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Mongo Beti, Ahmadou Kourouma and Ibrahima Ly: How Feminists are They?

Ramonu Sanusi

Mongo Beti's Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba (1956) and Mission terminée (1957), Ahmadou Kourouma's Les Soleils des indépendances (1970) and Ibrahima Ly's Toiles d'araignée (1972) depict female characters confronted with traditional attitudes, religious prescriptions and patriarchal mores in Cameroonian, Ivorian and Malian societies. This article recognizes and applauds the attacks launched by Beti, Kourouma and Ly on certain Christian, Islamic and traditional African practices that subjugate sub-Saharan African women, even though these authors still portray their female characters as subaltern and women in bondage who aspire to free themselves from cultural enslavement and patriarchal domination.

Key words: Mongo Beti, Ahmadou Kourouma, Ibrahima Ly, Patriarchy, Subordination, Women, Marriage, African traditional rites, Religion, Freedom

Introduction

Themes of subalternity of African female subject and of her oppression by traditional, Islamic and patriarchal ethos run through Mongo Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956) and *Mission terminée* (1957), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* (1970) and Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignée* (1972). These novels depict the condition of traditional African women in Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Mali. Female characters referred to in these texts are confronted with traditional attitudes, religious prescriptions and patriarchal mores in their societies and which are vehemently denounced by the aforementioned writers. Using John Beverley's theory drawn from his *Subalternity and Representation*, domination and subordination of the female subjects are highlighted here with a view to critiquing Beti, Kourouma and Ly's feminist posture.

In *Mission terminée*, *Les soleils des indépendances* and *Toiles d'araignée*, the issue of bride price is central and puts Niam's wife, Salimata and Mariama, the female personae of these novels, in a subaltern condition. It could be argued that their parents "sold" them and that they came to be the "property" of their husbands and under their control. These women, though, attempted to free themselves. Contrary to the idealized portrayals of African women by Negritude poets, Beti, Kourouma and Ly show pity for African women in their texts. Referring to Kourouma, Chemain-Degrange notes:

La remise en cause des coutumes connaît, avec Ahmadou Kourouma une acuité non encore atteinte auparavant. Excision, infabulation, viol rituel faisaient partie du domaine réservé à l'ethnographe, et Ahmadou Kourouma est le premier romancier négro-africain à avoir violé ces tabous. (342-343)

Beti, Kourouma and Ly's specifically depict woman's exploitation by man and her subordination to him in marriage, sex and domestic roles. Their works give an account of the harsh conditions female characters endure. In *Mission terminée*, the female character around whom the plot is centered is caught in a quagmire of domination and subordination. After his wife leaves him, Niam demonstrates his masculine arrogance: "Moi, je suis le sol. Elle n'est qu'une feuille morte qui vient de se détacher de l'arbre". (23). Niam's wife works as a house-wife and takes care of his farm as well. Her absence leaves Niam's house in shambles and shows his inability to take care of himself. The narrator is nevertheless aware that the wife's role is more complex:

Au bout de six mois de ce régime, Niam n'y tint plus. Il se rendit d'abord une nuit auprès de Bikokolo, le patriarche, le sage du village, à qui il avoua, non sans peine parce qu'il était un orgueilleux, qu'il désirait récupérer sa femme dont il avait grand besoin pour tenir sa maison. Au vrai, il était beaucoup plus intéressé que cela: il avait raté une saison d'arachides depuis le départ de sa femme, puisqu'il n'avait personne d'autre pour travailler dans son champ (23).

In Niam's eyes his wife is just a piece of machinery and a servant. The subservient position of the wife is subtly critiqued in the way she is portrayed. It is obvious in the novels written by Beti and Kourouma, that most female characters are represented as secondary and defined in relation to male characters. d'Almeida opines: « La femme est rarement un personnage principal aussi bien dans la trame narrative que dans la thématique où elle occupe une place tout-à-fait secondaire, se situe à l'arrière plan et ne se trouve définie que par rapport aux hommes» (137).

It is true that Niam's wife in *Mission terminée* and Salimata in *Les soleils* appear frequently in the novels but the principal characters of *Mission terminée* and *Les soleils* are male characters. Although the first part of *Les soleils* admittedly covers Salimata's life, Fama, her husband, is unquestionably the protagonist of the novel. The second part of the novel is devoted to Fama and the main focus is on his travaux in post-colonial Africa. Similarly, in *Mission terminée*, Niam's wife is omnipresent but Jean-Marie's adventure overrides other themes, and he is seen as the protagonist. It is true that the plight of Niam's wife remains important to this literary piece but Jean-Marie Medza is the main character. The principal actors in *Mission terminée*, *Le pauvre Christ*, *Les soleils des indépendances* and *Toiles d'araignée* are male. Since some African traditions place an emphasis on male superiority, the wife is placed under the authority and will of her husband. In such arrangements, a woman is trained to obey and respect all members of her husband's family. On the contrary, the husband or the male child is trained to rule his household knowing quite well that when it comes to important decisions, his wishes prevail. By virtue of this societal arrangement the husband-wife relationship is like a master-servant relationship. This norm of living gives women powerless status and they are frequently abused by their husbands as it is the case with Niam's wife:

