belongs to the ruling class or the working class, the point remains that the subject's life cannot be reduced to the bank or factory. The limitations become clearer in the context of a feminist reading of works by African women writers. None of the female characters in the novels we shall study operate in the sites of economic production evoked by the Marxist, Indian subalternist sense of that expression. And since most of the female subjects are married women in polygamous or monogamous contexts, the question arises as to whether they constitute a class within the domestic site of subalternity.

Chidi Amuta provides a striking example of how not to theorize the domestic site in African novels. In his otherwise impressive book, *The Theory of African Literature* (1989), Amuta offers a curious reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), using the capitalist mode of production approach and the bombastic diction of class analysis. In a novel set in Umuofia, a fictional, precolonial, preindustrial, and hence precapitalist village in eastern Nigeria, Amuta curiously comes up with a Marxist class analysis. Okonkwo, the no-nonsense hero of the novel, falls into the comprador bourgeois

class. His wives “naturally” fall into the exploited and oppressed class! And the main preoccupation of that novel, which is to explore the socio-cultural dislocations and the political disempowerment suffered by the people of Umuofia upon contact with the White man, is brushed aside in Amuta’s problematic reading.⁶¹

To avoid such problems, I will therefore shelve the Marxist class analysis of the Indian subalternists in favour of the more workable conceptualization of women as a heterogeneous social group facing specific problems of subalternization in the African context. I am by no means proposing a limited reading of African women’s experience within the domestic context. I have zeroed in on the domestic site solely for the purpose of demonstrating some of the limitations of class analysis, and consequently to signal a major difference between my reading of subalternity and the uses to which the Indian scholars have put the concept.

“Subaltern studies”, John Beverley argues, “is about power, who has it and who doesn’t, who is gaining it and who is losing it.”⁶² Power, in the work of the Indians, ultimately comes down to State power. While the elite or the ruling classes have it, the subaltern classes do not. The modalities through which the holders and wielders of State power secure the consent of those over whom they exercise power are referred to as ‘hegemony’. Where State power is exercised without the consent of the subaltern, the condition of ‘dominance’ occurs. ‘Subordination’ is the condition of those over whom power is exercised. When they “rebel and rise up”⁶³ against that condition, ‘insurgency’ occurs.

These concepts underscore some of the interesting problems associated with interdisciplinary reflection. It is clear that the concepts mentioned above – ‘hegemony’,

'dominance', 'subordination', 'insurgency' – belong more appropriately to the disciplines of the Social Sciences, especially Political Science. Their pre-eminence in Subaltern Studies is no surprise, since most members of the Collective are from the Social Sciences. Gayatri Spivak is the only notable member with a literary background. We are therefore confronted here with the question of how to readapt concepts traditionally associated with the hardware language of the Social Sciences to the software language of literature and cultural studies. Put differently, can patriarchal domination of women be read as hegemony? Can African women's struggle against patriarchal domination, as refracted in their fictional works, be read as insurgency?

Of all the aforementioned concepts, 'subordination' and 'dominance' are the least problematic when deployed as critical tools. For instance, it does not sound out of tune if one describes Okonkwo's wives as being subordinated to their husband in *Things Fall Apart*. The title of Meena Kelkar's book, *Subordination of Woman* (1995), certainly does not strike one as odd. Similarly, expressions like 'patriarchal domination', and 'male dominance' have long been commonplace in feminist literary criticism. 'Hegemony' and 'insurgency' become less problematic, the moment one looks beyond the State as the sole repository of power. Power, as Alvin Toffler reminds us in *Powershift* (1990), has become very pervasive and inheres in every aspect and every facet of our interactive lives. Hegemony can therefore occur even when State power is not at play. The sort of power that extended family patriarchs wield over female characters in the novels of several African male and female authors is hegemonic, insofar as the most ardent defenders of that patriarchal power usually turn out to be women who ensure the consent of other women in the household. Where the generalized subalternization of female

subjects in the literary work is sustained by culture, and where there is evidence of consensual submission to that cultural order by female characters, we are equally in the presence of hegemony.

It is also useful to move beyond the orthodox perception of insurgency as mass or popular uprisings against State power, a narrower version of it being armed insurgency against the State by disgruntled guerrilla movements. Indeed, insurgency occurs the moment the subaltern arrives at a level of consciousness which makes him/her withdraw his/her consent and undertake actions that undermine hegemony and dominance. Insurgency, therefore, need not always be against the State. It can be against patriarchal, cultural, socio-economic, and, even epistemic domination. This broad definition accounts for why those of us involved in oppositional scholarship against contemporary manifestations of Euro-American imperialisms are sometimes wont to describe our work as insurgent textualities, and for Benita Parry what we do is nothing less than "dissident criticism"⁶⁴. When broadened in this manner, the concepts of Subaltern Studies become applicable to a reading of African women's writing.

The legitimate question may now be asked concerning the point at which I wish to intervene in the process of knowledge generation on African women's writing. In 1984, Katherine Frank raised a few questions which, in her opinion, ought to determine the nature, scope and strategies of a feminist approach to the criticism of the African novel. Those questions are worth revisiting:

Why are there so few women writers in Africa? Should we swell their ranks by including white figures such as Olive Schreiner, Doris Lessing, and Nadine Gordimer...? What educational, marital, and familial circumstances foster and thwart writing by African women? Who do African women writers read and seek to emulate as literary models? Why have so many of them ceased to publish after writing only a novel or two...? Can we trace a women's African literary history in the two brief decades that have elapsed since Nwapa...brought out *Efuru*? Is there, that is, some sort of development stretching from Nwapa's early work to recent novels by Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Bessie Head?...How can we rescue and re-evaluate people like Nwapa and Aidoo and Ogot from the parentheses and footnotes of male-oriented, male-authored African literary history?⁶⁵

These questions were appropriate for the formative phase of contextual feminist discourses in both francophone and anglophone Africa. Consequently, much of the strategic thinking of the 1970s through to the mid-1990s was concerned in varying degrees with answering Frank's questions. This was largely a conceptual phase, in which critics worked to establish appropriate critical concepts for apprehending the experiences of African women. Gloria Onyeoziri's delineation of a "discours féminin", based on the conceptual category of "femme parlée/femmes parlant" in the works of Aminata Sow Fall, is indicative of the thematic thrust of African feminist discourses of that period⁶⁶.

The sheer mass of critical works (books, essays, special issues of journals, monographs) on the concepts of African feminist discourses in the last two decades now underscores the need to move the argument beyond conceptual foundationalism. This submission places me in the company of Homi Bhabha, who contends that discourse has now arrived at a "postfoundationalist" phase. Commenting on the *Critical Inquiry* special issue, "Identities", edited by Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in 1992, Bhabha avers that one of the values of that issue was to shift

... the question of identity from the ontological and epistemological imperative – *what is identity?* - to face the ethical and political prerogative - *what are identities for?* - or even to the present pragmatist alternative - *what can identities do?*⁶⁷ (emphases in the original)

Arguing further that minority discourses now operate in a “postontological, performative condition”, Bhabha contends that the issue now “is not what minority *is*, but what minority *does*, or what is done in its name, that is of political and cultural significance.”⁶⁸ With these crucial points in mind, my intervention in African feminist politics will be located at a “postontological, performative” level. In essence, rather than embark on foundationalist definitions of the subaltern woman in francophone African women’s novels, an issue that has been addressed by critics in the last two decades, I will be more concerned with what the subaltern woman does and how she does it in texts by francophone African women. While I do not seek to reverse the axiom that ontology precedes agency, I will nonetheless insist on the validity of shifting the argument from considerations of who the subaltern African woman *is* (ontology) to analyses of what she *does* (agency). By embarking on this course of political and pragmatic *engagement*, I am aligning myself with the tradition which makes African scholars eschew any critical approach that is socio-politically irrelevant.

Bhabha raises the crucial issue of what is done in the name of the minority. This point deserves attention. Despite the moral and ethical problems involved with the question of who has the right to do what for and in the name of the other, the fact can hardly be disputed that the very nature of his/her work imposes that task on the intellectual. From Julien Benda’s *La Trahison des Clercs* (1927) to Antonio Gramsci’s *The Prison Notebooks* (1971) and Edward Said’s more recent *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), one constant characteristic of the intellectual that emerges is that s/he

cannot run away from the function of reflecting for and in the name of the rest of society.

In essence, the intellectual cannot not represent.

However, the function of representation becomes more delicate when the intellectual (in this case, myself) is a male anglophone African critic reflecting *for* and in the name of the subaltern woman in francophone African women's novels. One of the paradoxes of the African feminist project is that while African feminists mark their boundary from Western feminists by proposing a non-antagonistic attitude towards African men, the same feminists become very confrontational whenever a male critic approaches a female text. It is no longer news to anyone in African literary circles that one critic, Femi Ojo-Ade, has been at the receiving end of disparaging attacks from African feminists since he published two famous essays (in the 1980s), "Female Writers, Male Critics" and "Still a Victim? Mariama Ba's *Une Si Longue Lettre*". Closer to us in the 1990s, Ali Mazrui's essay, "The Black Woman and the Problem of Gender: An African Perspective", drew the ire of Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, who unsheathed her critical sword and went for Mazrui's neck in her fiery rejoinder, "Beyond Hearsay and Academic Journalism: The Black Woman and Ali Mazrui".

Like Ojo-Ade and Mazrui before me, I have had my own share of acerbic recrimination since I began to make public interventions in African feminist discourse in the mid-1990s. Interestingly, attacks on me in the literary pages of newspapers came from both male and female writers. Piqued by some of my reflections on African feminist discourses, the Nigerian female writer Omowunmi Segun, author of an award-winning novel, *The Third Dimple* (1992), charged that:

It appears then that writing as a “male” enterprise is so firmly rooted in the psyche of the male writer-critics that it nullifies concrete reality and endangers, rather than engenders female writing. Pius Adesanmi... has made this pointedly clear. He slips into the same patronising attitude, which is most apparent when he upbraids the women writers for not having “deemed it important to take a cue from the male members of their generation”.⁶⁹

Segun went on to condemn my “male arrogance”. Arguing in the same vein as Segun, a male novelist, Sanya Osha, averred that:

Adesanmi shows himself to be some sort of flag-waving ideologue of feminism, a kind of impartial censor of sexual politics... Feminists say that being male automatically disqualifies one from the movement. So Adesanmi with all his gender moralising should recognise the limits.⁷⁰

It was not long before Obi Nwakanma, another Nigerian male poet and literary critic, joined the fray. After accusing me of “decentring the female writers” through my “vicarious” intervention in feminist politics, Nwakanma concluded that “Pius Adesanmi has chosen to wear his phallus on the wrong side of the argument”⁷¹. It is apparent from the above citations that any male critic working on women’s writing is treading on very thorny ground. He can variously be accused of “male arrogance” (Segun), meddlesomeness (Osha) and inappropriateness of purpose (Nwakanma).

The male critic working on women’s texts is consequently under constant pressure to define where he is coming from, as Americans would put it. Part of Osha’s problem with my foray into feminist criticism comes down to the question he asks: “now, what exactly is Adesanmi trying to do?”⁷² This question is still very relevant in the light of my present attempt to reflect on francophone African women’s novels, because of the famous example of Achille Mbembe. Mbembe, one of Africa’s front-line political theorists, had published an important essay, “The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Power in the Postcolony”. He got his fingers badly burnt and was attacked by Judith

Butler, V.Y. Mudimbe, Tejumola Olaniyan and Fernando Coronil⁷³, for taking it for granted that he could theorize the postcolony in the context of the North American University without stating where he was coming from, and “what exactly he was trying to do”, to rephrase Osha’s question.

Responding to Ernest Emenyonu’s charge several years ago that only African critics are equipped to engage in the criticism of African novels⁷⁴, Bernth Lindfors asserted, among other things, that “any literature needs all the criticism it can get”⁷⁵. Despite the prodigious production of commentaries on African women’s writing in the last two decades, the point remains that it is still a largely undercritiqued and undertheorized body of work, when compared with what is available and still being produced on African men’s writing. Francophone African women writers are doubly disadvantaged in this conjuncture, since their anglophone counterparts have gradually begun to enjoy the “superpower” institutional backing of Anglo-American Universities.

Consider the cases of Calixthe Beyala and Tsitsi Dangarembga. The former is easily francophone Africa’s most successful woman novelist at the moment. She has published nine novels and is one of the few Parisian writers who live exclusively on income from their writing. Her 1996 novel, *Les honneurs perdus*, won the Grand Prix du Roman de l’Académie française, making her the first Black writer to win that prestigious prize. Dangarembga, in contrast, has only one novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), to her credit, and to the best of my knowledge is yet to win a major international prize comparable to Beyala’s. Yet Dangarembga is far better known in international literary circuits than Beyala. The body of critical essays available on *Nervous Conditions* alone may well be at par with what one can hope to see appear on Beyala’s entire *oeuvre*. What

makes the difference is the institutional power of the North American University, which has canonized *Nervous Conditions*. When most Women's Studies Centres and literature departments/programs in American Universities decided that there were non-Western women writers worth studying, they looked largely in the direction of Rigoberta Menchu and Dangarembga.

African intellectuals addressing Western audiences have also contributed to what I would call the overcanonization of Dangarembga's only novel. It is noteworthy that a writer as important as Chinua Achebe considered Dangarembga worthy of mention in a series of lectures he gave at Harvard University (now published as *Home and Exile*). And in the introduction to *African Wo/man Palava*, published in 1996 by the University of Chicago Press for a North American audience, Okonjo Ogunyemi includes Dangarembga in a long list of "established novelists" comprising such names as Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Aminata Sow Fall, Nawal El Saadawi, and Assia Djebbar. It is indeed intriguing that a new writer with only one novel can figure in such an impressive list, while Beyala, who incidentally won a major international literary prize the year Ogunyemi's book was published, and whose novels are available in English translation, is excluded. I am therefore inclined to assert, like Lindfors (1975), that francophone African women's writing needs all the criticism it can get and deserves, from female and male critics alike, and that "a single tribe of (female) critics" cannot "claim a monopoly of clear vision" in the context of African women's writing.

As regards the issue of whether my belonging to the male gender constitutes an impediment to "objectivity" and should therefore be the basis of exclusion, as Osha

seems to argue when he advises me to “recognise the limits”, I find an appropriate response, incidentally, in Ogundipe-Leslie’s earlier mentioned excoriation of Mazrui:

Gender studies is not a discipline one can become authoritative about overnight, contrary to what some new male entryists (read Mazrui) think. One needs to be a cultural insider to the areas of knowledge called gender studies, women’s studies, and feminist studies. And there are differences. Who is a cultural insider?...A cultural insider to gender studies is not biologically constructed. *The cultural insider has epistemological privilege but does not have to be of the female gender.* He or she must want or try to become a cultural insider through the various ways possible: doing the enlightening and enabling research; showing capability for empathy; understanding, if not taking the perspectives of one’s research subjects; testing the knowledge gained with those who live the culture; living the culture; and learning the relevant languages. Understandably, a scholar may not be able to do all of this coincidentally; nonetheless, knowing and understanding the historical and sociological contexts of one’s research subjects seem primary and crucial if the scholar is to avoid reduction to superficial and touristic statements.⁷⁶ (emphasis added).

The perspectives presented by Lindfors and Ogundipe-Leslie sufficiently convey where I am coming from. As regards the more specific question of what exactly I am trying to do, the answer is simple. Like everyone who bears the responsibility of the academic vocation, I am trying to build on and expand the frontiers of existing knowledge on my subject of research: francophone African women’s writing. I believe that if deployed with the required humility, the gains of subalternist, feminist and cultural theorizing can help achieve this modest objective and open up new avenues in my area of research.

The Trap of Anti-Essentialism

So far, I have used the expressions “the African woman”, “African women’s writing” and “francophone African women’s writing” without qualification. This deliberate strategy lays me open to charges of essentialism, totalization and

homogenization. The African scholar must be prepared to take this reasonable risk if s/he is to avoid adopting scholarly agendas spawned in the heat of what Niyi Osundare refers to as "the crisis of poststructuralist theorizing". By decentering the European Subject and the self-aggrandizing grand narratives it spun for most of the last five centuries, postmodernism has fundamentally altered Western thought, forcing that establishment to reckon with difference, diversity and cultural specificity. A knowledge-system that has come to the end of its tether, in terms of justifying four centuries of essentializing and totalizing itself as Reason, History and Civilization, suddenly finds an escape route in the fetishization of difference, and this new agenda is once again assumed to be universal.

Postmodernism's phobia of unifying and overarching cultural systems, which it hastily dismisses as essentialism or totalization, poses serious problems for the Third World scholar whose politics is often at variance with the invidious agenda of postmodernism. From Chinweizu to Cabral, from Nkrumah to Senghor, and from Ghandi to Mandela (and Fanon to some extent), emphasizing what unites rather than what divides has been at the heart of Third World politics and theory, from its inception. I thus agree with cultural theorist Tejumola Olaniyan, when he posits that:

Postmodernism's deconstruction of the subject is both specific and general: not just the imperial European Subject but all putative claims to a subjecthood that would authorize or be the rallying point of knowledge or collective action or politics. This is where African critics, interested in constructing a resistant subject or identity against unending Western imperialism, part with postmodernism. Rejected also by the African critic are some of the ramifications of postmodernism's decentering of the subject such as a cynicism against all truth-claims, a suspicion of utopian strivings, and therefore a skepticism toward all political agendas, or, more polemically, an aversion toward politics.⁷⁷

Collective action and politics are at the heart of African theorizing. At the cultural level, this implies a tendency to underscore observable overarching cultural structures

that enable one to speak of a common Africanness. However, any student of the political history of francophone Africa cannot but be keenly aware of the dangers inherent in the articulation of a common identity. After all, narratives of oneness, unity of purpose and common identity were exploited without exception by the sanguinary tyrants who have ruled francophone Africa in the last thirty years. In Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Gabon, Congo, Central African Republic, the former Zaire, and the Republic of Benin, the narrative of a common Africanness provided the ideological excuse for the absurdity of a one-party totalitarian state in which all strivings toward political pluralism and freedom of expression were brutally repressed. This resulted in what Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Béatrice Hibou famously referred to as "the criminalization of the state" in Africa.

However, looking at the other side of the coin, the emphasis on difference as opposed to sameness has also produced its own historical calamities, as evidenced in the Aryan incubus of Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa. We have also witnessed the uses to which Bosnian Serbs, Zionist Jews, and Islamic fundamentalists have put difference in recent times. The story is similar in Rwanda, where the articulation of difference led to the genocide of the early 1990s. And when Edgar Gabriel Silex, a native American poet, screams that he wants to gain some "indifference" in his volume of poetry, *Through all the Displacements* (1995), the play on words is to remind us of the role that the narrative of difference has played in bringing the Native Indians of the Americas into their present deplorable condition. In his book, *The Lessons of History* (1991), British historian Michael Howard offers a penetrating panorama of narratives of oneness, difference from the other, and cultural purity in Europe. He ends his broad

historical sweep with an examination of what he calls "the sinister consequences"⁷⁸ of such ventures. In essence, neither exclusivity nor inclusivity enjoys the monopoly of madness. The onus is on the scholar deploying either system to be sufficiently aware of the dangers and the limitations of his/her choice.

I return to Oyeronke Oyewumi's work, *The Invention of Women*, to demonstrate how postmodernism's fetishization of difference, and the consequent dismissal of any opposing tendency as essentialism or homogenization, imposes a certain nervousness on the African scholar operating in the Western academy and sometimes leads to theoretical vacillation. Oyewumi is a feminist sociologist and a Professor of Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In her preface, she makes some important statements that are worth quoting:

Although it is certain that the findings of this study are applicable to some other African societies, I hesitate to apply them broadly, primarily because I do not want to fall into the common trap of erasing a multitude of African cultures by making facile generalizations, a process that results in unwarranted homogenization.⁷⁹

This excoriation of an unbridled homogenization and totalization of African cultures, usually absent in the works of home-based African scholars, has become a noticeable trend in the works of African scholars in American and European Universities. It is commonplace in their prefaces and introductions. It betrays a certain apprehension and even fear on the part of these scholars: the danger of being charged with essentialism and homogenization. But what may really be at stake in some of these cases is the reality of the scholar pandering to the expectations of his/her context, a postmodernist context marked by the fetishization of difference and the delegitimation of collective action and politics. This contention is sustained by the fact that the very first chapter of Oyewumi's

book is subtitled "Western Theories and African Subjects". Since she states very clearly in the preface that she will focus on the Oyo-Yoruba peoples of Western Nigeria, and vehemently decries unwarranted generalizations and homogenization, one would have expected her to drop the "African" and use "Oyo-Yoruba Subjects" or "Oyo-Yoruba Women". Again, what is at play here is another common strategy in the works of African scholars in the West. After "comforting" their Western readers in their prefaces and introductions by pretending to buy into the postmodernist fetishization of difference, they quietly slip back into the strategy of identifying commonalities and privileging them over difference.

African women, like African cultures, societies and traditional institutions, share many overarching features which Abiola Irele examines in his essay, "The African Imagination" (1993). But huge differences and disparities equally exist, and this increases the number of theoretical positions from which one might approach Africa. The scholar who decides to take the perspective of difference, zeroing in on a specific people and their cultures and highlighting how they differ from the rest of the continent, has taken a valid theoretical position. But I begin to have problems when this position is construed as the norm and is used as a basis for invalidating the strategies of another scholar who decides to approach Africa from the standpoint of historical and cultural commonalities. It is even more unsettling when it appears that the invalidation of the second position comes in response to a certain Western postmodernist stimulus.

The eight novelists whose works have been selected for this study are from Senegal, Cameroun, Gabon and Côte d'Ivoire. They are all African women writing in French, because their countries were once colonial possessions of France and are still

very much neo-colonial possessions of that European country. I have decided to approach them in this study from the perspective of the historical and cultural elements they have in common. I will therefore refer to them as francophone African women writers and, whenever necessary, African women writers. I am by no stretch of the imagination proposing to gloss over their differences, but emphasis will be on what unites rather than what divides them.

Olaniyan has opined that the African scholar should mobilize his reflections in response to the “substantive challenges facing Africa today: the rational mobilization of its human and material resources and their optimum allocation to improve the quality of life of the people, and the cultivation, nurturing and solidification of formations of responsive and accountable governance.”⁸⁰ To these I would add Mazrui’s three-point agenda for what he calls “the Black woman”: “*liberating* the Black woman, *centering* the Black woman, and *empowering* the Black woman.”⁸¹ (Mazrui’s emphases). While Mazrui seems to rely on the patriarchal African state to achieve these objectives on behalf of African women, I will opt for an approach which spotlights the historical initiative of women, and how they articulate their struggle to vacate positions of subalternity in francophone African women’s novels.

CHAPTER 2

Theory, Fiction and the Subaltern Woman in Francophone African Literary Discourse

Fait assez nouveau, on trouve à l'heure actuelle des romans écrits à la première personne... Ces récits sont parfois écrits par des personnes étrangères à la littérature – entendons qui ne sont pas à priori des écrivains –, et qui éprouvent, à un moment quelconque de leur existence, le besoin impérieux de se raconter. Deux récits suffiront à illustrer cette veine: 25 ans d'escalier ou la vie d'un planton et Une si longue lettre. L'un et l'autre sont des autobiographies à peine romancées; l'une de Seydou Traoré qui, à l'époque coloniale, était au service d'un patron blanc, l'autre d'une sage-femme sénégalaise dénonçant les injustices et les tares de la société sénégalaise actuelle parmi lesquelles se distingue l'épineux problème de la polygamie. Dans un registre plus littéraire, le livre d'Amadou Hampaté Bâ, L'Étrange destin de Wangrin s'impose comme un maître-livre dans la veine autobiographique. (Papa Samba Diop, "Au cœur de la littérature negro-africaine d'écriture française: problèmes littéraires et sociologiques". Bayreuth African Studies 3, 1985)

Subalternity among the Signs of Our Time

Pakistani cultural theorist Aijaz Ahmad opens his influential book, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992), with a lengthy introduction entitled "Literature among the Signs of Our Time". For reasons that will presently become evident, I have taken the liberty of borrowing that phrase for the opening subtitle in the present chapter, replacing Ahmad's 'Literature' with 'Subalternity', a term which, as we have seen, is deeply imbricated in the politics of literary and cultural production in those ex-centric sites of marginalized discursive formations (Africa, Asia, Latin America, non-White United States and Canada, Maori New Zealand and Aborigine Australia among others) so brilliantly theorized in the book edited by Abdul JanMohammed and Lloyd Brown, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990).

While I do not propose here an engagement with Ahmad's obviously problematic positions on such burning issues as theory, class, nationalism, the Third World and Orientalism, I do wish to underscore the fact that his deployment of the term 'literature' boils down essentially to post-World War II reformulations of literary-critical theory. Theory (read literary theory), in Ahmad's estimation, has become one of the dominant signs of our times because it has moved beyond its traditional mandate of a hermeneutic engagement with the literary text and now addresses itself to the broadest possible range of socio-political and cultural concerns at the global level. Encroaching on the traditional territories of most disciplines of the Humanities and the Social Sciences, literary theory's amorphous 'texts' now include the subject, minorities, identities, race, class, gender, empire, colony, nation, migrancy, centre, margin, postcoloniality, civil wars, global refugee crises, globalization and even cyberspace. I will address the problems posed by such a reading of literature and theory in the conclusion of this study.

Considering the fact that the very ontology of the subject in these transnational times always involves at least one, or a combination of several of these 'texts' of theory, it is not too difficult to imagine how literature, understood as literary theory in this context, has become instrumental in determining who we are and how we manifest our subjectivity. Theory, as it were, is no longer content with a mere evaluation of its objects of inquiry; it now produces its own subjects of inquiry. For the contemporary subject, there is simply no escaping the grip of theory. If literature/theory, a dominant sign of our times as Ahmad contends, spawns its own texts, another more compelling sign emerges the moment we open up those texts with a view to examining the relationships among the subjects who inhabit them. I refer here to the sign of subalternity which has been one of

the fundamental features of social organization in human communities from time immemorial. The historical importance of the sign of subalternity is underscored by John Stuart Mill who, in a classic essay entitled *On Liberty*, shows the persuasiveness of the thesis that throughout history the rise of a particular people, society, culture, class or ideology has always resulted in a corresponding subalternization of another. Indeed, the ontology of the other as we know it in postcolonial theory is inconceivable outside of the politics of subalternity.

At the level of socio-political formations, every empire and kingdom that flourished in Africa (including Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Oyo, Benin, Dahomey) in the period that corresponds roughly to the era of pre-Renaissance feudalism in Europe did so through a process of brutal subalternization of weak neighbours. The history of the West is not much different. Ancient Greece, Imperial Rome, Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment Europe and post-World War II America are all major items on history's inexhaustible list of dominant and dominating formations that arose on the back of subalternized others. "All 'nations'", according to Michael Howard in *The Lessons of History*, "even if we consider them as cultural and not political communities, are the result of complex and usually brutal historical processes. All have involved amalgamations and suppressions".⁸²

From this picture emerges what Ahmad refers to as "histories of subordinations" which have left us with the legacy of the subaltern subject and subalternity itself. So gripping is the subject of subalternity on the human psyche that virtually every philosophical idea has confronted it in one way or the other, generating in the process discursive tropes that have become the cornerstones of contemporary intellectual

reflection. Hegel's master-slave dialectic, which he develops in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, has become the standard theoretical trope for evaluating the manner in which the master's subjectivity depends on the subaltern ontology of the slave for valuation and legitimation. Rousseau's historical analysis of inequality among men remains a landmark contribution to the understanding of the causes of subalternity. Shakespeare's most enduring contribution to the trope of subalternity is the Prospero-Caliban situation which is so central to the preoccupations of postcolonial theory.

In view of the all too familiar uses to which Europe put its master narratives in the last four hundred years and the *mea culpa* of postmodernism which has now allowed for those narratives to be largely undone and discredited, it is perhaps now scandalous for any scholar to deploy the concept of master narratives for the purpose of theoretical exegesis⁸³. This danger notwithstanding, there persists a sense in which some of the most cherished theoretical tools of oppositional scholarship can be read as master narratives of subalternity. One hardly needs to look beyond Marxism, feminisms, Three Worlds theory, developmentalism and postcolonialism to prove this point. If one takes the single example of feminism, it is arguable that, despite the disagreements between First World and Third World feminisms, all the variants of that theory are united in the construction of the master narrative of the supreme male versus the subaltern female. Similarly, Marxism is a master narrative woven around the subalternity of the working classes in relation to the bourgeoisie. The theories of Fanon, Cabral, C.L.R. James, Said and Spivak have made it possible for postcolonialism to be read, in a way, as a master narrative of the subalternizing agendas of imperialism and colonialism.

It is impossible to grasp the constitution of the world-historical process of subalternity without a revisionist encounter with the Euro-American project of modernity and its legitimizing discourses. Since modernity *per se* is not my main object of inquiry in this chapter, I will limit myself to a rather loose but workable definition of it as the network of social, political, cultural, and, most importantly, economic processes through which Europe negotiated the phenomenal transition from the Middle Ages to the glorious age that only began to pale after the second World War, when the narrative of modernity shifted significantly to the United States. This is precisely the sense in which the Mexican Nobel laureate, Octavio Paz, deploys the term in his book, *The Other Voice* (1990). Located in the temporal frame of the more than four hundred years of the consolidation of European modernity are such landmarks as the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, triumphalist capitalism, and the techno-scientific advances associated with the information age.

A particular point of interest is the manner in which the ideology of Eurocentrism has conditioned contemporary Euro-American narratives of modernity. Jurgen Habermas' *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987), Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989), and Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1990) are among the most prominent Western theoretical and philosophical accounts of modernity. For an illuminating account of how the Eurocentric silences, blindnesses and ellipses of these thinkers have combined to produce unidirectional narratives of modernity as the exclusive product of White Western genius, thereby making short shrift of modernity's central role in the production of the global condition of subalternity, I turn to the work of the Argentinian philosopher, Enrique Dussel.

In his essay, "Eurocentrism and Modernity", Dussell pegs his critique of Euro-American discourses of modernity on a revisionist reading of Hegel, Habermas and Taylor. His opening paragraph is worth quoting at some length:

Modernity is, for many (for Jürgen Habermas or Charles Taylor, for example), an essentially or exclusively European phenomenon. In these lectures, I will argue that modernity is, in fact, a European phenomenon, but one constituted in a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity that is its ultimate content. Modernity appears when Europe affirms itself as the "centre" of a *World History* that it inaugurates; the "periphery" that surrounds this centre is consequently part of its self-definition. The occlusion of this periphery... leads the major thinkers of the "centre" into a Eurocentric fallacy in their understanding of modernity.⁸⁴ (emphasis in the original)

Dussell then proceeds to summarize some of those Eurocentric fallacies that are constitutive of what he refers to as "the myth of modernity":

We are now in a position to summarize the elements of the myth of modernity. (1) Modern (European) civilization understands itself as the most developed, the superior, civilization. (2) This sense of superiority obliges it, in the form of a categorical imperative, as it were, to "develop" (civilize, uplift, educate) the more primitive, barbarous, underdeveloped civilizations. (3) The path of such development should be that followed by Europe in its own development out of antiquity and the Middle Ages. (4) Where the Barbarian or the primitive opposes the civilizing process, the praxis of modernity must, in the last instance, have recourse to the violence necessary to remove the obstacles to modernization. (5) This violence, which produces, in many different ways, victims, takes on an almost ritualistic character: the civilizing hero invests his victims (the colonized, the slave, the woman, the ecological destruction of the earth, etc.) with the character of being participants in a process of redemptive sacrifice. (6) From the point of view of modernity, the barbarian or primitive is in a state of guilt (for, among other things, opposing the civilizing process). This allows modernity to present itself not only as innocent but also as a force that will emancipate or redeem its victims from their guilt. (7) Given this "civilizing and redemptive" character of modernity, the suffering and sacrifices (the costs) of modernization imposed on "immature" peoples, enslaved races, the "weaker" sex, et cetera, are inevitable and necessary.⁸⁵

It is clear from the above that what Dussell proposes is a revisionist narrative that will render modernity indissociable from the world-scale reality of subalternization it

engendered in the process of its self-constitution, for the story of Euro-American modernity is equally the story of imperialism, colonialism, and the slave trade. Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1982) and Galeano's *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* provide empirical and historical backing to Dussell's more philosophical opinions on an alternative reading of modernity within the paradigm of subalternity. In his own intervention in the argument, Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o takes issue with the blindnesses which characterize dominant versions of the story of American modernity. Like Dussell and Galeano, Ngugi also sees American modernity as indissociable from the story of subalternity:

If *Western civilization* means the history, culture, literature, and arts associated only with Europe, how do you teach that portion of it that is Renaissance and post-Renaissance without going into the notions of, say, slavery and colonialism? We know that there is no post-Renaissance European economics, history, and culture without colonialism. If you look at history, you will find that all the wars fought between the European powers during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries were over colonial trade and colonial possessions. India, as we know, is central to this, to the emergence of so many European nations... And how do you teach about slavery and the slave trade as integral to post-Renaissance Europe without talking about Africa? And since Africans have been part and parcel of the founding settlements and growth of America, is slavery not integral to American civilization? How can one teach American literature and history and culture without seeing the centrality of Africa in their makeup?... We see a lot of studies and comments on the notion of the *modern* and the *postmodern*. But they ignore what constitutes modernity. If you think of Western modernity in terms of Renaissance or post-Renaissance Europe, that modernity is bound up completely with colonialism. There is no way of extricating it from colonialism⁸⁶. (emphases in the original)

Ngugi's position can be read contrapuntally with that of Antonio Benitez-Rojo, who also examines how American modernity constituted itself through a prior subalternization and exclusion of certain segments of the society:

The United States, on breaking its colonial yoke, assumed its role as a nation in European terms, and under the canons of European thought and traditions, which it has followed ever since. The North American nation regards its own African, Asian, Latin American, and even Native American populations as "minorities", that is, as ethnic groups alien to its essentially European nature⁸⁷.

Benitez-Rojo thus restores a crucial missing dimension to Ngugi's account of American modernity: the Native question. If it is true, as Ngugi affirms, that American modernity cannot be extricated from the story of African slavery, it is no less true that American modernity is also irrevocably linked to the holocaust⁸⁸ visited on the Native Indians. Roy Harvey Pearce proves this point beyond doubt in his treatise on Native Indian history, *Savagism and Civilization* (1953).

Ngugi's centralization of India is however very useful. By conceptualizing the subalternization of India as a consequence of European modernity, concretized in the colonial adventure, Ngugi has provided that Archimedean location from which one can argue that in theorizing the condition of subalternity, as we know it in postcolonial theory today, all roads lead back to Euro-American modernity as the chief producer of that condition. The flawed, elitist historiography of India which provided the initial inflatus for the emergence of the Subaltern Studies Collective was constructed essentially by European modernity. In essence, Euro-American modernity is not only a major factor responsible for the condition of subalternity, it has also positioned subalternity among the dominant (if not as the dominant) signs of our times.

Modernity, then, produces a Hegelian master-slave situation in which a self-defined, self-constituting centre must produce a subalternized periphery as a pre-condition for valorizing its own essence. Franco Moretti⁸⁹ has demonstrated how this axiom works in the field of literature. Whenever a literature constitutes itself as the

'canon', the 'norm' or the 'Great Tradition', as F.R. Leavis puts it in *The Great Tradition* (1948), it invariably subalternizes other literatures as minor, marginal or peripheral. Moretti consequently holds that an unequal relationship exists between Western literatures and the literatures we refer to as Chinese, African or Indian. The relationship of subalternity among literatures is even more manifest in the domain of gender. In most cultures of the world texts authored by men have always been in an unequal relationship with those authored by women. History and (critical) tradition have maintained the female-authored text in a condition of subalternity that it is always seeking to overcome. Using the example of Brazilian literature, where the theme of Brazil's foreign debt to Western powers is ubiquitous, Moretti avers that when a literature inhabits the ontological space of subalternity, that condition ultimately determines the themes it chooses to address. I will examine the veracity of that claim with regard to how subalternity determines the themes and textual motifs of francophone African women's writing presently.

Considering the fact that the academy has only just begun to grapple with the dynamics of these spectres of subalternity, and also, as Edward Said reminds us, that any reasoned approach to some subalternist issues is still considered taboo in present-day America, the emergence of certain 'beyondist' tendencies in current critical reflection is rather disturbing. Postcolonial theory and subaltern studies are yet to exhaust the issues within their scope of reference, and not a few overzealous North American theorists, in flagrant disregard for Barbara Christian's call for circumspection in "The Race for Theory", are already proposing to move us "beyond postcolonialism", "beyond subalternity", and "beyond orientalism". Fortunately, some of these theorists only

announce “beyondist” agendas in their titles while, in the content of their work, they proceed to address real issues of subalternity. San Juan’s *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (1998) and Walter Mignolo’s essay, “(Post)Occidentalism, (Post)Coloniality, and Post(Subaltern) Rationality” (2000) are good examples of this tendency.

While I am wholly convinced of the workability of some of Mignolo’s discursive concepts, such as “subaltern reason” and “subaltern forms of rationality”, and will deploy them in subsequent portions of this chapter, I will place a question mark on his category of the ‘postsubaltern’, which can lead to the false impression that there is such a thing as ‘after the condition of subalternity’. Reacting to rumours that he was gay, Subcomandante Marcos, leader of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico, made a statement which legitimizes my claim that subalternity is, indeed, a dominant sign of our times:

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, Black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a gang member in Neza, a rocker in the National University, a Jew in Germany, an ombudsman in the Defense Ministry, a communist in the post-Cold War era, an artist without gallery or portfolio, a pacifist in Bosnia, a housewife alone on Saturday night in any neighborhood in any city... So Marcos is a human being, any human being, in this world. Marcos is all the exploited, marginalized and oppressed minorities, resisting and saying “Enough!”⁹⁰

I will now examine how the texts of francophone African women writers are positioned in Marcos’s subalternist inventory.

From Textual Conquest to Compartmentalization: Francophone African Women Writers and the Spectre of Subalternity

Women have had a chequered experience in their relationship with the literary text in francophone Africa, as in the rest of the continent. If it is true that subalternity is a dominant feature of the experience of womanhood in that part of Africa, it is no less true that the literary text has played a significant role in the consolidation of that ontological condition. One of the gains of image studies in francophone African critical discourse has been to underscore the modalities through which the text was transformed in male hands into an instrument of conquest. Consequently, “textual conquest” here does not refer to the conquest of the text – *prise d’écriture* – by francophone African women writers, but to the ways in which women and womanhood were textually conquered and subalternized as objects of representation by male writers.

It is now generally accepted that Négritude poets were the first to effect a textual conquest of African women. Négritude poetry, one must recall, emerged in Paris’s *Quartier Latin* in the 1930s–1940s, where certain young African intellectuals and their Caribbean counterparts not only suffered from the circumambient racism and the trauma of deracination but also felt the need to reconnect spiritually with Africa. Because of what they perceived as the possibility of drawing emotional succour and psychic anchorage from their ancestral source, the historical location to which the Négritude poets effected their imaginary return ended up being personified and feminized in their works as Mother Africa. Aimé Césaire makes ample use of the Mother Africa trope in his classic work, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939).

