

**Away from Feminist Radicalism: A New Reading of Calixthe
Beyala's *Maman a un amant* and *La petite fille du réverbère***

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Abstract:

Calixthe Beyala's creative works and public comments on her artistic productions and her life in general have enjoyed remarkable attention without any doubt. However, there is a particular aspect of her literary creativity begging for attention. This study, therefore, is set to investigate Beyala's religious disposition with a view to establishing the fact that African women do not only reject being restricted to the kitchen but also demonstrate that they should be considered when it comes to the matter of exercising their faith. The two novels selected for this study are Calixthe Beyala's *Maman a un amant* and *La petite fille du réverbère*. They can be translated as *Mama has a Lover* and *The little girl under the street lamp*. Adopting sociological conceptual framework, data are analyzed using the *French explication de texte* which can be interpreted as the close reading technique or content analysis of a text, verbal or non-verbal. Findings from the study suggest that the new generation of African female writers focuses on an attempt to establish and reconnect womenfolk with their most fundamental human rights through artistic designs and their creative writings. Besides being a means of socialization, religion is a ritualistic act of worship, and it reflects a significant part of a people's way of life. The study, however, concludes that there is a need for check and balance between the idea of masculinity and the concept of feminism to curtail the excesses there-in for the progress of human societies.

Keywords: Feminist radicalism, Calixthe Beyala, African female writers, masculinity

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, African female writing has grown tremendously, and it has provided a platform for the black woman in socio-cultural, economic and political development of the African continent and the world at large. The fast growing world and the unpredictable social system contribute to the level of human consciousness for both men and women in different climes. Africa, as a subset of the universe, has produced great female writers such as Aminata Sow Fall, Mariama Bâ, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Calixthe Beyala, etc. Most of these female writers of African blood, especially the new generation, are known for their militancy as a break away from the conservative narratives. They see it as a social responsibility to create a new line of thought on contemporary realities in their environment. Although majority of African male writers direct their artistic preoccupations towards lampooning the extent of power abuse and maladministration of African political leaders, corruption and poverty, African women authors concern themselves more with social injustice against womenfolk such as sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases, domestic violence and other cultural or religious restrictions. The intention of African female writers is well captured in the words of Ama Ata Aidoo when she remarks thus:

It is definite that anything that had to do with African woman was, of all vital pieces of information, the most unknown (or rather unsought), the most ignored of all concerns, the most unseen of all the visible, and we might as well face it, of everything to do with humanity, the most despised. This had nothing to do with anything that African woman did or failed to do. It had to do with politics of sex and the politics of the wealthy of this earth who grabbed it and who held it (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; cited by Siwoku-Awi, 2010).

It is clear that African female writers, whether they write in English or French, are basically interested in deconstructing the traditional patriarchal order in their society and discourage mindless struggle for materialism through male chauvinistic tendencies. In fact,

in their literary texts, novels, plays and even poems, the focus of many African female writers is to fight against social injustice. It is widely believed that the social imbalances are the barriers against women as they prevent them from attaining their potentials and contributing meaningfully to the socioeconomic and political development of their various countries. New generation African female writers such as Calixthe Beyala, Buchi Emecheta, Fatou Keïta, Régina Yao, Fatou Fanny-Cissé, Lynn Mbuko, Adelaïde Fassinou, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Stella Omonigho, Wumi Olayinka and Véronique Tadjo are right in the game of condemning social injustice that are particularly gender-based.

This quest sets the tone for discussion in this article. The study has purposefully selected two novels as corpus. They are: Calixthe Beyala's *Mama a un amant* (1993) and *La petite fille du reverber* (1998) (*Mama has a Lover* and *The little girl under the street lamp*) because of the common ground in the two texts on the subject-matter. The two novels have inclinations towards showing readers that despite the fact that Beyala is popularly described as a 'hard feminist,' there are other sides of her thoughtfulness, belief pattern or life as a writer or even as an individual that are captured knowingly or unknowingly in her literary works.

2. Conceptual Framework

Sociological Approach is of the view that literature should be seen in the light of the structure and historical stage of the society that produces it. Although literary works are produced by individual writers, they are basically a reflection of the collective life, which could be interpreted as the social existence of a given society.

Aristotle (1789) in his classification of form in his text *Poetics*, which was translated into French as *Poétique* by Hardy Joseph in 1932, sees poetic art as an imitation or representation of reality. Hence, literary works are grouped according to the means of imitation (medium of work, whether music, prose or verse); objects of imitation, which stand for the nature of the situation or characters being imitated and manner of the imitation, which is the point of view through which the work of art is presented. Manner of the imitation

could be found in the character's voice, the voice of an actor or the author's own voice. It is the perspective in which a story is presented. There are first person narrative (I-narrative), omniscient or third person narrative techniques.

