

PART I

Essays

Bodies that Matter: Calixthe Beyala's Female Bodies and Strategies of Hegemonic Subversion¹

Eyiwumi Bolutito Olayinka

Abstract

*Without challenging hegemony, liberal Francophone African feminists unearth aspects of patriarchal African cultural practices that objectify women. In contrast, radical Francophone African feminists call for drastic change to these practices through reappropriating the female body as a way to liberate African women from patriarchal oppression. They challenge the patriarchal order by opposing gender roles and stereotypes and by taking a decisive stand for total female liberation. They call for a radical reordering of patriarchal societies through the annulment of binary oppositions that classify women as "other." In this article, I follow Judith Butler's lead in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*¹ and explore Calixthe Beyala's commitment to African women's liberation from oppression. Beyala's approach presents auto-eroticism, homicide, infanticide, refusal of marriage, bodily and psychical dis-eroticization, and physical transformation of female bodies as strategies to secure women's freedom.*

Key Words: Calixthe Beyala, Radical Feminism, Patriarchal Oppression, Female Bodies, Strategies

Awa Thiam, the Senegalese feminist, writer, activist, and author of *La paroles aux négresses*,² testifies to the universality of women's oppression, which she says occurs globally through varying shades and forms.³ Regardless of location, the oppression of women is a constant variable in societies where patriarchal beliefs project that women are inferior to men. Radical African feminists such as Calixthe Beyala have endeavored to scrutinize the manipulation of women's bodies through their writings and criticisms. They insist that androcentric beliefs and practices must be changed drastically

¹ Content Trigger Warning: Part of this essay may be disturbing to some readers; in it, I engage with literary descriptions of sexual assault.

in order to fully liberate oppressed African women. They also suggest that dwelling on the reappropriation of the female body offers one path through which women may attain freedom from patriarchal oppression. Alluding to a biblical passage,⁴ Beyala metaphorically captures how hegemonic practices circumscribe women by relegating them to positions of servitude, deprivation, self-denial, and abnegation.

Discourse of the Body: Female Agency and Strategies of Revolt

The reification of the female body mainly occurs through the institutionalization of denigrating mythical cultural practices and processes that women themselves patronize. Taboos, marriage, maternity, servitude, excision, infibulations, and virginity tests are major oppressive cultural mediation tools that enforce the recreation and reformulation of women. These practices prepare women to see themselves as objects of male possession. Through these practices, the female body is thus often branded as male property. For instance, Prêtresse-goîtrée, the diabolically powerful priestess who wields supernatural powers over the people of Wuel, instructs women in *Seul le diable le savait* (abbreviated to *Diable* subsequently) to submit their bodies—hook, line, and sinker—to men, who are their human gods. She orders women to offer their bodies to men for lovemaking—without feeling disgust or protest.⁵ She directs women to release their bodies to men, who make love to them in the open until men have their fill, become tired, and lie motionless, sweaty, and out of breath. Love-making between men and women becomes an instant public show where men, in absolute possession of female bodies, loosen themselves up and subject women to the gratification of men's sexual desires.

In Beyala's narratives, other instances of women serving as patriarchal agents of female oppression abound. Often, women are the ones who sell their daughters through marriage by demanding bride price, which is the case in the story of Mégri, the protagonist of *Diable*, whose hand is given in marriage because of the material gains Dame maman, her mother, will derive from the transaction. In other narratives, women are the ones who engage in extramarital affairs with the husbands of their fellow women. Laetitia, a Westernized female character in *Diable*, is involved in an illicit affair with

Donga, Dame Donga's husband. Notably, it is one of Beyala's male characters, Donga in *Diable*, who articulates the idea that women are responsible for their own misfortunes and oppressions as far as gender relations are concerned.⁶ To this end, Jiff Mokobia, a Nigerian literary critic, accuses women of complicity in the oppression of women when he notes that women are victims of the situations they create for themselves—by themselves.⁷

Nonetheless, the complexity that surrounds the oppression of women in the Beyalian world calls for careful and objective analysis. While her male characters tend to see women as responsible for their own subjugation, her female characters see their oppression as anchored in phallogentric cultural tendencies. As portrayed in *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* (subsequently referred to as *Soleil*), Ateba, the protagonist, conveys women's frustration to her fellow women through a letter in which she wonders what it is that men *so* require of women that patriarchal systems must employ such high levels of female othering to obtain it.⁸ Her manner of interrogating patriarchy reiterates the excessive and often ill-defined demands that men place on women. The questions Ateba poses explain why Beyala refers to men in *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales* as a danger and a virus.⁹ Ambivalence surrounds the real agents of women's oppression and therefore necessitates investigating factors of oppression beyond the surface level. The psychosocial, political, and economic needs and perspectives of both genders seem to be the cardinal points Beyala suggests audiences must consider.

Resisting Maternity: A Quest to Liberate the Female Body

Maternity in Beyala's discourse of the body is a multifaceted phenomenon, and it constitutes one of the highest points of debate in her mission to liberate women. Beyala presents maternity as a state that devours women's bodies, since women must have many births to prove their fertility. Examples of such women include Mâ, Tanga's mother, and other mothers in *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (subsequently referred to as *Tanga*), who receive medals from the governor for their childbearing prolificacy.¹⁰ Beyala also depicts childbearing as an economic activity that determines the value of a woman's bride price: while a typical bride price is one thousand francs, that number skyrockets when Bertha, the mother of Mégr

in *Diable*, demands ten thousand francs.¹¹ Bertha considers that amount of money a high sum that must be paid because of Mégri's proven ability to procreate and her potential for successful and repeated childbearing.