Niam traitait une femme aussi travailleuse exactement comme si elle avait été une chienne! Et encore, une chienne, ça peut toujours faire des chiots, tandis que, elle qui n'avait pas d'enfant, était jugée bonne pour toutes les injures et tous les mépris. (21)

Some African tradition, generally speaking, vests much power in men while the place of women is understood in the context of man's identity. The mother rears the children while the husband contributes very little to their daily upbringing. Yet when it comes to making major decisions on matters that affect children, the father does that alone. This custom, transmitted from generation to generation, is largely pursued to subordinate women for it is believed that no woman should have power over a man. Women are assigned domestic responsibilities such as cooking, washing and cleaning. It is not surprising that in most African societies, women play the roles of wives, mothers, sisters and daughters—roles named in definition to their positioning with men. The power of patriarchy is manifested in all aspects of life, for the husband makes the final decision in the house. Medza, the protagonist of *Mission terminée*, testifies to that patriarchal power when he avers that: “[Ma mère] me supplia, en larmes, de m'éloigner, de ne pas offenser davantage mon père, de ne pas mériter sa malédiction” (246). Children are often trained to listen to their father in order not to incur his wrath. If a child disobeys his father, the mother is blamed for not rearing him well. The irony, however, is that the father and not the mother takes credit for his successful children. It is also assumed that the success of the child lies in the hands of his father and not those of his mother.

Similarly, in Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignée* one notices how the power of patriarchy functions. The father, in this case, decides who marries his daughter, and his expectation is that the daughter will obey his orders and not question them: “Si j'entends de toi la plus petite objection, je te maudis, tu quitteras la maison et aucun de mes parents ne te recevra” (48). The narrator describes Mariama's dejection and decries her state:

Mariama est éperdue. Elle a le même réflexe que l'iule qui se love pour se protéger du danger, elle se contracte davantage et ferme les yeux. Ce barrage est rompu par le torrent qui bouillonne en elle. Des larmes chaudes coulent de ses yeux, et comme dans un rêve ou les cauchemars abondent, elle voit défiler la chaîne des événements qui ont fait d'elle un ballon de chiffons sur lequel tapent non pas des enfants, mais des adultes; des êtres qu'elle craignait et vénérât. (37-38)

The author shows the inability of the young woman to help herself amidst the adult men who decide her fate. Mariama does not only respect them but she also fears them because she knows that once they take a decision, nobody can change it. The tears rolling down her cheeks are signs of her unhappiness and of her weakness to challenge the elders. This patriarchal attitude is also evident in many African novels where we frequently find ruthless husbands and authoritarian fathers lording it over docile, obedient mothers and helpless girls. Seydou Badian depicts this situation in *Sous l'orage* and shows how Kany, the female character around whom the story is centered, is victimized by her authoritarian father. A similar trend is observed with Mariama, the female character in Ly's *Toiles d'araignée*, who tries to confront the patriarchy but suffers for her action. Her struggle is futile in a society that strongly believes in its entrenched patriarchal values.

Marriage and the Subordination of Women

It is commonly agreed that subordination can only be understood in a binary context of which the other is domination. Patriarchy is a relationship of domination and subordination imposed on women in marriage or otherwise in order to subjugate them. Adrienne Rich provides a useful definition of patriarchy:

The power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which female everywhere are subsumed under the male. (57)

Needless to say men usually make important decisions that affect the family without consulting women. This implies that men are responsible for both their lives and those of their wives and children as well. This attitude appears in many Islamic societies where it is often said that a woman can only go to paradise through the mediation of her husband, hence she has to obey him and comport herself in such a way as to qualify for the “eternal life” hereafter. In Kourouma’s *Les soleils des indépendances*, the narrator notes: “Allah a dit que le paradis de la femme se gagnait dans la fumée de l’accomplissement du devoir de son mari. Alors Allah pouvait prévoir pour Salimata une place de repos dans son paradis éternel” (170). This religious doctrine is a vital tool in the construction of male hegemony and in the subalternization of woman.

Marriage in some African societies is considered sacred and a woman who is not married does not command any respect. In some traditional African societies, marriage is often arranged and leaves the concerned young woman out of the decision-making. In some cases, if the woman is lucky, her mother informs her about her father’s choice of her husband prior to her marriage and her duty is to obey and not to challenge this decision. If she resists, she and her mother are punished. In *Toiles d’araignée*, Mariama’s mother (Hawa) rebukes her daughter when Mariama objects to the marriage:

As-tu perdu la raison? Comment oses-tu parler ainsi devant moi? Comment oses-tu dire que tu ne l’aimes pas en ma présence? Serais-tu devenue folle? Aurais-tu perdu tout sens de la pudeur? Veux-tu faire de moi la plus misérable des mères, après avoir été la plus malheureuse des épouses? Je t’ai appelée pour t’informer. Penses-tu qu’on m’avait demandé si j’aimais ton père? (46)