“African womanhood” thus entered Négritude textuality as a malleable, romanticized trope. As this trope evolved progressively from one Négritude poet to another⁹¹, the line between the idealized Mother Africa and the real life African Mother became increasingly blurred, resulting in the projection of a reductionist image of African women, an image that was to be deconstructed decades later with the emergence of African women’s writing and feminist criticism. Woman in Négritude poetry comes out, at best, as a docile, long-suffering, persevering, never-complaining mother and, at worst, as a submissive lover whose physiognomy is evocative of nature. The subalternized image of woman as docile mother and submissive lover constitutes a major thematic pivot of the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor. His famous poem, “Femme Noire”, has been cited repeatedly as one of the most illuminating examples of the textual conquest of woman by the Négritude poets. David Diop’s poems, “A une danseuse noire” and “Rama Kam”, equally fall into this category. It goes without saying that the first francophone African male novelists inherited this domesticated image of woman from their Négritude predecessors and sustained it to a great extent. Camara Laye is the example that readily comes to mind. His novel *L’enfant noir* (1953) opens with a poem in praise of his mother. The poem reads like a Négritude Manifesto of African womanhood: the docile, submissive, ever-caring, self-sacrificing mother. Abdoulaye Sadjì projects the same image of womanhood in the character of Maïmouna’s mother in his novel, *Maïmouna* (1958).

This culture of textual subalternization of woman, created in poetry and sustained to a large extent in prose, resulted in a situation in which early manifestations of critical interest in women’s issues could only emerge in the form of analyses of the image of

woman in the works of francophone African male writers. Arlette Chemain-Degrangé's *Emancipation féminine et roman africain* (1980) and Milolo Kembe's *L'image de la femme chez les romanciers de l'Afrique noire francophone* (1986) are good examples of what has come to be known as image studies in francophone African literary criticism. Kenneth Little addresses himself to the same task, albeit on a broader scale, in *The Sociology of Urban Women's Image in African Literature* (1980). Henri Lopès' preface to Chemain-Degrangé's book, appropriately entitled "Femme opprimée, femme sublimée: l'image de la femme noire dans la littérature négro-africaine d'expression française" sums up the general conclusion of early critical evaluations of the images of women in the literature in question.

Exploring the reasons for the textual conquest and the consequent subalternization of woman via her image in the works of francophone African male writers, Chemain-Degrangé claims (incorrectly) that at the time of the publication of her work in 1980, no woman had yet published fiction or poetry in francophone Africa⁹². She thus ties the issue of subalternity to the absence of women writers able to tell their own story and repossess the conquered image. It is therefore appropriate, at this stage, to examine to what extent the gradual emergence of women writers on the African literary scene changed the images of African women projected by male writers. It is true to some extent that the absence of women writers in the first phase of the evolution of francophone African literatures and the consequent monopolization of discourse by male writers contributed immensely to the subalternization of African women. But it is also true that the eventual emergence of women's writing had very little initial impact on the situation. The continued subalternization of African women and the privileging of the

male point of view, even after writers like Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury and Mariama Bâ had published their first works, is attributable to the critical ambiance into which the first female-authored texts were born. As discussed earlier, the critical establishment in Africa was dominated entirely by male intellectuals in the formative stages of modern African literary discourse.

In francophone Africa and elsewhere in the continent, male critics created a subalternizing critical culture marked by two mutually reinforcing attitudes toward pioneer creative texts written by women. On the one hand, there were critical treatises characterized by haughty male arrogance and condescension, and on the other hand were attitudes amounting to what Joseph Ndinda calls “la conspiration du silence”⁹³. The epigraph which opens the present chapter best exemplifies the first attitude. Papa Samba Diop’s essay, “Au cœur de la littérature negro-africaine d’écriture française: problèmes littéraires et sociologiques”, from which the epigraph was taken, appeared in a 1985 issue of Bayreuth African Studies Series, alongside essays by influential French specialists in francophone African literatures like Jean Derive and Bernard Mouralis. We must bear in mind the considerable importance of Bayreuth as a “centre” of African(ist) discursive production. By 1985, Mariama Bâ had become one of Africa’s most celebrated writers and *Une si longue lettre* had already won the prestigious Noma Award. Admittedly, critics differed (and still differ) on the crucial question of the text’s typology, some classifying it as a novella and others considering it a full length novel, but there has been little doubt regarding the excellence of the author’s craft as a producer of creative fiction. Yet Samba Diop, expressing weighty opinions in an African Studies forum as important as Bayreuth, arrogantly lumps Bâ among his curious category of “not exactly writers”,

before summarily dismissing *Lettre* as an autobiographical tract. Such offhand dismissals ensured the continued subalternization of African women in francophone African literary discourse even after the emergence of pioneer women's texts.

While some, like Diop, dismissed women's texts in a few sentences, an even larger tribe of critics simply carried on as if women's writing was not worthy of any critical attention. It is impossible here to establish an exhaustive list of works by both African and Africanist critics in which the conspiracy of silence on women's writing seems to be the operative principle. I will therefore cite a few examples, bringing out the peculiar manner in which the authors' silence reinforces the subalternity of women. The first observation is that a good number of critical works published from the late 1970s to the early 1980s ignore works by francophone African women writers who had published by then. Such writers include Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall and Werewere Liking. This process of subalternization through the instrumentality of silence made Liking cry out in very telling terms:

Je constate qu'il y a des gens qui m'ignorent alors que j'ai publié depuis 1977 environ deux livres par an et qu'ils sont tous disponibles en librairie. Je ne peux que m'étonner⁹⁴.

John Erickson, for instance, did not consider any female writer worthy of critical evaluation in his *Nommo: African Fiction in French South of the Sahara* (1979). If the "oversight" of critics who published in the 1970s can be excused somewhat, on the grounds that very few women writers had made an appreciable impact on francophone African literatures at that period, the same argument can hardly be made for critics who published in the 1980s and 1990s and who, wittingly or unwittingly, sustained the tradition of subalternization of women's texts and issues through the instrumentality of

silence. Richard Bjornson's *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian Writing and the National Experience* was published in 1991. It is a 505-page opus that maps the entire topography of Cameroonian literatures. While male writers like Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Francis Bebey and Guillaume Oyono-Mbia are studied in independent chapters, no Cameroonian female writer is accorded an independent chapter. In fact, Beti is the subject of two different chapters in Bjornson's work. This situation clearly buttresses Liking's statement cited above. Jonathan Ngate's francophone *African Fiction: Reading a Literary Tradition* (1988) sets out to map the entire literary tradition of francophone Africa. It construes that tradition as an entirely male affair, thus speaking volumes on the subalternizing critical tradition that has been a major impediment in terms of assessing the contribution of women writers to the literary development of francophone Africa. By 1988, it was already possible to speak of an established francophone African women's literary tradition. Yet only two women writers are mentioned (in passing) in Ngate's work: Ghana's Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Bâ; and the latter's novel is cited in the context of the tradition of male textual representation of women. Neither Aidoo nor Bâ receives any independent discursive space in Ngate's work.

So far, only works written in English for an Anglo-North American audience have been examined. Suffice it to say that the situation is largely the same with works written in French and, in some cases, authored by francophone African novelists who are also well known literary critics. In Pius Ngandu Nkashama's *Écritures et discours littéraires: études sur le roman africain* (1989), Georges Ngal's *Création et rupture en littérature africaine* (1994), Séwanou Dabla's *Nouvelles écritures africaines* (1986), and André-

Patient Bokiba's *Écriture et identité dans la littérature africaine* (1998), women writers and issues hardly attract more than the occasional paragraph within overwhelmingly male parameters of discourse. More often than not, one has the impression, reading these works, that the spaces carved out for women writers, marginal as they are, come at best as a perfunctory exercise and at worst as an afterthought. I find a good illustration of this point in Ngandu Nkashama's book:

Les prouesses sexuelles évoquées déjà se réalisent dans le sens des gymnastiques physiologiques absurdes. Tel est le sens de la revendication permanente dans l' "écriture des femmes": des textes revendicatifs comme *La parole aux négresses* d'Awa Thiam (1978), ou des romans comme ceux d'Aminata Sow Fall, *La grève des Battù* (1979) et *Un chant écarlate* (1981), de Rawiri Ntyugwetondo, *Elonga* (1980), de Ken Bugul, *Le baobab fou* (1983), de Catherine Ndiaye, *Gens de sable* (1984), de Werewere Linking, *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail* (1984), de Maïga Ka, *La voie du salut* (1985), de Yaou, *La révolte d'Affiba* (1985), Véronique Tadjo, *A vol d'oiseau* (1986), Tshilolo Kabika, *Le pilier du chef* (1986), ou de Myriam Vieyra, *Femmes échouées* (1988)⁹⁵.

This passage ranks as one of the most careless I have come across in my reading of African critical texts. Coming from one of francophone Africa's most influential intellectuals, a writer with over ten novels and numerous plays to his credit, the weaknesses in the passage cannot be dismissed lightly. Admittedly, the publishers, L'Harmattan, may have been responsible for some of the problems that read more like editorial sloppiness. But L'Harmattan is one of the most important publishers of African writing in France. Between a giant African writer and his giant publisher, Mariama Bâ's second novel *Un chant écarlate* is wrongly credited to Aminata Sow Fall; Werewere Liking's last name comes out as "Linking" and Régina Yaou's first name is forgotten or omitted. Whether these problems are the author's or his publisher's is beside the point. The crucial fact is that nowhere in the book's 299 pages does one come across similar sloppiness when male writers are the subject of discussion. This underscores the fact that

women writers hardly receive the same painstaking and meticulous attention accorded their male counterparts in literary criticism.

With regard to the more serious ideological implications of the passage and how they reinforce the politics of subalternity, it is worthwhile reiterating the fact that the book in question was published in 1989. Yet the author deems it necessary to place the expression "écriture des femmes" in quotation marks. The most plausible reading of this is that women's writing in francophone Africa was still a kind of oddity, some sort of subalternized curiosity, as recently as 1989.

Added to this is the extreme condensation. The disparate thematic and discursive worlds of eleven women writers are lumped together in one single paragraph. Eleven women writers are monolithically read as merely participating in the "feminine" project of deconstructing the reductionist sexual biologism within which male writers have imprisoned women. No room is allowed for the divergences in their points of view. For instance, I can think of no conceivable manner in which *Un chant écarlate* and *La grève des Battù* can be read exclusively as instances of "revendication permanente" against sexual biologism, as Nkashama seems to imply. The problem of thematic reductionism, as evidence of subalternization, is that it has a more serious obverse side to it. Despite the more recent "prise de discours" by African(ist) women critics, the tendency to approach African women's creative works as autobiographical treatises dealing mainly with quotidian domestic problems is still very prevalent in African literary criticism. Indeed, the more generous critics extend the argument by reading women's texts as a critique of tradition and social mores. The logical consequence of this discursive strategy lies in the creation of what I will refer to as an exclusively male site of the serious.

And “the serious” from which women’s texts are routinely occluded includes ideology, politics, history, nationalism, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism⁹⁶. While it has become “normal” to expect critical readings of the works of Sembène Ousmane, Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, Alioum Fantouré, Tierno Monenembo and Emmanuel Dongala to recognize them as political/nationalist icons of an ideological challenge to imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, one hardly comes across such readings of African women’s works. I dare to suggest that any such reading would appear somewhat curious.

Consider the question of the critique of the corrupt postcolonial African state with its military tyrants, sit-tight civilian presidents and vile politicians. Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Les soleils des indépendances* (1968), Alioum Fantouré’s *Le cercle des tropiques* (1972), Henri Lopès’ *Le pleurer-rire* (1982) and Sony Labou Tansi’s *La vie et demie* (1979) have become synonymous with this theme. Aminata Sow Fall’s *L’ex-père de la nation* (1987), which examines the same theme from an equally rich multi-vocal perspective, is usually left out of the picture. Similarly, it is difficult to come across “ideological” or “political” readings of some novels that have been canonized as icons of the African feminist struggle against patriarchal oppression. Calixthe Beyala’s *Tu t’appelleras Tanga* (1988) is a good case in point. Unidirectional readings of the novel abound, celebrating it as a bold attempt to internationalize African feminism. Tanga’s bonding with Anna-Claude, a white French woman of Jewish origin, is read as an example of international sisterhood. In some other readings, the novel is celebrated as a bold appearance of lesbianism on the African feminist landscape. In her book, *L’œuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala* (1997), Béatrice Rangira Gallimore even coined the

expression “lesbian continuum” to describe the relationship between Tanga and Anna-Claude. Yet Beyala’s seering critique of the postcolonial African state is often missed. This is because in *Tu t’appelleras Tanga*, as in most novels authored by francophone African women, political engagement is developed as a subtextual discourse that is not readily available on the surface as is often the case in male-authored novels.

Francis Anani Joppa’s *L’engagement des écrivains africains noirs de langue française* (1982) and Guy Ossito Midiohouan’s *L’idéologie dans la littérature négro-africaine d’expression française* (1986) best exemplify the excision of women writers from the realms of ideology and political action. Joppa identifies several areas of engagement, ranging from the anti-colonial struggle to the revalorisation of negro-african values, from which the few women writers who had published at the time Joppa’s book appeared are naturally excluded. What I find more baffling is that in the second part of the book, entitled “L’affirmation” – affirmation among other things of African values –, Joppa devotes a segment to the study of novels dealing with “la vie traditionnelle africaine”. This is the precise area to which most critics, unwilling to stretch the argument to ideology, limit the thematic preoccupations of women’s texts. Surprisingly, Joppa does not deem it necessary to include any female text in his study of commitment to traditional African values. He examines African communalist cultures in such works as Malick Fall’s *La plaie* (1967), Bernard Dadié’s *Climbié* (1956), Seydou Badian’s *Sous l’orage* (1957), and Jean Ikelle-Matiba’s *Cette Afrique-là* (1963). Yet, despite the unequivocal deconstruction of polygamy, there is a lot to be said for the celebration of African values, especially, communalism in, say, *Une si longue lettre*.

Midiohouan, for his part, carries out his study of ideology in francophone African literatures using texts published between 1920 and 1981. The critic's perception and conceptualization of ideology therefore devolves wholly from male-authored texts. The occasional references to Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall are within a masculinized discursive framework and achieve very little in terms of demonstrating the author's willingness to acknowledge women's texts as having played an appreciable role in the emergence of "ideology" in francophone African literatures. Furthermore, I find it rather odd, for someone publishing in 1986 to declare 1981 as "*le terminus ad quem*"⁹⁷ of francophone African literary evolution. Consideration of the large number of female-authored novels published between 1982 and 1985⁹⁸ would certainly have had some impact on the overall perception of ideology in Midiohouan's work.

It is appropriate at this juncture to examine the "prise de discours" by African(ist) feminist critics who intervened in the intra-male flow of critical discourse precisely to deconstruct the masculinist discursive regimes responsible for the brazen subalternization of African women. The publication in 1986 of *Ngambika*, a volume edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves, marks a watershed in this development. Subtitled "Studies of Women in African Literature", the book is unique in many respects. The voices assembled in it belong to some of the most prominent female critics of African literatures. Furthermore, their reflections cover women's writing from both anglophone and francophone Africa. The radical intentions of the contributors to the volume notwithstanding, *Ngambika* presents serious problems which underlie the irony that emerges when female critics set out to deconstruct male hegemony only to end up reinforcing it. The most serious limitation of the volume lies in its proportional structure.

Although the editors state clearly in the preface that the book's ideological orientation is to address the works of both male and female writers, the fact remains that male writers are accorded the most attention. Of the eighteen chapters in the volume, nine are devoted exclusively to the study of the image of women in the works of African male writers, two offer comparative studies of both male and female texts, while five are devoted entirely to works by women writers. Of the chapters devoted exclusively to women writers, one is by Chimalum Nwankwo, a Nigerian male critic.

In essence, nine of *Ngambika's* eighteen chapters are, effectively, studies of male authors. Yet they offer nothing radically different from earlier image studies like those by Arlette Chemain-Degrangé, Milolo Kembe and Kenneth Little. Anglophone male writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Elechi Amadi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Christopher Okigbo and francophones like Abdoulaye Sadj, Sembène Ousmane and Henri Lopes reign supreme in the pages of *Ngambika* while female writers like Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Aminata Sow Fall, and Mariama Bâ are consigned to the margins of the text. Man thus remains the undisputed subject of discourse in a publication meant to challenge his dominance in the site of subjectivity. In *Ngambika*, the subalternity of woman comes around full circle. The editors, it should be noted, are not entirely unaware of the shortcomings of the volume. But the explanation they offer hardly helps matters. In her preface, Anne Adams Graves submits that

Another, regrettably unavoidable, absence is more work by francophone African women. Although Mariama Bâ is represented here, there are, besides Aminata Sow Fall no others who have attained any visibility as published writers⁹⁹.

This statement borders on the scandalous. The absence of more work by francophone women writers is, indeed, regrettable, but certainly not unavoidable in

Ngambika. Graves' contention implies, erroneously, that a writer like Werewere Liking had not attained any visibility as a published author by 1986! But it is even more serious for this female critic to accept visibility as a critical criterion for determining which authors deserve attention and which do not. After all, visibility is one of those critical tools invented by the male critical establishment and has been wielded for decades to the disadvantage of women. Male critics solely determined which authors became visible.

Consequently, the fact was forgotten that the francophone women writers excluded from *Ngambika* on the basis of their invisibility were first rendered invisible by male critics who ignored them. One would therefore have expected the editors of the volume to challenge the criterion of visibility by privileging "invisible" female writers like Lydie Dooh-Bunya and Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury. And if they had looked northward, the editors would certainly have come across a visible francophone female novelist in Assia Djebbar. Although Graves claims that the volume also covers the Maghreb, it is important to note that the only Maghrebian writer studied is the male novelist Driss Chraïbi.

A good number of post-*Ngambika* works have been able to redress the situation and turn woman into a veritable subject of African feminist discourses. A few examples are works like Jean-Marie Volet's *La parole aux Africaines* (1993) Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (1994), Mary Modupe Kolawole's *Womanism and African Consciousness* (1997), Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi's *Gender in African Women's Writing* (1997), Irène Assiba D'Almeida's *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (1994) and Odile Cazenave's *Femmes rebelles: naissance d'un nouveau roman africain au féminin*

(1996). Over the years, journals like *African Literature Today*, *Research in African Literatures*, *Callaloo* and *Notre Librairie* have all produced insightful special issues on African women writers. There has also been a flurry of edited works, most of which have been able to avoid the problems which beset the pioneering *Ngambika*. Chief among them are Susheila Nasta's *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, Caribbean and South Asia* (1992); the two volumes edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature* (1997), *Sisterhood, Feminisms, and Power* (1998), and Stephanie Newell's *Writing African Women* (1997).

Although the ideological perspectives from which the feminist authors of these critical works approach African women's texts are multifarious, they have in common an overwhelming inclination to decentre history and validate herstory as a site of discourse. Added to this is the deconstruction of the male-spawned discursive criterion of visibility which the editors of *Ngambika* adopted uncritically. This process of deconstruction is evident in Cazenave's *Femmes rebelles*. Included in the critic's primary sources are "invisible" writers whose works are usually glossed over in literary criticism, such as Ami Gad, Philomène Bassek, Tanella Boni, and Evelyne Mpoudi-Ngolle.

However, there is a sense in which these works have been unable to undo the quagmire of subalternity; indeed their very nature contributes to the subalternization of women writers and their works. A cursory survey of critical production on African literatures in the last thirty years will confirm the incontrovertible fact that the situation has been created in which only works studying texts by male writers can have the expression "African Literatures" or "African Writing" in their titles. The titles of the

critical works cited so far prove the point beyond doubt that works by African male writers have been constructed as a hegemonic synecdoche of African writing and, as far as I am aware, not even the most radical of African feminist critics have challenged that awkward situation. A critic can study various themes in the works of a single African male author and still entitle his book, say, "Thematic Shifts in African Writing", without anybody raising an eyebrow. What would the reaction be if an intrepid critic, male or female, were to entitle a work "Revolutionary Realism in African Literatures" and go on to study only women writers?¹⁰⁰

In essence, critics studying African male writers do not feel the need (or are not compelled) to indicate the gender of the writers they are studying, whereas women writers must first be compartmentalized within their gender before they can be studied as African writers. I am not aware of any critical study of African women writers that does not carry the tag "women", "female" or "feminine" in its title. In as much as criticism has been unwilling to allow the synecdochical deployment of women's writing as "African Literature" on the same terms as men's writing, the efforts of the Nnaemekas and the Cazenaves of this world can be read as mere exercises in compartmentalization, hence in subalternization.

Conquered first as an object of representation by male writers, ignored by a male-dominated critical establishment, compartmentalized for analysis by female and male critics desirous of liberating her, this has been the subalternist trajectory of woman and the female writer in francophone African literary discourse. I will now examine how these factors of subalternity play out in the fiction of Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, Aminata Maïga Ka and Philomène Bassek.

Rencontres essentielles or The Essential Man

I have argued so far that a homological continuum of subalternity governs the textual space accorded women from Négritude poetics to the fiction of francophone African male writers and, ultimately, to the criticism that developed around the entire francophone African literary process. Consequently, it does not come as a total surprise that the pioneer texts of francophone African women writers operate within the discursive purview of what Gautam Bhadra, an Indian subalternist, refers to as “the mentality of subalternity”:

I attempt in this chapter to focus on certain features of what may be called the subaltern mentality. It is well known that defiance is not the only characteristic of the behavior of subaltern classes. Submissiveness to authority in one context is as frequent as defiance in another. It is these two elements that together constitute the subaltern mentality. It is on account of this combination that the poor and the oppressed have, time and again, and in different histories, made voluntary sacrifices in favor of the rich and the dominant, at least as often as they have rebelled against the latter¹⁰¹.

Thérèse Kuoh Moukoury's *Rencontres essentielles* is a perfect exemplification of Bhadra's thesis in terms of both its themes and the discursive strategies which underpin the author's politics of gender representation. In approaching Moukoury's text, we must constantly bear in mind that submissiveness, as a sign of subalternity in the context of francophone African women's textual culture, cannot be divorced from the centralization of man as the ultimate subject of discourse. I am, of course, aware of the fact that my contention departs radically from the generalized tendency by critics to consider African women's novels as *the story* of a heroine. More often than not, it is the story of a heroine *in relation* to the man/men in her life.

On the surface, the simple, linear narrative of *Rencontres essentielles* comes down to the story of Flo, a young Camerounian woman who moves to Paris, and marries Joël, a compatriot of hers. After completing their studies in France, they return to Cameroun where the marriage begins to disintegrate. Things come to a head when Joël starts an affair with Doris, a white French woman and a childhood friend of Flo. Doris becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy. She dies afterwards in an air crash, leaving her son to be adopted and raised by Flo, the friend whose husband she snatched.

Flo's pathos-laden first-person narration, her autorepresentation as a victim, could lead one to the facile conclusion that the heroine is at the heart of the discursive universe of this novel. But she is not. Joël is. The construction of the story is such that the very existence of the heroine, let alone her metaphysical essence, is inconceivable outside of the personhood of her husband. And the fact that Flo, unlike Joël, turns out to be a "flat" character does not help matters. In other words, Moukoury presents us in this novel with the story of the essential man and the expendable woman. We witness the heroine's first act of self-subalternization in the following passage:

A cet instant-là, je sais que je l'aime profondément. Oui, les choses volent ainsi parfois au secours des êtres faibles et indécis. Un bout de lettre vient de me révéler mon amour pour Joël, pensé-je tout le long de mon chemin du retour. Dehors, l'air est frais, le parfum du printemps me fouette le visage, la fête s'installe dans mon cœur éclatant de joie. *Je comprends que je suis femme maintenant*¹⁰². (my emphasis)

The emphasis on the last sentence is to underscore the point at which an ostensibly simple and straightforward narrative becomes complex, intervening forcefully in the politics of identity and ontology. The fact that Flo's self-perception and self-definition as a woman begins only at the moment when she realizes that she has fallen in love with a man is of crucial significance to the reading of this novel. The male-

dependent identity that the heroine establishes for herself marks the beginning of a submissiveness bordering almost on monomaniacal self-erasure. From this point on, the heroine dissolves her world into that of her dominating husband. The textual effect of this action is drastic. Although she maintains her voice as first-person narrator, Flo vacates the subject position in the narrative for Joël, from the moment she anchors her being and presence in the text on his. This is most noticeable in the brusque and rather untidy transition from Chapter I to Chapter II. In the first chapter, the heroine establishes and maintains a discursive space which she occupies as subject. In Chapter II, she vacates that position for Joël and never really regains it throughout the novel.

Flo not only vacates the site of subjectivity for her husband, she equally denies other female characters in the novel access to that site. All the other female characters turn out in one way or the other to be appendages of men. This is most evident in her construction of the character of Doris. Despite Doris' liberationist inclinations, Joël becomes her essential man the moment they fall in love and begin their illicit affair. In Chapter X, for instance, both women consecrate Joël's status as the centre of the narrative by trying to outdo each other in the quest for his attention. For Flo, the domestic space, in which she accepts the traditional role of the docile, submissive wife, becomes the only site of self-valuation. Joseph Ndinda's reading of Flo's perception of the domestic space is pertinent:

Dans son ménage, Flo met un point d'honneur à remplir ses rôles d'épouse et de mère. Ces rôles correspondent aux fonctions sociales secondaires traditionnellement attribuées à la femme¹⁰³.

Whether the setting is in Paris or in Cameroun does not in any way affect Flo's perception and acceptance of her subservient domestic roles: witness her description of their mode of life in their Parisian apartment:

Joël semble comblé. Il l'est. Je fais des actes de tous les jours, la table, le ménage, la cuisine. Mon mari me couvre de tendresse, de chaleur, d'affection¹⁰⁴.

The heroine's conception of motherhood also falls in line with the generalized socio-sexual construction of woman as an agent of reproduction in most traditional African societies. In such contexts, motherhood is the crown of womanhood, and woe betide the "sterile" woman. I have placed sterile in quotation marks to underscore the fact that it sometimes turns out that the man, rather than the woman, was the infertile partner in the marriage. From Ahmadou Kourouma's Salimata in *Les soleils des indépendances* to Flora Nwapa's Efuru in her novel of the same name, the pages of African fiction are littered with the pathetic lives of "sterile" women and the attendant socio-cultural pressures they face. In most traditional African societies, young girls are socialized into the belief that a woman is only complete in the context of marriage and motherhood. Having children for herself is not the only issue. The point is for her to be able to give her husband the number of children he desires. In essence, a woman is considered complete and happy, not because she has children of her own but because she has been able to give her man children. This is understandable in social contexts where single motherhood, a commonplace condition in the West, is considered anathema.

This belief system explains Flo's sense of worthlessness after her first pregnancy ends in a miscarriage, and she is confronted with the disastrous news that she will never be able to conceive again because of medical complications. To understand the gravity of

the situation, one first has to examine Flo's perception of her pregnancy, her hopes and expectations:

Maternité, sceau du destin, extraordinaire graine que porte la femme en venant au monde! Je me sens bénie, élue. Cet enfant, vous ne pouvez savoir comme je le veux beau, fort, intelligent. Mieux. Plus. Toutes les qualités au superlatif. Maintenant l'enfant bouge en moi. Je le sens en de petits mouvements nerveux le long de mon flanc, parfois de réelles douleurs... elle doit être reconnaissante la femme que le destin dote d'une grossesse sans histoires¹⁰⁵.

"Destin" and "grossesse" are the key words here. They explain Flo's culturally determined view of the essence of womanhood. It therefore does not come as a surprise that her anguish at the news of her infertility again revolves around the unbearable thought of being a disappointment to the man she loves:

On ne peut vraiment savoir la douleur d'une femme lorsqu'elle se sent incapable de donner à l'homme qu'elle aime le plus beau cadeau du monde, lorsqu'elle se sent incapable d'un acte qui fait justement *notre* plénitude. Je me suis moi-même détruite. C'est ma faute, je ne me suis pas assez reposée. Le métro, les courses, la vaisselle, la maison..., de longues heures passées à tout faire moi-même, le petit salaire de Joël si insuffisant pour nous deux...¹⁰⁶ (my emphasis)

Flo's discourse at this point begins to border on self-flagellation, but she is no longer content with speaking only for herself. The possessive adjective "notre" draws attention to the discursive transformation which the heroine operates. Her narrow personal perception of herself as a metaphysical appendage of a man, existing only to produce children for him, is now generalized as the lot of every woman. In Flo's world, reproduction becomes the only site in which a woman can find completion. Again it needs be reiterated that Flo is not a naive peasant in some remote village. She is a "modern" African woman studying in Paris. The relationship between her social status and her philosophy of womanhood will be explored in greater detail later.

By constructing her husband as the essential man without whom her life as a woman is meaningless, Flo inevitably lands herself in a serious impasse when her marriage collapses on their return to Cameroun. Torn between various possibilities, she rules out divorce because of the negative perception of such a situation in her socio-cultural context. The divorcee's lot was an unenviable one in most societies in Africa. She usually bore the indelible social stigma of someone who has failed on the domestic front, hence Flo's uncompromising dismissal of the option:

Mais comment puis-je divorcer, que vont dire mes amis, ma famille, la société toute entière. Chez qui vais-je entrer, démunie? Une vie à reconstituer, des amis, des relations à refaire¹⁰⁷.

The heroine eventually opts for a solution which again consolidates male hegemony and reinforces her subalternity:

Je veux reconquérir Joël. Pour rien au monde, je ne cesserai d'être sa femme. Il m'est impossible d'admettre qu'une autre femme prenne ma place, se couche auprès de lui, le rencontre le matin à la salle d'eau, fasse son déjeuner, range ses chemises, veille sur lui. Pourtant, je me sens incapable de le séduire à nouveau. Je fais tous les jours des efforts surhumains. Il y a tellement longtemps que je ne suis plus belle... Il faut que je sois présentable¹⁰⁸.

Here, as in the other examples, we are confronted with the fundamental issue of the heroine's perception of womanhood. She demonstrates a problematic conceptualization of woman as some sort of functional tool meant to attend to the basic needs of man in a marriage and as an aesthetic object of his desire. More importantly, we are confronted with her peculiar deployment of language. Her verbal repertoire operates constantly within the ambit of serviceability and desire to please. Hence, for Flo, the fulfilled woman is one who gives her husband children, *prepares* his lunch, *arranges* his wardrobe, *watches* over him, provokes his desire.

Some digression is necessary at this point to examine the consequences of Flo's use of language in the light of one of the central themes of Subaltern Studies: Ranajit Guha's famous dismissal of the British Raj in India as a situation of "dominance without hegemony"¹⁰⁹. According to Guha, consent is the most important formative ingredient of hegemony. Western liberal democracy, with all its flaws, presents a good example. Western governments enjoy hegemony insofar as they have the consent of the governed, who must agree to subject themselves to the rule of law. For Guha, therefore, what British imperialist historiographers and their local quislings sought to do was to invest colonialism with a hegemony denied it by history, since the colonial master never had the consent of the colonised. The dubious hegemony accorded colonialism by its official British historiographers thus justifies the revisionism of Subaltern Studies.

I have already read the domestic space of Joël and Flo as one governed by dominance and subordination, the essential man dominating the expendable woman. However, Flo's diction, her penchant for verbs associated with the servile, adds a peculiar turn to the situation. As outlandish as the claim may seem, Flo actually confronts us with a benumbing scenario in which the subaltern not only induces dominance and hegemony but also constructs both as the genitors of a woman's marital fulfillment. This reading is supported by the fact that nowhere in the novel is it even remotely indicated that Joël comes into the relationship imbued with inordinate notions of male authority. Rather, Flo goes into the relationship with preconceived notions of woman as the subaltern partner in a heterosexual relationship.

It is expedient, at this juncture, to examine the character of Doris, Flo's best friend. Perhaps because she is a White Western female, there exists a tendency to read

her as the emancipated opposite of Flo. She is cited as the embodiment of the text's investment in feminism. Joseph Ndinda's reading is typical of this tendency:

Doris a une autre idée du couple et ne cultive pas la mystique du mariage comme son amie Flo. Elle est déterminée, sait ce qu'elle veut et revendique son entière liberté... Pour Doris, le mariage ne se réduit pas à une relation de dépendance, mais est fait de complémentarité¹¹⁰.

Flo is obviously in awe of Doris, to whom she ascribes very strong feminist tendencies:

Elle possède d'ailleurs une extraordinaire volonté qui lui permet de s'enfuir toutes les fois qu'elle se sent éprise d'un garçon. Elle ne veut pas être "esclave"... Les hommes ne jouent pas un grand rôle dans sa vie. Elle tient à son indépendance et n'hésite pas à détruire tout ce qui se met au travers de sa liberté, pour se sauvegarder, telle qu'elle se veut, un être sans amour vrai¹¹¹.

This image of Doris as the emancipated White Western woman is, however, not maintained throughout the narrative, and her volte-face is drastic enough to make me disagree with Ndinda's rather unidirectional reading of her character. Flo decides at some point to lure Doris into Joël's arms, as a curious ploy to win back her drifting husband and save her marriage. For someone cast in the mould of the hard-core, radical Western feminist who has no feelings for men, Doris walks into her friend's "trap" rather too easily and begins an affair with Joël.

As the narrative progresses, Joël does come to occupy a central role in Doris' life, contrary to the impression one had from Flo's description of her. The most radical reversal of Doris' feminist philosophy occurs when a disappointed Flo confronts her for stealing her husband: Flo's initial plans had gone awry. Piqued by Flo's recriminations, Doris charges:

Non, ce n'est pas vrai, laisse-moi te dire, ton ménage est brisé depuis longtemps et c'est toi-même qui l'as fait. Beaucoup de femmes sont comme toi, incapables de rendre un homme heureux. Et s'il en trouve une autre, vous poussez alors des cris¹¹².

So much for radical feminism. This passage reveals a confounding conformity with the underlying subalternizing philosophy of the entire text: woman exists merely as an ontological object of pleasure to satisfy the whims and wiles of man. Once the most radical female character in the novel buys into this logic, condemning other women for being incapable of making a man happy, the position of the essential man becomes irrevocably entrenched. Doris' eventual domestication in *Rencontres essentielles* falls in line with a specific tradition in francophone African literatures, and should therefore not be seen as an isolated case. It seems to me that in their handling of Western White women as fictional characters, francophone African writers first feel the need to "domesticate" those women, depriving them of their radical emancipationist tendencies before casting them as fictional characters. Mireille in Mariama Bâ's *Un chant écarlate* and Isabelle in Sembene Ousmane's *O pays mon beau peuple* (1957) are other examples of this dynamic.

The point has already been made that after the Négritude revolution, succeeding generations of francophone African writers, even while aspiring to clear an oppositional space in some cases, still worked essentially within the discursive strategies of Négritude. Nowhere is this more manifest than in the representation of women. The Négritudinist aestheticization of women has survived across three generations of writers, and many women writers have surprisingly become enamoured of a strategy which reduces women to objects of beauty. This strategy is particularly strong in *Rencontres essentielles*, where the narrator continually describes women as *objets d'art*:

Ici toutes les femmes sont belles et élégantes, couvertes de bijoux, de manteaux de fourrure. Des sacs de crocodile, de lézard, soulignent leur aisance. Leurs robes sont discrètes, très bien taillées, chics, de bon goût¹⁷³.

This passage is representative of the heroine's style in describing female characters in the novel. Every time a female character is described in such a way as to privilege her outward appearance, her physical beauty, over her psychological profundity, one cannot but think of the much denigrated Négritude romanticization of Mother Africa and, more importantly, the mothers of Africa.

It is clear from the above reading that *Rencontres essentielles* perspectivizes only one side of Bhadra's notion of subaltern mentality: the submissiveness to domination side. Although Ndinda suggests that the other side – resistance to domination – is present in the character of Doris, it appears that what we actually witness is an abortive aspiration towards resistance and not resistance itself. This explains why the entire process breaks down so easily when she falls in love with Joël. Besides, no Western White woman has been able to develop resistance to male domination to the point of a successful praxis in African fiction without being broken or destroyed in the process. The example of Mireille in *Un chant écarlate* has already been cited and one can also mention Anna-Claude in Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*. These women, along with Doris, constitute a tribe of Western women in African fiction who either commit suicide, end up in prison or in a sanitarium, or perish in accidents. African writers, it appears, are unwilling to fall into the dangerous historical trap of allowing White Western women to achieve victory in place of African women in African texts.

More than resistance, what *Rencontres essentielles* achieves at the level of subtextual discourse is breaking down the unrealistic binary constructed by critics in

which the educated, urbanized and Westernized African woman is cast as emancipated, in opposition to a supposedly uneducated, rural African woman who is cast as submissive and docile. Flo, the Paris-educated African woman, deconstructs this binary, carrying submissiveness to a level that would even horrify the so-called illiterate African woman in the village, while Doris turns out also to be subservient. This deconstruction of Western education and mores as the sole key to the liberation of the women of Africa is the major achievement of this slim novel.

Religion and Tradition as Signs of Subalternity in La voie du salut

Aminata Maïga Ka's *La voie du salut*, like a good number of Senegalese novels written by both male and female authors, examines the dual questions of religion (Islam) and tradition and how both, in their imbrication with Western modernity, impose what one might call a pedagogy of subalternity on women in some African contexts. It is true that the discursive issues examined in *Rencontres essentielles* – subaltern mentality, the politics of the essential man, and the 'essence' of women – are also treated here, in a much more complex manner: but the present novel recommends itself more as a discursive interrogation of the social space of women in an African society. In approaching this novel, one must be conscious of how the narrative establishes an intricate linkage between space and female identity, weaving those notions around the textual trajectories of the heroines, Rokhaya and her daughter, Rabiadou. The claim that *La voie du salut* has two heroines is contentious, but it is underscored by the fact that the text is constructed as the independent stories of Rokhaya and Rabiadou, and the narrative process would break down without either of the two.

Although writers like Calixthe Beyala and Chinua Achebe adopt this technique to a certain degree (in *Le petit prince de Belleville* (1992) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) respectively), it does not yield the same narrative effect in these novels as it does in Maïga Ka's text. *Le petit prince de Belleville*, for instance, remains *the story* of Loukoum (first person-child-narrator giving his perspective on the foibles of the adult world) in a way that *La voie du salut* cannot possibly be said to be the story of only Rokhaya or Rabiadou. Beyala's well-advertised cinematic technique of italicized introductory clips to every chapter (also employed in *Maman a un amant*) is not enough to classify *Le petit prince de Belleville* as a dual-hero novel. Consequently, *La voie du salut* deconstructs the sacrosanct position of the single, monolithic hero/heroine and this radical textual strategy makes it a unique text in francophone African women's writing.

The omniscient narration begins as the story of Rokhaya, an illiterate peasant living in Sinthiou-Manel, a fictional African village. We meet Rokhaya on her deathbed and flashback is employed as a narrative technique to take us back into her story and to set in motion the process of discursive interrogation of the spaces of subalternity which characterises the entire text. Through this character, the text examines the very thin line between the functions of religion and tradition in a predominantly Moslem African setting.