Beyond the commoditization of female reproduction, Beyala also presents maternity as undesirable. This position of undesirability arises as a necessary means of preventing the female body from being overused. For example, Ada, Ateba's aunt in *Soleil*, considers maternity an undesirable burden. The same goes for Tanga, the protagonist of *Tanga*, who clearly articulates her desire not to birth children after Cul-de-Jatte, her lover, asks her to give him a child.¹² Many of the mothers represented in Beyala's works dislike child-rearing, which prompts some to abandon their babies after childbirth or even to commit infanticide, such as Irène does in *Soleil*.

Beyala also depicts women's bodies as worn-out tools because of their incessant procreation. Of particular note is the way Mégri, in *Diable*, attributes the dilapidation that has occurred in Dame Donga's physiognomy to incessant births and to sexual intercourse. Mégri, with disgust, views Dame Donga's body as marked by drooping breasts and as fatigued by numerous pregnancies and the frequent sexual intercourse she has with her husband to prevent him from going to the slums to patronize other women.¹³ Mégri judges that Dame Donga subjects herself to too many episodes of sexual intercourse with her husband, Donga, in order to satisfy the latter's sexual desires and to prevent him from having illicit affairs with other women. Ironically, this appears not to work: Donga later dates Laetitia in the novel.

Apart from the damage done by regular or incessant sexual intercourse, another major factor that Beyala suggests ruins the female body is incessant procreation occasioned by the need of mothers to replace children they lose to diseases and plagues caused by inadequate medical care, malnutrition, and environmental pollution. Ateba's grandmother (in *Soleil*), Tanga's mother (in *Tanga*), and Grand-mère (in *La petite fille du réverbère*¹⁴) are examples of Beyalian women whose bodies are exhausted by successive maternities prompted by child mortality. This recalls the argument of Lauretta Ngcobo, a South African political activist, feminist critic, and writer, about the importance placed on childbearing in Africa.¹⁵ Ironically, though, childbearing in the

Beyalian sense bears no semblance to the importance Ngcobo invokes. While having a large number of children is a means by which many Africans procure posterity (and, at times, through which wealth and success are measured), for Beyalian mothers who seek liberation from hegemonic oppression, it is the opposite. Childbirth, for Beyala, represents a denigration and exploitation of the female body; it is used as an avenue for generating income through child labor, child abuse, and child prostitution, or it is considered an outright unattractive venture.

Rejecting Widowhood, Overturning Taboos

Widowhood is another theme through which Beyala revolts against patriarchy. As discussed earlier, in some African societies, a woman automatically becomes the property of her husband once her bride price is paid. After the man's death, the woman is expected to remain his wife or to be inherited by one of his close relations. If she chooses to remarry outside her husband's clan, she is expected to return her bride price to her husband's family before she remarries. Beyala ridicules this cultural practice through the exploits of Mâ in *Tanga*, who keeps a lover after her husband's death without reimbursing her bride price. To escape cultural injunctions, ridicule, and chastisement, she simply lies when she is caught returning from her lover's residence.

In similar widowhood exigencies, Bertha and Mégri in *Diable* are restricted to the confines of their houses for a mourning period of seven days after le Pygmée's death. During this time, they lie on the bare floor and are expected not to leave, work, or bathe. Although Bertha conforms, Mégri revolts against these customary injunctions of anguish and of enforced solitude. She does so by bathing, brightly decorating her face, and going out in a low-necked, yellow, high-street fashion dress and multi-colored sandals. These elements of revolt fulfill two radical feminist agendas: revalorizing the female body and reappropriating the power of gaze, both of which afford women power against patriarchal stipulations.

Resisting Marriage and Reappropriating the Female Body

Resisting marriage and reappropriating female bodies are mechanisms through which Beyalian women are able to reclaim agency

in patriarchal systems. Thiam underscores excision and infibulations, forced marriages, polygamy, and silencing as the most common and insupportable machineries of female oppression. In Thiam's view, some women who are conscious of their oppressed state have devised means of coping and/or outright rejecting oppression, while others have found no means of escape.¹⁶ In consequence, the "war of the sexes" goes beyond the realm of physical bodies and enters the psychological realm. To capture this, some authors portray women as psychologically disabled human beings who often become susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder, hypoactive sexual desire disorder, and tendencies toward infanticide or homicide. Beyala pays particular attention to the post-traumatic stress disorders suffered by her protagonists after they experience virginity tests. Ateba in *Soleil*, the eponymous heroine in *Tanga*, and Mègri in *Diable* are all examples of female characters who manifest psychical damage as a result of hegemonic demands placed on women.