A married woman has to be patient and submissive to the wills and dictates of her husband even when subjected to the most distasteful treatment. The narrator of *Les soleils des indépendances* summarizes the subordination of African women in an Islamic culture in the following words: “La soumission de la femme, sa servitude sont les commandements d’Allah, absolument essentiels” (45). Similarly, Beti depicts that subordination by portraying Niam’s wife as family property when Bikokolo sends Jean-Marie Medza to bring her back. The whole community is agitated and this remains essentially men’s affair. Jean-Marie Medza relates how Niam succeeded in bringing other men to his side: “Niam avait tous les habitants mâles du village dans sa manche. J’ignore

comment il s'y était pris. Ils manifestaient tous leur désir de me voir accepter d'aller là-bas faire peur aux beaux-parents de Niam" (26-27). When it comes to marital issues, men always come out en masse to help. Niam himself, convinced by the rule of tradition, tells Jean Marie Medza that "Cette affaire n'est pas seulement la mienne, c'est l'affaire de toute la tribu. Cette femme n'est pas seulement la mienne, c'est notre femme à tous. C'est donc nous tous que la situation actuelle affecte" (26).

When Bikokolo the patriarch assigns this special mission, Medza dares not refuse. Besides, Medza speaks the white man's language and the assumption when he is being sent to Kala is that he will be able to intimidate Niam's wife's father so that the latter forces his daughter to return. Bernth Lindfors notes that "Medza's job is to present Niam's case to the errant girl's father and demand her return. In other words, he functions as an enforcer of traditional moral codes, an agent of social conformity." (23) Medza has no choice but to carry out the assignment. The task of bringing back Niam's wife even involves the village's chief who lends his bicycle to Medza so that he can ride it to Kala to bring back Niam's wife: "Le chef de canton daigna consentir à apporter sa petite pierre à cet édifice national: la récupération de l'épouse Niam. Il me prêta son vélo." (34) Niam's wife meanwhile, complains about a husband who always beats her. This compelled her to run away with a man from a neighboring tribe. By running away, Niam's wife shows that she is not willing to be his property. However, her act indirectly defies the whole community. Arlette Chemain-Degrange observes that:

La conduite de l'épouse de Niam, la tante de Khris, constitue un défi à la soumission exigée des femmes. C'est elle qui a laissé le pauvre Niam désesparé devant son champ inculte. [...] Son attitude de paysanne émancipée ne correspond pas au portrait type cher aux premiers poètes. (199)

Chemain-Degrange views Niam's wife's decision to abandon her husband as an act that defies the patriarchal arrangement. Niam's wife's action can also be interpreted as a shrewd way of freeing herself from the oppression of men without necessarily having to confront them or engage them in a fight. Her departure from Niam not only created a vacuum in his house but also in his farm. Niam wants his wife back because of the work she does for him both in his house and his farm.

In some African societies when a married woman runs away from her husband's house, relatives of her husband go to look for her, especially when a bride price is paid to the woman's parents during her marriage. The bride price is a practice in which a bride's parents receive money and goods from the bridegroom in exchange for his right to marry their daughter. To some, it is as if this woman is for sale. If the woman decides to abandon an abusive husband, she often runs to another man whom she likes and who she thinks can pay back the bride price her parents received from her former husband.

The issue of bride price is complex and at times it clearly amounts to the traffic in women between two men. The woman's freedom is crippled and that of her parents is, too, in some cases, particularly if her parents do not have money to pay back. Zambo, Medza's cousin who accompanies him to Niam's father-in-law, rebukes the father-in-law in the following terms: "Ainsi donc, fit observer durement Zambo, tu serais prêt à appuyer ta fille si elle voulait divorcer? C'est donc que tu te sens capable de rembourser sa dot?" (66). Even though Niam's father-in-law says that his daughter is free to do what

she wants, the issue is not as simple as that. For the marriage to be dissolved locally, the father has to give back the bride price that he received from Niam because failure to do so would mean that his daughter would still remain Niam's legitimate wife. The question of bride price frequently appears in African texts. Indeed, it is a central theme in Ibrahima Ly's novel. Iman Ngondo notes that bride price and the notion of the woman as merely a pawn in an alliance between groups continue to dominate marriage practices. The obligation to refund a man's bride price in case of divorce originally represented an attempt to stabilize a marriage. When a bride price was paid, the woman was compelled to remain in her husband's house regardless of what might be done to her. Ngondo argues, however, that it may have the opposite effect, pushing a woman who must endure an unfortunate marital situation to search for a suitable partner outside of marriage. This is the situation in which Niam's wife finds herself when she decides to run away with another man. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and Guillaume Oyono Mbia's *Trois prétendants un mari* also address this complex issue. Laretta Ngcobo echoes that: "Sometimes even the death of one partner does not invalidate the marriage itself. If it is the wife who dies, the husband may go back to his in-laws to ask for another wife for more or less the same dowry" (142).