Rokhaya is spotted bathing in the river in the company of her friends by Baba Kounta, an itinerant medical doctor fighting a yellow fever epidemic among the villagers. He makes the traditional representations to Rokhaya's family, asking for her hand in marriage. They reject him because he is an outsider but he eventually finds a way to blackmail them into agreeing to give him their daughter. This is the point at which the

text takes on a new discursive dimension, confronting the reader with the Islamic and traditional African philosophies of marriage and how both operate together to constitute a pedagogy of subalternity imposed on the young girl. Her unquestioning acceptance of this pedagogy determines the space she occupies in the social scheme of things and, ultimately, her identity as a subaltern subject. The advice Rokhaya receives from Baba Gallé, her uncle and patriarch of the extended family, deserves some attention:

Quant à toi, poursuivit-il, se tournant vers Rokhaya, écoute les quelques conseils que je vais te prodiguer avant que tu ne rejoignes le domicile conjugal. Dès l'instant où tu es mariée, tu appartiens corps et âme à ton mari. Il est ton unique seigneur et maître. Il est seul habilité à te mener au Paradis où, du reste, tu n'iras qu'en lui obéissant aveuglément. Sois sourde, aveugle et muette, c'est le secret du bonheur. Sache mesurer tes paroles quand tu t'adresses à lui. Ta volonté entière doit être tendue à lui donner pleine satisfaction. C'est à cette seule condition que les enfants qui naîtront de votre union accèderont à l'échelon le plus élevé de la société¹¹⁴.

Baba Gallé's discourse swings between religion and tradition, blurring the boundaries between the two at some points. But he also establishes a logical continuity between the two, the Islamic paradise becoming the ultimate reward for adherence to some of his traditional prescriptions for the newly-wed Rokhaya. At the more ideological level, what Baba Gallé actually does is to mobilize religion and tradition as indispensable tools in the construction of male hegemony and in the corresponding subalternization of woman.

As we have seen in the theoretical articulations of Guha, hegemony is only legitimized by the consent of the subaltern. Where there is no consent, what occurs is brazen dominance. In my reconceptualization of the concept for use in an African feminist context, I have suggested that male hegemony is not only legitimized by the consent of the subaltern woman, it is also imposed, institutionalized and sustained by

powerful women in the extended family set-up. The idea of women being active agents in the legitimation and rationalization of male hegemony in the African context has also been explored by Béatrice Rangira Gallimore, a critic who, it should be noted, was not working within the framework of subaltern theory:

Dans la société africaine, c'est souvent à travers la femme que tout le comportement féminin se trouve réglé. La mère, la tante, la grand-mère, la matrone constituent une catégorie d'anti-mères qui servent de points de repères à la société patriarcale. Sous la pression de l'homme, ces femmes ont fini par rationaliser et par accepter – consciemment ou inconsciemment – la prédominance du masculin sur le féminin¹¹⁵.

La voie du salut fictionalizes these theoretical issues to the letter. Constructed early in the narration by Baba Gallé, male hegemony becomes legitimate only when Tante Aïssé, Rokhaya's matronly aunty, proffers the following advice to the young bride:

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*¹¹⁶. (My emphasis)

The consequences of Rokhaya's religious and traditional education by her uncle and aunt emerge early in the story when the narrator, hardly masking authorial intrusions, informs us that:

Rokhaya, en bonne élève, appliquait les conseils de ses parents. A peine apercevait-elle son mari à son retour du travail qu'elle se précipitait pour lui tenir sa trousse. Ensuite elle le déchaussait, lui apportait ses sandales et de l'eau fraîche. Elle lui servait son repas, lui découpait elle-même la viande ou le poisson, poussait les légumes à sa portée. Elle épongeait la moindre sueur qui lui perlait au front et l'éventait¹¹⁷.

One is therefore not surprised when years later Rokhaya, a flat character, expresses the following opinion with regard to the prospect of her daughter's marriage:

Le mariage est la seule gloire de la femme. Quels que puissent être sa richesse et son savoir, elle ne trouve sa plénitude que dans le mariage¹¹⁸.

The two passages above bring us to a consideration of how the novel intermeshes the notions of space and identity. In the first passage, we are presented with a detailed inventory of what Michel de Certeau would refer to as Rokhaya's "practices of every day life". The nature and the semantic scope of the verbs the narrator uses to describe those practices (*déchausser, apporter, servir, éventer*) suggest to a reasonable extent that Rokhaya's circumscribed life is spent within the confines of three physical spaces: the kitchen, the living room and the bedroom. The entire narrative buttresses this point. From the moment she marries to the time of her death, we hardly meet Rokhaya in any other location apart from her "husband's house", to use an apt Yoruba expression.

Monospatiality is an important aspect of the subaltern discourse which underpins this novel. It is indeed one of its most peculiar characteristics. In African women's writing, on the anglophone and francophone sides of the linguistic divide, one hardly comes across any example of a married female character as totally restricted to the domestic space as Rokhaya is. From Flora Nwapa to Mariama Bâ, from Bessie Head to Calixthe Beyala, African women writers have created subalternized female characters operating in spaces as varied as the farm, the market, the village stream and the street, in addition to their domestic spaces. Not once do we meet Rokhaya in any of these other spaces throughout her married life. And in that domestic space, "sa vie était soumission et don de soi en vue du bonheur exclusif de son mari"¹¹⁹. Even on completion of the compulsory mourning period after the death of her husband, Rokhaya maintains her monospacial régime:

Rokhaya, après les quatre mois et dix jours de deuil, continuait à vivre en recluse chez elle. D'ailleurs, elle n'était pas habituée à sortir. On lui avait appris que la femme devait rester à la maison¹²⁰.

It is important to point out the fact that as she adheres scrupulously to her self-abnegating codes of existence, Rokhaya obviously believes that she does so in observance of her religious duties and in deference to tradition. The visit of Oumar Kounta, Rokhaya's brother-in-law, introduces the more sociological dimensions of the text, through authorial interventions in the omniscient flow of the story. Such interventions explore the role mannerisms imposed on the wife in the traditional context, especially in her dealings with her in-laws. Rokhaya, the unquestioning respecter of tradition, displays the enthusiasm expected of her as a wife on hearing the news of Oumar's impending visit:

Rokhaya ne se sentait plus de joie: connaître enfin un parent de son mari, l'héberger, être aux petits soins avec lui pour témoigner à travers sa personne l'amour qu'elle portait à son mari! Voilà le rêve de toute bonne épouse: elle n'a pas seulement épousé son homme mais aussi toute la famille de celui-ci. Son rôle est de tout accepter de la belle-famille, sans broncher¹²¹.

Moving beyond Rokhaya's particular case, the narrator extends the sociological exegesis on the condition of the married woman. The strident irony is of course not lost on the perceptive reader:

La femme mariée est le déversoir des ordures familiales: une triste mine en servant le repas, un mot plus haut que l'autre peuvent lui valoir la répudiation ou une coalition généralisée de toute la famille contre elle¹²².

Oumar Kounta, as expected, turns out to be the stereotypical difficult in-law that is commonplace in African literatures and societies. He is the one who raises the thorny issue of Rokhaya's inability to 'give her husband a child' after two years of marriage. As the earlier discussion of *Rencontres essentielles* clearly demonstrated, childbirth is a thematic leitmotif in African women's writing. It perpetually haunts the texts of women

writers. Maïga Ka's omniscient narrator consequently does not let pass an opportunity to subject it to the underlying sociological preoccupation of *La voie du salut*:

Quel crime de ne pas donner le jour à un enfant! La faute en est automatiquement imputée à la femme! La stérilité est rejetée et honnie! La vraie mort consiste à ne laisser de soi aucune image dans cette vie! Le châtement qui s'ensuit pour la femme est, dans bien des cas, la répudiation ou l'imminence de se voir adjoindre une rivale; que celle-ci conçoive, et la voilà comblée, cajolée, portée aux nues par le mari et sa famille! Mais la femme "stérile" se voit reléguée au second rang, abandonnée de tous, soumise à la vindicte et aux quolibets de sa rivale, de sa belle-famille, de son mari! La plus grande calamité pour la femme africaine n'est-elle pas de ne point enfanter?¹²³

One then understands Rokhaya's relief when she eventually conceives and gives birth to a female child, Rabiadou¹²⁴. From this point, the story shifts emphatically to Rabiadou, who becomes the centre of the narration. Rokhaya's displacement from the centre of the narration can be read as an index of further subalternization within the overall subalternist fabric of the text, since her lack of Western education serves as the excuse for the shift in narrative focus. This provides a classic illustration of Ifi Amadiume's argument in her *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism* (2000). In this book, the author takes issue with the contemporary African situation in which educated and Westernised women (the daughters of imperialism) displace the mass of illiterate¹²⁵, rural women (daughters of the goddess) from the sites of discourse and agency. The educated Rabiadou pushes her mother to the margins of discourse, aided by her educated father:

De plus en plus, Rokhaya prenait conscience du fossé qui la séparait de son mari et de sa fille. Pour n'avoir pas été à l'école des Blancs, son jugement était toujours considéré comme sans valeur. La complicité du père et de la fille la reléguait au second rang... Comme elle regrettait les moments où Rabiadou enfant était tout à elle!... Elle lui obéissait alors sans discuter. Maintenant, Rabiadou avait acquis le savoir des Blancs. Elle s'était affranchie. Elle croyait tout savoir¹²⁶.

Rabiatou eventually moves to France to complete her education but returns home on receiving the news of the sudden death of her father, Baba Kounta. If her mother's subalternity was established by her sheepish adherence to religion and tradition on the one hand, and her lack of access to modernity on the other, patriarchal tradition proves to be Rabiatou's major challenge. On her return home, she meets and falls in love with Racine Ly, a young teacher with whom she shares the same passion for political discussion. As they prepare for their marriage, male hegemony intervenes through the instrumentality of Rabiatou's aunties who, dissatisfied with her choice of a poor teacher, demand an outrageous bride price:

Avant que le mariage ne soit consommé, Racine Ly et ses parents devront apporter: un maï bu jëk (premier cadeau) substantiel avec une montre de grande marque; une machine à coudre électrique Bernina; un téléviseur en couleurs; un lit acheté aux Meubles de France; un poste radio combiné avec cassette et deux cent mille francs de warugal¹²⁷.

The Westernised Rabiatou not surprisingly rejects what she considers to be an exploitative customary practice and that action places her on a collision course with her mother and other female 'légitimisers' of male hegemony:

Mère, l'être humain en général et la femme en particulier ne sauraient s'acheter. La femme n'a pas de prix!... Je suis un être libre, et seul le prix de ma liberté est incalculable! Si je me mariaais, ce serait par amour, par admiration et respect pour mon conjoint, pour le partage de la vie avec ses joies et ses aléas, et non à cause d'une fortune périssable¹²⁸.

Rokhaya is understandably shocked by her daughter's uncompromising rejection of tradition and she places the blame at the doorstep of the West:

Sa fille n'était plus une Africaine, elle épousait les idées des Blancs. Elle voulait se donner pour rien! Aucun homme ne méritait ce sacrifice! Elle le regretterait un jour. Ce mari pour qui elle aurait tout donné la traiterait en ennemie et prendrait plus tard une autre femme plus jeune et plus belle qu'elle. Qu'avait-elle fait pour mériter un pareil affront? Elle s'était toujours résignée, pliée aux exigences de son mari. N'étaient-ce pas là les conditions requises pour avoir de bons enfants?¹²⁹

Rabiatou resists every pressure and a stalemate ensues. To defuse the situation, she deliberately becomes pregnant. Premarital pregnancy is, of course, a very serious cultural contravention in Africa¹³⁰ and brings untold ignominy on a girl's family:

En apprenant la nouvelle, Rokhaya s'était évanouie. La plus grande honte pour une jeune fille, n'est-elle pas de tomber enceinte? Sa fille et elle seraient pendant des mois l'objet des ragots du quartier. Rokhaya sentit comme un poignard s'enfoncer dans son cœur... Pourquoi Rabiatou avait-elle agi ainsi? Les règles les plus élémentaires d'honneur et de dignité lui échappaient-elles? Elle l'avait fait volontairement pour manifester son indépendance, pour éviter à Racine toutes ces dépenses qu'elle taxait d'inutiles¹³¹.

Rokhaya's reading of her daughter's move as an act of resistance against tradition is most appropriate. And because the dishonoured Rabiatou no longer deserves a proper traditional wedding, a quiet ceremony is hurriedly organized. Racine, like Joël in *Rencontres essentielles*, changes very radically soon after his marriage. He bows to peer pressure and begins to stay out late at night. He eventually finds himself a mistress and marries her secretly. Rabiatou, pregnant with their second child, collapses and dies of a heart attack on hearing the news of her husband's treachery.

Rabiatou's tragic end deserves closer theoretical attention. In it lies the possibility of reading Maïga Ka's work, as is the case with *Rencontres essentielles*, as an example of the failure of one side of the subaltern mentality equation – the side of resistance, and the triumph of the other side – the side of dominance. It is even more telling that in her struggle against the dominance of patriarchal traditions, Rabiatou wins the battle against

female agents of male hegemony only to lose the war against patriarchy itself. The coming to pass of Rokhaya's prophecy of doom for her daughter's marriage also raises more theoretical questions than it answers. Rokhaya had predicted that if Rabiadou went ahead and married Racine in flagrant disregard for the customary regulations surrounding such a transaction, her husband would abandon her for another woman. Rabiadou loses her husband to another woman and also loses her life in consequence.

In essence, Rabiadou pays the ultimate price for her strong investment in Western modernity. Does Maïga Ka's novel, through its ominous conclusion, propose an Althusserian interpellation of the African subject back to the realms of tradition? Is this novel a fictional participant in the debate which preoccupied Africanists across a broad spectrum of disciplines in the 1980s and the 1990s, and which Patrick Chabal nicely sums up as "the re-traditionalisation of Africa" debate? In his contribution to the volume *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (1996), Chabal summarises the elements of what is understood as re-traditionalisation:

There are essentially two aspects to this question. The first is the extent to which individuals in Africa increasingly are, or are perceived to be behaving according to norms, criteria, values and so on, more readily associated with what passes for 'traditional' Africa than with the Africa which the colonial masters thought they had constructed. The second is the degree to which it seems that politics in Africa is conducted in ways (both overt and covert) that are either incomprehensible to the West or appear to be reminiscent of what precolonial politics is supposed to have been¹³².

Chabal proceeds to list concrete examples of re-traditionalisation in urban Africa, chief among which is the fact that "urban Africans are behaving in their family lives in ways which are seen as 'traditional' rather than 'modern': witness, for example, the enduring force of bridewealth and polygamy."¹³³ Bridewealth and bride price are the precise elements of tradition which Rabiadou rejects, only to meet with the gravest

possible consequences. This in itself allows for a possible reading of *La voie du salut* as a fictional advocacy for re-traditionalisation.

La voie du salut, however, comes out more justifiably as an exploration of the interstitial spaces between tradition and modernity. The text deftly embarks on the dual process of affirming and critiquing, whenever necessary, the discursive categories it examines: religion, tradition and modernity. Wherever religion and tradition are critiqued, modernity is affirmed, and vice versa. The novel proposes neither an uncritical retraditionalisation nor a blind erasure of tradition in favour of modernity. In the only instance where an inevitable confrontation occurs between tradition and modernity, the narrator carefully lays bare the facts without taking sides. This occurs during Rokhaya's search for the means to have a child. Mère Diouldé, a 'native' doctor, proposes to treat her sterility:

Tu as un mari djinn très jaloux. C'est lui qui t'empêche d'enfanter. Pour en venir à bout, tu devras tuer un coq rouge. Tu en prépareras la viande que tu donneras en charité à des enfants, un lundi. Puis tu feras à une femme enceinte l'aumône de deux colas rouges. Je te donnerai une poudre. Tu la délayeras dans une bouillie que tu ingurgiteras trois jours d'affilée. Nous verrons alors les résultats... De son côté, Baba Kounta faisait subir à sa femme un traitement gynécologique approprié. Lequel de ces deux pouvoirs intervint-il? Toujours est-il que Rokhaya ne vit pas ses règles le mois suivant¹³⁴.

Traditional African medicine is placed in confrontation with modern Western medicine and the narrator places on the reader the huge responsibility of determining which of the two worked. One's position here must, of necessity, be subjective. As someone who personally underwent both forms of treatment in the years of childhood, and given the interstitial position of the text in this particular conjuncture, I am inclined to conclude that both systems worked in the case of Rokhaya.

As far as gender politics is concerned, the point to be retained is that even if the narrator's admirable deployment of irony critiques and subverts it at every point, male hegemony is not successfully deconstructed in this novel by either the traditional Rokhaya or the modern Rabiadou. Woman starts her textual trajectory as a subaltern and ends it as one in *La voie du salut*.

Patriarchal Pedagogy, Conjugal Hierarchy and Failed Feminism in La tache de sang

Philomène Bassek's *La tache de sang* shares several similarities with *La voie du salut* in terms of narrative style, themes, characterization and subtextual discursive engagement. Apart from the absence of religion as a textual motif of subalternity in the former, both novels effect what Chris Dunton calls the "contextualization of women's experience"¹³⁵ through an exploration of the mother-daughter trope. However, unlike the situation in *La voie du salut*, where Rabiadou edges out Rokhaya from the centre of narrative discourse to become the novel's second protagonist, Mama Ida remains the effective heroine of *La tache de sang* even after the narration shifts significantly to her daughter, Patricia.

Patriarchal pedagogy, a concept developed by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*, constitutes the thematic core of *La tache de sang* and it works in a much more ruthless, insidious manner than what we witnessed in *La voie du salut*. Set in a fictional Camerounian village in the early 1960s, *La tache de sang* is the omniscient story of Mama Ida, a middle-aged mother of ten children who engages in a sustained self-effacing politics of identity throughout the narrative. In *La voie du salut* the agents of patriarchal

pedagogy, Rokhaya's uncle and aunties, are visible. They are present in the text and constitute part of the action, as is usually the situation in African fiction.

This is where *La tache de sang* differs fundamentally from most African novels. Here we encounter patriarchal pedagogy as a *fait accompli*. We encounter its finished product, Mama Ida, scrupulously carrying out the exigencies of her traditional education as mother and wife, battered wife to be precise. The question of woman's identity as subaltern subject is raised by two participants in the narrative process: the omniscient narrator and Mama Ida. At every point in the story, the narrator introduces elements that constantly remind the reader of Mama Ida's status as her husband's uncomplaining subordinate. Mama Ida's subalternity is, of course, "inherited": her own mother, Véronica, had been subordinated to her father. Mama Ida even had to abandon school to help her mother fulfil domestic chores:

L'irrégularité de Mama Ida commença à se faire sentir à l'école et le temps nécessaire pour étudier ses leçons vint à lui manquer. Véronica avait de plus en plus besoin de l'aide de sa fille à la maison et aux champs, d'autant que de nouvelles maternités l'accablaient... Mama Ida finit par sacrifier l'école. Elle déchargea sa mère de certains travaux en savourant le plaisir d'acquérir le bagage technique et artistique nécessaire à un exercice appréciable de son futur rôle d'épouse¹³⁶.

This is the only glimpse the narrator gives us of Mama Ida being socialized into the submissive adult woman she becomes by the apparatus of patriarchal pedagogy. But it is sufficient to prepare us for this description of the married Mama Ida that we encounter much later in the novel:

Levée très tôt le matin, elle n'aspirait qu'à faire ses devoirs harassants de femme. On lui avait appris dès l'enfance qu'une situation de ménage qui ne marche pas comme il faut a essentiellement pour responsable la maîtresse de maison. Aussi passait-elle le plus clair de son temps à trimer pour sauver l'honneur¹³⁷.

The description of Mama Ida's personality through the prism of her domestic responsibilities and her submissive relationship to her husband is sustained throughout the novel:

Mama Ida incarnait la bonne épouse. Tous les hommes la citaient en exemple lorsqu'ils n'avaient pas eu la chance de se marier à une femme de son genre: forte, travailleuse, docile et soumise. Elle bavardait peu et haussait rarement le ton devant son mari¹³⁸.

So effective is the textual function of patriarchal pedagogy in this novel that Mama Ida's perception of her own identity does not in any way differ from the picture the omniscient narrator paints of her. Mama Ida does not see herself as a person. She sees herself as Same's wife and as the mother of ten children. She exists only for her marriage and her children. She is, however, not totally oblivious of her disadvantaged location in the scheme of things. She knows, for instance, that it is wrong for Same to beat her the way he frequently does, but she rationalizes and justifies his actions. As far as she is concerned, Same has the natural right to beat her: "mais qui'y puis-je? N'est-il pas plus fort que moi? N'en a-t-il pas le droit?"¹³⁹

If Mama Ida is the character through whom the theme of patriarchal pedagogy is developed, her husband Same represents the sub-theme identified by the narrator as "conjugal hierarchy". Same's only concern throughout the narrative is the maintenance of this hierarchy which makes man the supreme head in an unequal conjugal relationship:

La responsabilité de chef de famille qui incombait à Same et qu'il assumait non sans privilèges et abus lui pesait parfois... 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 point¹⁴⁰.

Same's reasoning, reminiscent of Okonkwo's attitude to women in *Things Fall Apart*, often makes him resort to violence to maintain his cherished conjugal hierarchy. Justifying the brutal beating of his wife after Mama Ida had dared to contradict him, Same opines that "même hors d'elle, une femme doit pouvoir taire ses instincts et éviter de s'emporter en présence de son mari."¹⁴¹

After the beating, Mama Ida discovers that she is pregnant with her eleventh child. Her happiness on discovering that she is pregnant again is totally predicated on Same's expected happiness when he hears the news. Not once does Mama Ida consider the implications of the pregnancy for her health. After all, Same "owns" the pregnancy. As expected, Same is excited about the prospects of being a father again and decides that Mama Ida should travel to the city for pre-natal care. In the city, she is to put up with their eldest child, Patricia, an educated, thoroughly Westernized woman married to a successful lawyer, Mandika. Patricia's "revolutionary" ideas, her belief in her independence and individuality even within the marital context, set the stage for an inevitable confrontation between mother and daughter. For, as might be expected, Mama Ida attempts to foist the codes of patriarchal pedagogy on her daughter's domestic space. Observing on her arrival in the city that her liberated daughter's marriage is still very much intact, Mama Ida cannot hide her relief:

Car comment ne pas s'inquiéter de la survie heureuse de ces ménages modernes où la femme, parfois aussi instruite que le mari, ne sait pas ou ne veut pas baisser la tête? Certes, sa fille "connaissait le livre", elle travaillait et gagnait suffisamment d'argent, mais elle ne lui tolérerait pas une vie de célibataire par sa faute¹⁴².

Events soon begin to justify Mama Ida's anxiety over Patricia's behaviour. The "unimaginable" liberty Patricia takes frequently with her husband induces a feeling of

guilt in her mother who begins to wonder if, somehow, she failed in her duty to effectively transfer the codes of patriarchal pedagogy to her daughter during her formative years:

Pourtant, il y avait longtemps de cela, sitôt que le corps de sa fille eut commencé à prendre des formes provocantes, à se faire femme, Mama Ida prit soin de la mettre en garde contre certaines idées. Elle lui enseigna la tradition dans le domaine qui la concernait le plus, à savoir son avenir d'épouse-mère. Elle lui répéta qu'une fille ne pouvait trouver le bonheur que dans le mariage. Que pour être une femme respectable et respectée, il fallait aimer son homme, lui faire de bons plats, deviner ses intentions et surtout, avec l'aide du bon Dieu, lui faire des enfants, beaucoup d'enfants¹⁴³.

I agree with Odile Cazenave that in *La tache de sang*, as in other African women's novels examining the mother-daughter relationship, there is a fundamental questioning of the mirror-image trope of the mother, as well as a textual move to deconstruct the age-long axiom: like mother, like daughter¹⁴⁴. This explains the irreconcilable differences between Mama Ida and Patricia, who would have none of her mother's sheepish adherence to the tenets of patriarchal pedagogy. Patricia's joining a radical women's movement stands out as the crystallization of her rebellion against the seemingly omnipotent patriarchal pedagogy which governs this novel through the character of Mama Ida. Patricia and some of her urban friends, mostly married and all very Westernized, come together in a movement described in terms reminiscent of radical feminist formations in Europe and North America. Mama Ida is, of course, horrified by the idea that her daughter belongs to such a group; but Patricia insists that their intentions are noble: "nous réfléchissons sur les conditions d'existence des femmes dans la famille comme dans la société et nous étudions la manière de les transformer"¹⁴⁵.

If Patricia and her companions in struggle had succeeded in their attempt to forge a workable feminist praxis, one would probably not be studying *La tache de sang* in a

chapter dealing essentially with subalternized female subjecthood. But they fail dismally, and the narrator never misses an opportunity to underscore their failure. For an understanding of why radical feminism fails in Bassek's novel, I turn to Usha Menon's penetrating analysis of the failure of feminisms (read Euro-American feminisms) in India:

I suggest that feminists working in India find themselves out of touch with ordinary Hindu women because they offer very little in terms of message and meaning that resonates with the lived experience of these women. I submit that feminism is so particular a product of Western social and intellectual history, its moral order constructed so explicitly in terms of equality, individual rights, and personal choice, that it appears quite alien to Hindu women who live within another equally elaborated moral order that cherishes self-control, self-refinement, and duty to the family¹⁴⁶.

One only has to substitute Africa for India and African women for Hindu women in this passage to arrive at the situation in *La tache de sang*. A group of Westernized African women come together to impose their Western influences on an African context, without the benefit of serious reflection on how their newly acquired Western feminist consciousness could be adapted to appeal to African women. In *La tache de sang*, as elsewhere in contemporary Africa, the daughters of imperialism ascribe to themselves the role of liberating the "daughters of the goddess" only to end up alienating them.

The failure of Patricia and her friends also raises the crucial issue of who has the right to speak for or act on behalf of the other. The news that her mother is carrying her eleventh pregnancy and has actually come to the city for pre-natal care infuriates Patricia, who insists that a woman's life cannot be reduced to marriage and procreation. She conspires with Modi, one of her feminist friends and a medical doctor, to administer abortion-inducing drugs to her unsuspecting mother. Mama Ida consequently loses the pregnancy that gave her a sense of her own value. The narrator informs us that

administering such drugs secretly to pregnant women who, in her view, are only carrying their pregnancies at great risk to their own health just to make their husbands happy, is Modi's stock in trade. She rationalizes her action as a contribution to the necessary feminist struggle. It follows, therefore, that Patricia and Modi assume that they *know*, while Mama Ida and non-Westernized women do not *know* – that is, do not know what is good for themselves. By acting for her mother and terminating her pregnancy surreptitiously, Patricia denies her the right to make her own decision, the right to choice, the very right she and her “feminist” friends set out to defend.

In a rare moment of unconvincing lucidity, Mama Ida opens up to her daughter, confessing her secret admiration for her and her other feminist friends. Her long confession at the end of the novel is not totally free of authorial intrusion. She attributes those qualities she secretly admires in Patricia to the fact that the latter has learnt, not only to read and write, “mais surtout, à penser, à réfléchir.”¹⁴⁷ This appears to me to be a dangerous Senghorian equation of the ability to think with the West. Senghor's much-denounced statement, “la raison est hellène, l'émotion est nègre”, rings uncomfortably behind Mama Ida's proposition. The heroine presents “penser” and “réfléchir” as verbs that cannot be applied to Africans who do not read and write French.

Although *La tache de sang* concludes on a much brighter note than *Rencontres essentielles* and *La voie du salut* in terms of the vision of the rejuvenated and properly contextualized feminist struggle it offers in the end, nevertheless in none of these three novels do we witness an effective deconstruction of male hegemony. In their themes and subtextual discursive maneuvers, they all validate my modified deployment of Bhadra's

thesis of the subaltern mentality, that is an equation in which submission to the dominance in place far outweighs resistance against it by the subaltern.

CHAPTER 3

Feminism With a Small 'f': Recreated Subjects, Resilient Contexts

La littérature africaine écrite de nos jours, héritière de la littérature orale traditionnelle, héritière de la Négritude, reste une littérature de combat, écrite pour lutter et défendre une cause, combattre l'arbitraire. Conscient ou pas de cet héritage, l'écrivain africain, sans doute contraint par son contexte, ne peut écrire que pour lutter: (Amadou Koné, "Le rôle de l'écrivain dans l'Afrique contemporain: un témoignage" Nouvelles du sud, 1987)

*I cannot blind myself
To putrefying carcasses in the market place
pulling giant vultures
from the sky (Odia Ofeimun, The Poet Lied, 1980)*

The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice. In spite of the fact that for a decade the United Nations has paid special attention to woman's problems, in spite of beautiful speeches and praiseworthy intentions, women continue to be discriminated against. In the family, in the institutions, in society, in the street, in political organisations, discrimination reigns supreme. Social pressure shamelessly suffocates individual attempts at change... As women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. (Mariama Bâ, quoted by Mineke Schipper, "Mother Africa on a Pedestal", 1987)

The Socio-Political Destiny of African Literatures

This chapter opens with perspectives from three African writers on the nature, function and destiny of African literatures. Amadou Koné and Mariama Bâ are prominent francophone novelists while Odia Ofeimun is a major figure in contemporary anglophone African poetry. The focus on writers' view of their art is to underscore the fact that the consensus on the socio-political destiny of African literatures is not just a matter of a particular critical/theoretical prescription. Despite the numerous debates and

disagreements that have taken place among writers and critics on such issues as the language, and even, the themes, of African literatures, participants in these debates have tended to agree that the African writer and his/her art serve well-defined socio-political functions in African societies. The Euromodernist ideology of art for art's sake is alien to Africa. Because modern African literatures evolved from an African oral tradition, itself rooted in the socio-spiritual fabric of traditional Africa, and because modern African writers wrote mainly in response to European racism, imperialism and colonialism, African literature emerged as a weapon, an instrument of socio-political change. This is what the African writer, Nadine Gordimer, has in mind when she writes that:

From the start, then, modern African literature has been essentially a committed literature. Black men found their voices in the need to protest and demand. African writers often have been and are political leaders and politicians as well¹⁴⁸.

A French critic, Bernard Mouralis, amplifies this dialectic of protest with specific reference to the anti-colonial struggle as thematized by African writers:

Sous son aspect le plus immédiatement perceptible, la production littéraire négro-africaine écrite dans les langues européennes apparaît d'abord comme une littérature visant à dévoiler dans une perspective de combat le caractère véritable de l'entreprise de colonisation, à travers ses dimensions politique, sociale, culturelle. Dans leurs textes théoriques, les écrivains comme les critiques ont largement souligné cet aspect, à leurs yeux capital, de la littérature négro-africaine, au point qu'on en est venu, non sans raison d'ailleurs bien qu'il faille quelque peu, semble-t-il, nuancer cette façon de voir, à penser que la présence ou l'absence, dans les œuvres, d'une telle thématique permettait de dire si celles-ci relevaient ou non de la "littérature négro-africaine" véritable¹⁴⁹.

In the struggle against colonialism, the male African writer conceived of his mission not only to envision a new society but also to recreate the African subject, for imperialism and colonialism were also ideologies of subjecthood involved in the textual construction of "native subjectivities" that the writers found unacceptable. Hussein Alatas

examines imperialism's politics of subjecthood in his book, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977). Chinua Achebe has often declared that he came to fiction not only in response to Conrad's overt racism in *Heart of Darkness* but also to create credible African subjects and, thereby, deconstruct the risible, caricatural African types illustrated in British imperialist writer, Joyce Cary's "Nigerian" novel, *Mister Johnson* (1939). Similarly, a young Djiboutian novelist, Abdourahman Ali Waberi, took to writing because he could not reconcile himself with the Djiboutian subjects created by the French poet, Arthur Rimbaud, in his travel writing¹⁵⁰.

From Achebe's *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) to Wole Soyinka's *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* (1988), from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) to John Pepper Clark's *The Example of Shakespeare* (1970), anglophone African writers have consistently projected a utilitarian image of African writing. Their francophone counterparts like David Diop, L.S. Senghor, Mongo Beti and Pius Ngandu Nkashama have also reasoned along the same lines in numerous books and essays. So important is the conceptualization of writing as a weapon of socio-political conscientization and transformation that a novelist like Sembène Ousmane, confronted with the stark reality of his message not getting across to the vast majority of Senegalese people, who do not read French, abandoned fiction and took to the cinema. He has affirmed in various international fora that by making films in his mother tongue, he is able to get his message across to his people in a way he has been unable to do with his novels.

African women writers, because of the urgency of their struggle¹⁵¹ and the circumstances in which they came to write, have found the utilitarian function of art perhaps even more compelling than their male counterparts. This is clearly demonstrated

by the epigraph from Mariama Bâ. It is difficult to come across an African woman writer who does not share Bâ's conceptualization of literature as a weapon. Their themes and discursive strategies usually aim to recreate the African female subject and also to transform society. Mary Modupe Kolawole makes the point poignantly in her *Womanism and African Consciousness* (1997):

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 vacuo*, but within a dynamic cultural crucible¹⁵².

Kolawole is presumably referring to the fifteen African women writers interviewed and published by Adeola James in his book, *In their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk* (1990). The writers interviewed, all Anglophones, confessed to seeing their writing as an instrument of change. Similarly, their francophone counterparts have never missed an opportunity to project the conceptualization of writing as a weapon of conscientization and social change. Some francophone women writers have chosen the autobiographical genre to make this point, directly or indirectly. Nafissatou Diallo's *De Tilène au Plateau* (1975), Aoua Kéita's *Femme d'Afrique* (1975) and Ken Bugul's *Le baobab fou* (1984) are examples of this practice.

In view of this agreement among African writers in general, and francophone African women writers in particular, on the utilitarian function of their art, any critical evaluation of their works should be cognizant of two crucial parameters: the degree to which the recreation of subjecthood has been effected, and the degree to which social change can be measured. In the specific case of francophone African women's writing,

the second parameter will be employed in evaluating the success or otherwise of a particular writer's attempt to portray or inscribe social change at the textual level. The manner in which social/traditional attitudes toward women have or have not evolved in the texts under consideration will also be examined.

In doing this, I find it expedient to borrow and alter the meaning of Buchi Emecheta's celebrated theorization of her work as embodying a feminism "with a small f". Emecheta, one must recall, developed this notion in the context of African women's opposition to the tenets of mainstream, radical Western feminisms. She considers herself a feminist with a small 'f' because, like most African women, she rejects the fire-spitting, anti-male feminism that one comes across in some of the work of radical Western feminists like Rosalind Miles, Robin Morgan, Susan Brownmiller, Germaine Greer and Kate Millett, an antagonism that was decried by British journalist Neil Lyndon in his book, *No More Sex War* (1992).

I will deliberately decontextualize Emecheta's notion and redeploy it here as a theoretical tool for evaluating the degree of social change perceptible in the novels under consideration in this chapter. Consequently, for me, feminism with a small f operates in a novel in which one witnesses a recreated heroine or recreated female characters whose personal triumphs have little or no impact on the socio-political contexts in which such textual characters evolve. My emphasis on the socio-political and cultural context of the literary work is reminiscent of Christopher Miller's emphasis on the usefulness of the anthropological approach to the African creative text in his *Theories of Africans* (1990), and of Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's seminal essay, "The Female Writer and Her Commitment" (1987).

So Long a Letter, So Little Stiwa

It is difficult not to agree with Uzo Esonwanne that Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* "has become one of the most widely read novels in the American academy"¹⁵³. Beyond its American reception, one would not be pushing the argument too far in affirming that *Lettre* is, indeed, one of francophone Africa's most critiqued novels. Apart from Femi Ojo-Ade's rather negative reception of the novel¹⁵⁴, which caused quite a stir in African literary circuits, most of the critical opinions expressed on *Lettre* in the last two decades have been largely celebratory. This is due, in part, to what Esonwanne calls Bâ's "generic iconoclasm". As the title suggests, the narrative comes in the epistolary mode, an uncommon textual strategy in African literature as Ann McElaney-Johnson correctly observes:

Bâ distinguishes herself from her contemporaries in her choice of genre. Although the first person narrative is common in the African corpus, it is usually represented in the form of autobiography or journal writing. Letter novels are a rarity. One study of the francophone African corpus at the end of the 1970s reveals only five letter novels published before or around the time of *Une si longue lettre*, all by men¹⁵⁵.

Both McElaney-Johnson and Christopher Miller accord considerable importance to the thorny question of genre in their respective reflections on *Lettre*. While McElaney-Johnson privileges the epistolary structures of the text over its diary aspects, Miller proposes that we see Bâ's text as an exercise in generic hybridity because the text deftly combines elements of epistolarity and journal writing. By reading the text as not wholly belonging to either genre, Miller is able to develop a discourse of marginality in which the novel's indeterminate genre becomes a signifier of woman's subaltern condition:

Une Si Longue Lettre, as its title indicates, uses the format of an epistolary novel that becomes more like a journal because there is no exchange of correspondence. Bâ thus took a stance in regard to literary genre that placed her in a doubly marginal position: marginal in relation to the francophone corpus, which eschews epistolarity; and marginal in relation to the European epistolary genre, which normally represents an exchange of letters¹⁵⁶.

The assertion that there is no exchange of letters in the novel is, at best, debatable.

One is also at pains to understand why *Lettre*'s purported marginality "in relation to the European epistolary genre" should even be an issue at all. After all, there is no reason to believe that Bâ had the European epistolary genre in mind as a model to imitate when she set out to write her novel. Miller's statement, I think, is one of those imperialist slippages that can sometimes creep into the reflections of even the most circumspect Western critic of African literatures.

I am obviously less interested here in the generic distinction between epistolarity and the fictional journal, as it applies to *Lettre*, than in a contextualized reading of the novel's themes and discourses with a view to tracing textual manifestations, if any, of social transformation. This approach becomes all the more necessary when one considers the fact that most readings of *Lettre*, perhaps operating unwittingly within the constraining ethos of individualism, tend to limit issues to Bâ's pace-setting feminism in the francophone African literary context, and to the personal triumphs of her recreated female characters, Ramatoulaye, author of the letter, and Aïssatou, the addressee.

Admittedly the diegesis is constructed in such a way as to make an individualistic perspectivization of Ramatoulaye's and Aïssatou's personal triumphs inevitable. As in *La voie du salut*, patriarchal traditional values and the codes of the Islamic religion constitute the socio-cultural fabric of the narrative. Ramatoulaye, the heroine, has just lost her husband, Modou Fall. She is undergoing a forty-day period of mourning and isolation in

accordance with Islamic injunctions. But her isolation has a positive side to it by providing her room for introspection and stock taking. Both processes lead her to the catharsis of writing a long letter to her best friend, Aïssatou, who works at the Senegalese embassy in New York.