A practical example occurs in *Diable* when eighteen-year-old girls, like Mègri, are made to go through a virginity test at the hands of Prêtresse-goitrée. That episode leaves Mègri marked with shame and trauma. Weighed down by cultural pressures and by men's inadequate emotional support for women's psychosocial needs, Beyala's radical feminist archetypes often degenerate into mental disorders that result in infanticide and homicide. In the final analysis, declaring a gender war seems to be the only escape route for women. According to Rangira B. Gallimore, a feminist critic, the war between men and women is obvious in Beyala's work: in her bid to place women on a higher pedestal, Beyala mercilessly ridicules male power that issues from patriarchal systems.¹⁷ Therefore, her characters' resistance to marriage and motherhood, as well as their tendencies to kill their male aggressors, form part of Beyala's agenda to reappropriate women's bodies.

In Beyala's début, *Soleil*, as well as in her successive narratives, her female characters are physically unhealthy and clad in tattered clothes. The description of Tanga's mother's physical appearance confirms the wretched state of women, who are treated as subalterns and as prisoners caught in a web of hegemonic traditions. Beyala's female characters are portrayed as people who wear "old, dull 'grey' color boubou with collapsed breasts, frizzy whitish shock of hair, the corners of their lips

sunken by flaws that accentuate their female destiny emerging from nothingness heading for emptiness.”¹⁸ Hence, Beyala bestows women’s bodies with the physical marks of suffering—a traumatic representation of imprisonment through patriarchal traditions. Nathalie Etoke, a Cameroonian author and feminist, equally opines that suffering, pains, and subjection mark feminine identity in *La Petite peule*, an autobiographical novel by the Senegalese feminist writer Mariama Barry.¹⁹ For these authors, a woman only exists in a patriarchal system when she subjects herself to various dehumanizing processes and codes of social conduct.

In a Beyalian world, women are viciously molested by authorities, are forgotten, and go unrecognized by society. Prisoners to patriarchal injunctions, they are compelled to live under gruesome conditions where men commit adultery, rape, and impregnate their daughters with impunity. It is a society where a woman is a shadow of her real self.²⁰ The lexical apparatus with which Pâ, Tanga’s father, describes Mâ captures how the female body is devalued by Beyala’s oppressive male characters.

The kind of frustration that marks the lives of Beyalian women, who are confused by the excessive demands that patriarchal cultural practices place on them, makes it necessary for a feminist of Beyala’s rank to textualize women’s and men’s bodies in order to enable women to assert themselves through resistance and agency. In *Soleil*, Ateba, after being raped by an aggressor, tries to take a shower to cleanse herself of the man’s sperm. However, the man will not let her go and instead forces his penis into her mouth, up to the summit of her throat, and says: “que Dieu a sculpté la femme à genoux aux pieds de l’homme.”²¹ Consequently, Ateba is provoked beyond measure and spills out the man’s sperm at his feet. In a similar manner, Tanga vomits and flushes Cul-de-Jatte’s sperm away with water after sexual intercourse to signify female bodily purification from contact with males and to empty herself of sperm in order to avoid pregnancy. Second, her actions serve as a symbolic way of extricating herself from her past sexual encounters with men, an experience which she claims drums on her temple and aggresses her incessantly. The actions of these female protagonists directly enable them to confront patriarchal indices of oppression.

To set the record straight, Calixthe Beyala chooses to textualize female and male bodies using literary binoculars. Beyala

artistically maneuvers patriarchal social norms through her subversive feminist vision and turns the table around in favor of women, who, according to literary critic, novelist, and feminist Eva Figs, have been shaped by men.²² Beyala makes her protagonists undertake actions that literally shut men out of their psyches by denying men access to their bodies. For instance, instead of heterosexual gratification of her erotic needs, Ateba chooses to caress herself and to masturbate in her days of “innocence” to derive sexual pleasure and to break away from the hegemonic order that suppresses her from freely auto-possessing and expressing her sexuality. She employs masturbation as a way to break androcentric holds and to distance herself from men so that she will not be contaminated by them; she considers men to be the seeds of disorder. By so doing, auto-eroticism enables Ateba to create for herself a kind of feminist space that assures her total separation from males. It also saves her from the need to engage with another woman via a lesbian relationship. Therefore, massaging Betty’s (Ateba’s mother) body does not translate into gratifying her sexual needs; rather, it translates into purifying Betty of men’s touches and from their deposits into her body.²³

Extermination of Man’s Domination

As violent as they are, abortion, infanticide, and murder are other potent weapons Beyala offers to her protagonists. According to Françoise Lionnet, an American literary comparatist and specialist in gender studies, violence becomes “the ultimate act of resistance and survival.”²⁴ Every act of violence and agony, either in action or in words, is for Beyala’s protagonists a liberating means to justify their desires for freedom from patriarchal objectification. Irène’s abortion, in which Ateba is the lead accomplice, is a symbolic, apocalyptic act that kills the seed of the man who impregnated her before a child is born. By suppressing procreation, she seeks to end man’s oppressive tendencies against women. Hence, Irène declares that man will no longer take hold of her. The use of the conjugated future tense of the verb *will* (no longer) *take*²⁵ is affirmative and significant. It is the indicative mode of the French verb “prendre” (to take). When Irène speaks in the indicative mode, she signifies the reality of her determination that men can no longer take possession of her—because she has emptied herself

of the seed that a man deposited in her. Consequently, she fully possesses her body.