In such a case the family may need to give another daughter without another bride price. A woman may also find another man who is ready to pay back her bride price to her husband, thus freeing her to remarry. If not, the society and most especially the parents of her husband still consider her to be his wife. Niam's wife is a victim of this traditional arrangement. It is this same practice that is being forced on Mariama of Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignée* when Bakary, the old man proposed to her by her father, distributes money to all:

On la conduisit chez Bakary avec la lâche complicité de l'ombre. Le mariage avait déjà été noué la veille. Le marché était déjà conclu: le fiancé donnait deux cent mille francs du Béléya à son beau père, douze vaches laitières à sa nouvelle épouse, une seule à sa belle-mère, un boubou à chaque frère ou cousin de Mariama, une robe à chaque soeur ou cousine. Il s'engageait à donner devant le témoin, les vingt mille francs de dot réglementaires, et qui devaient selon la loi couvrir l'ensemble des dépenses du mariage. De l'argent a été distribué jusqu'aux grand-parents de la jeune fille. (57)

Mariama's marriage was like a product being sold whereby all parties involved agreed on a price and she was disposed of as an object of merchandise. With Bakary paying the bride price to his in-laws, he has sealed his marital contract as required by the traditions.

Another disturbing issue besides selling off a woman into marriage is the negative image of divorced women in most African societies. Ngcobo argues that only rarely do divorcees earn the understanding of the community, for instance in cases where the woman has a clean reputation that contrasts sharply with her husband's maltreatment of her. Even proven cases of assault or abuse against the woman by her husband may not be enough to justify her abandoning her matrimonial home.

In *Les soleils des indépendances*, Salimata ran away from Tiémoko to marry Fama. Salimata made a free choice for the first time by marrying Fama but she did not

escape from the traditions that oppress women. Salimata still remains a subordinate woman in Fama's house as evidenced in the subservient roles she plays.

From a feminist perspective *Les soleils des indépendances* can be considered as an account of traditional *malinke* (ivorian) society where women are still subjected to patriarchal rules encoded in Islamic and traditional rites. Salimata was first given in marriage to Baffi, immediately after her circumcision ceremony when she was still suffering the pains of her genital alteration. At the death of Baffi, as tradition dictates, Tiémoko stepped into his deceased brother's shoes and inherited Salimata as his wife. The poor treatment she received from Tiémoko forced her like Niam's wife in *Mission terminée*, to free herself from his violence by running away to marry Fama. Both novels depict women who often run away from the husbands imposed on them when they are treated poorly. This does not necessarily constitute liberation. Although Salimata chooses her husband, her problems are not over because as the narrator puts it, "la dot étant payée, le mariage célébré, Salimata vivra dans la cour de son mari comme une femme pour la cuisine, les lougans" (42). In addition, Salimata must also work hard to feed Fama: "Et c'est Salimata, l'épouse qui doit assurer le riz" (3). She must also take good care of her husband and make sure that he is well-fed and respected. Such treatment, which can be likened to the way the servant treats the king, gives women in typical traditional African societies the qualities of a "good wife." "La bouillie avait cuit; elle réserva une assiettée bien sucrée à Fama. Avec les soins que la femme doit, quel qu'ait pu être le comportement de l'homme, quelle qu'ait pu être sa valeur, un époux restait souverain" (45). In contradiction with the expectations of the husband's roles in a traditional African society, Salimata is the provider of food and not Fama. Traditionally for a man to be considered as a deserving husband he should be the provider of food and shelter. Nevertheless, although Salimata is seen to feed her husband, this does not accord her a primary place in the house. The belief that the metaphysical essence of women is to be mothers and in the service of men, continues to attribute power to men.

One notices that Niam's wife, Mariama and Salimata all have their roles defined by men and are still in the shadow of men (husbands or fathers) in most cases. Not one of the women is free from cultural bondage and masculine enslavement. Even though they attempt to free themselves, the burden of tradition still weighs heavily on them. By and large, all of these female characters are depicted as victims of oppressive situations in their matrimonial homes.

In traditional African societies women are instructed by tradition to obey and comport themselves according to traditional or religious dictates. The patriarchal pedagogy they receive from infancy teaches them simply to obey. They are also educated to copy the docile and passive attitudes of their mothers in order to succeed as good wives later in life. These dictates leave no room for women to query; they must accept things the way they are established. Any attempt to go against the constituted norms is rewarded with severe punishment as is the case in *Toiles d'araignée* where Salamanta rebukes Mariama in the following words:

Tu n'as pas voulu de ton mari parce qu'il est vieux. Jusqu'ici, je ne t'ai fait subir aucune violence. Nous avons simplement organisé pour toi une réception digne de ton rang. Tu méprises ce que notre société vénère. Tu paieras. A partir

d'aujourd'hui, tous les soirs, tu seras enfermée avec Tiécoura dans la cellule. Tu seras la femme d'un lépreux. (191)

It is pertinent to note that in the texts of a majority of post-Négritude male writers, female characters still have little voice because men are often seen deciding women's fate and destiny. Moreover, the reader gets to know these female characters only through the accounts of male characters who are either protagonists or narrators. In *Mission terminée*, Medza, the first-person narrator plays this role; in *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, Denis, also a first-person narrator, does this; in *Les soleils des indépendances* and *Toiles d'araignée*, an unidentified third-person male narrator plays this role. By and large, male characters interpret women through their own lenses.