The letter turns out to be a pool of revelations on the travails of womanhood and the villainy of manhood. For all the criticism that has attended Ojo-Ade's reading of *Lettre*, that critic's location of the text within the female-victim, male-victimizer paradigm remains valid. Ramatoulaye casts herself and Aïssatou as victims of the two treacherous men they respectively married. In Ramatoulaye's case, we learn that after twenty-five years of marriage and twelve children, her husband, Modou, opts for polygamy and marries Binetou, a classmate of their eldest daughter, Daba. As the letter progresses, Ramatoulaye regales the reader with what she calls the magnitude of Modou's treachery: he abandons his matrimonial home to live with his new wife in a magnificent villa he financed secretly with their life savings; he builds a second villa for Binetou's mother and even sponsors her on the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. Finally, he dies intestate, leaving crushing debts and liabilities.

Aïssatou hardly fares better. Her mother-in-law, who refuses to recognize Aïssatou's marriage to her son, Mawdo Bâ, because of Aïssatou's lowly social origin, travels to her village and comes back with a young girl whom she secretly grooms for her son. Mawdo, a successful medical doctor, marries the girl in deference to his mother and tries to rationalize the action to Aïssatou as a "cultural obligation". Aïssatou rejects the arrangement and moves to New York with her two sons to pursue a career in diplomacy. On the surface, the two women strike one as a study in contrasts: Ramatoulaye is the

quiet fighter with an outward appearance of docility and submissiveness, while Aïssatou is the aggressive one who would have none of Ramatoulaye's pretence at compromise and appearances. Furthermore, while Ramatoulaye, against all expectations, agrees to remain in the polygamous set up and fight her battle from within, Aïssatou opts out of her marriage and the society which legitimizes the "treachery" that is polygamy.

Obioma Nnaemeka's strategy of downplaying the function of polygamy in *Lettre*, in an otherwise engaging essay,¹⁵⁷ becomes problematic in light of the above. Irked by the tendency in Western-influenced critiques of the novel to reduce the entire argument to a critique of polygamy, which is then read as a sign of Africa's primordial backwardness, Nnaemeka charges that:

It is puzzling that a book, *Une si longue lettre/So Long a Letter*, in which the word "la polygamie/polygamy" *never* appears and polygamy (the institution) *never* functions – Aïssatou leaves immediately her husband marries la petite Nabou; Modou abandons Ramatoulaye for Binetou in spite of the latter's willingness to stay in a polygamous marriage – has been debated and analyzed *ad nauseam* in literary criticism (feminist criticism, in particular) as a book *about the institution of polygamy* (derided as one of Africa's chronic ailments). (Nnaemeka's emphases)¹⁵⁸

Nnaemeka is obviously attacking White Western feminist participants in African feminist discourse. While I am myself very unsympathetic to the familiar Western tendency of isolating certain "cultural signifiers"¹⁵⁹ in African texts, decontextualizing and sensationalizing them in a teleological move as signs of backwardness or even regression, I remain persuaded, contrary to Nnaemeka's position, that no rewarding reading of *Lettre* can afford to make short shrift of polygamy. The rejection of that institution from within by Ramatoulaye and from without by Aïssatou constitutes the thematic core of the text. Nnaemeka is led to an error of judgement by the fact that the word polygamy is never mentioned in *Lettre*, or is only mentioned as an adjective, as in

“instincts polyamiques” or “domaine polyamique”. The truth is that Mariama Bâ does not have to mention the word for it to be present in her text. As Ahmadou Koné points out in the first epigraph, modern African fiction evolved in part from Africa’s oral and rhetorical cultures. And most African oral cultures allow for the rhetorical device of never mentioning something perceived as unpleasant, horrible or fearful by its name. Such things are only described and alluded to indirectly in speech¹⁶⁰.

Similarly, the fact that Modou abandons his old home to live with his new bride in the newly acquired villa does not mean that polygamy never functions in *Lettre*. Whenever polygamy occurs among the educated elite in African cities, it is common practice for the man to rent a villa for the new wife on the other side of town and move in with her for a while. For lack of a better description, this can be described as “modernized” polygamy, as opposed to the traditional form in villages where all the parties live together¹⁶¹. The rejection of polygamy and its customary and religious supports is therefore a crucial key to understanding *Lettre*. Silhouetted against the female characters studied in Chapter One (Flo, Rokhaya, Rabiataou and Mama Ida), Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are far better constructed characters in terms of their perception of their situation and the options each one embarks upon to redress it. In essence, their response to the conditions, cultural and religious, which subalternize them as women operates at a much more sophisticated level than the response of the female characters in the previous chapter to the same conditions. It is against this background of a higher consciousness that I have chosen to read Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou as recreated subjects who have refused to “spin on the axis of maleness”, to borrow Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie’s apt expression.

However, it is imperative to contextualize Ramatoulaye's and Aïssatou's "higher consciousness" with a view to assessing its social impact. Such an approach will lead to a categorization of Aïssatou's approach as escapism, which leaves little room for meaningful social impact in terms of the transformation of the subalternizing patriarchal codes which ruined her marriage. With her education and social status, Aïssatou can easily be described as a "daughter of imperialism". However, this daughter of imperialism is slightly different from the ones Amadiume theorizes. Amadiume's typical daughter of imperialism is not content with her status as an "emancipated", Westernized African woman. She does not conceive of emancipation as an individualistic project. Her vision is for all African women, especially her "illiterate", non-Westernized sisters in the village, to be free.

The trouble is that the daughter of imperialism thinks she has a monopoly of knowledge, and conceives of her Western education as a licence to think, speak and act for her rural sisters at all times. And as Amadiume and Usha Menon demonstrate, she often imposes mal-adapted Western models of emancipation willy-nilly on her context. Aïssatou does not demonstrate sufficiently a broad-based, communalist perception of the struggle for women's liberation. It would seem that her conception of the enterprise functions strictly at the individualistic level, hence her prompt withdrawal from the scene in rejection of polygamy. It is worth noting that she leaves untransformed an entire traditional structure of subalternization epitomized by her uncompromising mother-in-law. In essence, Aïssatou's emancipationist departure does nothing to undo male hegemony in *Lettre*. If anything, it clears a space for it to be reinforced.

It is, however, in the character of the narrator-heroine, Ramatoulaye, that the textual strategy of individual emancipation without social transformation reaches its ultimate consolidation. Most often, critics are so easily carried away by the textual deconstruction of polygamy that they often join a bandwagon celebration of Ramatoulaye, losing sight in the process of what appear to me to be her significant failures. An understanding of those failures will entail a thorough analysis of the place and function of internal monologues in the whole narrative. Despite her struggle, Ramatoulaye fails to achieve social transformation, because her emancipationist opinions and her disapproval of the subalternist aspects of religious and traditional pedagogy only come in the form of internal monologues and private reflections. They are hardly ever exteriorized or raised to the level of a valid praxis, as in the examples we shall witness in the next chapter of this study. At the risk of sounding prescriptive, I dare to suggest that *Lettre* could have done with a little less monologism.

Taking her domestic situation as the inevitable backcloth of social analysis, what Ramatoulaye proposes in *Lettre* is a stinging critique of everything that is wrong with post-independence Senegalese society. In view of the heroine's apparent dissatisfaction with the condition of women, societal mores, traditions and habits are passed through a fine-tooth comb and nothing escapes her deconstructionist project. Yet her struggle is confined to her mind. We receive the first indication of the role of interior monologue early in the narrative, when the bereaved Ramatoulaye and her co-wife have to sit together to receive sympathisers in accordance with tradition:

La présence à mes côtés de ma co-épouse m'énerve. On l'a installée chez moi, selon la coutume, pour les funérailles. Chaque heure qui passe creuse ses joues plus profondément, cerne d'avantage ses yeux, des yeux immenses et beaux qui se ferment et s'ouvrent sur leurs secrets¹⁶².

Ramatoulaye's first sign of dissent is thus registered as an unvoiced monologue within the long epistolary text. The monologue builds up to a series of observations on traditional practices which Ramatoulaye finds unacceptable, but against which she fails to exteriorize her resentment. In African societies, there is always some sort of traditional ceremony performed to usher deserving wives "out of the period of mourning"¹⁶³. The details vary from society to society but it almost always involves the female relatives of the deceased performing some symbolic actions (bathing, discarding mourning clothes) on the widows. In the case of Ramatoulaye and Binetou, their sisters-in-law are required by tradition to loosen their braided hair. The heroine describes the ceremony:

Nos belles-sœurs nous décoiffent. Nous sommes installées, ma co-épouse et moi, sous une tente occasionnelle faite d'un pagne tendu au-dessus de nos têtes. Pendant que nos belles-sœurs œuvrent, les femmes présentes, prévenues de l'opération, se lèvent et jettent sur la toiture mouvante des piecettes pour conjurer le mauvais sort¹⁶⁴.

Ramatoulaye cannot resist the temptation of an excursus into the socio-cultural significance of that moment in the life of Senegalese women, and the narrative consequently shifts to the sociological exposé that is characteristic of much of African writing:

C'est le moment redouté de toute Sénégalaise, celui en vue duquel elle sacrifie ses biens en cadeaux à sa belle-famille, et où, pis encore, outre les biens, elle s'ampute de sa personnalité, de sa dignité, devenant une chose au service de l'homme qui l'épouse, du grand-père, de la grand-mère, du père, de la mère, du frère, de la sœur, de l'oncle, de la tante, des cousins, des cousines, des amis de cet homme. Sa conduite est conditionnée: une belle-sœur ne touche pas la tête d'une épouse qui a été avare, infidèle ou inhospitalière¹⁶⁵.

After this necessarily interested presentation of the general customs, Ramatoulaye gives the reader her personal reaction to the whole drama:

Nous, nous avons été méritantes et c'est le chœur de nos louanges chantées à tue-tête. Notre patience à toute épreuve, la largesse de notre cœur, la fréquence de nos cadeaux trouvent leur justification et leur récompense en ce jour. Nos belles-sœurs traitent avec la même égalité trente et cinq ans de vie conjugale. Elles célèbrent, avec la même aisance et les mêmes mots, douze et trois maternités. *J'enregistre, courroucée, cette volonté de nivellement qui réjouit la nouvelle belle-mère de Modou*¹⁶⁶. (my emphasis)

Because our privileged position as readers allows us to "read" Ramatoulaye's mind and follow the progression of her thought, we are the only witnesses to the heroine's unvoiced displeasure at the cultural enactments to which she grudgingly submits herself. Her deceased husband's relatives, especially his sisters, who are the objects of her angst, are completely unaware of the situation because of her feigned deference to tradition. The tendency in certain feminist quarters to read silence as an act of defiance or subversion simply does not apply here. Ramatoulaye's silence is to be taken for what it is: frustrated silence in the face of oppression.

The most redeeming quality in her reaction lies at the level of consciousness and awareness. Unlike Rokhaya, who demonstrates no awareness of certain injustices meted out to her on account of her gender and seeks at all times to convince her society and readers of *La voie du salut* of her exemplary submission to patriarchal codes, Ramatoulaye demonstrates a sustained awareness of her situation. She constantly seeks to convince the reader that she disapproves of the cultural mores that subalternize her, even if that disapproval is monologic:

Nous subissons, différemment, les contraintes sociales et la pesanteur des mœurs. J'aimais Modou. Je composais avec les siens. Je tolérais ses sœurs qui désertaient trop souvent leur foyer pour encombrer le mien. Elles se laissaient nourrir et choyer. Elles regardaient sans réagir leurs enfants danser sur mes fauteuils. Je tolérais les crachats glissés adroitement sous mes tapis¹⁶⁷.

Modou's mother is not spared in the heroine's monologic excoriation.

Ramatoulaye describes her in no flattering terms:

Sa mère passait et repassait, au gré de ses courses, toujours flanquée d'amies différentes, pour leur montrer la réussite sociale de son fils et surtout, leur faire toucher du doigt sa suprématie dans cette belle maison qu'elle n'habitait pas. Je la recevais avec tous les égards dus à une reine et elle s'en retournait, comblée, surtout si sa main emprisonnait le billet de banque que j'y plaçais adroitement. Mais à peine sortie de la maison, elle pensait à la nouvelle vague d'amies qu'elle devait prochainement épater¹⁶⁸.

The consequences of not voicing her rejection of mores that she finds objectionable lie in Ramatoulaye's continued subalternization within her domestic sphere. It is also no surprise that she extends her "critique" of her husband's family to the larger social set-up, raising questions about the continued validity of certain social practices and undermining their legitimacy in the same breath. The phenomenon of death involves many ceremonies in Africa. Apart from those involving the widow(s), as outlined above, there is also a myriad of cultural enactments to be performed for the safe passage of the departed and for the repose of his/her soul. Such ceremonies vary from society to society and can, in certain cases, culminate in celebrations if the departed is deemed to have led a good life, as was the case with Ramatoulaye's husband. But our heroine views such ceremonies in a negative light. Her critique follows the usual pattern: a sociological exposition of a cultural fact, followed by a categorical condemnation of it:

Le soir, vient la phase la plus déroutante de cette cérémonie du troisième jour. Plus de monde, davantage de bousculade pour mieux voir et mieux entendre. Des groupes se constituent par affinités, par liens de sang, par quartiers, par corporations. Chaque groupe exhibe sa participation aux frais¹⁶⁹.

Ramatoulaye's next move is to offer the reader a crucial critical comment on the transformations that this ceremony has undergone:

Jadis, cette aide se donnait en nature: mil, bétail, riz, farine, huile, sucre, lait. Aujourd'hui, elle s'exprime ostensiblement en billets de banque et personne ne veut donner moins que l'autre. Troublante extériorisation du sentiment intérieur inévaluable, évalué en francs! Et je pense encore: combien de morts auraient pu survivre si, avant d'organiser ses funérailles en festin, le parent ou l'ami avait acheté l'ordonnance salvatrice ou payé l'hospitalisation¹⁷⁰.

The entire process of social critique is again subjected to the monologic strategy inherent in the expression "et je pense encore". This again translates into the absence of any revisionist social impact, as those who surround the heroine do not know what she really thinks of the activities going on around her. Yet, Ramatoulaye's displeasure with what one may call the commoditization of the rituals surrounding funerals in her society is evocative of the arguments of those intellectuals in favour of the retraditionalization of Africa as opposed to its modernization: the forceful grafting of an essentially European and maladapted modernity on the cultures of Africa has led to some sort of pollution and bastardization that only a return to the original cultures could remedy.

Ramatoulaye is, however, far too enamoured of modernity to proffer the idealistic solution of the traditionalists. Her train of thought allows one to conclude that she would prefer the more radical solution of abolishing the cultural practices she dislikes:

Et pourtant, l'on nous dit dans le Coran que le troisième jour, le mort enfle et emplît sa tombe et pourtant, l'on nous dit que le huitième jour, il éclate; et l'on nous dit aussi que le quarantième jour, il est démantelé! Que signifient donc ces festins joyeux, établis en institution, qui accompagnent les prières pour la clémence de Dieu? Qui est là pour étancher sa soif? Qui est là par intérêt? Qui est là pour étancher sa soif? Qui est là pour se souvenir¹⁷¹?

If the reader has any expectations that the heroine will eventually give voice to her feelings and damn the consequences, such expectations are soon sacrificed on the altar of her brazen declaration of her willingness to play along with the very forces that maintain her in a quasi-carceral state of subalternization:

Je vis seule dans une monotonie que ne coupent que les bains purificateurs et les changements de vêtements de deuil, tous les lundis et vendredis. J'espère bien remplir mes charges. Mon cœur s'accorde aux exigences religieuses. Nourrie, dès l'enfance, à leurs sources rigides, je crois que je ne faillirai pas¹⁷².

It is because of this monotony that Ramatoulaye takes to writing as a means of "breaking out" of her confinement. However, monologue overshadows any manifestation of emancipationist self-expression that can be found in the text. Consequently, McElaney-Johnson's celebration of "Ramatoulaye's *prise de parole*"¹⁷³ may have carried the argument a bit too far. When this critic declares triumphantly that "Bâ *challenges* the status quo"¹⁷⁴ through the instrumentality of *Lettre*, she glosses over the issue of the social effectiveness or otherwise of that challenge.

Much has been made, critically, of Ramatoulaye's tirade against polygamy and other patriarchal codes when Tamsir, Modou's elder brother, comes to ask for her hand in marriage. Accompanied by Mawdo, Aïssatou's ex-husband, and the Imam, Tamsir arrogantly declares to Ramatoulaye that he intends to marry her as soon as she comes out of her period of mourning. It must be borne in mind that these are the same men who were mandated to announce the news of Modou's second marriage to Ramatoulaye.

A justifiably angry Ramatoulaye prepares the reader for her response to the three representatives of patriarchy using a discourse that cannot fail to gain the attention of the feminist reader:

Je regarde Mawdo. Je regarde l'Imam. Je serre mon châle noir. J'égrène mon chapelet. Cette fois, je parlerai. Ma voix connaît trente années de silence, trente années de brimades. Elle éclate, violente, tantôt sarcastique, tantôt méprisante¹⁷⁵.

Admittedly, this passage represents a significant shift in the discursive modalities of *Lettre* and temporarily undermines my reading of the text so far, as a monologic

construction that has little to recommend it in terms of social transformation . For once, internal monologue is suspended and valid agency comes to the forefront of the textual process. Very significantly, the heroine drops monologic verbs like “penser” and “réfléchir” – to which she has accustomed us by now – in favour of the expressive “parler”. What is more, Ramatoulaye goes ahead to introduce the concept of voice, deliberately choosing verbs and adjectives that appropriately capture the degree to which her voice constitutes a radical disruption and delegitimation of patriarchal discourse. This done, the reader is sufficiently prepared for what follows:

Ah! oui: ton calcul, c'est devancer tout prétendant possible, devancer Mawdo, l'ami fidèle qui a plus d'atouts que toi et qui, également, selon la coutume, peut hériter de la femme. Tu oublies que j'ai un cœur, une raison, que je ne suis pas un objet que l'on se passe de main en main. Tu ignores ce que se marier signifie pour moi: c'est un acte de foi et d'amour, un don total de soi à l'être que l'on a choisi et qui vous a choisi. (J'insistais sur le mot choisi.)¹⁷⁶

Ramatoulaye is not done with Tamsir yet. After the exposé on her personal view of love and marriage, she shifts the argument to an examination of Tamsir's domestic set-up:

Et tes femmes, Tamsir? Ton revenu ne couvre ni leurs besoins ni ceux de tes dizaines d'enfants. Pour te suppléer dans tes devoirs financiers, l'une de tes épouses fait des travaux de teinture, l'autre vend des fruits, la troisième inlassablement tourne la manivelle de sa machine à coudre. Toi, tu te prélasses en seigneur vénéré, obéi au doigt et à l'œil. Je ne serai jamais le complément de ta collection¹⁷⁷.

Taken together, the last three passages present a deceptively coherent picture of the heroine as having been able to break out of her monological cocoon to construct a successful social praxis. The reader's euphoria is, however, cut short by Ramatoulaye's closing statement after the departure of Tamsir and his entourage:

Je prenais ainsi ma revanche sur un autre jour où tous les trois m'avaient annoncé, avec désinvolture, le mariage de Modou Fall et de Binetou¹⁷⁸.

The entire emancipationist discourse that the heroine has so carefully constructed is again reduced to the personal in this singular monologic move, restoring as it were my reading of *Lettre* as a text in which the personal takes far too much narrative space at the expense of the collective. Beneath the veneer of collective emancipation, as indicated in the sympathetic reference to Tamsir's wives and children, lies the stark reality of a deep-seated commitment to a personal(ized) agenda. It is precisely the subtle significance of this last passage that is often left out of celebratory critiques of Ramatoulaye's dismissal of Tamsir. One must also not lose sight of the fact that, although Tamsir and his friends retreat from Ramatoulaye's house "defeated", we are given no indication that they left convinced that their mission, backed by immutable patriarchal mores, is wrong. Their phallocratic mentality remains essentially intact, leaving practically no room for social transformation.

The fact that a succession of men come after Tamsir to ask for Ramatoulaye's hand in marriage is further proof that her struggle is too personalized to have any meaningful social impact in terms of changing the perception of men that every widow is there for the taking. It is also a representation of the fact that, at this phase of social consciousness, the heroine alone cannot change society, the realities she faces being very complex. Thus, the personalized approach of Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou to the question of feminist activism should not be read as a weakness. It is fairer to read it as a necessary phase in the movement from passive docility to revolutionary praxis. As Gramsci proposes, the march of the subaltern toward freedom is necessarily fragmented and episodic.

What we witness, therefore, in *Lettre*, is a fictional refraction of the first stage of Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie's *stiwa* – social transformation including women in Africa. Although social transformation is absent in any real sense in *Lettre*, we do see the conditions assembled without which the very idea would be inconceivable: a sophisticated level of awareness of their condition by the subalternized victims of patriarchy, an equally sophisticated capacity to objectively analyze that condition and reject it either from within or from without, and finally, a sustained struggle for personal freedom. It is the aggregation of these factors that has produced the recreated African feminist subject epitomized by Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou. But insofar as their struggle secures personal liberation but does little to affect their resilient patriarchal context, the two major characters of *Lettre* are feminists with a small "f".

Subaltern Rationality in Sous la cendre le feu

While Gautam Bhadra's theoretical notion of subaltern mentality is also germane to a reading of Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle's *Sous la cendre le feu* (*Sous la cendre*), Walter Dignolo's concept of subaltern rationality can shed more light on this surprisingly undercritiqued novel, which stands out in francophone African women's writing as perhaps the only narrative informed by psychoanalysis. Subaltern mentality, one must recall, perspectivizes resistance to domination, and submission to it, as two sides of the same coin, and the subaltern is interpellated in the Althusserian sense to shift constantly between the two ontological sites in the struggle for agency. As the analysis of the novels of Kuoh-Moukoury, Maïga Ka and Bassek has shown, the trouble is that sheepish submission to male domination receives more discursive valuation than resistance to it,

thus seriously reducing the possibility of agency in certain texts by francophone African women writers.

Within the possibilities offered by new epistemological remappings of the colonial encounter, Mignolo proposes the notion of subaltern rationality as an episodic coming into consciousness of one's subaltern position and the consequent elaboration of strategies of movement from submission to resistance. In this equation, submission is already a given. It is the site inhabited by the subaltern, who is conscious of it and desires to vacate it, even as the dominating forces thwart every move towards agency. Thus, for Mignolo:

Subaltern rationality, linked to colonialism, arises as a response to the need to rethink and reconceptualize the stories that have been told to divide the world into Christians and pagans, blacks and whites, civilized and barbarian, modern and premodern, and developed and underdeveloped¹⁷⁹.

Apart from gradual movement, Mignolo also stresses the importance to his theoretical proposition of the idea of reversal, that is the reversal of the location of subalternity from the site of submission to the site of resistance. Consciousness of the need to reverse the location of woman as subaltern in the matrimonial context constitutes the thematic and discursive thrust of *Sous la cendre*. As is the case in *Lettre*, introspection is also crucial to the development of this narrative. The main difference is that while introspection leads to the development of monologue as a major textual strategy in *Lettre*, it produces a constructive dialogue in *Sous la cendre* between Mina, the novel's heroine, and Dr. Lobé, her physician.

The story opens *in medias res* in a hospital ward where the heroine, who is being admitted, has just been innocently informed by her young daughter that her illness is actually mental in nature: a combination of marital misfortunes have driven Mina crazy,

necessitating her hospitalization. Convinced that a particularly traumatic experience is responsible for Mina's emotional and psychic destabilization and her consequent loss of memory, Dr. Lobé decides to treat her by making her tell her story. The telling of her story and the eventual unearthing of her marital woes will, in Dr. Lobé's opinion, have a cathartic and healing effect, especially if the heroine is able to remember and reveal the particular experience, the last straw that broke the camel's back.

Thus it is that a half-sedated, half-hypnotised Mina goes into the deepest recesses of her mind and her story unfolds through the instrumentality of that introspection. We have seen so far that there is a discernible pattern which makes a sociological exposé on the condition of woman an inevitable narrative departure in much of African women's writing. *Sous la cendre* is no exception to this rule. The entire novel is an exercise in subaltern rationalism. The subaltern, conscious of her location, analyses the socio-traditional forces that create and maintain such a location before proceeding to give details of her struggle for emancipation.

The sociological excursion into her condition, and the general condition of woman in Cameroun, begins with Mina's simple admission of the fact that her husband is her problem and is solely responsible for all her woes. Then follows a socio-linguistic exposition on how African languages inscribe marital hierarchy and subalternize woman in the process:

Quand je parle de "l'homme que j'ai épousée", je sais que je commets un grave délit contre nos mœurs. Mais que voulez-vous, c'est la langue française, solide héritage de la colonisation, qui me permet de m'exprimer ainsi sans trop me compromettre. Pour être plus exacte et conforme à notre mentalité, je devrais dire "l'homme qui m'a épousée". En effet, si dans la langue française l'une et l'autre de ses deux expressions se valent et signifient la même chose, cette idée de réciprocité ne transparaît pas dans la plupart des langues de mon pays: c'est l'homme qui épouse la femme, et la réciproque est une aberration¹⁸⁰.

There follows a quasi-pedagogic discourse on the socialization of children in Africa. It needs be observed that the language of that discourse reads more like a social science treatise than fiction:

D'ailleurs toute l'éducation d'un enfant chez nous est construite sur la base qui fait de l'homme le maître, et de la femme l'être créé pour servir celui-ci. Ce fait n'est pas particulier au Cameroun, me dira-t-on. Mais cela n'enlève rien à la gravité que représente cette réalité, car le combat que mènent certains adultes – hommes et femmes – pour la libération de la femme devrait commencer par l'éducation des petites filles et des petits garçons¹⁸¹.

Following the narrative pattern that we have identified, the heroine proceeds from this general sociological analysis to an evaluation of her own personal situation within the equation:

Mes parents ont fait de moi une petite fille obéissante et réservée, qui ne doit pas élever le ton devant des garçons – fussent-ils plus jeunes que moi – une fille rompue aux tâches domestiques; cette fille est devenue plus tard, dans la suite logique des choses, la femme idéale, c'est-à-dire soumise à son mari, bonne mère et bonne ménagère, à la résistance physique et morale inébranlable¹⁸².

Like all the other female characters in the preceding novels, Mina does not escape the grip of patriarchal pedagogy on her society. But the language of the first two passages deserves closer attention. Ever since Raymond Williams's analysis¹⁸³ of the place of pedagogic discourse – I prefer to call this extra-fictional sociological discourse in the specific context of African writing – in Robert Tressell's classic novel, *Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, there has been a sustained interest in the issue. The main point is to determine how far the author can go in terms of undoing the conventions of fiction through pedagogic language. Authorized by Williams's favourable critical disposition to the use of that procedure in the Tressell novel, a South African critic, Brenda Cooper,

approvingly reads the use of the same strategy in Festus Iyayi's Nigerian novel, *Violence* (1979)¹⁸⁴.

The use of extra-fictional sociological discourse is appropriate in *Sous la cendre* and in African novels in general. The historical conditions of the birth of African fiction are such that no serious writer can avoid recourse to that procedure at some point. Apart from setting the general tone of the narrative and preparing the reader for what is to come, the use of this strategy in *Sous la cendre* sits well with subaltern rationality, because it demonstrates Mina's sophisticated consciousness of her situation and how immutable traditions still manage to short-change woman, even when modernity has decisively intervened to alter the order of things in Africa. Witness, for example, how the heroine deftly moves her analysis of patriarchal pedagogy to an evaluation of the subalternization of woman in the context of the modern school system:

Le lycée de New-Bell était alors exclusivement féminin, et si les effectifs étaient pléthoriques dans les petites classes – en moyenne soixante élèves par classe – ils tombaient inexorablement dans une moyenne de vingt élèves par classe, dans les classes de Première et de Terminale. En ces temps-là beaucoup de parents interrompaient les études de leurs filles qui n'avaient que trop duré, pour les envoyer – de gré ou plus souvent de force – servir un mari que celles-ci voyaient parfois pour la première fois¹⁸⁵.

After a few more negative comments on what the heroine calls “la mentalité traditionnelle” and how this constitutes an impediment to women's liberation, we enter into the kernel of her story. Because she is in the presence of her physician, who wants to cure her through a psychoanalytical exploration of her subconscious, the entire narrative evolves as an introspective flashback. The adolescent Mina has just found out that her amorous adventure with Joël Edimo, a young medical student, has resulted in an unwanted pregnancy. Joël promptly abandons her and she finds out, much to her regret,

that she had mistaken infantile infatuation for true love. Teenage pregnancy being a very serious source of opprobrium in Africa, the heroine is unable to inform her parents of the terrible news and consequently finds herself in a seemingly inextricable impasse. In a fortunate twist of fate, Mina meets Djibril, a young lawyer, at her best friend's birthday party. They fall in love and she lets Djibril into her secret. Djibril happily accepts to be the father of her child, promising that the secret will forever remain between them. They celebrate their marriage a few months later in a modest ceremony.

The marriage of Mina and Djibril constitutes the narrative moment in which the process of subaltern rationality begins to reveal the extent to which resilient social contexts can crystallize into three major consequences. They can prevent the emancipation of women and maintain them in the grip of subalternizing social and traditional customs; they can erase the space and the ground already gained by conscientized subaltern female subjects like Mina; and, finally, they can reduce any move toward the emergence of a collective praxis to a far less efficient personal(ized) struggle for liberation. The textual interface between these three consequences will be crucial to my overall interpretation of *Sous la cendre*.

Djibril turns out to be an exemplary husband whose devotion to his wife strikes one from the outset as too good to be true. They set up a modern household. After the birth of Fanny, Mina's child, Djibril encourages her to return to school and complete her studies. In order to make sure that his wife devotes all her time to her studies, Djibril takes over all domestic chores, including taking care of the baby. Such is his devotion that Mina's mother decides to call her daughter to order during her first visit to the couple:

Je sais, Mina , que vous ne voyez pas les choses comme nous. Mais il ne faut quand même pas exagérer. Suppose que les amis de ton mari vous trouvent comme ça: toi assise avec livres et cahiers, et lui nettoyant les fesses du bébé. Que penseront-ils? Que c'est ainsi que ta mère t'a éduquée? Que diront-ils¹⁸⁶?

While these remarks from Mina's mother provide useful insights into the revolutionary¹⁸⁷ domestic arrangement of Mina and Djibril, the heroine herself buttresses her mother's viewpoint with this description of her husband:

Djibril était devenu plus tendre encore qu'avant, attentif à mes moindres désirs, il me choyait tant et si bien que j'en étais devenue capricieuse au maximum. Un jour Maurice avait lancé en plaisantant, que mon mari m'entretenait comme une poupée, et qu'il risquait de me rendre incapable de me débrouiller sans lui. Djibril avait fait la sourde oreille et préféré ne pas répondre¹⁸⁸.

Djibril is not only a good husband, he also shows himself to be an exemplary father, so much so that the children draw closer to him than to their mother, as Mina claims:

Il fallait bien le reconnaître, Djibril était un père merveilleux et très affectueux. Il adorait nos deux enfants, ceux-ci le lui rendaient bien. Je voyais bien que les enfants lui étaient plus attachés qu'à moi, et cela se comprenait aisément: quand je n'étais pas à mes cours, je faisais mes devoirs, je recopiais ceux des cours auxquels je n'avais pas pu assister pour une raison ou une autre, j'étudiais... et cela m'arrangeait de ne pas avoir les petits dans mes jupes.¹⁸⁹

As long as the couple are able to shield themselves from societal interference, this state of affairs remains unchanged. One of the gains of subaltern studies is to sensitize us to the fact that dominant cultures and structures do not yield ground easily. They are impervious to change. This explains why every inch of territory gained by the subaltern has been the result of struggle. History has no record of the dominant willingly yielding space and territory to the subaltern. On the contrary, whenever dominance is forced to yield some ground, it always tries to regain lost territory either directly or, more often, in various indirect guises. Nothing proves these assertions more than the narratives of

colonialism and neo-colonialism. When the English and the French beat a reluctant retreat from Africa, sometimes after unfathomable acts of barbarity as in Kenya and Algeria, they knew they would be back wearing the mask of neo-colonialism. This slight digression is to allow me to theorize the “modern” marital space of Mina and Djibril in *Sous la cendre* as territory lost to the traditional patriarchal régime. In conformity with the logic of dominance, the damage must be repaired and lost ground must be regained. Who is better placed to stop the “nonsense” going on in Mina’s and Djibril’s household, who better able to regain lost ground and restore the traditional codes of patriarchy, than the most faithful agent of patriarchal hegemony in Africa – an elderly female member of the groom’s extended family, a daughter of the goddess?

The first serious sign of trouble appears when, out of the blue, Djibril announces the impending visit of Hadja, his elder sister, to Mina. In Chapter Two, we saw how Rokhaya instinctively cried out for joy when informed of the impending visit of her brother-in-law. That is the expected reaction from the “ideal” wife in most African contexts, the reaction that the subaltern woman has been conditioned by patriarchy to give. But there is too much subaltern rationality in Mina to allow for such a reaction. She is justifiably angry at being informed of this visit at the last minute:

Quelques jours avant la date prévue pour mon accouchement, mon mari me prévint de la venue prochaine de sa sœur aînée. Je n’avais jamais été présentée à un seul membre de ma belle-famille, bien que je l’aie réclamé à plus d’une reprise. Mais j’étais bien contrariée de me voir forcer la main de cette manière, et je ne manquai pas de le faire remarquer à Djibril¹⁹⁰.

Djibril gives a surprisingly angry reply, using a hitherto unknown authoritative tone in the manner of a man who expects his wife to behave and conform to patriarchal codes. Mina then informs us of a perceptible change in her husband’s behaviour:

Depuis que mon mari était allé passer un mois de vacances chez lui l'année d'avant, il avait profondément changé: nous ne nous parlions plus pour communiquer, mais pour nous montrer à quel point de non-communicabilité nous étions parvenus en glissant sur une pente à peine perceptible, mais de façon bien nette¹⁹¹.

We thus get the first hint that Djibril had actually begun the process of his "re-education" along patriarchal lines during his first visit home. Obviously, the dismayed members of Djibril's extended family have taken it upon themselves to call their errant son to order. They must have admonished him for allowing his wife to consider herself his equal in the marital equation. Above all, they must have instilled a pathological fear of hen-peckery in him. And one must bear in mind that it is socially disastrous for an African male subject to be seen as "weak" in his relationship with a woman. One must recall how the fear of being thought weak drives Okonkwo to brutalize his wives in *Things Fall Apart*.

Hadja therefore comes as an emissary of patriarchy with the specific mission of "sanitizing" the unacceptable marital situation into which her "son" has plunged himself. Mina herself confirms the reading of Hadja's visit as a "sanitizing mission". Her arrival coincides with the birth of the couple's third child. Hadja wastes no time in naming the child Yaya, a proper traditional name, as opposed to the name Mina and Djibril had originally agreed upon. This leads to the second confrontation between the couple when Mina comes to in the hospital:

-Yaya? fis-je, surprise. Qui lui a donné ce nom?
-C'est Hadja. C'est ainsi qu'on nomme chez nous le troisième enfant, si c'est un garçon.
-Mais ce n'est pas le nom que nous avons choisi! m'écriai-je, indignée.
-Ne te fâche pas, Petite Fleur. C'est de ma faute, j'aurais dû me souvenir de la tradition!
-Ah oui, tu aurais dû. Mais tu ne l'as pas fait, depuis que je te connais, et ta sœur arrive juste à temps pour limiter les dégâts¹⁹².

The arrival of Hadja corresponds, then, to a retraditionalization of Djibril as subject. It also translates into the encroachment and the imposition of patriarchal hegemony on a site that the couple has painstakingly constructed on a foundation of equality and mutual respect. It does not take long for Mina to find out that Hadja's authority over Djibril is absolute. Worse still, Djibril, it appears, intends to allow his sister to run his household:

Je considèrai longtemps l'homme que j'avais en face de moi: un Djibril paniqué parce que sa grande sœur était fâchée... je ne l'avais jamais vu perdre les pédales devant personne; on n'aurait pas reconnu là le fringant Maître Mohammadou qui avait toujours la bonne réplique. Il fallait que sa sœur eût vraiment beaucoup d'ascendant sur lui pour l'avoir mis dans un tel état¹⁹³.

We are informed later that Djibril is conscious of the unhealthy nature of his sister's control over him but is unwilling or unable to do anything about it:

Je voyais bien que devant cette grande sœur qui l'avait élevé parce que sa propre mère était restée longtemps souffrante après sa naissance, Djibril perdait tous ses moyens; elle n'avait qu'à dire un mot pour que toutes paroles de révolte préparées par Djibril rentrent dans sa gorge¹⁹⁴.

Mina soon finds out that patriarchal traditions are never content with partial victories. Once Hadja has been able to bring Djibril to a reasonable degree of conformity with the role mannerisms prescribed for him as a male in the traditional context, once she has been able to impose patriarchal hegemony on the domestic site she invades, she turns her attention to the "domestication" of Mina's body. The female body has for long been a subject of feminist polemical activity, for the simple reason that it is the site in which centuries of gender oppression are inscribed and made physically manifest. Indeed, religion and tradition have often colluded to perpetuate the conquest and the codification of the female body through hyper-conservative vestimental codes or through more

extreme corporal inscriptions like female excision and infibulation. One only has to think of the extremes to which the Taliban régime in Afghanistan has gone to control the female body to realize the ideological importance of that site to any emancipationist project.

Consequently, francophone African writers use their texts as instruments for the liberation of the female body, when it has already been conquered by patriarchy, or as instruments of resistance, when such a conquest is yet to occur. In *Sous la cendre*, Mpoudi Ngolle inscribes Mina's body as a site of resistance against Hadja's attempt to conquer and subject it to the codes of patriarchy. Hadja, being a devout Moslem from Northern Cameroun, adheres to the strictest possible Islamic dress codes for women and therefore covers most parts of her body. She wastes no time in disapproving of Mina's "modern", hence corrupt and loose, style of dressing. Djibril is, of course, blamed for allowing his wife such unimaginable latitudes. Hadja decides to broach the issue first with Mina:

-Chez nous, une femme qui montre ses jambes ou sa tête nue est mal vue; et je te parle comme si tu étais ma propre fille. Quand tu viendras au village, tu devras t'habiller correctement.

-C'est-à-dire en pagnes?

-Mais oui. Ton mari le sait, il devrait te l'avoir dit. Il ne fait pas bien son travail, cet enfant¹⁹⁵.

Mina, who has lost so much ground by capitulating very frequently to Hadja's demands at the urging of her husband, resolves not to yield on this one score. The resolution comes after a monologic evaluation of the situation. Mina's monologue is different from Ramatoulaye's in *Lettre*, because it leads to a concrete result in terms of her refusal to adhere to Hadja's vestimental prescriptions:

Et voilà qu'elle se mêlait maintenant de m'imposer une façon de m'habiller, sous prétexte que c'était la coutume chez eux. Je n'aimais pas les pagnes, je n'en avais jamais mis, et Djibril ne semblait pas particulièrement tenir à ce que je fusse vêtue comme le sont les femmes de chez lui. J'avais certes déjà pensé à me faire faire une tenue en pagnes, ça changerait de s'habiller ainsi de temps à autre. Mais de là à en faire une habitude, une contrainte... cela me paraissait difficilement réalisable¹⁹⁶.