Irène's death has been interpreted as an act of liberation. If Beyala had allowed the character to live and to metamorphose, Irène could have demonstrated her victory over male domination. It would seem, however, that Beyala positions death by violence as the only machinery through which women can free themselves from oppression. This arises because Irène's death makes it possible for her to reemerge in the dead body of Ateba's unnamed rapist. The synchronization of Ateba's lover's death by murder and the resurrection (albeit imaginary) of Irène is highly significant: it is through the death of the "old oppressed woman" that the new, emancipated woman can be rediscovered and reinvented. The emancipated woman's rediscovery, however, is linked to the death of patriarchy, which is symbolized through the death of the man that Ateba murders. Commenting on violence in Beyala's narratives, Gallimore argues that Beyala's heroines reappropriate their bodies through violence and establish an irreversible rupture between the oppressor and the oppressed.²⁶ For Beyala's protagonists to achieve liberty, they deliberately use homicide and infanticide as weapons to register their disgust against female objectification. As far as Beyala's feminist prototypes are concerned, violence begets violence at all costs. For them, female liberation is the act of rejecting and moving against every aspect of culture that objectifies the female gender.

Judging by Moi's (the omnipresent narrator in *Soleil*) definition of female destiny, the death of an oppressed woman is necessary in order for her to be reborn free. According to Moi's perspective, a woman's body, through metaphorical death, finds redefinition, rebirth, and victory over hegemony. Therefore, the eschatological state of the female gender seems to be a promising means of emancipation—even violence. Women, as metaphorical seeds, must fall to the ground and regeminate as women capable of giving light and liberation in the place of darkness and oppression, which male figures represent. Moi therefore predicts the inevitability of the death of the woman and encourages the protagonist, Ateba, to first fall in death and then to rise and shine light on darkness before winning back the legend.

The irreversible rupture that Gallimore implies becomes a necessity in Beyala's work; Beyala reckons that symbiosis between

men and women can only occur if women first break free of all forms of oppression. Violence in the Beyalian sense goes beyond linguistic violence and moves into the realm of murder and infanticide in order to stop marriages and procreation and to reappropriate the female body.²⁷

Ateba's libidinal desire to commit homicide derives from her need to purify womenfolk. This desire is sublimated in Ateba's unconscious and ambivalently pervades her calculated anti-patriarchal tendencies—until her *id* drive to exterminate patriarchal oppression is expressed at the end of the novel. At that point, Ateba satisfies her desire by killing her nameless one-night aggressor. Following Moi's narration, the way Ateba kills her aggressor resembles the desire she expressed earlier while she massaged her mother. The massage scene is similar to the scene in which Ateba finally unleashes her anger and kills the man.

To physically disconnect from oppressive male characters, Beyala dis-eroticizes the female body by disconnecting the female psyche from male contact. This is another example of an act that exterminates man's domination in order to further reduce male power. She disconnects both genders spatially and mentally by psychically disallowing and denying what is happening in the physical. Thus, male possession of a female body is made psychologically unreal; in this instance, an oppressed woman takes control of her body and prevents it from being possessed by a male oppressor. Consequently, Beyala's protagonists do not derive pleasure from sexual encounters, according to Gallimore, because they refuse to participate in female-male eroticism.²⁸ Rather, they choose to mentally exile themselves from the erotic world of men.

At Ateba's first contact with Jean Zepp, her aunt's tenant, she pleads for the purifying potency of tears and of the lagoon to transform her body and to cleanse her of Jean Zepp's agonizing touch. Ateba is thus portrayed as mentally ill—prepared to engage in erotic affairs with men to the extent that she feels polluted at the touch of a man. Ateba physically and psychologically separates her body from that of the man's to violate the law that orders her to submit her body to masculine emotion and to avoid contact with sperm, which Beyala describes as “the seed of disorder.”²⁹ Every female body felled in bed by man resembles her own image. In essence, she sees herself as the one being torn apart. Ateba consequently finds it necessary to divorce her body from male contact

physically, psychologically, and spatially. She castrates men generally by suspending and breaking this particular man's feelings, and, at the same time, by maintaining distance from males in order to deprive them of the powers of generation and regeneration. She does so to exterminate the subjection of female bodies to patriarchal possession and oppression.

Dis-eroticizing the Female Body

A host of Beyalian female characters often show repugnance toward sexual intercourse with men. They do not freely give themselves to sexual pleasure, and in their resistance, they are raped. During one such sexual assault with an unnamed man, Ateba does not betray any sentiments of enjoyment. Rather, she violently resists the man's advances. The lexical field Beyala chooses to describe this scene makes clear Ateba's lack of amorous desire for men. It also depicts the dis-eroticization of her body and the resistance she employs as she attempts to psychologically separate her body from that of the man. Ateba's chosen modes of resistance against her aggressor—beating, biting, tightening her thighs, rearing up against him, obstructing the movement of his hand into her vagina, turning her head, spitting on his face, moaning, scratching him, and pulling and choking his penis—are some of the weapons she employs to dis-eroticize her body.³⁰

Similarly, Ateba's friend, Irène, describes her encounter with a man whom she calls a bloke³¹ and sugar daddy.³² His description of the sexual acts that happened between the two of them portrays that it is the man who is both psychologically and physically involved in the sexual act. He is the major subject in the scene, while Irène is the object:

Monsieur me demande de sucer son truc. Je refuse. . . . Le truc tout petit et tout rouge. . . . Total: il me jette sur le lit, il fonce sur moi, il se frotte, il me caresse les seins, le ventre, le clitoris. « Je veux te donner du plaisir », qu'il dit en me bavant dessus. Et moi je le regarde comme ça d'un œil tout retourné comme si j'étais déjà partie.³³

The man asks me to suck his thing. I refuse. . . . The thing is very small and all red. . . . In summary: he throws me on the bed, he rushes at me, he rubs himself against my body, he caresses my

breasts, my stomach, my clitoris. “I want to give you pleasure,” he says leaking me all over the body. And me, I watch him like that with an eye turned away as if I had already left.