Physical and Sexual Exploitation of Women

Beti, Kourouma and Ly's novels depict men sexually and physically exploiting women. Although the younger female characters in their novels are exploited, they become slowly conscious of the conditions and situations in which they live. This is not, however, true of the older generation of women in their texts. These women consider what they experience in their daily life as normal—it is all their cultural and religious practices have allowed them to know and expect. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie states that: "African women are more than wives. To understand their multi-faceted identities beyond wifehood, we must look for their roles and statuses in sites other than marriage." (13) What Ogundipe implies here is that women, besides accomplishing matrimonial responsibilities, also do a lot of other things in the society. Village women in *Mission terminée*, for instance, accept their prescribed roles within domestic and agrarian domains. The same is true of Mariama's mother and other women of her generation in *Toiles d'araignée* and of several of the women in *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*. Reflecting on how Beti's novels depict the exploitation of women, Arlette Chemain-Degrange observes:

Le premier critère du choix d'une épouse est sa rentabilité à l'ouvrage. [...] Les romans de Mongo Beti confirment cette réalité: La femme est recherchée pour son travail. [...] Le rôle essentiel de la femme cultivatrice est mis en évidence par la leçon que l'épouse de Niam donne au village. [...] Niam contemple avec attendrissement "les femmes des autres courbées sur la terre," lui qui a perdu son ouvrière. Cette compassion pour les cultivatrices penchées sur la terre, et la reconnaissance du travail qu'elles fournissent remonte au deuxième roman de Mongo Beti: *Le pauvre christ de Bomba*. (178-179)

Awa Thiam corroborates Chemain-Degrange's view and states in her *La parole aux Négresses* that women in sub-Saharan Africa are saddled with domestic and tedious agrarian work by their husbands whom she calls "Dieu-son-mari" (22):

Elles remplissent les taches ménagères et agricoles [...] Ces travaux sont pénibles à exécuter. C'est le cas du pilage du mil, de la préparation du couscous à base de farine de mil, du ramassage du bois mort pour le feu, de la préparation des mets,

de la lessive. [...] La Négro-Africaine moyenne ne connaît ni la cuisinière, ni le réfrigérateur, ni les "Moulinex" et autres appareils ménagers. (21)

Most of the older female characters depicted by Beti, Kourouma and Ly are traditional women who do not attempt to liberate themselves from their suffering. These women are traditional in the sense that they accept their role as mothers and housewives. Domestic work ranges from cleaning the house, washing their husband and children's clothes and cooking huge meals for the large family and work in farms sometimes.

In *Mission terminée*, the author situates his scene in Kala, a typical village where women work to their fullest in farming activities. The narrator referring to Niam, says that: "Pendant ce temps, il errait à travers les champs comme un fantôme: il contemplait les femmes des autres, courbées sur la terre et remuant doucement le sol avec leur petite houe" (24-25). Women instead of men are seen largely engaged in farming activities. In this scene Niam does not have his wife to do similar work for him. Instead of Niam working on his farm he spends his time contemplating women working. His attitude shows that he needs his wife to do the physical work for him. She is exploited in this fashion. The narrator notes that: "Si cette femme n'a pas d'enfants, elle a au moins la force de travailler à la maison et aux champs" (47) Kembe Milolo affirms that specific roles are assigned to women in African societies. In her reading of Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, she asserts that: "Dans le pays de Mongo Beti (Cameroun), les travaux ménagers et agricoles et les soins des enfants prennent à la femme beaucoup de temps" (95). The narrator of *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* confirms this: « Ici, les mères de famille travaillent énormément malgré l'heure tardive, elles écrasaient des arachides sur la pierre ou elles hachaient de la viande ou elles faisaient des lavements à leurs enfants. Elles ne se fatiguent jamais" (91). The narrator's observation clearly illustrates the physical exploitation of sub-Saharan African women. Similarly, in *Mission terminée* the narrator's description of his uncle's wife testifies to her physical deterioration as a result of hard work and multiple childbirths:

Sa femme était presque aussi grande que lui. Jeune, elle avait dû être splendide; maintenant les maternités successives, les travaux des champs ou dans les plantations de cacao l'avaient fanée. Elle était douce, charmante, serviable, effacée comme une sainte. Elle ne parlait guère, probablement par ce phénomène de mimétisme qui, dit-on est courant dans les vieux ménages. (63-64)

In Beti's novels women are frequently used by men for their own selfish ends. For instance, the Kala chief in *Mission terminée* gives his daughter Edima in marriage to Medza believing that Medza, an educated young man, will be well-disposed to represent his (the chief's) interests in town. We learn of this in a dialogue between Fils-de-Dieu and Zambo:

-Je parie que depuis l'arrivée de Jean-Marie à Kala, [le chef] n'avait songé qu'à une chose: comment coller sa fillette au petit. [...] Mais quel profit peut-il bien escompter de l'événement? C'est ce que je ne vois pas encore très bien.

-Tu parles, dit Zambo, il est certain d'avoir désormais quelqu'un à la ville pour l'aider plus efficacement dans ses sales combines. Et quelqu'un d'instruit s'il te plaît. (215)

This same commerce is noticed in Beti's *Le roi miraculé* whereby each clan in the village gives one of their daughters in marriage to Essomba, the village's king, so as to receive certain privileges from him. This becomes glaringly clear when the king converts to Christianity and decides to repudiate his wives. In this situation, each clan struggles to have their daughter be the king's sole choice as a bride in order to allow the clan to continue to benefit from the king's favor. This story clearly shows again how men use women for their own benefits; women here are instrumental in the negotiations of the community's interests.