But Mina's first open manifestation of rebellion, her first valuation of her hitherto insidious subaltern rationality, perhaps comes a shade too late. While she struggles to save her body from Hadja's overbearing intervention, she discovers that her sister-in-law has discovered a new battleground: Mina's schooling, which increasingly makes her abandon the children to Hadja's care. A domestic accident involving the last born provides Hadja an occasion for launching a new attack, calling into question Mina's aptitude for motherhood, a very serious charge in Africa:

-Si tu t'en souciais, tu ne t'en irais pas tous les jours pendant si longtemps. On vous parle d'école...quelle école? Hein? A-t-on jamais vu une mère digne de ce nom partir du matin au soir en abandonnant des petits bébés qui doivent encore téter le sein maternel? Et avec l'accord de son mari, en plus?¹⁹⁷

As if Hadja's attempts at eroding the heroine's independence were not enough, Mina soon finds out that she has to deal with another set of patriarchal representatives. Perhaps because of Hadja's presence, and the corresponding need for him to be seen to be asserting his masculinity, Djibril suddenly takes to a group of friends from the same ethnic background as himself. They promote him to the role of all-purpose problem solver and advisor. He revels in this new prominence and allows them to invade his home even at odd hours of the night. Obviously, the more time he spends with his new-found "brothers", the less time he has for his wife and children. To make matters worse, Mina is

informed that she can no longer be present in the sitting room whenever Djibril is receiving his "brothers":

Tant que nos fréquentations étaient faites de camarades rencontrés à l'école ou dans le milieu professionnel, nous les recevions ensemble, et sortions souvent ensemble, à deux ou avec nos amis. Depuis que la plupart des visiteurs de mon mari étaient des Nordistes, il n'en était plus question. Djibril avait commencé par m'expliquer que, avec ces gens habitués à causer entre hommes, j'allais simplement m'ennuyer; je leur apportais des boissons et des friandises, puis les laissais discuter "entre hommes"¹⁹⁸.

The significance of this last passage cannot be overlooked. The move towards the subalternization of a hitherto emancipated female subject reaches completion here. Now that Hadja has accomplished her traditional role as an agent of patriarchal hegemony by re-traditionalizing Djibril and eroding Mina's independence, the stage is set for the triumphant entry of patriarchy into what was once a site of gender equality and mutual respect. The transformation of the couple's sitting room into an exclusive space of "men's talk" and the powerful image of Mina serving drinks and snacks before withdrawing to the background represent the symbolic victory of patriarchy in this text. For without realizing it, Mina, a daughter of imperialism, has slipped into the subalternizing role mannerisms which daughters of the goddess like Rokhaya and Mama Ida joyfully accept as woman's destiny.

It needs be stated that Mina does not resign herself passively to the encroachment of "men's talk" on her territory. She fights it, just as she fought Hadja as an embodiment of patriarchal hegemony. The heroine's albatross is therefore not to be located in her personality. As is the case with Ramatoulaye in *Lettre*, it is the resilient social context, rooted in rigid patriarchal traditions, that subverts Mina's personal efforts at defending her space. Proof of this lies in the response she receives from her own parents, both of

whom are educated to some extent, when she runs to them for help concerning the invasion of her home by Djibril's "brothers" and their "men's talk". Naturally, her father sees nothing unusual in a husband as devoted as Djibril occasionally spending time with male friends. Mina turns to her mother, whom she expects to be more understanding, but she is rewarded with an even more shocking reply:

-Ma chère petite fille, fit-elle en me faisant signe de me rasseoir; tu es venue nous soumettre ton problème pour que nous te donnions notre avis? Alors, assieds-toi et écoute les conseils de ton père et de ta mère: le mariage est une chose difficile; tu n'avais pas encore été confrontée à ces difficultés, parce que tu n'étais qu'une enfant. Ça ne pouvait durer éternellement, et tu dois comprendre que tout ne sera pas toujours gai. D'ailleurs pour un Haoussa, ce garçon est un très bon mari. Que lui reproches-tu, finalement? D'être souvent avec ses frères? Quoi de plus normal? Il n'est pas une herbe germée comme ça tout seul au milieu de la cour¹⁹⁹!

It is perhaps these overwhelming circumstances that blind Mina to so many other disturbing details about her husband, and by the time she comes to terms with the fact that she is married to a "monster" irreparable damage has been done: not only does Djibril attempt to rape Essèbe, Mina's younger sister who has come to spend her holidays with the couple, he actually rapes Fanny, Mina's first child by her first love whom Djibril had agreed to father. We are informed that something snaps in Mina's mind when she makes the tragic discovery that Djibril has been sleeping with Fanny, and that is how she has ended up in the hospital as a mental case. The narrative sequence of events after these tragic discoveries is by far the major weakness of this interesting novel. The pace increases and the textual events become less and less convincing. On being discharged from the hospital, Mina decides to pardon her husband and save her marriage. Both extended families are informed and a reconciliation ceremony is organised in the village. Djibril apologises for his misdeeds and the novel ends on the happy-ever-after model of American romantic movies.

What can be said in defence of this weak ending of an otherwise well-crafted text? Francophone African women writers and, indeed, African women writers in general, are always very reluctant to allow textual marriages to end in divorce. Aïssatou's case in *Lettre* is a rather infrequent occurrence. Modernization notwithstanding, divorce still has a relatively negative social perception in Africa, even if it is no longer as uncommon as it used to be. Djibril's apology and Hadja's repentance at the end of the story are far too artificial, too unconvincing for us to conclude that social transformation occurs in *Sous la cendre*. Mina's "victory" is personal and transient and one is left with the feeling that, once again, patriarchal hegemony has suffered only a minor and temporary defeat. As is the situation in *Lettre*, the overall "mentalité traditionnelle" which Mina denounces is left intact because feminism with a small 'f' – Mina's brand of feminism – is not strong enough to overthrow it. It only secures her own personal, temporary victory.

*From Thematic Iconoclasm to Conformism: The Dominance of Social Context in
Fureurs et cris de femmes*

The socio-cultural contexts in which the narrative evolves in *Lettre* and *Sous la cendre* are much too rooted in rigid patriarchal norms to allow for any broad-based social transformation beyond the transient personal victories recorded by the recreated subaltern female subjects in those novels. Angèle Rawiri develops the argument further in *Fureurs et cris de femmes* by examining not only the pressures exerted on the subaltern female subject by dominant socio-cultural codes but also how cultural dominance can impose a regime of conformism and complacency on the woman, thereby becoming the chief determiner of her subjectivity. Although *Fureurs* appeared one year before *Sous la*

cendre, Rawiri's text can be read as an extension or continuation of Mpoudi Ngolle's, to the extent that *Sous la cendre* explores how patriarchal codes work to re-conquer "lost territory", while *Fureurs* narrates the post-conquest subjecthood of an emancipated daughter of imperialism. For all the complacency and capitulation to socio-cultural dominance that permeates the text, it is important to note that *Fureurs* starts out a remarkable exercise in thematic iconoclasm in which the heroine, Emilienne, and her fiancé, Joseph, rebel against their parents for objecting to their marriage on ethnic grounds. What is more, we witness a full-blown lesbian relationship in the course of this narrative, and the author regales the reader with graphic details of amorous encounters between the partners. This in an African context in which talking openly about sex is frowned upon, never mind the "unimaginable horror" of sex between two women. Perhaps only in the works of Calixthe Beyala do we come across a textual daring comparable to what Rawiri offers in *Fureurs*.

Set in Olamba, the imaginary capital city of Kampana, an equally imaginary African country – although the parallels with Libreville, Gabon are obvious – the story opens with a frustrated Emilienne reflecting on the early phase of her relationship with Joseph. The couple has just returned from Paris and have plans to get married, settle down to their respective careers and start a family. As they belong to different ethnic groups, they encounter stiff opposition from their parents. Their reaction on each occasion sensitizes the reader to the fact that *Fureurs*, like a good number of African novels published in the 1980s and 1990s, will be another textual attestation of the rebellion of a new generation of Westernized and "modernized" African subjects against tradition. What is peculiar to *Fureurs* is the unusual violence of the language in which the

couple's rejection of parental authority is couched. Joseph, reacting to his mother's categorical rejection of Emilienne, charges:

Cette attitude est indigne de toi, ma mère. J'ai honte. J'épouserai Emilienne dès que nous aurons regagné la France. Te rends-tu compte que tu viens de perdre un fils? A moins que tu ne lui présentes tes excuses, je ne t'adresserai plus la parole. Rassure-toi, je continuerai d'habiter à la maison jusqu'à mon départ, pour sauver les apparences²⁰⁰.

Emilienne, for her part, reacts to her mother's opposition thus:

Je veux que tu comprennes une bonne fois pour toutes que je l'aime et que c'est avec lui que j'ai l'intention de faire ma vie. Qu'avez-vous donc, la mère de Joseph et toi? Elle souffre d'un complexe d'infériorité tandis que toi, tu juges tes compatriotes à partir d'un piédestal que tu t'es créé dans ta tête. Il y a quelque chose qui ne tourne pas rond dans notre société. Et dire que tu te dis chrétienne! Tu me donnes envie de vomir²⁰¹.

A number of observations can be made from these two passages. Emilienne and Joseph, like Djibril and Mina in *Sous la cendre*, are determined to set up a modern domestic space from which patriarchal pedagogy, patriarchal hegemony and other subalternizing socio-cultural mores would be excluded. While Joseph's rebellion is strictly personal, Emilienne extends hers to society as a whole, critiquing what she calls "considérations moyenâgeuses"²⁰² and insisting that "il est grand temps que nous changions de mentalité"²⁰³. From the outset, then, Emilienne is aware of the importance of social context in the equation of struggle. She also knows that personal victories are meaningless without a corresponding change of mentality by the society as a whole, in terms of its perception and treatment of women. One would therefore expect this consciousness to undergird her actions throughout the narrative.

After their marriage, we are informed of other "unusual" traits of their situation. Emilienne earns twice as much as her husband and her financial situation makes her the

breadwinner of the family. Furthermore, they live in a luxurious villa offered them by Emilienne's employers. This initially poses no problem and the couple spends the first five years of their marriage in bliss. Those years represent the narrative brackets within which the character of Emilienne can be read as an embodiment of thematic iconoclasm, insofar as her marital situation constitutes a travesty of reigning socio-cultural orthodoxies. Interior monologue intervenes early in the narrative, changing the situation described above rather dramatically. We are informed that problems set in when Emilienne begins to have miscarriages after the birth of her daughter, Rékia. Discouraged by the fact that his wife has only been able to give him a single child after five years of marriage, Joseph finds a mistress and begins to oscillate openly between Emilienne and the other woman. We are also informed that Joseph's mother, Eyang, moves in with the couple despite her unhidden dislike for Emilienne.

In a move reminiscent of what we witnessed in *Sous la cendre*, patriarchal society intervenes through its traditional representative – a daughter of the goddess – to alter the nature of things in an egalitarian domestic space and redefine the subjectivity and identity of a hitherto emancipated daughter of imperialism. For the oppositional encounter between dominant/resilient social contexts and the subjectivity of the Westernized female subject in African women's writing boils down not only to a contest over space but, most importantly, to the problematics of definition and redefinition of identity. While the daughter of imperialism constantly defines, positions and asserts herself as a free, independent, liberated, equal partner in a modernized marital arrangement, the dominant social context in which she resides constantly seeks to redefine her as a docile, submissive, unequal partner in the marital equation. The social context also seeks to

redefine her as a mere channel of reproduction who needs the essential man to be complete and happy as a subject. Textual tension in much of African women's writing, as discussed earlier, is usually occasioned by these contending forces.

Given this scenario, it becomes crucial for the critic to pay particular attention to how the embattled subaltern female subject negotiates this discursive impasse. Her resolution of the problem determines whether we can reasonably conclude that a successful (African) feminist praxis has been formulated in the text under scrutiny. I have already established the identitarian rubrics within which the patriarchal social context seeks to redefine the character of Emilienne. How then does the heroine handle this textual tension?

First comes the question of the essential man and his inessential wife, defined only as existing to bear his children and perpetuate his lineage. We already have the facts: Joseph is unfaithful to his wife and makes no pretense about it, sleeping at his mistress's home for days on end, and returning home only occasionally for a change of clothing. Emilienne, the liberated breadwinner of the family, surprises us with her acceptance of society's definition of her dishonest husband as an essential man whose love she must do everything in her capacity to regain. The omniscient narrator informs us in no uncertain terms that:

Comme dans ses moments de dépression, ses pensées troubles et agitées la ramènent brusquement à une seule évidence: la sauvegarde de sa vie conjugale. Il lui faut, quel que soit le prix qu' elle devra payer, reconquérir son mari qui lui échappe²⁰⁴.

Despite the existence of overwhelming evidence that Joseph no longer loves nor cares about her, despite being consistently drawn towards a radical solution, Emilienne perseveres in a situation in which she is consistently demeaned and disrespected. She

rationalizes and justifies Joseph's actions, especially her docile submission to his sexual whims. Joseph comes home after several weeks away and literally forces Emilienne to have sex with him:

Ils se sont vus pour la dernière fois il y a trois semaines, juste deux heures. Il lui avait fait l'amour comme un ivrogne se jetant sur une prostituée ramassée sur un trottoir obscur. Emilienne ne lui en tint pas rigueur. Il y a des humiliations que seule une femme peut subir avec entêtement quand elle veut atteindre le but qu'elle s'est fixé²⁰⁵.

By accepting to be humiliated continually by Joseph, Emilienne fundamentally alters her prior identity as an equal partner in her marriage. Her slip from equality into conformism to subalternizing social codes is made all the more evident by the fact that, upon discovering that Joseph is actually jealous of her financial and professional superiority, Emilienne performs the ultimate act of self-abnegation by apologizing for it in order to regain the love of her essential man:

Il est ridicule que tu veuilles prendre une deuxième femme pour effacer ma situation sociale, car je ne pense pas avoir profité de ma supériorité – je n'aime pas beaucoup ce mot – pour faire prévaloir mon autorité dans notre couple. Il se trouve que j'ai une certaine conception du mariage que je défendais déjà lorsque nous étions étudiants. J'ai besoin de toi et ce n'est certainement pas ma condition sociale qui comblera le vide que tu laisseras si jamais nous nous séparons. Et si, sans m'en rendre compte, je t'ai fait sentir que l'argent avait plus d'importance à mes yeux que toi, je te prie de me pardonner²⁰⁶.

Despite this largely undeserved overture from Emilienne, Joseph still has the nerve to declare, arrogantly, that:

Aucun homme, pas même le plus libéral, n'accepte d'être dans une situation financière inférieure à celle de son épouse... Comment un homme peut-il dans ces conditions supporter longtemps la supériorité financière de sa compagne, surtout quand des amis manquant de finesse vous le rabâchent à tout vent²⁰⁷?

Not once does it occur to Emilienne that Joseph, from the moment of this admission, no longer deserves her. Society has packaged Joseph as an essential man and she concurs, in a radical departure from her initial position as independent subject and from her self-confessed personal conception of marriage. One may pause to ponder how Emilienne arrives at this subaltern location, mired in the social conformism she previously resisted. The tragic death of her only daughter is surely an immense contributory factor. This event, and her subsequent inability to have another child, deal a tragic blow to her self-perception as a mother in a pattern which is now familiar.

However, as Rich proposes in *Of Woman Born*, a clear distinction must be made between motherhood as an ontological condition she desires for herself and motherhood defined for her by society and by her husband, whose approval is the essential condition of her self-esteem. While the former devolves from choice, the latter devolves from patriarchal hegemony and pedagogy. It is tragic that after resolutely opposing motherhood as a social prescription and patriarchal imposition, Emilienne again yields precious ground and slides into conformism. Emilienne's encounter with her younger sister, Eva, and their parents on the issue is worth quoting in some detail. Eva and the parents represent society's traditional conceptions of womanhood and motherhood, and ruffled by Emilienne's seeming acceptance of her situation as a non-mother, Eva starts on a rather confrontational tone:

Tu dois savoir que tu ne seras jamais une femme à part entière tant que tu n'auras pas des enfants que tu élèveras et que ton entourage verra grandir. Je vais te blesser sans doute en disant que ton enfant qui est mort ne compte plus, et dans quelques années on aura oublié que tu as été mère comme toutes les femmes normales. Rassure-toi, ce que je dis là ne s'applique pas à nous, ta famille. Je veux parler de ta belle-mère et de la société tout entière²⁰⁸.

Supported by their mother, who even confesses sympathy for Joseph, Eva goes ahead to consecrate Emilienne's husband as an essential man whose actions, even if irrational, would be justifiable in view of his wife's inability to procreate:

Enfin tu avoues que ton époux a une maîtresse, vois-tu je le savais. Estime-toi heureuse que vous soyez encore ensemble après toutes ces années qu'il a passées à attendre que tu lui donnes un second enfant. J'ai cru pendant un moment que la mort de Rékia allait te faire voir la réalité; je constate que je me suis trompée²⁰⁹.

Openda, Emilienne's father, intervenes in the discussion, ostensibly to stress the need for a woman to strike a balance between marriage and career. But, inevitably, his contribution veers into the subalternization of woman as a mere instrument of reproduction. Emilienne listens to her father's elaboration of patriarchal pedagogy with frustration and restrained anger, knowing that everything they say goes against her beliefs and her personal conception of womanhood. In the end, she explodes:

-C'est ça, vous m'aimez, et je parie que vous m'aimeriez plus si j'avais trois à cinq enfants. Comment pourrais-je vous le reprocher! Il semble qu'une femme, encore aujourd'hui, ne suscite la considération et le respect de son entourage que par sa maternité... je ne justifie pas ma stérilité secondaire, je veux vous amener à réaliser que la maternité et les enfants ne représentent pas le bonheur absolu²¹⁰.

We soon find out, however, that it is one thing to be able to put up this line of defence when arguing with one's family and another thing entirely to be able to stick to it in one's more sober, private moments. Everything points to the fact that Emilienne does not realise how much she has internalized the tyranny of the conceptions and prescriptions of her social context. Dominique, her secretary, hardly helps when Emilienne confides in her and she takes a position that is even more extreme than that of Emilienne's family. We are given the impression of a vicious social circle, a miasma in

which the heroine is inextricably enmeshed. The exchange between Emilienne and Dominique is very significant:

Et puis vous savez, madame, une femme sans enfant est comme un manchot. Comment vous expliquer ça? Toute son existence, il lui manquera cette autre vie venant d'elle et sans laquelle elle devient infirme. Toute sa vie, elle sera montrée du doigt, ridiculisée et plainte.

-Que pensez-vous des femmes qui choisissent de ne pas faire d'enfants?

-Il faut être malade dans sa tête pour prendre une telle décision, s'indigne la secrétaire²¹¹.

In her shift towards societal prescriptions, Emilienne passes through a phase of confusion in which it becomes evident that she is not sure whether Joseph really loves her as an individual or only as a potential mother:

Pourquoi ne peut-il m'aimer même sans enfants? Ma maladie, si c'en est une, n'est pas contagieuse et ne devrait pas nous voler notre amour. Non, je ne peux pas croire que Joseph m'ait aimée pour les enfants que j'étais supposée lui donner après notre mariage. Je ne veux pas croire qu'il n'ait vu en moi que cette femme qui deviendrait la mère de ses enfants. Non, cette idée m'est insupportable. Je suis une femme et je le resterai quoi qu'il advienne... Et moi dans cette affaire je n'ai pas changé, je demeure moi, celle qu'il a aimée, je reste une femme, sa femme²¹²!

Emilienne resolves her confusion by slipping into the dominant attitudes of her social context. We find evidence of this in her interior monologues. Not only does she unwittingly subscribe to the notion that a woman is incomplete so long as she has not given birth, she also sees procreation as a conjugal duty, a task to be accomplished for the sole pleasure of her man. Surely, she concedes, in her competition with his mistress the birth of a son would tip the scales in her favour:

"Que dois-je faire pour le récupérer? La naissance d'un second enfant lui ferait-elle abandonner cette femme? Oh Seigneur! Que n'essaierais-je pour rectifier la courbe de notre union et la rendre nette et ascendante!... C'est bien cela. Elle s'agite et se tord les mains, il faut que je lui donne un garçon qui lui ressemble"²¹³.

We are decidedly not very far from the traditional conceptions of womanhood held by characters like Rokhaya and Mama Ida. So effective is the insidious function of dominant social codes in *Fureurs* that the emancipated Emilienne now sees herself as existing merely to fulfill the function of bearing Joseph a male child. Worse still, because society, represented by her secretary, her sister and her parents, persistently speaks of a woman's infertility as a disease, a kind of sickness and disability, Emilienne unwittingly adopts this point of view and begins to hate and despise her own body.

Increasingly, she employs a welter of denigrating expressions to describe her body, referring to an "utérus inutile"²¹⁴, her "chair inféconde"²¹⁵, a "corps incapable d'assumer son rôle vital"²¹⁶, a "ventre déjà mort"²¹⁷, and a "femme en décomposition"²¹⁸. We hear her frequently castigate her body for having betrayed her and the whole process results in a feeling of self-pity and guilt, "un sentiment de culpabilité insurmontable"²¹⁹, to use her own words. We are therefore not overly surprised when the process of re-traditionalizing Emilienne crystallizes in the following confession:

Je ne me sentirai femme de nouveau que lorsque j'aurai donné à mon mari d'autres enfants. Ses regards tendres sur ses neveux sont des coups de poignard qu'il porte à mon cœur. Je me sens encore capable de lui donner l'occasion de serrer dans ses bras des enfants qui seraient bien à lui. Après tout, il y a des femmes qui accouchent à quarante ans et je n'en suis pas encore là²²⁰.

To accomplish her aim, Emilienne subjects herself to all sorts of modern and traditional healing methods. Her efforts do not impress Joseph who, during one of their rare romantic nights together callously informs Emilienne that he has a nine-year old son and an eight-year old daughter by his mistress. If we are left with any doubt as to the depth of humiliation into which Joseph is prepared to plunge his wife, the following passage dispels it:

Emilienne, elle, n'a besoin du soutien financier d'aucun homme, c'est ce qui la perdra, pense Joseph. Pourtant, je souhaite ne pas la quitter. C'est une femme d'intérieur remarquable et une mère parfaite quand tout va bien. Mon rêve serait qu'elle élève tous les enfants que je ferai avec d'autres femmes. C'est ce que font certaines épouses dans sa situation. Seulement voilà, je suis tombé sur une intellectuelle qui refuse de franchir certaines barrières²²¹.

Even before having two illegitimate children with his mistress, Joseph had already envisaged a babysitting role for Emilienne in his orchestrated folly. After an initially horrified reaction to the news of her husband having two children with another woman and hiding it from her for eleven years, a much calmer Emilienne goes into her usual monologue and begins to rationalize, once again, her husband's treachery, while at the same time giving hints that she will not accept the situation:

Il fallait bien qu'il l'aimât pour lui faire deux enfants et rester avec elle jusqu'à ce jour. Si je suis encore sa femme, c'est à elle qu'il est lié pour la vie. Je suis son épouse et c'est une autre qui a su l'avoir, le retenir et le garder pendant qu'il se retire de moi à pas feutrés. Deux beaux enfants dit-il, qu'il aimerait me voir élever pour qu'il puisse à pleins poumons crier au monde sa domination, sa victoire et sa virilité; ma soumission et ma faiblesse. Me croit-il bête pour aller jusque-là, pour vivre au grand jour mon humiliation²²²?

Following her now established pattern of making a resolution and doing exactly the opposite, Emilienne's next course of action is to redouble her efforts to bear children for Joseph. Accompanied by Eva, she travels to a remote village to participate in a carnivalesque cleansing ceremony for sterile women. However, her sense of rationality has not completely disappeared, for in a moment of lucidity during the ceremony, she exclaims:

Qu'est-ce que je fais ici? Je ne dois plus être moi-même. Quelle autre femme normale agirait comme moi en ce moment, après que son mari lui ait révélé sans ménagements l'existence de deux enfants qu'il aurait eus avec une autre, et osé lui proposer de les élever²²³?

The answer to Emilienne's self-interrogation is not far-fetched. It is to be found in her total subscription to society's construction of Joseph as her essential man. Even if she is reluctant to admit this fact, the reader knows better since she gives us insights into her weaknesses during her frequent monologues. For instance, after taking stock of the incredible number of humiliating circumstances Joseph has submitted her to, the possibility of divorce naturally flashes through her mind but she dismisses it in a manner that even Mama Ida would have been ashamed of:

Comment pourrais-je, à mon âge, recommencer une vie sentimentale avec un autre qui ne serait pas lui? Dieu, qu'est-ce qui me le fait aimer à ce point? J'en deviens malade et envisager le divorce me rend folle. Je n'y arriverai pas. Ma sœur aurait-elle raison? Sans lui, ma vie n'a plus de sens et ce n'est pas ma carrière professionnelle qui me comblerait de bonheur²²⁴.

Apart from the problems of procreation, and the assumption that a man is essential, and the consequences this portends for Emilienne in terms of her original identity as a liberated female subject, the heroine is also no longer in control of her domestic space. Her matrimonial home is invaded by Eyang, Joseph's mother, and also two of Joseph's nephews without, needless to say, Emilienne being consulted beforehand. As we have seen before, a traditional woman in such circumstances is supposed to be happy to have the opportunity to take care of her in-laws. In anticipation of the inevitable presence of in-laws in any young couple's domestic space, Eva had tried to prepare her emancipated sister's mind before her marriage to Joseph, telling her that:

Quelles que soient tes raisons, n'essaie jamais d'affronter ta belle-famille. Même si ton époux se range de ton côté. Très rapidement, tu te trouveras isolée si celle-ci est assez aimable pour ne pas provoquer ton divorce. Tu ferais mieux, crois-moi, de te débarrasser de tes principes de femme émancipée²²⁵.

Emilienne remembers this advice and behaves accordingly when Joseph arrives at home one evening with two children with whom she develops a somewhat cordial relationship. The same, however, cannot be said for her relationship with Eyang, who is depicted by Rawiri as the stereotypical African mother-in-law: a rabble-rousing devil incarnate who sees herself constantly in competition with her son's wife. Eyang, who appears to be thoroughly evil, never hides the fact that she hates Emilienne and spends considerable narrative time/space scheming against her. She appeals to her son to leave Emilienne for his mistress, whom she prefers:

Tu veux connaître le fond de ma pensée? Eh bien oui, ta femme ne me convient pas. Quelle est cette épouse qui passe ses jours et une bonne partie de ses nuits à des réunions féminines pour revendiquer je ne sais quels droits, comme si elle voulait refaire nos traditions! Crois-tu qu'elle réussira à s'imposer dans ce pays si elle ne sait pas être une bonne épouse et ne peut pas faire des enfants comme toutes les autres femmes? Peux-tu me dire à quoi elle te sert aujourd'hui²²⁶?

Surprisingly, although Emilienne happens frequently on such exchanges between Joseph and his mother, she always procrastinates about taking the only option open to her, making Eyang leave. She acknowledges in her monologues that such an action would be perfectly legitimate, but never embarks on it until far too much damage has been done for that action to have any redeeming impact. Finally, at the end of the story – on the very last page – on witnessing yet another exchange between Joseph and his mother, she asks both of them to leave, but textual indices point to the fact that what she wants is only a temporary respite. The move is suggestive of a transient separation between her and Joseph, Eyang being the main target of that belated action. It is all the more unfortunate that the action comes after Joseph has been allowed to inscribe the ultimate victory of patriarchal hegemony over Emilienne in these telling words:

-Tu aimerais sans doute savoir pourquoi *je ne te quitte pas!* Je vais te le dire, ajoute-t-il l'air provoquant. Je ne vois pas la raison de le faire. *Tu as fini par te plier à ma façon de vivre*, et de plus, tu ne me gênes pas. Par ailleurs, tu as des qualités que je n'ai retrouvées chez aucune femme. Tiens, par exemple, ta manière d'élever mes neveux, bien que tu ne t'intéresses plus beaucoup à eux depuis deux bonnes années. Contrairement aux autres hommes, vois-tu, *je ne te rejeterai pas* parce que ma situation financière s'est redressée notablement²²⁷. (my emphases)

Tu as fini par te plier à ma façon de vivre. In this sombre statement lies the tragic culmination of the textual trip from thematic iconoclasm to conformism. In it we witness the ultimate defeat of the principles of gender equality and every conceivable version of African feminism. In it lies the triumph of patriarchal hegemony. Every action that comes after its utterance in this novel pales into pathetic insignificance. This explains why too much critical value cannot be accorded to Emilienne's "sacking" of Joseph and his mother at the end of story. It is nothing but another pyrrhic, personal victory recorded by a daughter of imperialism, while the principles governing the overall social context remain fundamentally unaltered.

These analyses are by no means aimed at minimizing the importance of the personal victories recorded by Ramatoulaye, Mina and Emilienne within the overall context of the struggle of the subaltern sexed subject in African literatures and societies. If, as Gramsci advances, the march of the subaltern from his/her disadvantaged location to the valorizing sites of agency is necessarily fragmented and episodic, then the personal rebellions seen in this chapter should be figured as an important episode of that march. Even if, at this stage of the struggle, the heroines' social context, mired in a long patriarchal mores, proves too resilient and impervious to change, their rejection of an unquestioning acceptance of traditional prescriptions prepares the ground for the next

phase of the momentous struggle. In the context of African women's writing, non-conformity is a form of victory.

CHAPTER 4

The Subaltern Can Act: Three Women's Texts and the Production of Transformative Social Effects

The subaltern, in other words, is not only acted on, despite the tendency in traditional paradigms to see it as a passive or "absent" subject that can be mobilized only from above; it also acts to produce social effects that are visible, if not always predictable or understandable (Founding Statement: Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, Boundary 2 20.3, 1993)

The Episodic Development of Feminist Consciousness and Action in African Women's Writing

Gramsci underscores the importance of his characterization of the processes leading to the "permanent victory" of the subaltern as "episodic". This position implies that the emancipation of the subaltern does not occur as a fortuitous accident of history in an unplanned, unprogrammable void. Rather, the development can be seen as occurring in phases, each phase marked by a seismic dislocation of subalternizing orthodoxies. Because of Gramsci's Marxist orientation, it is safe to aver that, for him, the phases of the subaltern's struggle for agency correspond to the discernible phases of the proletariat's struggle in the Marxist reading of history and society.

The first phase translates into a *prise de conscience* by the subaltern, born out of an "objective" analysis of his/her situation. The second phase is characterized by acts of resistance from subaltern individuals or groups, resulting mostly in personal or transient small-scale victories. It is the phase of "independent initiatives", to borrow Gramsci's expression. The small victories recorded in the second phase not only prepare the ground

for the final phase, they also combine to produce the transformative social effects which characterize that final phase.

Nothing corroborates this schematic reading of the dialectic of struggle better than the perspicacious account given by C.L.R. James of the Haitian revolution, in his monumental historical treatise *The Black Jacobins* (1938). In this revisionist magnum opus that has become one of the most widely acclaimed textual deconstructions of European imperialism, James, an integral historian in the Gramscian sense, recounts “every trace of independent initiative” (Gramsci) on the part of the dehumanized Black slaves of the island of San Domingo (present-day Haiti) and the carefully articulated processes that led to the San Domingo revolution of 1791. James’ summary of events underlines the import of reading the emancipation of the subaltern through the lens of the Gramscian episodic paradigm:

In August 1791, after two years of the French Revolution and its repercussions in San Domingo, the slaves revolted. The struggle lasted for 12 years. The slaves defeated in turn the local whites and the soldiers of the French monarchy, a Spanish invasion, a British expedition of some 60,000 men and a French expedition of similar size under Bonaparte’s brother-in-law. The defeat of Bonaparte’s expedition in 1803 resulted in the establishment of the Negro state of Haiti which has lasted to this day. The revolt is the only successful slave revolt in history, and the odds it had to overcome is evidence of the magnitude of interests that were involved. The transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organise themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day, is one of the great epics of revolutionary struggle and achievement. Why and how this happened is the theme of this book²²⁸.

James was a Marxist and had evidently read Gramsci: the internal progression of his discourse in *The Black Jacobins* corresponds to the three phases of the subaltern’s march to freedom. From passive acceptance of their situation, James takes us through

their *prise de conscience*, their organization around their charismatic leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, their pyrrhic successes, and their ultimate victory.

Frantz Fanon equally places himself in the company of Gramsci and James by positing a phased, episodic reading of the development of the resistance cultures of the Third World. In his chapter "On National Culture", in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon at one point in his argument zeroes in on literature and makes this important observation:

If we wanted to trace in the works of native writers the different phases which characterize this evolution we would find spread out before us *a panorama on three levels*²²⁹. (my emphasis)

Fanon goes on to discuss the characteristics of each phase. His discussion of the third phase is germane here:

Finally in the third phase, which is called the fighting phase, the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature²³⁰.

The shifts described by Gramsci, James and Fanon apply extremely well to the subaltern subject's trajectory in francophone African women's fiction. A similar three-phase, episodic paradigm is useful and appropriate for reading the subaltern woman's struggle for agency in the texts in question. Having traced the progression of feminist consciousness from the passive submission of characters like Rokhaya and Mama Ida to the ravages of patriarchal pedagogy and hegemony, to the sophisticated personal struggles of Ramatoulaye, Mina and Emilienne, the stage is now set for an examination of the third and final phase of the struggle. In this stage, the subaltern not only vacates the subaltern position, at least textually, but also provokes far-reaching social effects. This

third stage constitutes the thematic core of Abibatou Traoré's *Sidagamie*, Fatou Keita's *Rebelle*, and Régina Yaou's *Le prix de la révolte*.

Polygamy as a Sign of Emancipation in Sidagamie

Abibatou Traoré's novel, *Sidagamie*, reads, in terms of narrative craft, as the juvenile work of a very promising writer. The perceivable artistic weaknesses of the novel can be excused on the grounds that it is the first work of a Paris-based Senegalese writer born in 1973. This should not cause us to disregard the significance of the work. The inclusion of *Sidagamie* in this chapter is partly in response to the overriding necessity of clearing a discursive space for emergent female writers of francophone Africa who continue to be overshadowed by the Mariama Bâs and the Aminata Sow Falls. Furthermore, whatever Traoré's work lacks in narrative expertise and artistry, it largely makes up for in discursive and thematic daring.

In order to fully grasp the thematic subversions at work in Traoré's text, it is necessary to recall John Beverley's theoretical mapping of Subaltern Studies as being essentially about who is losing or gaining power²³¹. *Sidagamie* illustrates a shift, in offering a construction of polygamy that is radically different from the picture to which most African writers have accustomed us. From Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* (1964) to Amadou Kourouma's *Monnè, outrages et défis* (1990) and Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, polygamy is usually cast as an uncontested site of male dominance and female victimhood. Whether polygamy is depicted as actually functioning, as in the texts of Achebe and Kourouma, or is introspectively dissected after it has broken down, as in

Bâ's text, there can be no possible doubt as to who occupies the locations of power and subalternity in those works.

In the traditional scenario, man holds all the aces and reigns supreme in a polygamous arrangement. All authority devolves from him, and the women who occupy the subaltern positions in the arrangement hardly need to be reminded of this. The bickerings and verbal confrontations which usually turn polygamy into a theatre of chaos occur horizontally among the competing wives. Hardly ever do they occur vertically between the wives and their lord and master. Traoré's discourse on polygamy, however, is not hostage to such fashions and bandwagon effects. In *Sidagamie*, the novelist undertakes a subversive reading of polygamy as a site of empowerment for the subaltern woman. In this novel, which amplifies Beverley's reading of the politics of subalternity, the man at the centre of the polygamous drama loses power with each additional wife he marries. Correspondingly, his wives and assertive daughter gain power and strength.

Set in Ziguinchor, a volatile site of secessionist ethnic uprisings in postcolonial Senegal, *Sidagamie* is the story of Pauline, a young Christian girl who defies her family to marry a Moslem, Moussa, the love of her life. The couple settles down to a life of relative bliss and they have three daughters. Aïda, the eldest, is a precocious and restless teenager, while her younger sisters, Adama and Awa, are six-year-old identical twins. Despite the fact that Moussa and Pauline have a modern domestic arrangement, we nevertheless have the impression that they are not as equal as were Djibril and Mina (in *Sous la cendre*) or Joseph and Emilienne (in *Fureurs*) at the beginning of their respective stories. Moussa's initial dominance is understandable because, unlike Mina and

Emilienne, Pauline opts to be a full time housewife and thus depend entirely on her husband for financial sustenance.

Life moves along on a generally happy note for the young couple and their daughters until Moussa decides to rock the boat by marrying a second wife: the balance of power begins to tilt visibly the moment he makes this announcement to his family. Part of Traoré's thematic inventiveness is to register what is usually the moment of the male's triumph in African fiction as the narrative moment of Moussa's defeat, of his loss of power and consequent slide into subalternity in his own home. Let us examine the moment of this announcement in closer detail. Moussa has informed a devastated Pauline of his intentions and Aïda, who has been eavesdropping all along on her parent's tempestuous confrontation, finally intervenes:

-Non papa, pas ça.

-Va dans ta chambre, Aïda.

-Non papa, tu ne vas pas nous faire ça. Tu t'imagines une seconde le mal que tu fais à maman? Tu t'en fous?

-La ferme, Aïda. On ne parle pas ainsi à son père.

-Comment veux-tu que je te parle? Comment peux-tu espérer du respect de ma part si tu cherches à commettre une bêtise qui, à mon avis, n'est digne que des hommes sans éducation? Tu me dégoûtes et...

Elle reçut une belle gifle et sortit de la chambre en sanglotant. Pauline reprit enfin la parole:

-Elle a raison. Tu es dégoûtant.

Moussa ne savait plus où donner de la tête. Il cria sur sa femme aussi:

-Je suis chez moi ici. C'est moi le maître et vous n'avez pas à me dicter ma conduite. Je ne faisais que t'informer et je te croyais assez intelligente pour prendre la chose correctement. Fiche-moi la paix maintenant, il faut que je dorme²³².

We, as readers, know that Moussa is mistaken. There are enough clues in the passage cited to show that he has already been dislocated from the position of power and authority. The first is Aïda's tone and her choice of words in addressing her father. Since, according to the régime of gerontocracy prevalent in most African cultures, children

usually remain under absolute parental control until they marry in their late twenties and early thirties²³³, terms like “bêtise” and “dégoûter” are not to be expected in the presence of adults, much less from a child addressing his/her father. No matter how horrible and unjustifiable Moussa’s action is, it is hard to think of any cultural location in West Africa where Aïda’s reaction would not have occasioned very serious cultural consequences.

Aïda’s reaction is therefore an important indicator of the gradual erosion of Moussa’s authority. Pauline’s outburst, which the omniscient narrator significantly explains as the first since their marriage, is also to be read as her manifesto of emancipation. That Moussa finds himself in a situation where he has to scream to remind everyone that he is the boss is evidence of his loss of authority. The point needs be reiterated that such screams of affirmation are very unnecessary in the traditional polygamous context, where the man’s authority is self-evident and occasions very dire consequences for women who challenge it. After all, as Wole Soyinka reminds us, a tiger does not need to proclaim its tigritude.