Refusing, describing the sugar daddy in injurious terms, and witnessing are the only actions Irène performs during this forced assault. These actions reveal her lack of participation and her disinterest in the man and in sexual intercourse, except for her interest in the money she received from offering her body in an encounter that is tantamount to prostitution.

Ekassi, one of the female characters in *Soleil*, offers her body while preventing any psychological control or possession of her body by men. Like Irène, she offers her body because of the basic necessity for survival. She also offers her body because she wishes to obtain freedom for Gala, her lover. Her remarks on her sexual intercourse with policemen say it all when she responds that the act was nothing more than the body.³⁴ In the same vein, Tanga’s grandmother dis-eroticizes her body by burying palm kernels into her vagina. Another character, Khadjaba in *Tanga*, also undertakes this painful act in order to register her resentment against men and against maternity after she is serially raped and then gives birth to Tanga’s mother. Similarly, Tanga all but transforms her flesh into a machine—her body exists without feeling, color, and the usual bodily movements that connote sexual pleasure. This demonstrates her body’s denial of real presence and enjoyment, even though it is engaged in sexual acts. Her body is not totally released having been psychologically banned from that environment. Gallimore explains that Beyala’s refusal to use reflexive or reciprocal verbs emphasizes the psychological distance that separates female protagonists’ bodies from male ones.³⁵ The same process, divorcing the body and the psyche through dis-eroticization, occurs in *Diable* when Mégri narrates how she distances her body and her mental participation from l’Étranger’s gaze before he makes any sexual demands. She stated that without reflecting, she tightened hard her thighs one against the other to prevent her aggressor from gaining access into her vagina. She does this to an agonizing extent thereby forbidding herself all forms of pleasure derivable from sex and becoming a murderer herself.³⁶ Since Mégri does not actually commit suicide, her mention of it could be understood as an act of contemplating fatalistic

suicide, which is one of the four types of suicide identified by David Emile Durkheim. Her contemplation occurs because of the excessive regulation she experiences in the hegemonic milieu, which in turn culminates in her disillusionment, disappointment, and confusion.³⁷ Her contemplation of suicide is a byproduct of the extremely suppressive cultural environment in which she lives—one where her passion for life, her will to live, and her abilities for self-realization are strangled. For Mégri, fatalistic suicide constitutes a solution: it is a way to escape patriarchal oppression.

Invoking a New Female Image

Beyala includes the transformation of female sexuality on her agenda to transform the female body. This aspect of her feminist revolt addresses modernization that has occurred as a result of contact with the Western world. For instance, feminist critic Chioma Opara indicates that clothing is one of the mechanisms through which African women are marked and oppressed in patriarchal societies.³⁸ Transforming the body and how it looks, including what is worn, is imperative to enact feminist change in the world. In line with Beyala's feminist agenda, Ateba, Tanga, Mégri, Betty, and Mademoiselle Etoundi (a feminist archetype in *Diabla*) are often clad in clothes fashioned after the Western world. In their quest for liberty, Beyalian protagonists transform their bodies by dressing like Western women and by making use of bleaching creams to liberate themselves from procrustean cultural demands. At times, they overdress by wearing tight-fitting t-shirts and mini-skirts, which by social norms are synonymous with harlotry and cultural aberration, and are insulted by people in their societies. Through the ways she clothes her characters, Beyala thus ascribes to most of her protagonists an internal locus of control and the ability to take their destinies in their own hands. Hence, bodily transformation is one of the mechanisms Beyala's protagonists employ to draw for themselves an image of the free woman they desire to be. In that wise, Tanga paints her eye and her lips, takes a mirror and looks into it. These actions enable her to invoke the idea of the image she wants of herself – that of a clean and desirable woman not under the bondage of hegemony.³⁹ Tanga's use of a mirror to confirm that she has transformed her appearance into what she wants is a symbolic act; it signifies

that the patriarchal masculine gaze is no longer imbued with the authority to ratify her looks. She becomes a subject who invokes her own image as clean and desirable instead of an object who is completely shriveled, exhausted, frustrated, and caricatured by time. For Mégri, her bodily transformation facilitates destroying the yoke of a traditional, patriarchal practice that imposes suffering on a woman's body while she mourns the death of a loved one. In particular, Mégri directly breaks that pact with tradition. She goes out, looks into a mirror, clothes herself in colorful attire, and applies makeup to her full face. Mirrors therefore become an unavoidable trope that oppressed African women need to create their own images in the way they desire. In other words, an African woman must find a way to conduct an auto-assessment to ensure that she is really the free woman she wants to be.