In *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, in an attempt to expose missionary practices in Cameroon, Mongo Beti reveals not only the failure of Reverend-Father Drumont, the overseer of Bomba's Catholic Church, but also deplors the misery, exploitation and oppression of the young women caged in the "sixa." Catherine, Monique, Marguerite Anaba and many other female characters in the story are presented as prostitutes, mercilessly exploited by the Europeans and their African male agents. The depiction of female characters as prostitutes is common in Beti's novels. In Beti's *Perpetue* a mediocre civil servant prostitutes his wife to a higher officer in order to get promotion in his work. It is also noticeable in *Mission terminée* where the narrator says:

Ma mère me donna beaucoup plus tard sa version de la brouille [de] l'époux Niam. Selon elle, madame avait eu des relations scandaleuses avec un petit voyou de la ville, market-boy de sa profession, lequel lui offrait des cotonnades et d'autres choses agréables à voir et propres à séduire une jeune femme. (21)

Similarly, in *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, women of the "sixa" are all depicted as prostitutes because they are compelled by the system set up by Drumont to sell their bodies cheaply in exchange for food. This attracts them to Zacharie, the RPS's cook:

Les femmes qui couraient après Zacharie, peut être qu'elles n'ont même pas regardé sa haute taille, ni ses chaussures de cuir; peut être qu'elles viennent seulement pour des choses enfantines: une miche de pain, une boîte de conserve, sachant que Zacharie est cuisinier. Mon père dit souvent que les femmes ressemblent aux enfants par leurs désirs. (28-29)

Female characters who dwell in the "sixa" are symbols of exploited women through the missionaries' religious practices because not only are they used in construction works but they are also unpaid for the work they do. The Christian religion brought by Drumont, for example, was a means to exploit women and not to liberate them. Throughout the novel one notices the subaltern roles of women. They clean churches, carry luggage to the church and are used as laborers in erecting church buildings. Drumont himself recognizes that he exploits these women when he says:

La femme indigène, la petite femme noire si docile, quelle machine idéale! [...] Nous nous amenons, nous, les chrétiens, nous, les messagers du Christ, nous, les civilisateurs. Et qu'est-ce que vous croyez que nous faisons? Que nous rendons à la femme sa dignité? Oh! surtout pas, mon Père. Ah, non! Nous la maintenons dans sa servitude. Mais, cette fois, à notre profit. (327)

This remark from Drumont shows us once again how Christianity oppressed women through its machinery. Similarly, the “sixa” that Drumont erected in Bomba claimed to prepare young women for marriage, but in reality it designated what their roles were to be as wives. They were there to receive domestic education. Perfect wives, according to Drumont’s religious ideology, were the ones molded to be obedient and docile. They were also to play traditional roles as mothers rearing and educating children. By and large the female characters that Beti features in *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* are oppressed women whose roles in this novel are fashioned by Christian religious practices implanted by missionaries in Southern Cameroon. Mongo Beti asserts that:

Le problème féminin est posé, mais d’une façon accessoire, d’une façon assez parallèle et simplement par le biais d’une institution catholique (la Sixa) qui est typiquement sud-camerounaise et qui appartient à l’époque missionnaire au Sud du Cameroun où les missionnaires profitaient du rôle qu’ils jouaient pour faire croire aux femmes que pour avoir un mariage qui soit vraiment valable, il fallait qu’elles fassent d’abord un séjour à la mission catholique. Et pendant ce séjour, naturellement, la mission utilisait cette main d’oeuvre gratuite. (276-277)

Mongo Beti’s critical portrayal of missionary practices reveals to what extent Christianity did harm to women. Raphael, the catechist vested with the responsibility of taking care of the “sixa,” makes love with the women and spreads his syphilis. Raphael also offers these young women as prostitutes to his friends. The young women prefer this to the hard labor he would assign to them otherwise. It is clear that these young women of the “sixa” are forced into prostitution through economic dependency, which Raphael guarantees in exchange for sex. Gerald Moore describes this situation in the following terms: “Raphael, the catechist-director of the “sixa,” has been systematically debauching the girls in his charge and infecting them with syphilis [...] the girls are cruelly overworked and constantly intimidated by the catechists” (79).

One wonders why Raphael’s role was not given to a woman. It is true that Reverend-Father Drumont did not know about the sexual exploitation of the women in the “sixa.” However, he was largely responsible for what happened to them because this terrible institution is at the root of the prostitution and victimization of women. When Drumont came back from his tour of Tala village and heard about the scandal at the “sixa,” he conducted a medical inquiry and this revealed the harm done to these young women. They had essentially become inmates of this institution, living in poor conditions in unhealthy dormitories. To worsen the already bad situation, Drumont proceeded to inflict inhumane punishment on these women. It is only during Reverend-Father Drumont’s robust interrogation that we see women of the “sixa” speaking for themselves. After these girls were forced to confess their sexual lives, they were brought one after the other to be beaten by Anatole at the order of the Reverend-Father Drumont. Reverend-

Father Drumont himself failed to discipline his male workers who turned these young women into sexual slaves and instead blamed what happened on the innocent women. As is commonly the case in patriarchal societies, these women were the scapegoats, held responsible for whatever went wrong in the society. The unpaid labor at the "sixa," furthermore, revealed the exploitation to which these young women were subjugated.