Hippolyte Taine, a French-historian, critic and philosopher, attempts to apply the methods of biological science to literature. He comes up with three major factors that determine the uniqueness of a given work of art. He identifies *race, milieu and moment*. Race is the national features, which could be interpreted as culture. Milieu is the artist's environment, the totality of the artist's experience, formal and informal exposures such as family background, education, occupation; travels, marriage(s), income and love affairs. Moment represents all other less personal influences in a writer's life like the major intellectual currents of a period, its governing ideas and assumptions (Dobie, 2012). However, René Wellek and Austin Warren develop what is known today as the social approach. In their book titled, *Theory of Literature*, they identify three areas which should be of interest to a social critic. Such areas are: The writer's background; that is, the author's biological/hereditary and environmental factors, which help understand and explain social attitudes as well as opinions that appear in a particular literary work. The world that is imitated or created and presented in the work itself is another area. This aspect investigates the culture and the society, which are depicted in the text. It also considers how the fictive, imaginary or poetic world reflects its outer world. The third area is the target audience. This last determinant examines the kind of impact the literary work has on its readers. In other words, this aspect interrogates the nature of reception a given text enjoys. This is the area which interest the group of critics called the *receptionists* (Dobie, 2012). Adebayo (2020) asserts:

The relationship between society and African literature in general and the novel in particular can be visualized along two lines: how literature has constituted itself into a model of analysis and synthesis of social reality, and the effect of literature on society. Since its beginnings, the primary role of the African novel has been to elucidate historical and social phenomena (2020, p. 15)

Without doubt, it is important to state that characters in African literature interpret their environment bearing in mind its historical, temporal, political, economical, cultural or spiritual dimension. Literature is simply the mirror of a given society as it concerns individual player or collective personality.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The study presents the popular side of Calixthe Beyala and gives insights into the seemingly untold aspect of her creative works premised on two of her novels; namely, *Mama a un amant* (1993) and *La petite fille du reverber* (1998) (*Mama has a Lover* and *The little girl under the street lamp*).

3.1 Popular side of Calixthe Beyala

Beyala is an African female writer from Cameroon. She is well-known for her literary activism. She is indeed a radical feminist. Many literary and social critics have condemned and nailed her for the use of vulgar language, which they termed “dirty language.” It is because the use of certain words or expressions is uncommon to conservative female writers around the world particularly in Africa. This use of strange and mysterious female voice makes people blame Beyala. The presentation of pornographic descriptions without neither any sense of shame nor apology is a common feature in her artistic works. She often leaves readers to be concerned with and manage the erotic feelings that can emanate from the pages of her novels. Siwoku-Awi opines thus:

Beyala in an unmitigated and bilious satire strips the African man of his honour and presents him as worthless and impotent, with only his phallus to boast of. We can affirm that Beyala is haunted by an uncontrollable hatred for the male and every occasion for revenge is relished (2010, p. 56).

As a matter of fact, Beyala, at every single opportunity, fights back at misogyny; that is, hatred of women, which is the basis on which women are taken as mere sexual or as most productive objects. In an interview, she is quoted thus: “Depuis que je vis, les homes africains me ruinent les nerfs. J’ai une haine particulière, moi contre cette dictature de couilles ” (Siwoku-Awi, 2010).

From this citation one understands that all her life, African men get on the novelist's nerves. She has a particular hatred for what she described as dictatorship of the testicles. This show of hatred for the male counterpart takes a centre stage in Beyala's creative compositions. Babatunde Ayeleru (2007) observes that Beyala's radicalism is evinced in her style. She demonstrates very broadly that the postmodern world is full of uncertainties, scepticism and parodic irony.

Displaying her radical feminist posture, Beyala criticises the unwanted male domination and oppression over the womenfolk, where the latter are treated as common materials of sexual pleasure and domestic decorators or at most, productive objects. Irène, one of Beyala's characters in *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée*, presents this disgusting erotic feeling.

Speaking through Irène, Beyala writes in another novel *It is sun that burnt me (C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée)* that "Monsieur me demande de sucer son **truc (pénis)**. Je refuse... Ce truc tout petit et tout rouge... il me jette sur le lit, il fonce sur moi, il se frotte, il me caresse **les seins, le ventre, le clitoris**" (p. 99).

The origin of hatred for men can be deduced from their madness in the handling of their female counterpart.

Without any reservation, Beyala proudly mentions the male sexual organ, the penis and sensitive female parts such as breast, belly and clitoris. It is unpopular for an African cultured woman to talk about these things in public. It used to be considered as a taboo; a forbidden act in traditional African societies for a lady or a woman to speak about certain issues especially in the public sphere.