Thus, Beyala postulates that African women should realize times have changed and that the African world must allow women to assume control of their own destinies and exercise control over their bodies. She clearly articulates this point when one of the secondary female characters declared that it was after all their body and that they had the right to do with it whatever they wanted.⁴⁰ This view strongly invokes a new female image—one that stands in contrast to images of the past when girls did not go out, did not question anything but only asked for a good husband and children.⁴¹ Thus, Beyala depicts successful resistance to women's subjugation: her liberated female characters call the bluff of tradition through their thoughts and self-fashioning actions.

Imageries and symbols used by Beyala serve as tropes to demonstrate how women's bodies are trapped by patriarchy in different facets of life. These symbols are immediate; even book titles are encoded. The imagery of the sun, used in the title and prologue of *Soleil*, connotatively signifies the suffering to which female bodies are exposed. From the translation of the title of the novel *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulée* (The Sun Has Beaten Me), it is clear that the person being beaten by the sun is female: the main verb beaten (*brulée*), in its past perfect form, carries the gender marker (the last letter "e") for female. In this instance, the sun (*soleil*) is a symbolic representation of patriarchy.

Further, Beyala employs images of lice, cells, restricted spaces, and filth to illustrate the unimaginable oppression women experience. Lice are parasitic insects that feed on their host's

blood. In this sense, Beyala uses the imagery of lice to depict men as parasites: they suck women's blood, while women are made to suck crass from their own bodies under the pretext of patriarchal culture. Blood connotes life. If lice metaphorically represent men, then the symbolic interpretation is that men suck the life out of women, while women become receptacles for the dirt that issues from men's bodies. Lice are picked from the head of Tapoussi re's (the protagonist of *La Petite fille du r verb re*) neighbour, which is emblematic of family structure in patriarchal societies. Men are positioned as heads over women, and unfortunately these men feed fat over women, just as we see B n rafa (Saïda's father) feeding fat over his wife in *Les honneurs perdus*⁴² (hereafter referred to as *Honneurs*), le Pygm e feeding fat over bon Blanc in *Diable*, and Ada's lovers feeding fat over her in *Soleil*. The feminist message is in the joy Tapoussi re derives from hearing the sound of exploding lice as she kills them with her nails. This implies that men's domination over women must be attacked through killing and that the death of patriarchy will give joy to women.

The cell and other confined spaces are procrustean structures inside which women's bodies are constricted. Tanga gives a vivid description of rats and cockroaches freely climbing over her family's living conditions. This is an unpleasant situation they have come to accept as normal and inevitable because of poverty—but also because P  (the patriarch) takes no action to change the situation. These rats and cockroaches are metaphorical representations of men who constitute a nuisance to women and of situations where women have no choice but to live with men and their decisions. In Tanga's opinion, when men who unequivocally symbolize the patriarchy die, much like rats that cause a putrefying odor, they should be buried and any memory of them repressed so that the psyches of women are not damaged.

The omnipotent narrator in *Soleil* summarizes the lives of women using images of overused and oxidized objects and remarks that "les vieilles dames ressemblent   de vieux bidons rouill s, les uns comme les autres rong s par la vie, momifi s par l'attente de la vie."⁴³ The choice of the metaphors in this phrase aptly captures the life of oppressed Beyalian women. Using such words to describe the women of Quartier G n ral (QG) in *Soleil* implies that, in general, women are living dead bodies that are squeezed to the left angle of life, where they are not supposed to be heard.

Rupturing Silence, Breaking the Pact: Gaining Her Voice to Save Her Body

That women are compressed into corners and are accustomed to discomfort speaks to the fact that women's bodies have been so subjected to miserable lives that women are no longer able to recognize misery. When they do, they simply cannot voice it. This same kind of abject and abnegated life is visible in *Tanga*, when Mâ is described by Tanga as shadow of a being unaware of herself.⁴⁴ Psychologically silenced by patriarchal tradition, Mâ demonstrates her helplessness in the face of her husband's misconduct, which includes adultery, incest, and debauchery. She welcomes Pâ's concubines into her home and takes no action to defend Tanga when she is raped and impregnated by Pâ. A similar scene occurs in Evelyne Mpoudi-Ngollé's *Sous la cendre le feu*, where Djibril Mohamadou almost rapes his sister-in-law and later does rape his surrogate daughter.⁴⁵ Instead of saying something when her sister is almost raped, Mina, his wife, chooses to keep quiet until she learns that he has raped her daughter. She ends up as a neurotic patient. Without psychoanalytical intervention, Mina could have died a mad woman.⁴⁶

From the experiences of the oppressed women in the various texts that I have explored in this article, two potent patriarchal weapons used to perpetrate women's oppression and to sustain hegemonic traditions in African societies appear to emerge: psychological and physical silencing. Through ascription of social roles, oppression, societal expectations, and stereotyping, African women often face difficulties expressing dissent against oppression. This same trend, men silencing and brutalizing women, is found in Aminata Ka Maïga's *La Voie du salut* and Philomène Bassek's *La Tache de sang*.⁴⁷ In these novels, women experience psychological torture from their husbands but do not voice it. Such silencing often results in psychological disorders such as depression, psychosis, de-realisation, de-personalisation, low self-esteem, and others. At times, such women live with these terrible experiences until they die.

