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The Role of the female character in the Cameroonian novel

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Abstract

This study provides first of all, a smattering view of the 20th Century novel and goes on to examine the various ways in which the concept of the female character is handled in the black African novel in general and in the Cameroonian novel in particular. The study further discusses the role and place of the woman, her perception and her importance in the black African novel. It also looks at the hypothesis that, in the black African novel, the female character sometimes initiates and aids action in the novel, by symbolizing various facets of the African society or personality. These emphases should not however be interpreted to mean that our choice of topic is dictated by the common place 'feminism' nor the choice of writers manipulated to suit the topic. The novelists use the female character not only as part of their narrative techniques but also as a door to various issues concerning and in understanding the sociological role of the woman in the real society. We decide to focus on five Contemporary Cameroonian writers: Mongo Beti, Francis Bebey, Honoré Godefroy Essomba- Ahanda, Sonne Dipoko and a female writer, Lydie Dooh as our scope of study. This will enable us spell out how their characterization of the female character adds to new knowledge and concept of the African woman in our modern African society.

Introduction

The novel, we may suggest, is primarily a work of art which, among other things, aims at depicting a coherent fictional universe which is more often than not homologous to the real life society. The black African novel is no exception. Just as in the real life society where individuals or groups of people are seen in different perspectives and as prime movers of action, the novel sets out characters who act out various roles that provide action in the fictional universe. We share Forster's view that "…the basis of a novel is a story, and a story is a narrative of events arranged

in time-sequence," (Forster 20) because it summarizes what a novel is; 'a story.' A story is therefore referred to as the 'narrative' and the act of telling it, is, 'narration.' It is principally a work of art according to Gérard, that attempts to put across to the reader a "succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc.", which builds up the imaginary world. More appropriately, narration "consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself" (Gérard 25-26).

Therefore, because of its flexible nature, narration has many forms. This means that there are as many types of stories as there are many ways of telling them. Leibowitz tells us that "Each narrative form, having its own developmental goals, uses techniques of selecting proper to these goals, but the techniques themselves are not adequate for generic distinction" (Leibowitz 18).What Leibowitz raises here is the issue of the difficult task every writer confronts when he is about to start the 'act of telling his story'. Thus, an important task facing every writer is not just having something to tell but deciding about the best way to tell it. The novelist, Robbe-Grillet butresses this fact by remarking that: "Croire que le romancier a "quelque chose à dire", et qu'il cherche ensuite comment le dire, représente le plus grave des contre-sens. Car c'est précisément ce "comment", cette manière de dire, qui constitue son projet d'écrivain, projet obscur entre tous, et qui sera plus tard le contenu douteux de son livre" (Robbe-Grillet 121).

In agreeing with Robbe-Grillet, it means that the success or failure of any narrative form therefore depends on how well a writer adapts one technique or the other in the cause of narration. This is why a writer may sometimes be assessed by his efforts to comply with the conventional way of arranging his events within the more or less loose conventions of any particular genre he has chosen to express himself. The ingredient of telling the story is characterization, which we know is a prominent feature of the narrative technique of any novelist. The way characters are chosen and presented is therefore hardly gratuitous. In considering the woman in the novel therefore, we need to see her as the case may be, as an important member of both the fictional and the real world, where she has, in her own right, specific roles and functions to play.

Thus, it is not out of fear of being labeled misogynist that the writer includes women among characters in his works but rather because he knows that a coherent, balanced view of the universe, even on the fictional level, must include views and actions of both men and women. Our

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method of investigation is based largely on what and how they present these facts. The method is not exclusively investigative, but is also socio-politically analytic.

Our choice of the Cameroonian novel as our area of interest is not fortuitous because Cameroon has many prolific writers and has a privileged language background where both English and French are used as official languages. Both Anglophone and Francophone countries stand to gain equally from that literature and because it has wide readership and a diversity of interesting areas of research studies such as ours. Besides, the authors are carefully selected to avoid monopoly of views. The novels in this regard include *Le fruit défend*u by Essomba-Ahanda, *La Poupée Ashanti* by Francis Bebey, *Perpétue* by Mongo Beti, *Because of women* by Sonne Dipoko and *La brise du jour* by Lydie Dooh. Each of these writers has his or her peculiarity in style, content and influence. This variety is the spice of this research work.

The female character as a narrative technique in the novel

Novelists create characters and ascribe to them functions for a purpose. We shall limit our investigation to motivating functions, that is, the use of female characters as agents for motivating actions and intrigues in a literary work. For this study, we would take a look at the female character either as a protagonist or an antagonist. The protagonist being the main character motivates the action in the story, while the antagonist stands in opposition to the protagonist. This may not always be obvious since the opposing force to the protagonist can and does manifest itself through various other characters. In *Perpétue* of Mongo Beti, for example, Martin, Maria, and eventually, Edouard, play the role of antagonists in relation to the female protagonist, Perpétue.