Moussa’s scream is thus a drowning man’s last gasp for air. Once he sets certain seismic processes in motion with his decision to become a polygamist, Moussa discovers to his dismay that not only his authority but his centrality in all decisions affecting the family are progressively jeopardised. It also marks the beginning of a long process of self-rediscovery for Pauline. Polygamy, rather than being an instrument of subalternization, becomes the principal catalyst for the heroine’s *prise de conscience* in *Sidagamie*. Pauline, who until now has seen Moussa as her “essential man”, suddenly comes to the realization this notion is inimical to her aspiration for agency, and consequently decides to dethrone Moussa from that location.

Like Ramatoulaye, she opts to act from within the polygamous equation. Her first action is literally to shut Moussa out of her life, thus effecting a textual obliteration of her supposedly essential man:

Pendant les jours suivants, Pauline accorda les trois quarts de son temps à son nouveau centre d'intérêt. Elle manifesta à l'égard de Moussa une froideur qu'il ne lui avait jamais connue et s'enferma dans un mutisme qu'il avait un mal fou à supporter. Il chercha à lui parler mais se heurta à un mur infranchissable²³⁴.

Her second step in self-assertion and restoration of agency is to return to her Catholic religion. We are told that Pauline was, until her marriage, a devout Catholic who had even contemplated becoming a nun. She had given up practising her faith to please her husband, a devout Moslem who hates the idea of his wife and children attending mass. She makes her intention to return to church known to Aminta, her elderly bosom friend and confidant, informing her of the pleasure she will derive from doing something of which her husband does not approve.

The introduction of the character of Aminta is one of Traoré's innovations in this novel. Aminta, by all accounts, is a "daughter of the goddess". One would therefore expect her to be cast in the mould of the other daughters of the goddess we have encountered so far in this study: an agent of patriarchy seeking to impose the codes of traditional pedagogy on her young friend. Aminta, however, defies stereotypical codifications and proves that identity, even for an older woman, is a contingent factor that evolves with the times. When Pauline confides in her, she expresses surprisingly secular views on polygamy:

-Je ne t'apprends rien en disant que l'existence de tout être est parsemée d'embûches. Il faut savoir les surmonter la tête haute. Je n'en reviens pas que Moussa veuille épouser une seconde femme, je suis aussi choquée que toi. Il aurait pu éviter de te faire toute cette peine²³⁵.

Here, solidarity among women is stronger than generational differences, and the older woman is not fatalistic. The concept of choice is central to this narrative. Pauline constantly finds herself faced with situations in which she has to make difficult choices. But it needs be mentioned that unlike the situation in a good number of African texts by both male and female authors, in which a woman's choices are either severely controlled or already pre-determined for her by her socio-cultural context, Pauline's margin of choice and action is much larger. She also makes her choices usually in response to an analysis of her situation and not in deference to the prescriptions of her context. For instance, her decision to remain married to Moussa is based on the realization that it makes financial and economic sense for her and her children to remain with the man she now considers a traitor.

Polygamy not only empowers Pauline, in the sense of forcing her to make difficult, independent choices, it also enhances her assertiveness and her desire to have a voice from now on in the day-to-day running of their household, an area of action that was the exclusive preserve of Moussa. We learn, for instance, that Moussa, whose financial resources are limited, had not really given any thought to the question of space for his new wife. When faced with the practical problem of where to accommodate her, he attempts to make Aïda vacate her room for the new bride. He makes this move out of the conviction that he is still the lord and master of the household whose decisions can go unchallenged. The reaction he receives from Aïda and Pauline bears further testimony to his loss of power and authority and the corresponding empowerment of his wife and daughter. Aïda is the first to challenge her father's decision:

-Je ne quitterai jamais ma chambre. J'adore mes petites sœurs mais il n'est pas question qu'à mon âge je dorme avec des enfants qui ont presque dix ans de moins que moi.

-C'est ma maison ici. C'est moi qui dicte les lois et toi tu es ma fille, tu te dois de m'obéir...

-...Ce n'est pas parce que tu nous nourris que nous devons absolument faire tout ce que tu veux. Ta femme a des droits même si elle est sous ton toit. En mettant des enfants au monde tu as des devoirs vis-à-vis d'eux, tu leur accordes des droits aussi, que tu le veuilles ou non²³⁶.

If Moussa thinks his daughter's invalidation of his decision constitutes the height of outrage, Pauline registers an even more shocking delegitimation of his authority:

-Réfléchis un peu quand tu parles. Je ne veux pas me disputer avec toi. Tout ce que j'ai à te dire c'est que Aïda ne quittera pas sa chambre. Trouve où caser ta femme mais, de grâce, n'y mêle pas mes enfants, je ne te laisserai pas faire. Débrouille-toi, sans nous casser les oreilles²³⁷.

This encounter marks the second time in the narrative that a disoriented Moussa has to scream in a futile bid to assert his by now largely meretricious authority. Because mother and daughter hold similar views on polygamy, and because of the considerable space they now occupy both at the level of the narrative and in the household, Moussa progressively finds himself entrapped in a domestic space in which anti-polygamic women's talk reigns supreme, unlike the men's talk that overshadowed Mina in her domestic space in *Sous la cendre*. Pauline fails to understand why it is usually the most impecunious men who insist on polygamy:

-La polygamie n'est pas faite pour les pauvres mais cela, la majorité des hommes ne le comprennent pas. Plus ils sont pauvres, plus ils ont tendance à pencher vers cette pratique. Tout ce qui leur importe c'est d'avoir leur plaisir même s'ils doivent entasser femmes et enfants comme du bétail dans de petites maisons²³⁸.

Aïda, for her part, sees polygamy as one of the cultural flaws of this particular patriarchal society and condemns it in a flight of sociological discourse that incorporates critical commentary into the fictional dialogue in a not wholly convincing manner:

-C'est la société qui le veut. Elle a toujours fait de la femme l'inférieure de l'homme. Que voulez-vous? Il faut que ça change. Les hommes ne se gênent pas pour exploiter les femmes. Ils utilisent pour cela la tradition et la religion. Il faut combattre ce système, en finir avec cet état d'esprit selon lequel les mœurs des anciens sont des choses à perpétuer, des tabous intouchables²³⁹.

Aïda and her teenage friend, Mariétou, serve as instruments for the expression of sociological discourse in a demonstration of authorial intervention that disrupts the fictional illusion and betrays the author's lack of experience. Mariétou also serves another role in the plot, since Moussa's new wife turns out to be none other than her elder sister, Maïmouna. The latter enters the narrative as a doubly subalternized subject, since she has had the misfortune of having her first child out of wedlock in a cultural context in which being a single mother is not tolerated. As she moves in with Moussa and his family, one therefore expects her relationship with Pauline and Aïda to be marked by incessant bickerings, quarrels, machinations and competition for their husband's attention, as is characteristic of polygamous situations in other novels.

One of the signs of patriarchal triumphalism in the polygamous context is precisely the Hobbesian relationship which it engenders among the wives. It titillates the man's ego to be the prized "possession" for which the women indulge in cutthroat competition. Their quarrels centralize him, consecrating him as the essential man. It is therefore to Traoré's authorial credit that she denies Moussa this victory. Unlike some of his textual predecessors in African fiction, polygamy decentralizes him. Admittedly, Pauline and Aïda accord Maïmouna anything but a warm reception on her arrival, but their hostility soon dissolves into mutual respect and, finally, friendship. Maïmouna even becomes Aïda's confidant.

In a radical departure from the customary situation, polygamy in *Sidagmie* results in a kind of female bonding, with each of the women understanding the peculiar position of the other. A mutual appreciation of each other's situation as victim of an overriding cultural system is thus established. This entente further consolidates the transformation of Moussa's house into a space for the exploration of women's talk, thereby increasing his alienation and peripheralization within the scheme of things:

Tous ces conseils de tantes éloignées, de copines et de voisines avaient fait entrevoir à Maïmouna sa future co-épouse en sorcière et son foyer en champ de bataille où elle allait devoir s'affirmer pour faire valoir ses droits. Ce ne fut guère le cas et elle en fut la première surprise. On l'avait certes accueillie avec beaucoup de froideur mais à aucun moment elle n'avait eu l'impression que l'autre Mme Konaté cherchait à rendre son mariage infernal. Pauline s'était comportée avec respect vis-à-vis d'elle. Sa réserve. Maïmouna l'avait d'ailleurs comprise. Elle se mettait à sa place et se doutait bien que voir son mari épouser une seconde femme ne pouvait plaire à personne. Pauline n'avait pas été méchante et elle lui en était reconnaissante²⁴⁰.

The cordial relationship which Maïmouna succeeds in establishing with Pauline and Aïda yields an interesting textual consequence: we learn in the course of an intimate conversation between Aïda and Maïmouna that the latter is still very much in love with her first lover, Ricardo. Moussa is merely being used by Maïmouna for convenience:

Elle aimait beaucoup son mari mais elle ne précisa pas que ce n'était que de l'affection. Elle n'avait pas aimé l'homme mais le futur mari qui devait la sortir d'une situation gênante aux yeux de la société. Cela n'avait rien à voir avec l'amour qu'une jeune fille peut éprouver pour quelqu'un de son âge²⁴¹.

Maïmouna eventually succeeds in re-establishing contact with her true love and begins to cheat on Moussa. Every action undertaken by Moussa's two wives and his eldest daughter ultimately translates into a corresponding subalternization of the man: Pauline stops having sexual relations with him, Maïmouna cheats on him, Aïda no longer accords him the customary respect due to a father. His domestic space having been

“conquered” by these three women, an alienated Moussa increasingly escapes to the street:

Il évitait de répondre et commençait à sortir de chez lui sans trop savoir où il allait. Ses pas le menaient au hasard des rues. Il passait des heures à flaner s’arrêtant par-ci par-là pour bavarder avec des connaissances ou se retrouvant sans l’avoir prévu chez des gens avec qui il avait de vagues relations²⁴².

His increasing sense of worthlessness and the need to shore up his badly damaged ego are perhaps responsible for his sudden decision to marry a third wife, this time an eighteen-year-old peasant rigidly trained in Islamic and traditional codes, making her a suitable candidate for absolute submission and docility. Moussa feels the need to have at least one woman in his household over whom he has unquestioned control. While Pauline manifests a cold, if not surreal indifference to the idea of a third wife, Maïmouna decides to fight it, thus making things very difficult for N’Deye Marème, the new wife.

While not totally restoring Moussa to his former central position, the incessant quarrels between the last two wives give him a new sense of relevance in the scheme of things, as he now has to come home more frequently to make peace between the women. The omniscient narrator makes a poignant assessment of this situation through one of Aïda’s interior monologues:

Son père appartenait désormais à une catégorie d’individus qu’elle méprisait. Il passait ses journées sous un arbre à palabre à jouer aux cartes avec des gens comme lui, qui ne semblaient avoir rien d’autre à faire. Il ne rentrait chez lui que pour prendre ses repas et dormir ou bien tenter de ramener ses deux dernières femmes à la raison. Maïmouna et N’Deye Marème ne s’entendaient pas du tout et elles ne laissaient pas de répit à leur entourage. Il ne se passait pas une journée sans qu’on les entende²⁴³.

The acrimonious situation between the two women does not, however, last long. Maïmouna’s renewed contact with her first love gives her a new sense of direction. It

rejuvenates her and she decides to adopt a more positive attitude to life and to people around her, including her bitter rival. Aïda, who by now has become an undergraduate at the University of Dakar, comes home for holidays in Ziguinchor and announces to her parents that she and her boyfriend, Armando, have decided to get married. Moussa objects on the grounds that Aïda is still too young to marry at nineteen, only to be reminded by his angry daughter that N'Deye Marème was eighteen when he married her as his third wife. This is yet another indication of Moussa's loss of authority, for even in the most Westernized families in Africa where children are free to choose their partners, parental approval of one's choice is still a quasi-spiritual necessity.

Pauline approves of her daughter's choice but advises her not to rush into marriage. The encounter between mother and daughter over this issue opens up the possibility of reading *Sidagmie* within Catherine Acholonu's theoretical matrix of motherism. This theoretical concept exposes some of the fundamental differences in the perception of motherhood between African women and certain radical Western feminists. Let us consider, for instance, two opinions on motherhood, one by a Western feminist and the other by an African feminist. For Jeffner Allen:

Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers and, conversely, because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity and world that is open and free. An active rejection of motherhood entails the development and enactment of a philosophy of evacuation... A philosophy of evacuation proposes women's collective removal of themselves from all forms of motherhood⁴⁴.

The phrase "all forms of motherhood" precludes any metaphorical reading of Allen's position. A Camerounian theorist, Julianah Nfah-Abbenyi, presents an African opinion on motherhood:

The critique of motherhood (that views women as forced mothers) and heterosexuality (that views women as sexual slaves) can be problematical to most African women simply because motherhood and family have historically represented different experiences and social practices to Western and African women... Whereas many Western women may view multiple childbirth as both oppressive and restrictive... most African women find empowerment in their children and families²⁴⁵.

Motherhood as a source of empowerment is crucial to Acholonu's theory. Beyond that, motherism also involves the possibility of African women exploiting the culturally revered location of motherhood to reject their role as agents of patriarchal hegemony who perpetuate certain subalternizing role mannerisms by socializing their daughters into an unquestioning culture of conformism. Motherism has a futuristic side to it, envisaging the possibility of mothers breaking the chain of subalternization through using their own experience of subalternity as a lesson for their daughters. This is exactly what happens between Pauline and Aïda, where the issue of the latter's marriage allows us to see motherism at work:

-Trouves-tu que je suis trop jeune pour savoir ce qu'il me faut? S'enquit la jeune fille.

-Non ma chérie. Quand je me suis mariée, j'étais beaucoup plus jeune que toi. Ce que je pense, c'est qu'il faut que tu réussisses brillamment tes études et si tu te maries maintenant, cela risque d'être difficile. Ta vie de femme va prendre le dessus sur ta vie d'étudiante. Tu peux tomber enceinte par exemple et je ne veux en aucun cas que tu te retrouves dans la situation que je vis aujourd'hui. Je suis prise au piège comme tu vois. Armando va bientôt devenir médecin, c'est très bien mais il ne faut pas que tu sois dans son sillage, que tu ne brilles que par lui. Tu ne dois pas vivre dans son ombre. Il ne faut pas qu'on parle plus de toi en tant que femme de tel homme qu'en tant que toi. Vois-tu ce que je veux dire? N'accepte jamais de dépendre d'un homme, de mettre ton avenir entre ses mains... Je te comprends parfaitement, mais je veux que mon expérience te serve. Il serait bête qu'il t'arrive la même chose qu'à moi. Regarde donc, je suis là, clouée chez un homme qui m'a fait subir la plus grosse des humiliations. Penses-tu que j'aurais accepté cela si j'avais été un tant soit peu indépendante²⁴⁶?

This certainly represents a huge leap from the kind of education that Mina and Patricia received from their mothers in *Sous la cendre* and *La tache de sang* respectively. We are thus not surprised that Pauline succeeds in convincing her daughter to wait. While this positive deployment of motherism takes effect between Pauline and Aïda, we find out that N'Deye Marème, who has been hospitalised for a while with a curious illness, has been diagnosed with AIDS. She was obviously infected long before she married Moussa. The news devastates Moussa, who now realises his folly. Not only did his experiment with polygamy disempower and decentralize him, but the whole arrangement has turned from polygamy to "sidagamie" (from the French for AIDS, SIDA), with the realization that he and Maïmouna are also infected. Only Pauline is safe, having stopped all sexual relations with him since his second marriage.

By the time the novel ends, Moussa's textual eviction from his original location as an essential man has been fully realised. We are informed that a seropositive Maïmouna is pregnant with her lover's child. We are also left to conclude that apart from escaping from being infected by AIDS, Pauline's motheristic intervention works and Aïda will end up in a different kind of marriage. It will face its own inevitable challenges, but gender equality and mutual respect will carry the day, as opposed to what happened in the cases of Mina and Djibril in *Sous la cendre*, and Emilienne and Joseph in *Fureurs*.

Although linear simplism and a sometimes defective handling of narrative techniques are weaknesses in this novel, they take nothing away from the work's thematic and discursive originality. Traoré offers a revisionist construction of polygamy that is rare in African literature. Indeed, there is hardly any African work at the moment in which a polygamous male character is made so peripheral and irrelevant as Moussa

turns out to be. His wives and daughter achieve empowerment at his expense. What is more, this peculiar polygamous situation occurs without any serious social pressure being put on the women to conform and recentralize their husband. There are very minimal references to the extended family in *Sidagamie*. In the customary situation, the entire community, acting as one big family, would have made a concerted effort against Moussa's wives, especially Pauline, forcing them to "behave". *Sidagamie* thus presents us with a situation in which the peculiar emancipation of the subaltern woman through the instrumentality of polygamy is made all the more concrete by the flexibility and adaptability of the social context in which she operates, as opposed to the resistant contexts we have encountered until now.

Negofeminism and Collective Action In Rebelle

In contrast with *Sidagamie*, Fatou Keïta's *Rebelle* comes across as a very successful experiment in character development and praxis formation for a first novel. Exploring the discursive possibilities offered by Obioma Nnaemeka's negofeminism and the dialectical imperative of collective subaltern action, as described in the works of Fanon and Amílcar Cabral, the novel reveals Keïta as a much more accomplished storyteller than Traoré. The major accomplishment of the author of *Rebelle*, however, lies in the successful transformation of the personal into the collective, one subaltern subject's personal struggles and triumphs against patriarchal oppression being wholly embraced by her peers. While not dissolving class difference among the female actors in this novel, the author sublimates it to the higher imperative of working together for a common goal. A rare occurrence in francophone African women's fiction, the usually

arrogant daughters of imperialism are made to “unlearn their privileges”, to borrow a popular Spivak phrase, and struggle alongside daughters of the goddess in order to achieve *stiwa*.

From the outset, this novel lives up to its title. It is a narrative embedded in resistance and rebellion, and the entire plot is structured around the need to accommodate those imperatives. The story evolves as a long flash back into the life of Malimouna, a teenage peasant girl living with her mother in the fictional village of Boritouni. Malimouna and her mother live alone because the latter was repudiated by her husband as a result of her inability to have a male child. Malimouna is a precocious child. Her mother’s unjust treatment by society, coupled with her association with Sanita, a city girl raised in Paris who visits the village for holidays, combine to sharpen the rebellious streak in her. For instance, in the course of their wanderings in the thickets surrounding the village, Sanita had taught the heroine to touch, caress and appreciate her clitoris. Malimouna has come to think of her clitoris as “cette petite partie de son corps, si douce au toucher”²⁴⁷. One is therefore not surprised that her narrative trajectory starts with her firm refusal to submit to female excision (genital mutilation in Western discourse), a ceremony performed annually on teenage girls by the feared Dimikèla, an elderly priestess.

Matou, who is already condemned to a life of humiliation as an outcast, is understandably devastated by her daughter’s rejection of circumcision, an action that is bound to result in the most severe social consequences for mother and daughter. Matou presumably attributes Malimouna’s deviance to Sanita and her Westernized parents:

Les mains sur les hanches, Matou, incrédule, regardait sa fille. Et tout d'un coup elle comprit. Sanita! Cette maudite petite citadine aux manières de Toubab (White people), et qui était devenue l'amie de sa fille, avait dû lui donner toutes ces mauvaises idées... Mais elle, Matou, sauverait sa fille de ce désastre. Elle l'empêcherait, quoi qu'il lui en coûte, de se retrouver au ban de la société. Elle la sauverait d'elle-même²⁴⁸.

Matou eventually enlists the help of Dimikèla to jolt her daughter back to reason.

This triggers off a series of events which make us appreciate Malimouna's resolve and her willingness to use any means to achieve her aim of defying patriarchal society and preserving her clitoris. During one of her solitary wanderings in the outskirts of Boritouni, Malimouna had happened on Dimikèla and Seynou, the village hunter. Both adults, completely nude, were copulating in the bush. Consequently, in their confrontation over the issue of excision, the young Malimouna knows that she is operating from a position of strength, since Dimikèla would never risk exposure. Malimouna drives home the point by threatening to tell the whole village what she saw in the bush. A helpless Dimikèla sees no way out and succumbs to the blackmail.

It is significant that the first victory of the subaltern subject recorded in *Rebelle* is over female excision, a sensitive issue which has been transformed into a human rights agenda by Western agencies and NGOs, generating what Chris Dunton sees as "widespread and anguished debate"²⁴⁹ in contemporary times. Because of the vexed nature of the debate over it, which usually pitches Africa against the West, it is tempting to compare Keïta's handling of it with that of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of Africa's most famous male novelists. Ngugi is a Marxist whose entire œuvre explores the consequences of Western imperialism in Africa. Such a comparison is useful in determining how the same theme relating to women's experience is handled by a male and a female writer.

Because of Ngugi's ideological orientation, the theme of female excision is subsumed within a broad anti-imperialist project in his novel, *The River Between* (1965). Imperialist Christian missionaries, imbued with the cultural arrogance of Europe and the consequent belief in the superiority of their values over those of the "savages" they were struggling to civilize in Africa, decried this practice as a barbaric custom that must be wiped out. The Gikuyu, for whom the practice has primordial spiritual and social value, resisted the "civilizing" move of the British. Ngugi, not a writer known to resolve textual conflicts in favour of the West, deftly makes Muthoni, the daughter of the local leader of the Christian community, defy her father and submit willingly to circumcision.

We thus have a situation in which a female character sacrifices her clitoris for the greater cause of anti-colonial resistance. Ngugi's handling of the theme conforms with the general attitude of Africa's male intellectuals, to the effect that African women must push feminist issues to the background and join hands with their male counterparts in the 'more important' struggle against Euro-American neo-colonialism. This is the 'first things first' motif so powerfully depicted in Felix Mnthali's poem, "Letter to a Feminist Friend"²⁵⁰. Keïta's handling of the theme in *Rebelle* proves that African women writers are not impressed by their male counterparts' approach to the issue. While Ngugi sacrifices Muthoni's clitoris, Keïta saves Malimouna's, to demonstrate that issues relating to the condition of women in Africa are as important as the ideological priority of anti-imperialist resistance so dear to the male writers.

No sooner has Malimouna overcome the effects of her first confrontation with patriarchy than another potentially dangerous situation occurs. By now she has blossomed into a beautiful teenager and Louma, the father who abandoned her, suddenly

remembers that he had promised her in marriage, ever since she was born, to his old friend, the rich Sando. The wedding is hurriedly arranged, without Malimouna or her mother having any say in the matter. On her wedding night, two elderly women acting as agents of patriarchy lock up the hapless Malimouna in a bedroom. She is to remain there waiting for Sando to come and consummate their marriage, after which the two women will inspect the bed sheets for bloodstains, evidence of Malimouna's virginity. Sando enters the room some time after midnight and reaches for her. Malimouna grabs a wooden statue and hits him on the head, knocking him unconscious. She steals out of the bedroom and runs out into the night, with no idea where she is headed.

This event marks the second incidence of subaltern rebellion against another formidable canon of patriarchy: arranged marriage. These first two victories are, of necessity, personal, but the narrative evolves in a manner that reflects the need to move from the personal to the collective, if the possibility of Gramsci's "permanent victory" of the subaltern is to be remotely thinkable. It is therefore not by happenstance that Malimouna's flight takes her to Salouma, the capital city of the fictional country in which the story is set. By successfully overcoming female circumcision and an arranged marriage, Malimouna has reached the possible limit of her potential. It is difficult to imagine the possibility of further dissident action on the part of this teenager in a village rigidly governed by a religious and traditional ethos. The change of setting from the village to the city therefore opens up narrative possibilities which have the overall effect of facilitating the further development of Malimouna's character. In Salouma, she works in rapid succession as a domestic servant and nanny for two expatriate French families. The second family decides to take her to a small village in France for the holidays. There,

her employer's husband attempts to rape her and she escapes to Paris. This marks her third flight from male exploitation.

The rebellious daughter of the goddess thus begins a long process of transformation into a daughter of imperialism. Initially, life turns out unbearably difficult for her in Paris, as she literally has to scrounge and do all sorts of odd jobs to survive. By the time she becomes solvent, her consciousness has developed sufficiently for her to feel the pressing need to acquire an education, in order to be better equipped to face life's challenges and rise up to the occasion of fighting to improve the lot of women:

Financièrement, Malimouna s'en sortait, mais elle avait d'autres ambitions. Elle souhaitait s'inscrire dans quelques mois, dans un Institut d'Etudes Sociales. Celui qui se trouvait non loin de chez elle lui semblait le lieu indiqué pour apprendre le métier qui lui permettrait d'atteindre son but: "Aider les femmes"²⁵¹.

The incident which convinces Malimouna that she has the ultimate mission of helping women, particularly African women living in France, occurs when she suddenly finds herself hosting Fanta, a victim of an arranged marriage sent to join her husband in France. Fanta had been betrothed during her childhood in Mali to Barou, who eventually leaves for France. As the family back home receives no word from him concerning his wife for several years, they arrange to send the girl to him. Since Barou was away at work on her arrival in France, Malimouna offers to take her in pending her husband's arrival and this provides the opportunity to hear Fanta's story.

The narrative moves at a faster pace from here on in order to accommodate Fanta's case as a story within a story. Fanta and her husband live in the apartment opposite Malimouna's, making it possible for the two women to establish a strong friendship. Malimouna's determination, her zeal to improve her lot and evacuate the position of subalternity begin to rub off on Fanta, who expresses the wish to start

schooling. This is impeded because Fanta soon begins to have children in very rapid succession and is already carrying her fifth child at the age of twenty-four. Malimouna, who by now has developed into a full-blown feminist, is naturally dissatisfied with this state of things and confronts Fanta:

-Mais comment vas-tu t'en sortir avec tous ces bébés?

Malimouna calcula rapidement.

-Noura n'aura même pas trois ans et les jumeaux auront à peine quatorze mois quand ce bébé naîtra! Et c'est toi qui parlais de t'instruire comme moi! Mais quand pourras-tu le faire?

-Ne parle pas si fort, Malimouna, mon mari pourrait t'entendre! Mes enfants iront à l'école, ce sera ma consolation... Que veux-tu que je fasse²⁵²?

This classic encounter between a daughter of imperialism and a daughter of the goddess is significant because it enables us to see conscientization at work. One must be careful not to decontextualize Malimouna's position on children. She is not against multiple childbirth *per se* but adopts a position in which the decision to have several children should be mediated by the couple's economic situation and, more importantly, by the woman's health. Malimouna's position therefore does not run foul of motherism but rather reinforces it, one of the cardinal tenets of that theory being that rather than avoid motherhood, African women must occupy that location strategically and remap it, whenever necessary, as a de-subalternized position of strength.

Fanta's last statement in the cited passage – “que veux-tu que je fasse?” – falls in line with the initial position of daughters of the goddess when confronted with the stark reality of their situation: resignation, or even worse, fatalism. Fortunately, Malimouna is not cast in the mould of the arrogant feminists whose movement fails in *La tache de sang*. They fail, among other reasons, because they assume to know more than their uneducated peasant sisters, whom they perceive of as objects to be educated rather than

subjects in the collective process of education. They therefore constantly peddle artificial solutions that are at variance with the realities and the sensibilities of their less privileged sisters. Building on the discursive continuity established between the texts studied so far, Malimouna's strategies can be read as an improvement on the failed strategies of her sisters in *La tache de sang*.

The daughters of imperialism failed in that 1990 text because they adopt the wrong strategies in their dealings with their peasant sisters. Eight years later, one of them, having learned from that "historical failure" (I borrow the expression from Guha), unlearns her privileges and treats her uneducated sister as a reasoning subject. For Malimouna, even when convinced of the superiority of her opinions, never imposes them on Fanta. She conveys them as suggestions in the course of their conversations and allows the latter to reflect and make her own decisions. This is precisely what happens when Malimouna suggests the pill as a solution to Fanta's recurrent pregnancies. It takes Fanta several months to approach Malimouna with her decision:

Deux mois après la naissance de son quatrième enfant, Fanta demanda à Malimouna de l'aider à obtenir cette contraception à l'insu de son mari. Malimouna savait qu'elle s'engageait là dans une situation dont les conséquences pouvaient être terribles, et pour elle et pour son amie, si jamais Barou venait à découvrir leur complicité. Mais elle ne devait pas reculer. Fanta passait le plus clair de son temps entre les couches, les tétées, la vaisselle, la cuisine et la lessive... La nuit, elle était constamment réveillée par les pleurs des bébés. Elle aurait pu se reposer quelques instants entre midi et deux heures, mais à ce moment-là, le mari se réveillait et accomplissait son devoir conjugal. Fanta avait les yeux cernés et maigrissait à vue d'œil. Elle avait besoin d'aide²⁵³.

Beyond the emphasis on Fanta's exercise of choice, this passage also bears testimony to the inevitable confrontation between subaltern female subjects struggling to vacate that position and a patriarchy intent on maintaining the status quo. The confrontation in *Rebelle* is even more interesting because it is played out in Paris. The

Foyer Africain in which Malimouna, Barou and Fanta, and so many other Africans live is a quintessential ethnospace rigidly governed by patriarchal pedagogy and hegemony. In an earlier study²⁵⁴ of this phenomenon in francophone African fiction, I suggested the notion of ethnospace to account for the spaces which immigrant communities carve out for themselves in Western cities – the ubiquitous Chinatowns for instance – in which they reterritorialize the mores, cultures, traditions and even the architecture of the homeland.

The ethnospace is a site of resistance to incorporation into the dominant Western culture. It can also be read as a Baudrillardian simulacrum of reality, providing psychic anchorage for the immigrant through a reproduction of the realities of his/her homeland. This is the sense in which Isabelle Allende, for example, explores the concept of ethnospace in her novel, *The Infinite Plan* (1991), where she traces the formation of a Chicano barrio in California by Mexican immigrants. The barrio is an ethnospace invested with the food, dress codes, ethical norms, religion and, most importantly, the language of the immigrants. The cultural boundaries are so rigidly marked that the barrio becomes, for the immigrants, a site of resistance against incorporation into the dominant American culture. So effective is the ethnospatial 'Mexicanization' of that American space that one of the characters, an elderly grandmother, never even realizes that she left Mexico years ago. She dies comforted by the illusion that she will be buried beside her ancestors.

In essence, an ethnospace reroots the deracinated immigrant who withdraws frequently into it on account of the daily indignities he encounters with the dominant culture, as seen in Beyala's *Le petit prince de Belleville* and Sembène Ousmane's *Le docker noir* (1958). Much like the protagonist's father in *Le petit prince de Belleville*,

Barou and his brothers in *Rebelle* see their Parisian 'Foyer Africain' as Africa, and themselves as the patriarchs and lords of that space. Because they are mostly Moslems from Mali, they impose religious and traditional codes on that space and this puts them on a collision course with Malimouna who might "corrupt" their wives with her "dangerous" ideas.

Malimouna's feared confrontation with patriarchy in the ethnospace comes to pass when Barou catches his wife taking the pill, even after he had explained to her that it is against their religion and proclaimed that only morally lax women resort to it to cover up their sordid lifestyle. A furious Barou descends on Fanta, beating her to a pulp and threatening to administer the same treatment to Malimouna whom he holds responsible for his wife's grievous error. Malimouna knows that the right thing to do is to call the police, but that option sensitizes her to another serious ideological consideration born out of their collective condition as African immigrants in France:

Elle souleva le combiné du téléphone pour appeler la police. Elle composa le numéro mais, lorsqu'elle entendit la voix au bout du fil, elle raccrocha. A quoi cela servirait-il? Que pourrait la police, si d'ailleurs elle daignait s'intéresser à ce genre de problèmes? Cela ne ferait qu'aggraver la situation dans laquelle se trouvait Fanta. Cette dernière était démunie et sans aucune instruction. Son mari était tout pour elle dans cette ville étrangère. Et puis comment elle, Malimouna, une noire, pourrait-elle causer des ennuis à un noir dans un pays où la couleur de leur peau était l'objet de tant de misères²⁵⁵?

Faced with the choice between feminist action and ideological solidarity with the male oppressor, dictated by racial affinities and the laws of the ethnospace in the racist context of Paris, Malimouna sacrifices the feminist imperative on the altar of racial solidarity, thus buying, even if momentarily, into the 'first things first' logic of African male intellectuals. Malimouna's action has a parallel in *The Infinite Plan*. When Olga performs a failed, near-fatal abortion on Carmen, the bohemian daughter of Pedro

Morales, police investigation of the matter fails because nobody agrees to inform them on who carried out the abortion. Sticking together to shield one another (even an errant brother/sister) from the law is one of the cardinal rules of ethnospatial formation by immigrant communities in the West. As the narrator puts it, Pedro and Immaculada Morales refuse to reveal the identity of the woman who carried out the crude abortion on their daughter to the police “because in the Mexican barrio informing was an unthinkable crime”²⁵⁶.

Even if she fails to act by calling the police to stop Barou from inflicting bodily harm on Fanta through the severe beating, Malimouna learns useful lessons from the whole experience: “Malimouna avait beaucoup pleuré ce jour-là, de rage et d’impuissance. Lorsqu’elle se calma, sa décision était définitivement prise: elle lutterait pour aider ses sœurs.”²⁵⁷ Her failure to act decisively on this occasion will, however, have serious consequences later. As a fallout of the clash with Barou, the heroine moves out of the ‘Foyer Africain’ into her own apartment. She has by now finished her studies and fallen in love with Philippe Blain, the director of the Institute where she studied. She is also now gainfully employed at the ‘Centre de Guidance Féminin’, a social centre specialized in helping immigrant women in difficult situations.

Because of Malimouna’s long separation from Fanta after the incident of the pill, the latter has had plenty of time to lose the precious ground she gained in terms of conscientization. Abandoned to her fate in the patriarchal context of the Foyer. Fanta stands no chance against patriarchal codes. She therefore re-emerges later in the narrative as the epitome of docility and submissiveness, an avid believer in Barou’s superiority and

the subalternizing rules he establishes for her. It is thus a thoroughly brainwashed Fanta who suddenly shows up one day in Malimouna's office seeking her old friend's help:

Il s'agit de ma fille Noura, ta petite chérie. Tu te souviens d'elle! Elle a onze ans à présent, et on doit l'exciser demain, mais elle ne veut rien entendre! Nos enfants qui grandissent en France ne comprennent plus rien de nos traditions et de leur importance. Mon mari me tuera si ce n'est pas fait demain! Tu comprends, elle s'était déjà sauvée la première fois que cela devait avoir lieu, et avait disparu pendant deux jours. Mon mari menace de me répudier avec elle... Il m'accuse de lui avoir monté la tête. Où vais-je aller, que vais-je devenir²⁵⁸?

If the shocked Malimouna thinks she has heard the worst, she quickly realises that she is mistaken, as Fanta insists on giving her a lesson in the sociology of female excision:

Et ma fille chérie, elle ne pourra jamais se marier... Tu sais bien que pour nous une femme non excisée n'est pas une femme digne de ce nom et ne peut sous aucun prétexte prétendre au mariage! Qui voudrait d'elle²⁵⁹?

Fanta consequently wants Malimouna to help convince the recalcitrant Noura to submit to circumcision. This request places Malimouna in the awkward position of every African feminist fighting for the eradication of female excision: how to convince those who believe in it without using the self-righteous, condescending language of Western critics of the practice. Malimouna tries to approach the issue from the perspective of the physical pain it will inflict on Noura but stops when she discovers that she has already begun to sound like Westerners:

Malimouna se rendait bien compte que ce discours creux et superficiel était celui qu'elle avait elle-même tant de fois entendu de la bouche d'Occidentaux. Ces gens qui voient souvent tout de l'extérieur et qui pourtant se croient autorisés à lancer au monde entier des condamnations stériles et injustes²⁶⁰.

This is certainly a learning process for Malimouna. She discovers how dangerous the concept of cultural relativity - understood here as all cultures being valid from the

perspective of insiders to each particular culture - can be to the feminist desirous of transforming society. This is especially true in Africa, where women are sometimes the most avid defenders of those subalternizing patriarchal cultures the feminist wishes to change:

Mais elle savait que, dans cet instant critique, elle ne trouverait pas les arguments nécessaires pour convaincre cette femme pétrie de traditions. Comment la persuader, là, maintenant, tout de suite, que sa fille, sa petite Noura chérie, ne deviendrait pas une dévergondée simplement parce qu'elle garderait entier son clitoris? Fanta justement pensait que c'était bien là une preuve d'amour que de vouloir exciser sa fille: là était SA vérité, SA réalité²⁶¹. (emphasis in the original)

Faced with this dilemma, Malimouna decides that the best option is to inform Fanta of her own refusal to be circumcised years back in the village. Fanta's reaction is predictable. She rushes out of Malimouna's office screaming that it explains why Malimouna can debase herself by dating and sleeping with a White man. Barou and Fanta eventually force their daughter to undergo circumcision in a clandestine traditional clinic. The girl dies from the infections she sustains in the process. The police move in to arrest the couple and the French press has a field day sensationalizing the couple's action as yet another proof of Africa's savagery. Malimouna is even more irked by the fact that her fiancé, Philippe, entirely approves of the general perception of Barou and Fanta, describing their action as "barbaric". An angry Malimouna is quick to remind him that Europeans, with their history rooted in centuries of unimaginable barbarity, are in no position to throw that word carelessly around.

The lesson to be learnt from this is that the issue of female circumcision is not as easy as UN agencies and Western activists working for its eradication in Africa and Asia assume it to be. These agencies often adopt the simplicist approach of sending "experts" to the field to teach Africans to rid themselves of their "barbaric" cultural values. Every

Western “expert” working in Africa unfortunately bears the burden of Europe’s historical investment in barbarity. Consequently, every move s/he makes puts Africans on the defensive, as is the case in Ngugi’s *The River Between*, for Africans do not usually feel that they have to take lessons in “civilized” cultural practices from those who are “responsible for the greatest heap of corpses in history”, to borrow Aimé Césaire’s telling description of Europe in his *Discourse on colonialism* (1972).

The solution, then, may well be for the concerned international agencies to involve more Africans in the process of persuading and sensitizing their own people to the need for change. Only cultural insiders, working from within and sufficiently sensitive to the need to respect the cultures they wish to change, can attain any meaningful progress in the struggle against female excision. Malimouna reaches this inevitable conclusion and begins to feel the need to return to Africa and attack most of the problems she sees in Paris from their roots. Philippe agrees to relocate with her but once in Salouma, the capital city, their differences begin to surface. Things come to a head when she happens on a discussion between Philippe and his elder sister, Agnès, who is visiting. Philippe has just informed Agnès of Malimouna’s pregnancy and his intention to marry her. An angry Agnès charges:

-Tu ne vas tout de même pas nous imposer cette négresse dans la famille, et un tas de petits métis par-dessus le marché. Maman t’en voudra toute sa vie! Tu n’as même pas eu le courage de lui présenter cette fille²⁶².