Again, Beyala presents Ateba's rape with a view that the woman is unjustly manhandled. She writes: "Il lui plie le bras dans le dos et l'oblige à s'agenouiller devant lui. "... en frottant son sexe sur sa bouche, il lui dit, prend-le". Il l'empoigne par les cheveux, il la force, elle résiste la bouche pleine de sa chair... Il souffle, il râle, elle le reçoit, la nausée dans le ventre. Il la débarrasse en un flocc mouillé et dit, le visage frétilant, que Dieu a sculpté la femme à genoux aux pieds de l'homme" (p. 151).

The novelist debunks the male domination and oppression of women by presenting the inhuman treatment of the male character in the novel. For instance, the man places Ateba's arm on her back and compels her to kneel down in front of him. While putting his dick in her mouth, he commands her, hold it!" He grabs her by the hairs.

The instance above confirms Beyala's linguistic vulgarity. "...sex organs and sexual issues that are hitherto unspeakable become loudly speakable" (Ayeleru, 2007). One is made to see the picture of a wicked man who forcefully has carnal knowledge of a girl who is totally unwilling. Beyala uses this to condemn the male chauvinism in African society, which presents the man as superior to the woman. The writer's attempt is radical but rational. It is a struggle to break the age long silence that enslaves the woman in human history.

3.3 Untapped side of Calixthe Beyala

As crude as the creative writing of Beyala might appear to some critics, she equally has a space for talking about religion although this facet of her writing has not gained attention from scholars who have appraised her literary works in history. Religion is a major agent of socialisation. It is a tenet by which people demonstrate their ways and manners of life through worship. Religion remains a serious integral part of any culture that explains a people's life style (Ogundokun, 2014). Every act of worship is ritualistic in nature or put it simply, it is a rite. Religious issues are archetypal anywhere in the world. Religion is a spirituo-social thing. Akpenpuun Dzurgba notes:

Religion is a spiritual and social phenomenon. Its spiritual component consists of non-physical, immaterial, incorporeal, intangible or invisible entities, e.g God, satan, angels, demons, heaven and hell. It consists also of sovereign authority and power by which God is described as the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. God to whom there is no impossibility. He interacts with human beings spiritually and satisfies their needs.

... A divino-human relationship exists in which the spiritual personalities are constantly offered adoration, glorification, thanksgiving, propitiation, appeasement and expiation to ward off

divine anger, judgment and penalties such as drought, famine, diseases, infertility and unprofitable trade (2008, p. 10)

Dzurgba makes people understand that the social aspect of religion is the physical or the material things, which are visible and can be associated with religion such as the holy books (the Holy Bible, the Holy Quran), the buildings, regalia, drums, offerings etc.

Beyala's references to the holy books particularly the Holy Bible and the Glorious Quran portray her in another light. In *La petite fille du réverbère*, the novelist mentions biblical names like Judas (p. 29), Mary Magdalene (p. 41), Jehovah, Pontious Pilate (p. 70), Jésus (p. 87), Lucifer (p. 106), Jézabel, Old testament/ancient testament (p. 125), Eden (p. 185). She also references events such as Noël/Christmas (p. 28), la Mer Rouge/Red Sea, Jericho and "Paradis"/paradise.

Besides, the adoption of names like "Phillipe", "Jean-Paul" and "Thomas" for her characters further demonstrates Beyala's religious consciousness. On page 87 of her novel, *La petite fille du réverbère*, she declares:

J'avais fois ences paroles telle une malade en Jésus, la preuve de notre égalité fraternelle. J'apprenais, et mon sang se purifiait. Je lisais, et une lumière céleste passait dans mes yeux (p. 87).

I saw in these words like a sick person in Jesus, the proof of our fraternal equality. I learned, and my blood was purified. I was reading, and a celestial light passed through my eyes (The little girl from the street lamp (Our translation).

At least literarily, the use of first person narrative technique amplifies the reliability of the statements. From the very first page of the novel, *La petite fille du réverbère*, the autobiographical nature of the novel is revealed when Beyala writes thus: "Je m'appelle Beyala B'Assanga Djuli, ce qui signifie "Reine D' Assanga". The author's belief is again highlighted when she says:

Bien sûr! C'est Grand-mère qui me l'apprit. Ce qu'homme veut, il l'obtient. Comme Jésus sortit des flammes éternelles, vous nous sauverez ! (*La petite fille du réverbère*, p. 89).

Of course! It was Grandma who taught me. What a man wants, he gets. As Jesus came out of the eternal flames, you will save us! (*The little girl under the street lamp*, p. 89 Our translation).