Women as Scapegoats of Sterility

Female circumcision practices are partly responsible for women's sterility in many African societies. Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* comes to mind here. Salimata is a traditional woman who suffers the atrocities of female mutilation and carries this unfortunate experience with her throughout her life. In a series of flashbacks, Kourouma evokes her memories of circumcision, rape and sterility. Chemain-Degrange views Salimata's sterility in light of the female circumcision that she endured and avers that: "Il faut saisir le destin de Salimata dans son ensemble pour comprendre la portée de ce premier élément du récit: l'initiation. La conséquence en est le maléfice de la stérilité, véritable obsession pour la généreuse épouse" (325). The circumcision operation has a devastating effect on Salimata's life.

Kourouma criticizes traditions by exposing the problems Salimata is going through, especially sterility. Female circumcision often damages women's reproductive organs and consequently results in women's sterility. The issue of sterility is handled with seriousness in most African societies for women are valued first as mothers. A number of African male writers and poets exalt women in their maternal roles and consider sterility as a negative thing that can happen to a woman. Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana corroborates this view: "La plupart des écrivains africains exaltent les fonctions maternelles de leurs héroïnes et considèrent la stérilité comme une malédiction divine qu'il convient de conjurer" (229). A barren woman is an isolated woman because children are viewed in many African societies as inheritance. In most cases when a woman is considered barren she tries in every possible way to have a child even by visiting village spiritualists to ask for help. Kourouma describes the travails of Salimata in her efforts to become pregnant: "Et que n'a-t-elle pas éprouvé! Le sorcier, le marabout, les sacrifices et les médicaments, tout [...] Rien n'en sortira"(27). By doing all this, Salimata was attempting to appease the spirits and God in order to have a child and thereby become fully integrated into her husband's family.

The norm is that a sterile woman is a nonentity, and the family of the husband encourages him to take another wife. Fama, being from a royal family, has an enormous weight on his shoulders if he is to remain with a woman who cannot give him a child. The narrator remarks: "Au village, on avait médité Fama: un légitime, un fils de chef qui courbait la tête sous les ailes d'une femme stérile" (93). Fama had affairs with younger women in his desperate efforts to have children and even inherited Mariam, his cousin's wife. However, no children apparently result from these liaisons. The reality is that Fama is as infertile as Salimata. But women are usually blamed for sterility, not men. The narrator puts it in the following words: "La femme est l'arbre de vie; elle seule peut être accusée de stérilité, car on n'attribue jamais cette responsabilité au mari. Aucune femme

mariée ne demeure volontairement sans enfant et la stérilité totale est la pire des malheurs qui puisse lui arriver” (30).

Women found to be barren are often treated with disrespect to the extent that they must abandon their matrimonial homes. In *Mission terminée* Niam's wife is held responsible for the couple not having children and is insulted by the society and ill-treated by her husband. The narrator remarks that:

C'est le sort commun chez nous à toutes les épouses sans enfants d'être en butte à un étrange anathème dont il faut chercher l'origine chez nos frères bantous. Une épouse mère, elle, se voit pardonner toutes les infidélités, tous ses caprices. Mais vous devez savoir tout cela. Bref, la femme Niam était partie. [...] C'est toujours ainsi qu'elles partent, du reste: de nuit. Et c'est pour cette raison qu'on les appelle les enfants de la nuit. (22)

Commenting on the poor treatment of women considered as barren in traditional African societies, Bernth Lindfors argues that Niam's wife has been a disappointment to her husband as a wife. What Lindfors implies here is that by failing to have children, Niam's wife has not lived up to her side of the marriage contract. This has won her the contempt of the entire adult community. It is therefore not surprising that she should seek release from the miseries of her home life by involving herself in a romantic affair with a stranger. The supposed sterility of Niam's wife in a way liberated her because she was able to leave her husband's home for a while and avoided his beatings.

The subjugation of African woman makes her the victim in many situations. Even if she is not responsible, she is always blamed for what goes wrong. This attitude might be in line with men's belief that woman is "evil." Nothing however proves that Niam's wife is barren; this assumption is simply due to the fact that the society at large attributes this failure to women. Jean-Marie Medza, the narrator in *Mission terminée*, says the following about Tante Amou who cannot have any children: "Je suis convaincu aujourd'hui que Tante Amou faisait un complexe parce qu'elle n'avait jamais pu avoir d'enfant" (21). Barren women have complexes not only in their matrimonial homes but also among their fellow women who have children and in the society at large.

Kourouma is from a Muslim background and his representation of woman in his novels reflects both an indigenous and Muslim point of view. His handling of sterility in his novel is to criticize traditional attitudes toward women. Salimata, like Niam's wife, is perceived as a barren woman by her society. The childless woman in some traditional societies is considered as a devilish creature and regarded as a useless woman in the house. She seeks desperately to quit this pitiful condition by opting for various sacrifices recommended by village or Islamic spiritualists whom she visits for help. Kourouma's *Les Soleils des indépendances*, reveals the multiple sacrifices made by Salimata in order to have children. This issue most of the time is of more concern to women than to their husbands because the women are desperate to keep their marriages from collapsing. They will run to perform rituals in order to have children. In *Les soleils des indépendances* the narrator tells us about this ritual.