This blatant display of racism, which results in her having a miscarriage, is all Malimouna needs to conclude that she and Philippe are not meant to be together. She breaks up with him and he returns to France. The break-up affords her the opportunity of devoting her time to her job at a social centre for the mentally challenged. She also joins

the nascent "Association d'Aide à la Femme en Difficulté" (AAFD), along with her best friend Laura. After she meets Karim, a successful businessman, during a lunch break, a relationship blossoms between them and they eventually marry and start a family almost immediately. The eternal conflict between family and career ensues. When Karim convinces her to resign from her job and become a full time housewife, Malimouna needs little persuasion as she now is determined to sacrifice everything for her marriage and children, a position that is reminiscent of the situation of the heroines examined in Chapter One.

Despite her sacrifices, Karim begins to lose interest in his family, keeping late nights and seeing other women. This sudden turn of events, coupled with Laura's persistent heckling, jolts Malimouna who realises how deep she has sunk into complacency. She rekindles her interest in feminist issues and resumes full-time employment with the AAFD. In no time, she becomes the brain of the association, articulating an entire philosophy of women's emancipation and also developing pragmatic strategies for action. It is precisely at this narrative juncture that *Rebelle* scores its finest textual achievement in terms of the elaboration of a negofeminist approach to the struggle, rooted as it were, in the historical imperative of collective action on the part of the subaltern sexed group. For the first time in African women's fiction, the daughters of imperialism and the daughters of the goddess come together to reflect on their condition and, more importantly, act decisively. *Rebelle* is perhaps the only African text by a woman in which the praxis of a full-blown revolutionary women's movement, sufficiently conscious of the cultural peculiarities of its milieu, is established and concretely developed.

The bane of feminist action in Africa has been the unwillingness of activists, Western and African, to take the required time to study the terrain and identify those cultural peculiarities with which they must negotiate. Malimouna and her friends in the association are able to avoid this pitfall, basing their actions on a careful analysis of those areas in which negofeminism is the only viable option. One such area is the domain of meaning and cognition, a usually volatile and contested terrain. Feminist action frequently runs into trouble in Africa because of its Western-inspired vocabulary and cognitive structures which attract undue hostility. Malimouna and her colleagues therefore invent new concepts that can further their cause without ruffling feathers:

Malimouna pouvait donc se donner à fond à la lutte qu'elle et ses amies de l'Association avaient entrepris de poursuivre. La lutte pour un "mieux-être" de la femme. Elles s'auto-censuraient et ne parlaient jamais de "liberté" de la femme, pour ne pas être mises au pilori par de nombreux hommes. Les femmes en détresse auxquelles elles tentaient de porter secours vivaient bien souvent avec ses hommes-là. Ce mot de "liberté" était tabou. C'était, leur lançait-on au visage, un mot emprunté à l'idéologie occidentale²⁶³.

Authorial intrusions, masquerading as narrative omniscience, give Fatou Keïta away as a writer who is enamoured of the pragmatic modalities of action made possible by negofeminism:

Les femmes de l'Association avaient le sens de la diplomatie. Elles savaient s'entourer de précautions, elles savaient qu'elles étaient sur un terrain glissant et qu'il leur fallait manœuvrer avec finesse et subtilité²⁶⁴.

The Association's actions inevitably put Malimouna and her associates on a collision course with men who feel threatened by this new surge of feminist energy in the society. But Malimouna is a good student of history who knows that self-reflexivity is an integral part of a struggle. She has learnt valuable lessons from the example of her abysmal failure to conscientize Fanta in Paris, a failure due largely to the confrontational

posture she adopted with Fanta's husband instead of persuasion and negotiation. Negotiating with the authoritarian husbands of women in difficulty thus becomes one of her main strategies:

Malimouna parvenait, grâce à cette "diplomatie" qu'elle avait faite sienne, à rendre certaines situations moins tendues. Elle savait parler aux maris en question, quand bien même son seul désir était de leur jeter leur égoïsme au visage. Elle savait les flatter, leur faire entendre ce qu'ils voulaient entendre, afin d'obtenir ce qu'elle-même souhaitait obtenir: un peu de répit pour ces femmes²⁶⁵.

The greatest threat to the aspirations of the Association, however, comes from some women, fellow daughters of imperialism, who have been co-opted into the 'first things first' philosophy of Africa's male intellectuals and who consequently believe that the ideological confrontation with foreign domination is more important than any Western-inspired feminist cause:

Le plus dur, pour Malimouna et ses amies, était de rencontrer de l'hostilité de la part d'autres femmes. Des femmes dont les propos pouvaient être encore plus virulents que ceux de leurs opposants masculins. Ces détractrices expliquaient à qui voulait les entendre que les femmes n'avaient jamais été les esclaves des hommes, et que tout ceci n'était qu'une récupération des conceptions occidentales visant à perpétuer l'image de l'homme, de l'homme noir en particulier²⁶⁶.

Convincing the daughters of the goddess to join the movement also proves initially to be a tall order, largely because of the influence of patriarchal pedagogy:

Malimouna se lançait corps et âme dans la bataille. Elle allait à la rencontre des femmes, car l'une des grandes difficultés de leur organisation était que, quand bien même ce centre était connu à présent, les femmes, très souvent, ne prenaient pas l'initiative de s'y rendre. C'était contraire à leur éducation. Chez elles, les affaires de famille ne pouvait se régler qu'en famille. Une femme ne devait pas étaler sa vie devant des étrangers. En cas de conflit, elle pouvait demander l'intervention d'aînés au sein de la famille²⁶⁷.

Finally, Malimouna's dialectical strategies pay off and the Association overcomes these initial difficulties. Malimouna by now has been unanimously elected president of

the Association. With the press on their side, the women organise a campaign for funds from local and international organizations in order to commence a massive rural education scheme for women. Malimouna's most ambitious project, however, is to organize a huge public rally with the theme: "Les dangers de l'excision". For the first time in the history of the country, Malimouna intends to convince excised women to testify publicly at the rally regarding the physical and psychological trauma they have had to live with as a result of the procedure. To convince women to testify in public on such a sensitive issue in Africa stretches the negofeminist and persuasive prowess of the members of the association to the limit and the narrator regales us with meticulous details of the reasoned and systematic manner in which they go about the daunting challenge.

Karim, as might be expected, becomes very jealous of Malimouna's celebrity status and also virulently opposes the feminist cause she champions. The heroine opts for divorce this time, rather than caving in to her husband's insistence that she jettison the idea of a public rally against female excision. The rally turns out to be a huge success in terms of the release of hitherto repressed women's energies and stories and also in strengthening their collective resolve to end female excision:

La pudeur auto-destructrice des femmes se libérait tout d'un coup. Elles n'avaient plus honte de leur corps et se sentaient libres d'en parler, de le défendre. Dieu les avait créées avec un clitoris. Pourquoi, et au nom de quoi, un simple être humain pouvait-il décider que l'œuvre du "Tout Puissant" était imparfaite? Comment pouvait-on croire à la fois en Dieu et en de telles absurdités²⁶⁸?

The change of vocabulary here is instructive. When Philippe, a Westerner, critiques female excision, he speaks of "barbarity". African women critiquing the same practice speak of "absurdity". The rebellion against the absurdities of their existence portends a new dawn within a fundamentally transformed social space:

Ces femmes découvraient avec ravissement la solidarité et l'espoir. Elles prenaient véritablement conscience d'une injustice qu'elles n'avaient jamais considérée comme telle, conditionnées et résignées qu'elles étaient à un sort auquel elles ne pouvaient pas vraiment échapper. Ce qu'elles avaient vécu était supposé être la norme, mais elles se rendaient compte qu'il ne tenait qu'à elles que cette norme soit revue et corrigée afin que s'estompe progressivement la domination exercée sur leur corps et leur esprit²⁶⁹.

In Chapter Three, we witnessed how patriarchal hegemony progressively eroded the tremendous progress made by subjects like Mina in *Sous la cendre* and Emilienne in *Fureurs*. The revolutionary women in *Rebelle* are sufficiently sensitive to this dynamic ability of patriarchy to fight back insidiously, and they put contingency measures in place:

Elles avaient compris le message de Malimouna. Elles cesseraient d'être les complices passives d'une auto-destruction générale. Vigilance était le mot d'ordre! Elles seraient vigilantes²⁷⁰.

The greatest test of the women's resolve to maintain the social transformation they have painstakingly established occurs when the inhabitants of Boritouni, Malimouna's village, send people to kidnap her. They have not forgotten the "crime" she committed twenty years earlier by knocking out her "husband" and fleeing the village. Malimouna must be brought to judgement in the assembly of elders. A significant part of the punishment will be to excise her by force. Laura informs the AAFD of this threat, and the women along with the police invade Boritouni. They arrive just in time to liberate Malimouna and the stunned villagers come to the realisation that things have indeed changed. Permanently. The collective action of modern and rural women in *Rebelle*, which brings about transformative social effects through the instrumentality of negofeminism, weighs strongly in favour of Julianah Nfah-Abbenyi's suggestion that we read African women's works as "fictionalized theory". And given the rich history of

African women's activism, epitomized by the famous Aba women's war of 1929, it is equally possible to read African women's creative writing as fictionalized praxis. The dialectical and episodic struggles of the women of the AAFD are fictionalized versions of James' Black slaves in *The Black Jacobins*, Fanon's natives in *The Wretched of the Earth*, or even Gramsci's subalterns in *The Prison Notebooks*.

When A Tree Makes A Forest: Taming Patriarchy In Le prix de la révolte

While the isolated, personal victories recorded by Mina and Emilienne in *Sous la cendre* and *Fureurs* seem to buttress the aphorism that a tree does not make a forest, Régina Yaou resolutely takes on the task of deconstructing that aphorism in her novel, *Le prix de la révolte*, by exploring situations in which the dialectical and sustained struggle of one determined subaltern sexed subject generates seismic social effects, culminating in a complete reversal of patriarchal mentality.

Being a give and take philosophy, negofeminism involves assertiveness and persistence on the one hand and compromises and concessions on the other. This complex situation demands that the struggling subject know which compromises and concessions to make and when to make them. It also requires the subaltern to know when not and what not to yield. The failure of Mina and Emilienne to see their personal struggles transformed into a broad-based transformative praxis is informed, among other things, by the heroines' overly generous deployment of negofeminism as a rallying call for unbridled concessions to patriarchy. Yaou's task in *Le Prix* consists in rectifying this flawed deployment of negofeminism, and it is in this sense that her heroine's position can be read as an improvement upon or a refinement of the positions of Mina and Emilienne.

As is the case with Malimouna in *Rebelle*, the story opens in *Le Prix* with Affiba, the heroine, in a direct clash with tradition and patriarchy. Affiba, unlike the other heroines, starts her textual trajectory from a position of double subalternity: she is a woman and a widow. Widowhood in some African contexts places the woman at the mercy of her deceased husband's family, if she is docile and compliant, or in confrontation with them if she is rebellious. Affiba, the rebellious widow of Koffi Mensah, has been involved in a protracted struggle – her husband has been dead for years – with Koffi's very large extended family, over the deceased's "assets". Tradition perceives all assets as belonging to the man, irrespective of the role his wife may have played in the accumulation of those assets. Since the woman in any case "belongs" to her husband, it goes without saying that whatever she owns also belongs to him.

Although the story is set in Abidjan, the economic and very modern capital of the West African country of Côte d'Ivoire, Koffi's extended family, headed by his ruthless father, *le vieux* Mensah, is still very much enamoured of ancestral observances. Tradition requires here that following his death, everything Koffi owned while he was alive should be returned to his family. Under "normal" circumstances, *le vieux* Mensah would take over his dead son's assets for distribution among the extended family, while accepting responsibility for the sustenance of the dispossessed widow and her children.

Affiba would have none of this. She refuses to hand over the assets she jointly accumulated with her husband to those she considers opportunists and hangers-on. "Jointly" is a generous term here, because she actually made more financial contribution than Koffi in the accumulation of "their" assets. Affiba's rebellion has produced a ten-year deadlock between her and her deceased husband's extended family. The novelist

neatly locates the conflict between Affiba and her in-laws within the tradition-versus-modernity motif, one of the thematic cornerstones of African discourse. Tradition is represented by Koffi's extended family and Gnamkè, Affiba's mother, while Affiba and Ezan, her father, stand on the side of modernity and the progressive adaptation of culture to the reality of the times.

A closer look at the position of the two sides is needed to fully grasp the discursive processes at play in this complex text. After the tenth anniversary of Koffi's demise has been marked, le vieux Mensah decides to summon a family meeting to discuss Affiba's intransigence. His opening remarks at the meeting sum up the extended family's position:

Mes frères, ma sœur unique, mes enfants, je suis content que vous soyez venus pour m'accompagner sur la tombe de mon fils Koffi hier et m'aider à résoudre ce problème d'héritage qui vous touche tous. Mon fils Koffi nous a quittés voilà dix ans et, jusqu'à ce jour, sa femme Affiba, la fille d'Ezan, détient toujours les biens du défunt. Illégalement, puisqu'elle n'était que son épouse. En dépit de toutes les interventions, cette soi-disant veuve éplorée ne veut pas entendre raison. Cela ne peut durer davantage. Je me fais vraiment très vieux et je ne voudrais pas m'en aller au pays de mes ancêtres sans avoir réglé cette histoire. Avant de partir pour un long voyage, il faut mettre de l'ordre dans sa maison²⁷¹.

After a series of emotionally charged deliberations in which the most virulent opponents of Affiba's resistance turn out to be Koffi's female relatives, the family unanimously decides to send a high-powered delegation to Affiba's parents. While presenting their case to them, Adahi, Koffi's uncle and leader of the delegation, underlines the illegality of Affiba's position from the point of view of tradition:

Hier, il y a eu dix ans que notre fils Koffi n'est plus. Depuis dix ans donc, Affiba sa veuve, détient arbitrairement les biens du défunt. Cela ne s'est jamais vu. Malgré tout ce que nous avons fait, elle n'a pas voulu entendre raison²⁷².

The bottom line of the delegation's position is that it behooves Ezan to call his daughter to order by requesting her to relinquish Koffi's assets to his family. While sympathising with his in-laws, Ezan advises them to adopt a more pragmatic view of the situation, insisting that they must move with the times:

A quel siècle vous croyez-vous? Est-ce que vous vous rendez compte que les temps ont changé et que ce qui se faisait hier ne peut pas forcément se faire aujourd'hui? S'il était normal autrefois de prendre à une veuve et à ses enfants tout ce qu'elle et son mari avaient acquis ensemble, aujourd'hui cela ne l'est plus. Avant parce qu'elle n'apportait que sa force physique dans les entreprises de son mari, la veuve pouvait accepter de rendre ce que l'homme avait eu avant de mourir; à présent, la participation de la femme n'est plus seulement physique ou morale, elle est aussi et surtout financière; et on voit mal comment une personne peut accepter d'être dépouillée de son propre bien²⁷³.

The entire story line progresses with a series of clashes between the two families. Affiba, it should be stated, is a daughter of imperialism. She and her husband had studied in France and even had their first daughter, Diane, in Paris before returning to Côte d'Ivoire. She therefore understands the importance of her struggle at the national level. Her consciousness of the fact that the outcome of her struggle is crucial to the emancipation of Ivorian women is what transforms the personal into the collective in this text.

Affiba therefore employs a different but no less effective strategy than that of Malimouna (in *Rebelle*) in making women conscious of the need to fight for the eradication of the oppressive traditions through which patriarchy subalternizes them. While Malimouna achieves her aim through propaganda, Affiba opts for subtle but decisive actions in the hope that all women will follow her example, especially if she makes a success of the struggle. The author is careful to sensitize us to the fact that not all daughters of the goddess are willing pawns in the hands of patriarchal hegemony. We

learn that they are usually capable of making a rational analysis of their situation and their outward display of conformism cannot always be taken at face value. The omniscient narrator takes us, for instance, into the thoughts of some of Koffi's female relatives:

Parmi ces femmes, il y en avait qui admiraient Affiba pour son cran. Elles n'oseraient jamais exprimer ouvertement ce qu'elles ressentaient, mais ne pensaient pas moins que, tout compte fait, Affiba avait raison. Autrefois, c'était autrefois et aujourd'hui, c'est aujourd'hui. On ne pouvait pas raisonnablement transporter d'un siècle dans un autre toutes les habitudes, puisque le contexte était différent. Ces femmes, même si elles n'apportaient pas d'argent dans le foyer, étaient utiles: il leur fallait accompagner leur mari à la plantation et mettre la main à la pâte; pourtant lorsque ces plantations produiraient, elles n'en verraient peut-être même pas la couleur des fruits. Tout simplement parce que leurs maris seraient morts et que la famille de ces derniers auraient tout accaparé²⁷⁴.

This group of women will prove to be the most willing to draw inspiration from Affiba's protracted confrontation with tradition and patriarchy. The narrative plot takes a sudden twist when we discover that not only was Koffi not a faithful husband, but he actually had a two-year affair with Mireille, the beautiful curator of an Abidjan based art gallery. Frank, Koffi's first son, is the product of this affair with Mireille. Koffi returned to Affiba and their two children - Diane and Loïc - after two years of philandering. As might be expected, there is no love lost between Affiba and Mireille, but their two sons become inseparable upon discovering that they are half-brothers, thus forcing their mothers to tolerate and accommodate each other.

Despite the differences between the socio-cultural and geographic situations in *Le prix* and *Sidagamie*, the rapprochement between Affiba and Mireille serves the same strategic purpose it serves in the case of Moussa's wives in *Sidagamie*: the concerned women discuss their situations and come to the realization that they are both victims of the same social system. The ensuing empathy between them strengthens the women and

reinforces the struggle for emancipation. The idea of a rapprochement between women whom one could expect to be at daggers drawn in the competitive context of polygamy, first in *Sidagamie* and now in *Le Prix*, deserves closer attention. It appears to be a useful textual strategy for some francophone women writers who wish to deconstruct one of the dominant tropes of African novels written by men: rival women tearing at each other's throats, fighting over their husband in a polygamous situation. Isidore Okpewho carried this scenario to the extreme in his novel, *The Victims* (1971). When the acrimony stops, the women are better able to appreciate each other's predicament and the man, who is the cause of their troubles, is progressively decentralized.

For instance, Affiba and Mireille are better able to analyze their situation objectively in the course of a dialogue which eventually douses the animosity each initially feels for the other. They come up with an interesting thesis of "social impunity" which allows men to philander without dire consequences, whereas the same liberty of action is not accorded to women. Mireille makes the point succinctly:

Le monde qui nous entoure est plein de tentations et les femmes, tout autant que les hommes, sont presque en permanence, sollicitées. Et si les hommes succombent plus facilement et plus souvent, c'est parce que sur le plan social, ils jouissent d'une certaine impunité²⁷⁵.

The resolution of the conflict between Affiba and Mireille, however, has little effect on the face-off between Affiba and Koffi's extended family. It needs be stressed that Affiba's every move is born out of a negofeminist consciousness. She understands very clearly where her in-laws are coming from, knowing that their demand for Koffi's assets is backed by centuries of tradition. She is therefore sufficiently sensitive to the fact that le vieux Mensah cannot really be accused of acting irrationally, since he is convinced that he is playing strictly by the rules. It is precisely because of her pragmatic view of the

situation that the heroine does not insist on keeping everything for herself and her children. Several times, she proposes the compromise of sharing on her own terms, attempting to negotiate and to persuade Mensah that sharing is the only way out of the impasse. She tries to persuade her own mother, who would rather she adhered strictly to tradition by relinquishing everything to her in-laws, that she is not advocating a sudden and complete jettisoning of tradition. She merely wishes tradition to be forward-looking and flexible, constantly adapting to the reality of the times.

Mensah, as is to be expected, rejects Affiba's numerous overtures, which are made all the more "insulting" by the fact that the heroine insists on a sharing of assets strictly on her own terms. The more the patriarch condemns Affiba's intransigence, the less sure he is of the wisdom of his own hard-line position. To make matters worse for him, Affiba's ten-year resistance has begun to win her disciples among the womenfolk in his family. Ama, le vieux Mensah's granddaughter and an undergraduate law student, holds Affiba in high esteem. Ama shares a special bond with her grandfather and is the only woman in the household who can confront him, argue with him and get away with it. She decides to exploit this bond to advance Affiba's case and the feminist struggle.

Ama, knowing that Mensah is eager for her to get married and settle down to start a family, decides that the issue of her marriage is an advantageous position from which to discuss Affiba's situation with her grandfather. She informs him that she wants to work and accumulate her own property in order not to find herself in Affiba's situation. Encouraged by le vieux Mensah's unease, Ama continues to defend Affiba:

Durant toutes ses études et depuis leur retour au pays, elle n'a cessé de travailler pour apporter sa contribution à l'oncle Koffi pour toutes leurs réalisations. D'ailleurs, oncle Koffi avait eu des problèmes d'argent très graves, mais tante Affiba avait œuvré à étouffer l'affaire... quand il est mort, vous n'avez même pas eu la décence d'attendre l'enterrement pour réclamer "votre" héritage, allant même jusqu'à vouloir occuper la villa. J'étais encore bien jeune à l'époque, mais je me souviens que j'ai eu très mal au cœur et aujourd'hui, lorsque j'y pense, j'ai honte, honte pour ma famille, mon clan, mon nom et ma condition de femme²⁷⁶.

Ama is aware that the feud between her grandfather and Affiba is indicative of the much broader ideological confrontation between tradition and modernity. For her, the solution lies in eschewing a rigid adherence to either of the two and exploring that space of in-betweenness germane to compromise:

Regarde encore tante Affiba! Cela fait dix ans qu'elle lutte pour vous faire fléchir, vous faire comprendre que la seule solution à ce problème, c'est un compromis, qu'il n'y a pas d'autre alternative. Un compromis entre la loi des Blancs que nous ne pouvons copier bêtement et nos coutumes dont nous ne saurions faire fi complètement²⁷⁷.

One can assume up to this moment that these opinions belong to Ama. However, Yaou's authorial voice takes over in a manner that by now has become quite familiar: the intervention of a sociological discourse in the fiction. Placing herself behind the character of Ama, Yaou undermines the arguments of traditionalists who insist on a blind adherence to all African cultural values, without demonstrating any awareness of the need to sift through our cultures with a view to determining those that are no longer useful for our material existence and advancement:

A quelles atrocités, sous le fallacieux prétexte du respect des coutumes, ne s'est-on pas livré? Etouffer un jumeau à la naissance si sa mère était primipare, est-ce humain? Jeter un enfant parce qu'il est le nième né de ses parents pour ne pas porter malheur aux siens, est-ce une chose à faire? Non. Et pourtant! Nous sommes à l'aube de l'an 2000 et ces pratiques continuent d'exister. Nous n'en avons pas besoin²⁷⁸.

Critical realism is the recourse of most African women writers when they are confronted with sensitive areas of tradition. This occurs when the text criticises an event, a phenomenon, a cultural fact, or society as a whole without proposing palpable alternatives. Criticism becomes an end in itself. Social realism on the other hand is, in my view, an extension of critical realism, in which the text proposes solutions or canvases alternatives to the object of its discontent. A narrower version of social realism is socialist realism, which always proposes socialism as an alternative to capitalism. The novels of Sembène Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Festus Iyayi, and the plays of Tunde Fatunde are good examples of African socialist realism. In *Le Prix*, Yaou pitches her tent on the side of social realism. She does not stop at the critique of culture in the passage quoted above, but proceeds, still using Ama's voice, to propose alternative ways of maintaining those aspects of our cultural values which she believes are still useful to us:

Apprenez-nous plutôt à parler correctement nos langues, à parer une nouvelle accouchée; apprenez-nous à danser les rythmes de chez nous, à comprendre le message du tam-tam parleur, apprenez-nous les chansons pour les soirées au clair de lune. Montrez-nous comment nouer le pagne et le foulard, comment se parer pour la fête des générations; transmettez-nous tout ce que nos ancêtres vous ont laissé de beau. Apprenez-nous l'amour du prochain, la solidarité, le partage. Car, c'est ensemble, jeunes et vieux, hommes et femmes, traditionalistes et modernistes, que nous franchirons le seuil des temps nouveaux²⁷⁹.

This, then, is Yaou's version of how the retraditionalization of Africa can be effected in such a way as not to make it constitute an impediment to what a French sociologist, Jean Copans, calls "la longue marche de la modernité africaine", in his impressive book of the same title. Uprooting tradition or modifying it in face of the implacable advance of modernity is, however, not an easy task. Affiba decides to take the bull by the horns, goes to Mensah's compound to dialogue directly with him. Given the

fact that Affiba has boycotted Mensah's compound for ten years, it turns out to be an epic encounter between the two of them.

The embattled heroine speaks for a long time, trying to make her father-in-law realise that she is the one who worked and made enormous sacrifices for the accumulation of what everyone erroneously believes to be Koffi's assets. Mensah's intransigence, his refusal to believe that Affiba could have contributed in accumulating the couple's assets, provokes a tirade which marks the transformation of Affiba's personal struggle into a collective agitation on behalf of African women:

Nous les femmes, nous serons toujours celles qui travaillent dans l'anonymat et pour rien. Que la femme sue sang et eau pour aider l'homme à réaliser ce qu'il veut, jamais elle n'en sera remerciée comme il se doit. Les femmes de ce pays ont marché sur Bassam pour que leurs maris soient libérés des chaînes du colonisateur, mais combien d'années se sont-elles écoulées avant que d'autres femmes participent à la vie politique du pays en tant que ministres, députés ou maires?... Nos grands-mères, nos mères, se sont éreintées dans des plantations, à travailler pour constituer les richesses de leurs époux; mais du jour où ceux-ci sont morts, elles ont été dessaisies de tout... elles ont accepté et se sont tues²⁸⁰.

Affiba's consciousness of history falls in line with the theoretical importance that the Indian Subalternists accord to memory in their work. Memory is an integral part of the subaltern's struggle. Memory is what, according to Gramsci, allows the subaltern to make a historical inventory of his/her oppression. Without an inventory, the subaltern can neither contextualize his/her present struggle nor know him/herself. Gramsci argues further that:

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. It is important therefore to make an inventory²⁸¹.

For Odia Ofeimun, the function of memory in the African experience of subalternity is to make us question our past in order to understand our present and prepare a glorious tomorrow for generations yet unborn. Constructing itself as our collective voice, the poet-persona implores on our behalf:

we have come to you priestess of memory
on dream-tracks seeking the measure of a new day
we have come to awaken our dead
because we love the unborn (my emphasis)²⁸²

Achebe offers perhaps the most brilliant elucidation of the importance of memory and inventory, subsuming in his usual manner the most sophisticated philosophical and theoretical issues within fiction. A theoretical position that Gramsci, the Indian Subalternists, and Pierre Nora in his book, *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984), all need several pages to develop is neatly summed up by Achebe's omniscient narrator in *A Man of the People* (1966) in a famous sentence stating that we, Africans, must know when and where the rain began to beat us. Regrettably, Achebe did not add a rider regarding the necessity of understanding why the metaphorical rains of slavery, colonialism and Euro-American neo-colonialism beat us so successfully, so effectively, so completely.

Suffice it to say that when and where the rain began to beat the women of Côte d'Ivoire – as in the historical event of Bassam and the slavish work they used to do on their husbands' cocoa and coffee plantations – are crucial to Affiba's consciousness and to the contextualization of her subalternity. This is what emboldens her in her resolve to make le vieux Mensah realise that the rain has beaten women long enough:

Aujourd'hui, c'est terminé, la résignation des femmes. Si elles mettent la main à la pâte, c'est pour pouvoir jouir un jour du fruit de ce travail entrepris en commun avec leur mari...Pensez-vous réellement que le père et la mère qui se privent et investissent ce qu'ils gagnent, le fassent uniquement pour eux-mêmes ou pour la famille du mari? Non. Ils le font aussi et surtout pour leurs enfants²⁸³.

Le vieux Mensah remains unimpressed by Affiba's argument. The gradual move toward modernity, which Affiba sees as progress, is for him an unacceptable sign of decadence:

C'est vrai que les temps ont changé, que tout ce qu'il y avait de bon s'en va doucement, lentement, mais sûrement. Mais nous les vieux, nous qui sommes garants de la pérennité [sic] de nos traditions, nous nous accrocherons à elles jusqu'à notre dernier souffle... Nous userons de tous les moyens pour nous soustraire à ce naufrage²⁸⁴.

Despite this rigid perspective, le vieux Mensah is no longer very sure of the appropriateness of his stance. The more he reflects, the more he finds it difficult to justify the continued vilification of Affiba. The omniscient narrator takes us into his confused mind:

Mensah s'abîma dans de sombres réflexions. Tout ce monde qui lui disait qu'il était injuste, avait-il raison? Aurait-il dû ne pas réclamer cet héritage? Aurait-il mal agi, lui qui ne faisait que répéter des gestes accomplis par ses ascendants? Lui qui ne représentait que la perpétuation, la pérennité de la coutume, des traditions de son peuple, de son ethnie, en quoi avait-il péché? N'avait-il pas agi dans le souci de préserver la coutume?... Il ne pouvait nier le fait qu'il était conscient des changements intervenant chaque jour dans son environnement. Seulement, il n'avait pas cru qu'ils remettrait tout en question, mêmes les pratiques ancestrales²⁸⁵.

Mensah, in essence, has no wish to be caught in the unenviable position of one of the ancient kings of Basutoland who, because of his openness to the White man and his modernity, is treated in one of Ofeimun's historical poems as the traitor who is "setting the bones of the ancestors/among the gods of strangers"²⁸⁶. Yet Affiba's persistence eventually pays off. Le vieux Mensah, after days of difficult reflection, comes to the

realization that Affiba's offer of a compromise is the only honorable way out of the impasse. The idea of capitulation puts him in a tricky cultural situation: a patriarch cannot be seen giving in to a woman, especially to his daughter-in-law. He invites and confides in Ismaël Koulibaly, a police officer and Koffi's best friend who has stood by Affiba and her children since Koffi's death. The two men hold a long discussion, with Ismaël an incredulous listener for the most part. We again hear Yaou's authorial voice in le vieux Mensah's rationalization of his decision to accept Affiba's proposed resolution of the conflict:

J'ai réfléchi, réfléchi, réfléchi. Et j'ai compris qu'Affiba n'avait pas tort... Affiba est dans le vrai. Le monde est en perpétuelle mutation. Et à ce changement, il faut s'adapter ou périr. Nous avons adopté le modernisme du point de vue utilitaire, mais nous avons gardé nos mentalités d'antan qui, bien souvent ne correspondent plus à rien. Aujourd'hui, presque tous les problèmes se règlent d'une façon nouvelle. Le courant ira de plus en plus fort et celui qui ne bouge pas sera emporté²⁸⁷.

The key to understanding the importance and the irreversibility of the patriarch's decision lies in the very first sentence of this passage. The significance of the repetition of the word "réfléchi" may easily be lost on the Western reader. It may even be perceived as superfluous. In most African cultures, including the Yoruba culture, when a word, a claim, a statement, a wish or a fact is repeated thrice, the speaker has already conferred spiritual solemnity on the event. We are positioned in the sacred presence of the ancestors and the spirits by dint of such a repetition and there can be no possible withdrawal. Witness another example in Ofeimun's poetic rendering of the inescapable interpellation of the African writer to testify in the anti-imperialist struggle:

You do not have to see to believe it:
That we did not have to choose.
We have been chosen by an age of struggle
to testify, to testify, to testify²⁸⁸

Repeating words and expressions three times is not gratuitous in African literatures, it is cultural, and indicative of how African writers domesticate the literary languages of imperialism, making them bear the burden of our oralities. It is tempting to compare Yaou's handling of Mensah's surrender to the logic of modernity – always represented in African fiction as the White man and Christianity – with Achebe's handling of the same theme in *Arrow of God*. Ezeulu, chief priest of Ulu and the most powerful custodian of ancestral observances in the village, suddenly decides to send one of his sons to the White missionaries who will convert him to Christianity and train him in the ways of the West. He rationalizes his decision to the concerned boy thus:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow²⁸⁹.

Africa's fictional landscape is awash with Ezeulus and Mensahs who must make the difficult transition to Western modernity, usually at a pace dictated by the agents of that historical process. Those who refuse to march along, like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, or those who are unable to negotiate successfully the contradictions and the paradoxes of the new existential condition, are destroyed like Samba Diallo in Cheik Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë* (1962) and Amamu in Koffi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother* (1971).

Following his significant three-time repetition of the wish to accept Affiba's compromise, urged on by Ismaël, Mensah summons a grand meeting of the two extended families – his and Affiba's. Before everyone present, and to the utter consternation of his own family members, the patriarch recants his position, withdrawing all claims to Koffi's assets, and announces that Affiba had been right all along. News of Affiba's spectacular victory spreads fast. Women draw inspiration from her and social attitudes begin to change. Régina Yaou's tree blossoms into a forest before the very eyes of the reader. This exchange between Myriam, Ismaël's wife, and Affiba is representative of the impact of the heroine's action on the other female characters in the text:

-Ah bon! Affiba, permets-moi de te féliciter. Il n'est pas donné à n'importe quelle femme de bousculer des habitudes, des pratiques coutumières vieilles de plusieurs siècles!

-Merci, Myriam. Mais ce que j'ai fait, beaucoup de femmes le peuvent aussi. Il suffit d'y croire et de se montrer obstinée. Car la vérité triomphe toujours²⁹⁰.

The best indication that Affiba's action has resulted in a broad-based social transformation from which even her most virulent female detractors have begun to reap immense benefits comes from Effoua and Edrah, two of Koffi's female relatives who initially served as agents of patriarchy. Both women take the pains to thank Affiba, whose struggle has begun to save other women in similar situations:

Ton exemple nous a servi à nous tirer d'affaire Affiba. En effet, les beaux-parents d'Adjoba nous défiaient de leur citer un seul cas de veuve et d'orphelins héritiers chez des gens de notre ethnie; il le fallait pour remettre l'héritage à Adjoba et à ses enfants. Nous avons dit: "et Affiba, fille d'Ezan et veuve de notre fils Koffi?". Ce fut l'argument massue. Nos antagonistes ont baissé les bras. A présent, Affiba, grâce à toi, beaucoup de choses vont changer pour les veuves et leurs enfants au sein de nos communautés²⁹¹.

A grandiose reconciliation feast is organised, during which Mensah again publicly praises Affiba. At the end of the party, we meet Affiba alone in her garden offering a thankful prayer:

O Etre suprême toi qui es le maître de toutes choses, ô Dieu de mes ancêtres, ô esprits qui peuplez les terres et les mers, vous qui m'avez aidée et protégée dans ma lutte... vous m'avez fait triompher, c'est en votre nom que je crie VICTOIRE!... Jamais je n'oublierai le soir où le vieux Mensah a accepté le compromis que je lui ai proposé. Ce jour-là, n'était pas celui de ma victoire, mais le jour de la victoire de toutes les femmes qui luttent pour leur émancipation²⁹².

This prayer is what secures Yaou's novel's place as the one with the most complete vision of women's struggle in the texts studied here. There is perhaps no other African female novel in which a subaltern sexed subject single-handedly tames patriarchy, effects social transformation, and is also able to proclaim her victory for the whole world to hear. This places Affiba a step ahead of Malimouna. There is consequently no exaggeration in concluding that Affiba's triumph is the closest in African women's writing to Gramsci's notion of the "permanent victory" of the subaltern. In *Le prix de la révolte*, the subaltern woman wins, wins, wins.

CONCLUSION

In Search of a New Earth: Francophone African Women's Writing as Fire, Fight Back and Continuance

*Si l'histoire de l'humanité était à refaire
nous la referions à hauteur de tous les êtres au monde
nous la referions couleur de tous les épidermes
nous la referions au son de toutes les musiques
nous la referions dansant toutes les danses
nous la referions saluant tous les cultes
nous la referions au goût de toutes les cuisines
nous la referions en adieu à tous les malheurs!* (Edouard Maunick, "A-bo-li-tion", *Notre Librairie* 143, 2001)

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away. (Revelation 21:1)

One of the major issues that pitched African writers and critics against Western scholars of African literatures in the 1960s through to the early 1980s was the critical parameter of universality. Initially unsure of which critical standards to apply to early African works produced out of historical and cultural experiences with which they were not familiar, the first Western critics to approach African works established the criterion of "universal" value. This approach, epitomized by the work of the American Charles Larson, singled out for praise African works considered to be of 'universal relevance' in content and form. 'Universal' in the minds of these critics was – and still usually is – a synonym for European and American. Since they almost all assumed, with very few exceptions, that every African writer was an apprentice and an imitator of some Western master, they created a situation in which only African novels deemed to have sufficiently imitated a Western antecedent were regarded as successful and 'universal'. The farther

removed a work was from the African historical and cultural experience, the more accomplished its author was ultimately deemed to be.

African writers and scholars not surprisingly had serious problems with these critical methods and they took issue with their Western colleagues in often charged and bitter debates. This explains how the critical criterion of universality came to have very negative connotations in the context of modern African discourse. Chinua Achebe's excoriation of the Western exponents of universality is fairly representative of the African position on the issue:

In the nature of things the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. So-and-so's work is universal; he has truly arrived! As though universality were some distant bend in the road which you may take if you travel out far enough in the direction of Europe or America; if you put adequate distance between yourself and your home. I should like to see the word 'universal' banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world²⁹³.

This quotation is from an essay Achebe published in 1975. Three decades later, our attitude, as African intellectuals, to the critical parameter of universality has hardly changed. We are still very sensitive – as we should be going by our history – to any perceived attempt to impose Western critical standards on our literatures and discourses. Much of our strategic thinking is still invested in evolving what we variously refer to as 'African critical methods', 'Afrocentric criticism', or 'vernacular theory'. But on reflection, I see a false problem in our entire attitude toward universality. If we have rejected this critical criterion for more than three decades, if, as Achebe suggests, we may even consider banning it from our discursive space, it is because we have all along

accepted, albeit unwittingly, the subalternizing premise that only Euro-America can define and determine what is universal.

We need to insist more on our right to evolve broad-ranging critical methods and the right to label them as 'universal'. I have no problem with someone constructing a theory that is workable only in London, Paris, Ottawa and Washington and baptising it 'universal', so long as I am allowed to do the same with a theory workable only in Lagos, Bombay, Lima and Havana. In essence, we should be able to consider as 'universal' a theoretical model constructed from the thought of the intellectuals of Africa, the Caribbean, South East Asia, Latin America, Native America, Native Canada and Aboriginal Australia and New Zealand, with any relevant contribution from their Western counterparts. Including relevant aspects of Western theory in our own 'universal' theoretical articulations is necessary if we are to avoid the pitfall of merely replacing one "narrow, self-serving parochialism" with another.

I am inclined toward the construction of our own theories with claims to universal relevance because, unlike Achebe, I am not optimistic enough to foresee a time in the future when Euro-America will outgrow the narcissistic instinct of seeing itself as synonymous with the universe. The unipolar configuration of our times, with the United States and its European satellites at the centre of the commanding heights of global economy, simply does not leave room for such optimism. Reading the creative works of francophone African women writers through theoretical prisms created out of an interdiscursive reading of South Asian subaltern theory and African feminist discourses – *stiwānism*, *negofeminism*, *motherism* – has been here a conscious attempt at exploring this alternative ramification of universality, based on a recognition of competing and

sometimes complementary tendencies. Because African scholars are always obviously ideologically situated in one way or the other – “we have been chosen by an age of struggle”, as Ofeimun puts it – this alternative construction of a theoretical universality is indicative of the present study’s commitment to the resistance epistemologies of the Third World.