Rokhaya, a new bride and protagonist in *La Voie du salut*, carries her depression to her grave after she is trained to remain submissive to her husband all her life. Rokhaya is counselled by her uncle, Baba Gallé, and her aunt to be blindly obedient to her

husband in order to honor her family. She is also told to ensure the wellbeing of her children in order to procure her license to paradise. Rokhaya's marriage is symbolized by a box to which only she has the key, and this conveys the idea that marriage, as an institution, confines women and inhibits their abilities to freely express themselves.

Apart from the symbolical silencing of the female voice through excision and infibulations, outward expression and enjoyment of female sexuality is also suppressed through these practices. Even though Beyala's male characters are described as unable to properly make love to a woman or to make women enjoy the act of love-making, the genital mutilation of Beyala's female characters also contributes to their inability to enjoy sex. Although Beyala seems silent on the issue of cause and effect, excision and virginity tests, as explained in her novels, are processes that can cause frigidity in females. Drawing on scientific findings, Etoke suggests that 85 percent of excised females experience frigidity and sexual frustration.⁴⁸ Basing her analysis on Abasse Ndione's *Ramata*, Etoke explicates how excision contributes to the eponymous heroine's frigidity and sexual frustration.⁴⁹ Given such findings, the lack of pleasure expressed by Beyala's female characters becomes understandable. Excision and infibulation, as well as men's inability to give women sexual pleasure, are key factors that prevent Beyala's female characters from deriving pleasure from sex.

Further, girls are not allowed to express pain or fear during excision. This operates as a mechanism to mentally prepare women to be stoic, to bear the pains of patriarchal oppression, and to suffer in silence until death. The stoicism of Beyala's protagonists often leads to their psychological and physical deaths, since they are forbidden to speak about the deplorable conditions they experience in their marriages. Their stoicism encourages states of self-denial and suicidal acts. For instance, Mama Ida in *La Tache* meets her untimely death because she refuses to verbally acknowledge and to resist her husband's oppressive tendencies.⁵⁰ Gallimore, alluding to Michel Erlich, opines that the family's honor is also tied to this sort of voice control.⁵¹ According to Gallimore, girls who undergo genital amputation must not betray any sign of pain; if they do, they will bring shame upon their families.

Conclusion

Beyala employs eclectic strategies to militate against the oppression of women and to reinstate female bodies. Her sensitivity to the feminine condition in Africa informs the strategies she employs to dismantle mythical creations surrounding African women's oppression. Beyala does not appear to shy away from demystifying cultural beliefs that are implicated in the subjugation of African women. Instead, she reworks the female body to reappropriate it and set it free from patriarchal oppression.

A major observation in Beyala's feminist commitment is that her narratives are some of the most radical within twenty-first century African feminist preoccupations. Her major concern is to challenge and overthrow the existing patriarchal order in androcentric societies by opposing all established gender roles, stereotypes, and oppressions of women. In her war against female oppression and her quest for total female liberation, she acts as an ombudsman to militantly call for a radical reordering of society—through the use of revolutionary acts to suppress the binary opposition that classifies women as “other” in all African societies. Through deploying themes of auto-eroticism, homicide, infanticide, refusal of marriage, bodily and psychical dis-eroticization, and the physical transformation of female bodies via fashion, Beyala shows her commitment to African feminism in the diaspora and discusses strategies, often painful and traumatic, through which women can claim freedom.

Essentially, Beyala uses her female protagonists to rupture the silences imposed on them by hegemonic cultural practices in order to revalorize female bodies. The feminist writings of Beyala are preoccupied with bodily discourse. She succeeds in her enterprise by transgressing language in order to break cultural and traditional barriers.

Notes

¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

² Awa Thiam, *Paroles aux négresses* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1978). Translated into English in 1986 with the title *Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*.