Furthermore, with the following statements:

a). “La tempête se calma. Derrière les judas du ciel, le soleil se pointa” (p.29)/ The storm calmed down. And, from the sky, the sun appeared.

b). « Cet homme est le diable, envoyé par Lucifer pour perturber les prières de sa Sainteté catholique ! » (p. 106) ; Beyala reminds her readers the biblical event of Mark chapter 4 verse 39 which explains the calming down of storm on the sea by Jesus Christ. The portion of the Holy Bible reads thus:

And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark, 4: 39)

If the writer is not taking seriously as a believer or a “born again” of a sort, the above extract confirms that the novelist is at least a good student of the Bible. In fact, Beyala’s use of biblical allusion demonstrates significantly that despite her feminist excesses, she believes in the existence of God. A critical reading of her literary works reveals that certain statements of hers can be linked to some events in the Holy Bible. For instance, the account of 1 Peter chapter 5 verse 8 which reads: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, (and) seeking whom he may devour:”

And, Isaiah chapter 14 verse 12 which says: “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning, down to the ground which didst weaken the nations.” It can be understood that Beyala believes in the casting out of the Devil as pointed out in the Holy Bible: “ the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan which deceives the whole world . . . (Revelation, chapter 12 verse 9).

Consolidating her religious consciousness, Beyala employs direct Bible quotations as one can see from the examples below:

- a) “Je m’en lave les mains comme Ponce Pilate”/ I wash my hands like Pontious Pilate did [*La petite fille du réverbère*, p. 7] **(Mathew, chapter 27 verse 24).**
- b) “Nous nous sommes mariés devant Dieu et ce que Dieu a uni, personne ne peut le défaire”/ We are married to ourselves before God and what therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder [*La petite fille du réverbère*, p. 78] **(Mathew, chapter 19 verse 6).**
- c) “... les oiseaux du ciel ne cultivent ni ne moissonnent, pourtant ils vivent!”/the birds of the air neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet they eat [*La petite fille du réverbère*, p. 98] **(Mathew, chapter 6 verse 26).**
- d) Seeking the face of God as a sinner, Beyala adds “Pardonnez-nous nos offenses comme nous pardonnons aussi à ceux qui nous offensent/Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us [*La petite fille du réverbère*, p. 148].**(Mathew, chapter 6 verse 12).**

These metaphors of events from the Holy Scripture are not mere literary accidental discharge; they underscore the fact that Beyala is not blind as regards religious knowledge, matters, beliefs and practices.

As if that was not enough, one is dazzled when one reads Beyala’s *Maman a un amant* as the novelist conveniently switches to the use of words and expressions that are from the Muslims’ Holy book, *The Glorious Quran*. For example, the author’s main character carries an Islamic name, Mamadou Traoré (also known as Loukoum). Other Islamic names like Abdou, Aminata, Maryam, Aziza, Mohamed, Fatima among others are adopted for the characters. She even makes reference to Mecque (*Maman a un amant*, p. 16), the Islamic Holy land where Muslims all over the world visit every year during holy pilgrimage.

The expressions, “*Inch Allah*”/if God permits or by God’s grace and “*Wallai*”/believe me are generously used in the novel. Affirming her faith in the superiority of God/Allah, as the only one who can protect, Beyala’s narrator says: “*Qu’Allah te protégé!*”/May God

protect you! [*Maman a un amant*, p. 16]. The narrator, representing the sub-consciousness of the novelist, goes ahead to portray herself as a believer demonstrates her gratitude to God by saying: “Gloire à Allah”/Glory be to God [*Maman a un amant*, p. 124].

As a matter of fact, the argument in this essay is not whether Calixthe Beyala is a Christian or a Muslim. It is to establish the fact that apart from the novelist’s inclination for radical feminism and revolutionary tendencies for positive social changes in human society, she has faith in God.

3. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the use of both the direct and indirect characterisation help the novelist to capture important actions, in-actions and events in a very vivid manner. The technique of characterisation provides a better understanding of the author’s thematic preoccupations and her motive for readers. Ngugi (1967; 1981: 72) and reiterated in Crowder and Obaro (1970) and Chinweizu et al. (1980):

Literature cannot escape from the class-power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice, whether or not he is aware of it, his (or her) work reflects on one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural, and ideological struggles in society.

From the study, therefore, it is evident that apart from chasing gender equality, Beyala recognizes and appreciates God in her artistic exploration. She does not support docility so as to enhance humanity. She has a balanced and a progressive mind set. Indeed, every writer has his/her own style of writing and he/she should not be blamed for choosing to write the way it is best known to him/her to accomplish target objective(s). God also supports diversity of culture, ideology, education among other things. John 14: 2 says: “In my father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.”

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