When we construct supersyncretic theories out of the common historical experiences we share with other oppressed peoples in the world, the process confers humanizing relevance on our work and has the advantage of making us avoid the trap of reductionism and parochialism into which certain African critics have fallen in the past. The Nigerian critic, Adeola James, is a good case in point. In his fiery review of Eustace Palmer’s *An Introduction to the African Novel*, James, angered by what he considered as Palmer’s uncritical imposition of Western critical models on African novels, continually called for critical tools informed wholly by the African experience:

Intellectuals are entitled to demand a total system of truth about the world, but African intellectuals cannot honestly forget that the African people are the most oppressed and the most dehumanised in the world. This historical truth alone demands that our point of view be subjective, i.e. looking at African literature not from any vague or glib universal criteria (if such a thing exists) but from the definite historical reality which gives birth to our literature²⁹⁴.

Having made a statement like this, James entraps himself within a rigid Afrocentrism from which he is unable to escape throughout his review. This necessarily blinds him to the relevance of other oppressed peoples’ experiences to a better understanding of African literatures. Had I adopted James’ approach, for instance, it would have been impossible or invalid for me to look in the direction of India for a theoretical elucidation of francophone African women’s writing. Like Professor James, I once believed in the “historical truth” that Africans are “the most oppressed and the most

dehumanised" people in the world. That was before I crossed the Atlantic and was able to witness firsthand the conditions in which the supposedly civilized governments of the USA and Canada continue to maintain their Native populations. It is therefore necessary for African critics to be conscious of other relevant experiences in their attempts to formulate appropriate critical paradigms for our literatures. The sort of ideological approach adopted in this study is made all the more relevant by the fact that African writers, male and female, constantly enrich their texts with the experiences of other oppressed peoples of the world, as David Diop does in this memorable verse: "Je pense au Vietnamien couché dans la rizi re/Au for at du Congo fr re du lyn h  d'Atlanta"²⁹⁵. The Vietnamese sniper set to pounce on American and French imperialists, the Congolese forced labourer, the African-American lynched for looking at a White woman: three historical experiences of subalternity woven together in the construction of an alternative theoretical universality.

Beyond the ideological revision of universality, the theoretical position of the Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa, regarding the ontological function of literature, equally summarises this study's perception of the function of francophone African women's writing. In an essay significantly entitled "Literature is Fire", Llosa captures the very essence of the relationship between literature and society:

It is important to remind our societies what to expect. Warn them that literature is fire, that it means nonconformity and rebellion, that the *raison d' tre* of a writer is protest, disagreement and criticism. Explain to them that there are no halfway measures: that society must either suppress forever that human faculty which is artistic creation and eliminate once and for all that unruly social element, the writer, or else embrace literature, in which case it has no alternative but to accept a perpetual torrent of attacks, of irony and of satire aimed at both the transitory and the essential aspects of life, and at all levels of the social pyramid. That is how things are and there is no escape: the writer has been, is, and will continue to

be, dissatisfied. No one who is satisfied is capable of writing; no one who is in agreement with, or reconciled to, reality can commit the ambitious folly of inventing verbal realities. The literary vocation is born out of the disagreement between a man and his world, out of his intuition of the deficiencies, disparities and misery that surround him. Literature is a form of permanent insurrection and cannot accept strait-jackets. Any attempt to bend its angry, rebellious nature is doomed to failure. Literature might die but it will never be conformist²⁹⁶.

This study has maintained the thesis that francophone African women's writing is fire, and has explored how that fire burns through the discursive spaces of Africa. It has explained why and how francophone African women writers fall within the Llosan category of "dissatisfied" beings, because of a fundamental dissatisfaction with society that puts them in a location of permanent rebellion against the vagaries and exigencies of patriarchal pedagogy and hegemony. Indeed, the entire project of feminism can be read through the prism of Llosa's metaphorical fire, burning down centuries of patriarchal oppression of women all over the world.

If francophone African women's writing, in general, is fire, the textual strategies employed in the individual texts that fall within that burning corpus all perform the theoretical function of fightback. *Fighting Back*, and its logical extension, *Fighting On*, are two theoretical concepts I am borrowing from Simon Ortiz, a writer and thinker who has been described as "one of the most important Native American poets"²⁹⁷. In several essays and numerous volumes of poetry, Ortiz has consistently theorized the Native peoples of the Americas as subjects chosen by history to respond to the Althusserian interpellation to fight back and fight on. This is the only option, if victory is not to be conceded to those who would rather empty the continent of the remaining Native populations in order to have unhindered access to whatever resources the Reservations may be sitting on:

In an America, particularly the United States, which is overwhelmingly present every day, in every social, political, cultural, economic, psychological way, it's hard not to feel as if you're *confronting* a reality that is so powerful you can't expect it to recognize you. Especially if you are a people who has been historically subjected to the meanest, cruelest treatment by social and economic forces backed up by military power... Corporate mining companies required cheap labor – we were it. Grants, the mostly white boomtown, and its businesses wanted profits – they took our hard-earned wages. “Bad influences” sold us liquor and turned us against our values. American public schools hardly mentioned us except as tribal participants, in fact hindrances, in American progress and development. Christianity still mainly missionized, its members praying for our heathen souls. The American political-economic system was mainly interested in control and exploitation... I understood the reason for the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, and with poetry and prose I tried to express my perception and hope for the present and future in *Fight Back*. Fighting back is fighting on... It must be part of every aspect of Native American life and outlook.²⁹⁸

This process leads Ortiz to explore how the literatures of Native America are fighting back and fighting on. It is easy to see the applicability of his theoretical concepts to francophone African women's writing. Francophone African women writers are fighting back against centuries of patriarchal oppression worsened by the colonial experience, fighting back against the wrongful deployment of Islamic tenets to justify practices that are no longer in tune with the times, fighting back against the subalternization of their texts in a male-dominated literary space, fighting back against the ‘first things first’ ideology of their male colleagues. Even where significant victories have been achieved, as in *Rebelle* and *Le Prix*, francophone women writers, like Ortiz, are conscious of the need to fight on. Indeed, the very last sentence of *Rebelle* is an excellent fictionalization of the theory of Fight On. As she celebrates her final victory, the narrator informs us that Malimouna is cautious because she is acutely aware of one fact: “D’autres combats l’attendaient”²⁹⁹.

Continuance is another key notion in the thought of Simon Ortiz. Given the fact that the Native American writer starts life rooted in the culture, customs, spirituality and

language of his people, he is usually already an artist, at least an oral artist in some sense, so that whatever he eventually produces in English is a 'continuance' of that primal beginning. The first work in English of the Native American writer is never a new beginning. It is a continuation of the artistry that belonged to his native language. The Native writer merely continues him/herself in English. Ortiz equally uses this notion to knit together the thematic preoccupations of various writers straddling different generations. Younger writers continue the themes and the struggles of their predecessors.

This notion describes the reading of francophone African women's writing undertaken here. Almost without exception, African women writers stress the fact that they owe their craft to the training they received from their mothers and grandmothers in the art of storytelling. Like their male counterparts, orature is the point of departure of the African female writer. Consequently, the works we read in English and in French constitute a continuance in those languages of the originary orality of African tongues. In their works, francophone African women writers continue the stories and the narrative strategies of their grandmothers and we, as critics, should always establish these connections. For instance, Régina Yaou's use of triple repetition is continuance in French of an important oral strategy.

It is, however, at the level of themes that the theory of continuance is most apparent. My corpus straddles three generations of francophone African women writers, Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury being the oldest and Abibatou Traoré the youngest. The chapters have been arranged in such a way as to show how the thematic preoccupations of one generation continue those of the generation immediately preceding it. Continuance involves avoiding the mistakes of preceding generations. Pauline, Malimouna and Affiba

continue the struggle of Ramatoulaye, Mina and Emilienne while at the same time avoiding their mistakes. Thus, continuance explains why the heroines of Chapter Four are able to translate the personal victories of Chapter Three into collective social transformation.

Fire, fight back, fight on and continuance, as deployed by francophone African women writers, all point to the same textual end: the emergence of a new earth. The new earth motif is usually associated with Ngugi. Indeed, the verse taken from the book of Revelation serves as epigraph to a chapter in one of Ngugi's novels, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). In his works, Ngugi usually foresees the passing away of the first earth – characterized by capitalist oppression and the exploitation of the peoples of Africa by foreign imperialists – and the coming of a new socialist earth in which the ills of the first earth will be absent. The Marxist plays of Olu Obafemi and Tunde Fatunde also explore the new earth motif. Because of ideological differences with their male colleagues, francophone African women writers are interested in a different kind of new earth. The emergence of a new socialist earth is not really their priority. Going by the texts in my corpus, the new earth they envisage and fight for is one rid of subalternization on the basis of gender. They seek a new earth in which gender equality will be the norm, a world in which tradition will be refigured as a living, mutative process and not as an immutable liability. It is only after these basic objectives have been met, after the confinement and the subalternization of women have been overcome, that the ideological nationhood of the male writers can become a viable option for the female writers to embrace, as Toyin Adewale, a leading Nigerian female poet, asserts in "A Prayer I":

I dismantle the confinements
Blood tingles my veins.
May the nations bring me a gift
In this hum of the flies,
behold my orchard, send deep rain.
Answer my hunger. Answer my thirst³⁰⁰.

Any single study can claim only to indicate the research possibilities in a given field and the present one is no exception. Identifying the necessary limitations of one's work is the means to point out possible future research directions, accompanied by the recognition of the need for a better map and compass. Certain gaps are noticeable, such as the absence of full-length studies of *La tache de sang*, *Sous la cendre*, *Le prix de la révolte* or *Rebelle* in the bibliography. More than ten years after the publication of the first two novels, it is still virtually impossible to locate full-length articles on either one in any major journal. There is, of course, always the possibility of an article existing on one of them in some obscure departmental journal somewhere in francophone Africa. But given the importance of these novels, there is an urgent need to study them in the pages of reputable international journals like *Research in African Literatures*, *Notre Librairie*, *Matatu*, *Kunapipi* and *Ariel*.

The paucity of studies of the younger generation of francophone African women writers is occasioned by the fact that most critics continue to focus on the same set of established writers: Mariama Bâ, Sow Fall, Liking. Calixthe Beyala is perhaps the only member of the younger generation who has been able to break the cycle by drawing considerable attention. Béatrice Rangira Gallimore's study of Beyala's novels is a welcome development. There is still a pressing need for more work on other members of her generation, especially for book-length studies of other individual authors who have

published a sufficient number of creative texts to justify such a venture, such as Sow Fall, Liking and Tanella Boni.

Subaltern studies is about the “little histories” of “little subjects”. My task in this study has been to examine subalternity along inter-gender lines, looking at the relationship of subalternity between male and female subjects within a subaltern group, and how female subjects struggle to alter that relationship. That is one way of looking at subalternity in its application to gender analysis in literary texts. The fact remains that there are other valid ways that constraints of space have not allowed this study to fully explore. For instance, there is also the possibility of studying subalternity along intra-gender lines in francophone African women’s writing. This would mean focusing more on the relationship between the heroine and other female characters in a novel. Where the heroine is a daughter of imperialism and the secondary female characters are daughters of the goddess, the research possibilities become all the more interesting. Secondary female characters in African women’s novels always have their own “little herstories” which occupy a position of subalternity in relation to the dominant herstories of the heroines and one would like to see more research into this area in the future.

The novels analysed here provide a good deal of material and discussions to follow upon. The extension and application of subaltern theory should prove useful also in further comparative studies of writing by doubly subalterned subjects in Africa in particular and the world in general. The remapping and application of the operative concepts of Subaltern Studies – hierarchy, dominance, hegemony, insurgency, subordination – to African women’s creative writing underscores the rich possibilities of a subalternist approach to African Studies. Against this backdrop, it is rather surprising

that Subaltern Studies has made virtually no inroad into Africa. Unlike the situation in South Asia and Latin America, an African Subaltern Studies group or collective is yet to exist. The closest thing there is to a subalternist study of Africa comes from a disparate group of French Africanist social scientists led by Jean-François Bayart, who mooted the idea of studying "le politique par le bas" in Africa. But nothing in Bayart's project, and those of other scholars like Jean Copans, Achille Mbembe, Comi Toulabor and Elikia M'bokolo, comes close to a systematic recording of the "little voices of history", a cardinal agenda of Subaltern Studies. If applied to African literature and other areas of African studies in a sustained, cross-disciplinary venture, Subaltern Studies has the potential of yielding significant maps of African subjecthood in terms of how it has evolved across time and space in response to various historical situations, including evolving constructions of gendered relationships in the home and in politics.

ENDNOTES

Chapter 1 Notes

¹ Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997) 15.

² Gloria Nne Onyeoziri, "The Give and Take of Theory," *Canadian Literature* 165 (Summer 2000) : 163-165.

³ By textual culture, I refer to the processes through which the totality of African women's experiences became concretized through the medium of creative texts – novels, plays, short stories and poetry – and the attendant critical discourses/exegeses that have developed around such texts.

⁴ *African Literature Today* was initially based in Sierra Leone until its publication was taken over by James Currey of London; *Research in African Literatures* is published in the USA while *Présence Africaine* and *Peuples Noirs, Peuples Africains* are both published in France.

⁵ Pius Adesanmi, "The Fire This Time: Discourse of the Body and "Scrotophobia" in the Works of Calixthe Beyala," *Feminism and African Women's Creative Writing*, ed. Aduke Adebayo 201-219.

⁶ Chris Dunton, "Socializing the Teaching of the Verbal Arts in African Universities," *Texts and Contexts: Essays in African Literature in Honor of Bernth Lindfors*, ed. Toyin Falola and Barbara Harlow. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press (in press).

⁷ Opposition by other African scholars to traditionalism soon resulted in the tradition-modernity binarism. Chinweizu on the side of tradition, Manthia Diawara on the side of modernity. Interstitial space occupied by Harry Garuba.

⁸ Harry Garuba, "Negotiating the Postcolonial Impasse." (Unpublished manuscript).

⁹ Lord Frederick Lugard *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: William Blackwood & Sons Ltd, 1929).

¹⁰ Deidre Badejo, "African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent," *Research in African Literatures* 29.2 (1998) 94-111; and Zulu Sofola. "Feminism and African Womanhood," *Sisterhood, Feminism and Power*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka 51-64.

¹¹ See for instance her essay, "Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism," *African Literature Today* 15 (1987) 35-54.

¹² For details, see his essay, "Explorations in Animist Realism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture and Society," (Unpublished monograph).

¹³ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996).3.

¹⁴ I disagree with the not uncommon view of colonialism as an accident of history. Nothing was done unwittingly by the colonial masters. They calculated. They premeditated. They were thorough.

¹⁵ See Biodun Jeyifo, "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory," *Research in African Literatures* 21.1 (1990) 33-48.

¹⁶ Eloise Briere, *Le roman camerounais et ses discours*, (Ivry: Nouvelles du Sud, 1993) 7.

¹⁷ *ibid.* 8.

¹⁸ Mamdani. *op. cit.* 39.

¹⁹ Mamdani cites Ifi Amadiume's essay, "Gender, Political Systems and Social Movements: A West African Experience," *African Studies in Social Movements*, ed. Mahmood Mamdani and E. Wambia-dia-Wambia, (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995).

²⁰ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, *op. cit.* 41.

²¹ Oyeronke Oyewumi. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 122.

²² Sofola, *op. cit.* 61.

²³ Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women," *Perceiving Women*, ed. S. Ardener.

²⁴ Oyewumi, *op. cit.* 123.

²⁵ I am thinking specifically of two of his major works: *L'Odeur du père* and *The Invention of Africa*.

²⁶ Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990) 1.

- ²⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre may seem a strange inclusion in this list of world-renowned Western specialists of African literatures. Unlike the others, Sartre was by no means an Africanist. I have included him here because *Orphée noir*, the long and contentious introduction he wrote to Léopold Sedar Senghor's pioneering *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie africaine et malgache*, is the foundational critical text on Négritude poetics and still remains one of the most important treatises on African literatures to date.
- ²⁸ Beier, Moore and Theroux were instrumental in developing the criticism of African literature and arts in the foundational journal, *Black Orpheus*.
- ²⁹ J.P. Clark, "The Legacy of Caliban," *Black Orpheus* 2.1 (February 1968) : 28.
- ³⁰ The famous literary "war" between Ernest Emenyonu and Bernth Lindfors in *African Literature Today* is a good case in point. In a 1969 issue of the journal, Lindfors had published an essay entitled "Cyprian Ekwensi- An African popular novelist" in which he concluded that the famous Nigerian novelist was not only a failure in terms of craft and artistry but was equally a poor imitator of his Western influences. Three years later, Emenyonu published a vitriolic rejoinder in the same journal entitled "African Literature: What Does it Take to be its Critic?" He dismissed Lindfors and other Western critics of African literatures as incapable of producing good knowledge on African writing. In 1975, Lindfors replied Emenyonu in a now famous essay, "The Blind Men and the Elephant", dismissing the claim that only African critics can handle African texts objectively on the ground that, in Lindfors' own words, "common sense just does not allow a single tribe of critics to claim a monopoly on clear vision."
- ³¹ Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99. 5 (1994) : 1475-1490
- ³² Oyewumi, *op. cit.* 17-18.
- ³³ Prakash, *op. cit.* 1476.
- ³⁴ Antonio Gramsci, "Notes on Italian History", *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed/trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).
- ³⁵ *ibid.* 55.
- ³⁶ Edward Said, preface, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha & Gayatri Spivak (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) ix.
- ³⁷ E. San Juan Jr, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) 85.
- ³⁸ The three essays cited are all reprinted in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, *op. cit.*
- ³⁹ Gramsci, *op. cit.* 55.
- ⁴⁰ Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects" *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997) 8.
- ⁴¹ Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986) : 76.
- ⁴² Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. 289.
- ⁴³ *ibid.* 295.
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.* 306.
- ⁴⁵ *ibid.* 308.
- ⁴⁶ Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001) 45.
- ⁴⁷ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1991) 17.
- ⁴⁸ Speaking here is to be interpreted at the metaphorical level. It is inclusive of action and all other non-voiced modalities of resistance through which the subaltern seeks to acquire agency.
- ⁴⁹ Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991-92) : 5 -32.
- ⁵⁰ Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994) 11.
- ⁵¹ *ibid.* 10.
- ⁵² Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. (London: Zed Books, 1987) 7.
- ⁵³ Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Chandra Mohanty et al (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 51.
- ⁵⁴ See for instance Deidre Badejo's earlier cited essay and Chikwenye *African Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago P, 1996).

- ⁵⁵ Carole Boyce Davies, introduction, "Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism," *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986) 8.
- ⁵⁶ *ibid.* 8-9.
- ⁵⁷ Katherine Frank, "Feminist Criticism and the African Novel," *African Literature Today* 14 (1984) 45.
- ⁵⁸ Ifi Amadiume, *Daughters of the Goddess, Daughters of Imperialism*. (London & New York: Zed Books, 2000).
- ⁵⁹ Quoted in Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970) 13.
- ⁶⁰ *ibid.* 13.
- ⁶¹ For a further critique of the "vulgar Marxist style" of Chidi Amuta and his colleagues in the Marxist/Sociological school of criticism which flourished in Nigeria in the 1980s, see Charles Nnolim's essay, "Trends in the Criticism of African Literature," ed. Ernest Emenyonu. *Goatskin Bags and Wisdom: New Critical Perspectives on African Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999) 3-15.
- ⁶² John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1996) 1.
- ⁶³ Gramsci, *op. cit.* 55.
- ⁶⁴ Benita Parry, "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *The Oxford Literary Review*, 9.1-2 (1987) 27.
- ⁶⁵ Frank, *op. cit.* 43-44.
- ⁶⁶ Gloria Nne Onyeoziri, "Femme Parlée/Femmes Parlant: Réflexions sur le Discours Féminin d'Aminata Sow Fall," *The Literary Griot* 1.1 (Fall 1988).
- ⁶⁷ Homi Bhabha, editor's introduction: "Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Spring 1997) : 434.
- ⁶⁸ *ibid.* 437.
- ⁶⁹ Omowumi Segun, "(In)visible (Wo)man," *PELS* (January 25-31, 1997) : 9.
- ⁷⁰ Sanya Osha, "Haba, Mister Feminist!," *PELS* (January 11-17, 1997) : 9.
- ⁷¹ Obi Nwakanma, "Literature, Prizes and Decentering the Arguments," *Sunday Vanguard* (January 5, 1997) : 15.
- ⁷² Osha, *op. cit.* 9.
- ⁷³ Mbembe's essay appeared in *Public Culture* 4.2(1992) : 1-30. The responses to it were assembled in the following issue of the same journal, *Public Culture* 5.1(1992).
- ⁷⁴ Ernest Emenyonu, "African Literature: what does it take to be its critic?," *African Literature Today* 5 (1971) : 1-11.
- ⁷⁵ Bernth Lindfors, "The Blind men and the Elephant," *African Literature Today* 7 (1975) : 54.
- ⁷⁶ Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, "Beyond Hearsay and Academic Journalism: The Black Woman and Ali Mazrui," *Research in African Literatures* 24.1 (Spring 1993) 111.
- ⁷⁷ Tejumola Olaniyan, "Postmodernity, Postcoloniality and African Studies" (Unpublished manuscript).
- ⁷⁸ Michael Howard, *The Lessons of History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991) 34.
- ⁷⁹ Oyewumi, *op. cit.* xiv.
- ⁸⁰ Olaniyan, *op. cit.* 18.
- ⁸¹ Mazrui, *op. cit.* 87.

Chapter 2 Notes

- ⁸² Howard, *op. cit.* 33.
- ⁸³ Fredric Jameson is a remarkable exception. This thinker has a penchant for master narratives. His essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986) has become one of his most contentious articulations of master narratives. He constructs nationalism as a grand narrative, the sole key to understanding the literatures and discourses of the Third World. Similarly, in his book, *The Political Unconscious*, the political becomes a master narrative, "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation". 17.
- ⁸⁴ Enrique Dussell, "Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)," *Boundary 2* 20.3 (1993) 65.
- ⁸⁵ *ibid.* 75.

- ⁸⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Borders and Bridges: Seeking Connections between Things," *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*. eds. Afzal-Khan, Fawzia and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2000) : 124.
- ⁸⁷ Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island* Trans. James E. Maraniss. (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1996) 201.
- ⁸⁸ I am persuaded by Wole Soyinka's rejection of Euromodernist constructions of Hitler's holocaust on the Jews as the first and perhaps the only holocaust. Soyinka insists that the extermination of the "Indians" in the Americas is the first holocaust.
- ⁸⁹ Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (January/February 2000).
- ⁹⁰ Quoted in San Juan, *op. cit.* 19.
- ⁹¹ In her *Emancipation féminine et roman africain*, Arlette Chemain-Degrangé cites Birago Diop, Bernard Dadié and David Diop as disciples of Senghor whose poetry either explore an idealized image of woman to validate African traditions and civilizations, or construct the trope of the docile woman 18.
- ⁹² *ibid.* 23. Such a claim does not take cognizance of the fact that Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury and Werewere Liking had published works of fiction before 1980.
- ⁹³ Joseph Ndinda, "Ecriture et discours féminin au Cameroun: trois générations de romancières," *Notre Librairie* 118(1994) : 7.
- ⁹⁴ *ibid.* 7.
- ⁹⁵ Pius Ngandu Nkashama, *Ecritures et discours littéraires: études sur le roman africain* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989) 183.
- ⁹⁶ The ongoing research being carried out by Gloria Onyeoziri, Robert Miller and this writer into the political aspects of francophone African women's writing is a modest attempt at rectifying this problem.
- ⁹⁷ Guy Ossito Midiohouan, *L'idéologie dans la littérature négro-africaine d'expression française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986) 10.
- ⁹⁸ Anne-Marie Adiaffi's *Une vie hypothéquée* (1984), Michèle Assamoua's *Le défi* (1984), Simone Kaya's *Le prix d'une vie* (1984), Ami Gad's *Etrange héritage* (1985), and Aminata Maïga Ka's *La voie du salut* (1985) are good examples of women's novels published before 1986.
- ⁹⁹ Anne Adams Graves, preface, *Ngambika*, *op. cit.* ix-x.
- ¹⁰⁰ This thesis, when reworked for publication as a book, intends to blaze the trail in this direction with the working title: "Subaltern Theory in Francophone African Fiction".
- ¹⁰¹ Gautam Bhadra, "The Mentality of Subalternity," *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 63.
- ¹⁰² Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, *Rencontres essentielles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995) 34-35.
- ¹⁰³ Ndinda, *op. cit.* 8.
- ¹⁰⁴ Kuoh-Moukoury, *op. cit.* 39-40.
- ¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* 40.
- ¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* 42.
- ¹⁰⁷ *ibid.* 84.
- ¹⁰⁸ *ibid.* 85.
- ¹⁰⁹ See his editor's introduction to *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995*.
- ¹¹⁰ Ndinda, *op. cit.* 8.
- ¹¹¹ Kuoh-Moukoury, *op. cit.* 21-22.
- ¹¹² *ibid.* 111.
- ¹¹³ *ibid.* 13-14.
- ¹¹⁴ Aminata Maïga Ka, *La voie du salut* suivi de *Le miroir de la vie* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1985) 36-37.
- ¹¹⁵ Rangira Gallimore, "De l'aliénation à la réappropriation chez les romancières de l'Afrique noire francophone," *Notre Librairie* 117(1994) : 59.
- ¹¹⁶ Ka, *op. cit.* 39.
- ¹¹⁷ *ibid.* 39.
- ¹¹⁸ *ibid.* 70.
- ¹¹⁹ *ibid.* 40.
- ¹²⁰ *ibid.* 66.
- ¹²¹ *ibid.* 40.
- ¹²² *ibid.* 40.

¹²³ *ibid.* 45.

¹²⁴ I emphasize the gender of Rokhaya's child to bring out the point that in some African societies – in Yoruba land for instance – the consequences of not having a male child are no less serious for the woman than not having a child at all. As an only son and a last born whose university-educated mother faced very serious problems when her first two children turned out to be girls, this writer's life exemplifies the problem.

¹²⁵ One cannot be too careful in deploying the word "illiterate" in the African context because of its colonialist provenance. For the colonial authorities, an "illiterate native" was one who could not read and write English, French or Portuguese. This wrongheaded usage of the term continues in contemporary discourse. It is not uncommon to come across World Bank and IMF reports peddling cliché statements to the extent that hundreds of millions of Africans are illiterates. My grandmother, who reads and writes Yoruba but does not know any European language, would be classified as an illiterate in official discourse.

¹²⁶ Ka, *op. cit.* 56.

¹²⁷ *ibid.* 75.

¹²⁸ *ibid.* 76-77.

¹²⁹ *ibid.* 78-79.

¹³⁰ South Africa with its dominant Caucasian culture is the only possible exception that comes to mind.

¹³¹ Ka, *op. cit.* 80.

¹³² Patrick Chabal, "The African Crisis: Context and Interpretation," *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, eds. Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger (London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996) 33.

¹³³ *ibid.* 33.

¹³⁴ Ka, *op. cit.* 46-47.

¹³⁵ Chris Dunton, "This Rape is Political: The Siting of Women's Experience in Novels by Aidoo, Ngugi, Farah and El Saadawi," *English in Africa* 27.1 (2000) 1.

¹³⁶ Philomène Bassek, *La tache de sang* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990) 11-12.

¹³⁷ *ibid.* 71.

¹³⁸ *ibid.* 71.

¹³⁹ *ibid.* 90.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.* 47.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.* 40.

¹⁴² *ibid.* 79.

¹⁴³ *ibid.* 83.

¹⁴⁴ See Part Two, Chapter One of her book, *Femmes rebelles: naissance d'un nouveau roman africain au féminin* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996).

¹⁴⁵ Bassek, *op. cit.* 89.

¹⁴⁶ Usha Menon, "Does Feminism Have Universal Relevance? The Challenges Posed by Oriya Hindu Family Practices," *Daedalus* 129.4(2000) : 77-78.

¹⁴⁷ Bassek, *op. cit.* 155.

Chapter 3 Notes

¹⁴⁸ Nadine Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters* (Johannesburg: SPRO-CAS/Ravan Press, 1973) 7.

¹⁴⁹ Bernard Mouralis, "La révolte contre le pouvoir colonial et religieux dans la fiction négro-africaine de langue française" *Nouvelles du sud: littératures africaines* 49.

¹⁵⁰ Tirthankar Chanda, "Entretien avec Abdourahman A. Waberi," *Notre Librairie* 135 (1998) 62.

¹⁵¹ African women have always been conscious of the fact that their struggle is made all the more urgent by the attitude and thinking of African male intellectuals who tend to believe that the struggle for gender equality is secondary to the "more important" struggle against neo-colonialism and foreign domination. Felix Mnthali's famous poem, "Letter to a Feminist Friend", in which he admonishes African feminists for prioritizing the feminist struggle at the expense of the anti-imperialist struggle is a good case in point.

¹⁵² Mary Modupe Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1997) 153.

¹⁵³ Uzo Esonwanne, "Enlightenment Epistemology and "Aesthetic Cognition": Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*," *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 82.

- ¹⁵⁴ See Femi Ojo-Ade, "Still a Victim? Mariama Bâ's *Une si Longue Lettre*," *African Literature Today* 12(1982) 71-87.
- ¹⁵⁵ Ann McElaney-Johnson, "Epistolary Friendship: *La prise de parole* in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*," *Research in African Literatures* 30.2(1999) 111.
- ¹⁵⁶ Christopher Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1990) 278.
- ¹⁵⁷ Obioma Nnaemeka, "Urban Spaces, Women's Places: Polygamy as Sign in Mariama Bâ's Novels." *The Politics of (M)Othering op. cit.* 162-191.
- ¹⁵⁸ *ibid.* 163.
- ¹⁵⁹ I borrow the expression from Gloria Onyeoziri who employs it in a study of Ahmadou Kourouma. See *Alfa* 6 (1993) 123-134.
- ¹⁶⁰ In Yoruba land for instance, it is taboo to call a snake by its name at night. It is called a long rope or a long string. The rhetorical device of skirting around an unpleasant subject or object without calling a spade a spade is common place in Achebe's fiction.
- ¹⁶¹ This writer's maternal uncle, a former Director-General of Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Finance and also a one-time Director of the Nigerian Industrial Development Bank, who spent close to twenty years in Europe, is a "modern" polygamist with three "homes" in Lagos. His three wives, a lawyer, an accountant and a teacher all studied in Europe and are emancipated in the Western sense of that word. None of them married him in deference to religious or customary codes.
- ¹⁶² Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre*. (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979) 10.
- ¹⁶³ In Yoruba land, the ceremony is known as *isupo*.
- ¹⁶⁴ Bâ, *op. cit.* 11.
- ¹⁶⁵ *ibid.* 11.
- ¹⁶⁶ *ibid.* 11.
- ¹⁶⁷ *ibid.* 33.
- ¹⁶⁸ *ibid.* 33.
- ¹⁶⁹ *ibid.* 14.
- ¹⁷⁰ *ibid.* 14.
- ¹⁷¹ *ibid.* 17.
- ¹⁷² *ibid.* 18.
- ¹⁷³ McElaney-Johnson, *op. cit.* 119.
- ¹⁷⁴ *ibid.* 119.
- ¹⁷⁵ *ibid.* 85.
- ¹⁷⁶ *ibid.* 85.
- ¹⁷⁷ *ibid.* 85.
- ¹⁷⁸ *ibid.* 86.
- ¹⁷⁹ Walter Mignolo, "(Post)Occidentalism, (Post)Coloniality and (Post)Subaltern Rationality," *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks *op. cit.* 91.
- ¹⁸⁰ Evelynne Mpoudi Ngolle, *Sous la cendre le feu* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990) 8.
- ¹⁸¹ *ibid.* 8.
- ¹⁸² *ibid.* 8.
- ¹⁸³ Raymond Williams, *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1984).
- ¹⁸⁴ Brenda Cooper, *To Lay These Secrets Open: Evaluating African Writing*. (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1992) see chapter five of the book.
- ¹⁸⁵ Mpoudi Ngolle, *op. cit.* 14.
- ¹⁸⁶ *ibid.* 98.
- ¹⁸⁷ There is no exaggeration in describing as revolutionary a situation in which a man changes diapers in the African context.
- ¹⁸⁸ Mpoudi Ngolle, *op. cit.* 99.
- ¹⁸⁹ *ibid.* 100.
- ¹⁹⁰ *ibid.* 97.
- ¹⁹¹ *ibid.* 97.
- ¹⁹² *ibid.* 104-105.
- ¹⁹³ *ibid.* 108.
- ¹⁹⁴ *ibid.* 111.

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- ¹⁹⁵ *ibid.* 113-114.
¹⁹⁶ *ibid.* 114.
¹⁹⁷ *ibid.* 118-119.
¹⁹⁸ *ibid.* 154.
¹⁹⁹ *ibid.* 155.
²⁰⁰ Angèle Rawiri, *Fureurs et cris de femmes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989) 14-15.
²⁰¹ *ibid.* 18.
²⁰² *ibid.* 17.
²⁰³ *ibid.* 18.
²⁰⁴ *ibid.* 10.
²⁰⁵ *ibid.* 29.
²⁰⁶ *ibid.* 71.
²⁰⁷ *ibid.* 72.
²⁰⁸ *ibid.* 89.
²⁰⁹ *ibid.* 89.
²¹⁰ *ibid.* 91-92.
²¹¹ *ibid.* 100.
²¹² *ibid.* 81.
²¹³ *ibid.* 24-25.
²¹⁴ *ibid.* 13.
²¹⁵ *ibid.* 27.
²¹⁶ *ibid.* 27.
²¹⁷ *ibid.* 43.
²¹⁸ *ibid.* 27.
²¹⁹ *ibid.* 24.
²²⁰ *ibid.* 115.
²²¹ *ibid.* 95.
²²² *ibid.* 136.
²²³ *ibid.* 136.
²²⁴ *ibid.* 99.
²²⁵ *ibid.* 39.
²²⁶ *ibid.* 49.
²²⁷ *ibid.* 156.

Chapter 4 Notes

- ²²⁸ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (London: Allison and Busby, 1980) ix. Revised Edition.
²²⁹ Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 222.
²³⁰ *ibid.* 222-223.
²³¹ Beverley, *op. cit.* 1.
²³² Abibatou Traoré. *Sidagamie* (Paris: Présence Africain, 1998) 37.
²³³ The Western idea of eighteen year-olds free to make their own decisions as adults outside of parental control usually horrifies most Africans. It is not unusual among Africans raising their children in the West to send them back home for secondary education. The real reason, of course, is that such parents usually want to avoid the "disaster" of not being able to make decisions for their eighteen year-old "adults". Conversely, my Western friends usually gasp in disbelief when I tell them at twenty-nine, I am still very much under parental control and must seek their approval back in Nigeria of my important decisions. Cultural relativity is such that the idea of eighteen year-old "adults" is strange to Africans while the idea of twenty-nine year old "children" is strange to Westerners.
²³⁴ Traoré, *op. cit.* 49.
²³⁵ *ibid.* 54.
²³⁶ *ibid.* 75.
²³⁷ *ibid.* 77.
²³⁸ *ibid.* 77

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- ²³⁹ *ibid.* 55.
²⁴⁰ *ibid.* 109.
²⁴¹ *ibid.* 114.
²⁴² *ibid.* 129.
²⁴³ *ibid.* 151.
²⁴⁴ Jeffner Allen, "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women," *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanhead, 1984) 315.
²⁴⁵ Nfah-Abbenyi, *op. cit.* 24.
²⁴⁶ Traoré, *op. cit.* 154-155.
²⁴⁷ Keïta, *op. cit.* 18.
²⁴⁸ *ibid.* 15 & 18.
²⁴⁹ Dunton. "This Rape is Political" *op. cit.*
²⁵⁰ Cited by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie *op. cit.* 220-221.
²⁵¹ Keïta, *op. cit.* 83.
²⁵² *ibid.* 92.
²⁵³ *ibid.* 93.
²⁵⁴ I proposed the notion of ethnospace in my essay "Ethnospatial politics in Francophone African Fiction" which I presented at the XVIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association held in Pretoria, South Africa from August 13-19 2000.
²⁵⁵ Keïta, *op. cit.* 94-95.
²⁵⁶ Isabelle Allende, *The Infinite Plan*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (New York: HarperCollins 1993) 142.
²⁵⁷ Keïta, *op. cit.* 95.
²⁵⁸ *ibid.* 123.
²⁵⁹ *ibid.* 123-124.
²⁶⁰ *ibid.* 124-125.
²⁶¹ *ibid.* 125.
²⁶² *ibid.* 137.
²⁶³ *ibid.* 179.
²⁶⁴ *ibid.* 180.
²⁶⁵ *ibid.* 181.
²⁶⁶ *ibid.* 181-182.
²⁶⁷ *ibid.* 180.
²⁶⁸ *ibid.* 218.
²⁶⁹ *ibid.* 219-220.
²⁷⁰ *ibid.* 220-221.
²⁷¹ Régina Yaou, *Le prix de la révolte* (Abidjan: Nouvelles Editions Ivoiriennes, 1997) 16.
²⁷² *ibid.* 25.
²⁷³ *ibid.* 27.
²⁷⁴ *ibid.* 21.
²⁷⁵ *ibid.* 97.
²⁷⁶ *ibid.* 188.
²⁷⁷ *ibid.* 189.
²⁷⁸ *ibid.* 190.
²⁷⁹ *ibid.* 190.
²⁸⁰ *ibid.* 159.
²⁸¹ Gramsci, *op. cit.* 324.
²⁸² Odia Ofeimun, *A feast of Return* (Lagos: Hornbill, n.d.) 29.
²⁸³ Yaou, *op. cit.* 159-160.
²⁸⁴ *ibid.* 160.
²⁸⁵ *ibid.* 191.
²⁸⁶ Ofeimun, *op. cit.* 46.
²⁸⁷ Yaou, *op. cit.* 203.
²⁸⁸ *ibid.* 52.
²⁸⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964) 55.
²⁹⁰ Yaou, *op. cit.* 223.

²⁹¹ *ibid.* 237.

²⁹² *ibid.* 235.

Conclusion Notes

²⁹³ Chinua Achebe, "Colonialist Criticism," *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989) 51-52.

²⁹⁴ Adeola James, "Eustace Palmer, *An Introduction to the African Novel*," *African Literature Today* 7(1975) 150-151.

²⁹⁵ David Diop, "L'Agonie des chaînes," *Coups de pilon* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1961) : 10.

²⁹⁶ Mario Vargas Llosa, *Making Waves*, trans. John King. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996) 72.

²⁹⁷ Simon Ortiz, blurb, *Woven Stone* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1992).

²⁹⁸ *ibid.* 26/31.

²⁹⁹ Keïta. *op. cit.* 232.

³⁰⁰ Toyin Adewale, *Die Aromaforscherin* (Stuttgart: Edition Solitude, 1998) 20.

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