³ Awa Thiam, *Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

- ⁴ Bible Society, “Song of Songs,” *Good News Bible* (China: Collins, 2014), 663.
- ⁵ “Offrez-le aux hommes, vos dieux humains, pour qu’ils l’aiment! Laissez-les se frotter à vous sans dégoût ni rébellion car leur dos, leur cou ont besoin de se reposer et de danser sur vous!” Calixthe Beyala, *Seul le diable le savait* (Paris: Le Pré aux Clercs, 1990), 60. *A note on translations* : I have taken the liberty to oscillate between using the original French and English translation (all translations my own) in the body of the main text, this choice based on my perceived effectiveness of the quote in French or English. I have utilized footnotes to provide the alternative, when I felt necessary.
- ⁶ “La femme n’est malheureuse que parce qu’elle oublie d’être heureuse . . .” Ibid., 217.
- ⁷ “La femme de la société africaine contemporaine chez Calixthe Beyala.” Jiff Mokobia, *Women Novelists in Francophone Black Africa: Views, Reviews, and Interviews*, ed. E.E. Omonzejie (Porto-Novo: Édition Sonou d’Afrique, 2010), 179.
- ⁸ Calixthe Beyala, *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* (Paris: Le Pré aux Clercs, 1990), 46.
- ⁹ “danger, un virus que l’on contractait . . .” Calixthe Beyala, *Lettre d’une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales* (Paris: Spengler, 1995), 21.
- ¹⁰ Calixthe Beyala, *Tu t’appelleras Tanga* (Paris: J’ai Lu, 1997), 85–86.
- ¹¹ Beyala, *Diable*, 241.
- ¹² “je ne veux pas me multiplier.” Beyala, *Tanga*, 166.
- ¹³ “je la détaillai, avec dégoût, cette grosse femme maniérée, aux seins dégoulinants, épuisée par les maternités et les fréquentes parties de jambes en l’air auxquelles elle se contraignait, espérant ainsi empêcher son mari d’aller courir les bas-fonds.” Beyala, *Diable*, 200.
- ¹⁴ Calixthe Beyala, *La petite fille du réverbère* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).
- ¹⁵ Lauretta Ngcobo, “African Motherhood – Myth and Reality,” *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. T. Olaniyan and A. Quayson (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 533–541.
- ¹⁶ Thiam, *Black Sisters*, 113.
- ¹⁷ Rangira B. Gallimore, *L’œuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala: le renouveau de l’écriture féminine en Afrique francophone sub-saharienne* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997).
- ¹⁸ “boubou gris est usé à l’endroit des aisselles . . . seins écroulés . . . tignasse crépue, blanchâtre par endroits, . . . Les coins de ses lèvres affaissées par lels défaites soulignent son destin de femme surgie de néant allant vers le vide.” Beyala, *Tanga*, 36.
- ¹⁹ Nathalie Etoke, *L’Écriture du corps féminin dans la littérature de l’Afrique francophone au sud du Sahara*. (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010); Mariama Barry, *La petite Peule* (Paris: Mazarine, 2000).
- ²⁰ Beyala, *Tanga*, 43.
- ²¹ “how God has created woman on her knees at the feet of man.” Beyala, *Soleil*, 151.
- ²² Eva Figs, *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (London: Macmillan, 1986).
- ²³ Beyala, *Soleil*, 89–90.
- ²⁴ Cited by Gallimore in *L’œuvre romanesque*, 95.

- ²⁵ “prend” Beyala, *Soleil*, 140.
- ²⁶ Gallimore, *L'Oeuvre romanesque*.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ “le germe du désordre.” Beyala, *Soleil*, 22.
- ³⁰ “elle le frappe . . . elle le mord, elle ne veut pas . . . elle se cabre, elle serre les cuisses pour faire obstacle à la main qui se fraye un chemin à coup d’ongles . . . elle détourne la tête . . . elle lui crache au visage . . . elle gémit . . . elle le griffe . . . D’un geste rageur elle accroche sa main au sexe, le retire, le serre, . . . de plus en plus fort, elle l’étrangle.” Ibid., 131–132.
- ³¹ “mec” (slang). Ibid., 98.
- ³² “kruma.” Ibid., 98.
- ³³ Ibid., 99.
- ³⁴ “. . . ce n’était rien. Rien que du corps” Ibid., 51.
- ³⁵ Gallimore, *Oeuvre romanesque*.
- ³⁶ “Sans réfléchir, je serrai mes cuisses l’une contre l’autre. Je serrai fort . . . Toute ma nervosité, centrée, là, à l’endroit du sexe . . . serrer jusqu’à l’agonie. M’interdire tout plaisir. Devenir meurtrière. De moi-même.” Beyala, *Diable*, 158.
- ³⁷ Emile Durkheim, *Le suicide: étude de sociologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).
- ³⁸ Chioma Opara, “Clothing as Iconography: Examples of Bâ and Emecheta,” in *Feminism and Black Women’s Creative Writing: Theory, Practice, Criticism*, ed. A. Adebayo (Ibadan: AMD Publishers, 1996), 110–125.
- ³⁹ “. . . je peignais un œil, les lèvres. Je ramassais un miroir. J’invoquais l’idée de l’image que je voulais de moi . . . Je le pomponnais. Il était propre. Il était désirable . . .” Beyala, *Tanga*, 100–101.
- ⁴⁰ “Après tout c’est leur corps. Elles ont droit d’en faire ce qu’elles veulent.” Beyala, *Soleil*, 66.
- ⁴¹ “les filles ne sortaient pas, ne se posaient pas de questions. Elles ne demandaient qu’un bon mari et des enfants.” Ibid., 66.
- ⁴² Calixthe Beyala, *Les honneurs perdus* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996).
- ⁴³ “old women resemble old corroded cans, all of them devoured by life, mummified by expectations of life.” Beyala, *Soleil*, 11.
- ⁴⁴ “ombre d’un être qui s’ignorait.” Beyala, *Tanga*, 43.
- ⁴⁵ Evelyn Mpoudi Ngollé, *Sous la cendre le feu* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1990).
- ⁴⁶ Wumi Olayinka, “Madness and Free Association in Evelyn Mpoudi Ngolle’s *Sous la cendre le feu*,” *Ibadan Journal of European Studies*, no. 7 (April 2007).
- ⁴⁷ Aminata Maïga Ka, *La voie du salut*, suivi de *Le miroir de la vie* (Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1985); Philomène Bassek, *La tache de sang* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1990).
- ⁴⁸ Etoke, *L’Écriture*.
- ⁴⁹ Abasse Ndione, *Ramata* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2000) cited by Nathalie Etoke (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010).
- ⁵⁰ Bassek, *La tache*.
- ⁵¹ Gallimore, *L’oeuvres romanesques*.