Le sacrifice protège contre le mauvais sort, appelle la santé, la fécondité, le bonheur et la paix. Et le premier sacrifice, c'est d'offrir; offrir ouvre tous les

coeurs. Et sait-on jamais en offrant qui est le secouru, le vis-à-vis? Peut-être un grand sorcier, un élu et aimé d'Allah dont un petit mot suffirait pour féconder la plus déshéritée des femmes. (61)

A childless woman finds herself in such a difficult situation that she is willing to give whatever she has for a child in order for her place in the marriage to be secured. At times women who find themselves in these situations try to be mothers to other children by adopting a relative's child with the permission of their husband. This is not, however, to say that these women abandon their struggle to have their own children for their husbands. Children in most African families are a must because a majority of communities need them to help with their farming activities. Families with many children mean much work can be accomplished in the farm, thus ensuring huge economic revenue. Beti and Ly place much emphasis on farming activities considered traditional activities and show how women and children are laboring to increase the family's productivity.

Women and Polygamy

Beti, Kourouma and Ly all describe polygamous settings in their depictions of everyday life for African women. Women in their texts do very little to oppose or reject polygamy; even if they are not happy about it, they end up accepting it. One notices particularly that women of the older generations keep quiet in order not to provoke the wrath of their husbands or their communities. Some women who are unable to conceive even seem to welcome their husbands' polygamy. Salimata hypocritically welcomes her husband's new wife. The narrator says: "Salimata avait salué avec joie la coépouse et expliqué avec grand coeur et esprit qu'une famille avec une seule femme était comme un escabeau à un pied, ou un homme à une jambe; ça ne tient qu'en s'appuyant sur un étranger" (157). Salimata's kindness to her co-wife, however, is contradictory to her later behavior. Salimata later fights Mariam whom she had greeted with enthusiasm on the first day of her arrival. The narrator throws some light on this:

Salimata devint jalouse, puis folle et un matin elle explosa, injuria. Les deux coépouses comme deux poules s'assailirent, s'agrippèrent l'une au pagne de l'autre. Mariam voulait coûte que coûte tomber le pagne de Salimata afin que chacun vît "la matrice ratatinée d'une stérile," et Salimata devêtir Mariam afin que tout le monde reconnût "la chose pourrie et incommensurable d'une putain." (152)

One remarkable thing here however is that Salimata stopped respecting her husband after he brought a new wife home. Chemain-Degrange corroborates this view: "Salimata ne se sent plus d'obligations envers l'époux qu'elle vénérât auparavant. Plus de tendresse. Elle refuse à faire bouillir sa marmite avec le produit de son propre travail" (284). With the arrival of Mariama, Salimata has learned that her sacrifice for her husband has to stop; she has also decided to abandon her unreserved subordination to him.

Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* shows his male characters very reluctant to abandon polygamy they claimed, was passed down to them by their ancestors. Issues related to polygamy in Africa today are variously interpreted by a majority of African

feminist critics. Buchi Emecheta for example believes that polygamy empowers the African woman. She argues in her article "Feminism with a Small 'f!'" that:

In many cases polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her, especially if she is educated. The husband has no reason to stop her from attending international conferences like this one [...]. Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside for her family and friends. It gives her freedom from having to worry about her husband most of the time. (178-179)

The issue of polygamy in Africa has to be properly addressed, because the majority of African women, those who are the most affected, are illiterate and very different from the few educated ones whom Emecheta thinks that polygamy can liberate. Education being a powerful tool for the liberation of women, Buchi Emecheta might be correct in her analysis. She has to remember though that feminism is out to correct all forms of domination to which the generality of women are subjected. Emecheta's postulate is very limited. Polygamy does not do any good to women in African societies ultimately it does not even benefit educated women because they also suffer subordination. Fatima Mernissi decries polygamy and asserts that: "Polygamy entitles the male not simply to satisfy his sexuality, but to indulge it to saturation without taking into consideration the woman's needs, the woman being considered a simple "agent" in the process" (16).

Conclusion

Beti's *Mission terminée*, *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* and *Le roi miraculé* are all written before independence and depict the subaltern role of uneducated women. Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* and Ibrahima Ly's *Toiles d'araignée* are written after independence but the condition of women in these novels by men remains fairly unchanged. Independence, as portrayed by these authors, failed to alleviate the sufferings of women as their status remained subaltern. It is nevertheless pertinent to recognize and applaud the attacks launched by these authors on certain Christian, Islamic and traditional African practices that subjugate sub-Saharan African women, even though the authors still depict their female characters as women in bondage. Their criticisms of the religious and traditional rites that plague women portray women differently from the Negritude poets and from writers who glorify the subaltern roles of African women. Though Beti and Kourouma joined their ancestors, they will always be remembered for the role they played in denouncing the subaltern role of women and African cultural and patriarchal mores that enslave them (women) in their novels. No wonder these novelists in their last works (Beti's *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (1999) and *Branle-bas en noir et blanc* (2000); and Kourouma's *Quand on refuse on dit non* (2004) continue their quest for the liberation of women in Africa.

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