In creating female characters, some authors deliberately apportion such prominent roles to them, in order to sometimes overshadow the roles of their male counterparts. Conversely, female characters are used in order to just 'fill up the space'. Quite a number of the characters bear names that leave us in no doubt as to the role they play in the novel. The novel *Perpétue*, as a name, reminds us of something 'long-lasting.' Mengue-Rose in *Le fruit défendu* of Honoré Godefroy is a name given to the girl whose exceptional beauty makes her 'a forbidden fruit'. Mengue-Rose is, of course, 'le fruit défendu', a reference to Eve's role in the fall of man in the Bible and the

subsequent curse pronounced on both the man and the woman. The woman bears the fruit of the blame for this unfortunate incidence. She is told, among other things: "your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you" (Genesis 3.16). The name of the protagonist and the title of the novel thus seem to sound a warning; she may be as beautiful as a rose flower, but roses have thorns.

Examples of motivating agents are clearly brought out in *La Poupée Ashanti* of Francis Bebey. The story revolves around two main female characters: Edna and her grandmother, Mam. As a trader in the market, Edna is hardworking and successful. She is skilled in the art of trading and copes well in the city, Accra. 'La Poupée Ashanti', a term which infers that 'the doll' may be beautiful but has no brains. However, Bebey seems to say that a woman like Edna may be beautiful as well as talented and courageous, ready to take risks that may make a man shrink in fear. Edna is a beautiful, shrewd market woman, full of intelligence and courage. She uses her business techniques to win over her customers. Her qualities and especially her intelligence impress Spio and make him fall in love with her. It is this love that binds the two characters together and so constitutes the plot of the story.

The love motivated by Edna's intelligence finally ends in uniting the two characters in matrimony. It is again this love that makes Spio stand by the women in their demonstration that consequently succeeded in further uniting the women in the novel. Mam, Edna's grandmother, also plays a very important role in the advancement of the action in the novel. She puts and orients Edna in the trade. She is happy with the success of Edna in the business and encourages her to uphold it. Through her experience in the trade, Mam is able to convince and unite all other market women to form a trade union for their own benefit and progress. She is therefore a unifying force of the activities of other characters. Both Edna and Mam take the lead in the protest against the maltreatment of the market women. This demonstration by the women leads to crisis. Many get hurt as the women surge into the streets and are confronted by the anti-riot police. Edna in particular, wounded and hospitalized, builds up sympathy even from the men.

Francis Bebey presents Edna in control of a dramatic scene in order to heighten the effect of her role: "Bientôt, malgré le tohu-bohu d'un corps à corps entre policiers et manifestants, Edna parvint jusqu'au petit perron au seuil de l'entrée principale" (Bebey 107). Bebey carefully chooses

certain words like, 'tohu-bohu' to create an atmosphere of chaos and confusion by the demonstrators. Amidst this noise and confusion, is a woman who is pulling the crowd on. In spite of the tensed atmosphere, the women continue in their bid to make their impact felt. The danger involved in confronting the police is ignored because it is a fight to the end. Again, Bebey makes a description of the dangerous atmosphere in order to bring out the courageous quality of the women. He puts it in a very strong and effective language:

> De la fumée, probablement jaillie des armes à feu, s'était élevée
> et couvrait la foule, une odeur de pétrole ou d'essence brulée
> emplissait l'air chaud des environs de midi, tandis que des
> coups de fusil mal tirés partaient deci, delà, d'autant plus
> nombreux à présent que beaucoup d'autres gens, des paysans,
> des badauds, s'étaient joints aux manifestations, bravent la
>
> mort pour une cause qui n'était pas la leur (102).

The shooting by the police, the smell of petrol and kerosene with the smoke that fills the air certainly create a sensitive and insecure situation for the people. Even passers-by and those who sympathise with the women, without knowing the cause of their plight, all join in the demonstration. In effect, because of her strong will and personality, Edna is portrayed to possess the qualities that are often ascribed to men. Her courage blends with patriotism and heroism. As a heroine, she must have the strong will to face the risks she is taking. In *La Poupée Ashanti*, Bebey creates a dramatic and militant tone to blend with the very traumatic political experience Ghana had to undergo before gaining independence from the British colonial rule. Perhaps to fully grasp the important role which the market women played in Ghanaian society as portrayed in the novel, we need to make reference to real-life events in Ghana before 1957.

On the eve of independence, many political parties, including the United Gold Coast Convention to which Dr. Nkrumah belonged, were involved in the struggle for power. During the elections, the market women came out en masse as a social group to vote Dr. Nkrumah into power (Staff K. 1957). This was so because, unlike in most West African counties, the women in Ghana were in control of market trading. However the political crisis experienced by Dr. Nkrumah in 1957 heightened because he left UGCC to found Convention Peoples' Party (CPP). He later became power drunk to the point of vanity and this finally led to his downfall.

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These are the historical events that seem to have been reflected in Bebey's *La Poupée Ashanti*. 'Le Docteur' for example, in the novel could easily be compared to 'Dr.' Nkrumah with the exception of the fact that in the novel, Bebey retains 'Le Docteur' in power. The title of the novel itself which describes Edna as the 'Ashanti Doll' is not gratuitous. It is in fact a motivating index that makes the reader want to know what this 'Ashanti Doll' is. Bebey quite often uses trivial situations to create more serious ones. The market permit of Madam Amiofi seized by the government for some trivial reasons provides an occasion for us to familiarize ourselves with the market women's thought patterns and political awareness. More importantly, at the end of the demonstration, they succeed in retrieving the permit and also in changing the attitude of the government towards them.

The female characters in *La Poupée Ashanti*, add a lot to the richness of the style and to the dramatic episodes of the novel. These episodes do not only motivate the narrative but also sustain our interest as readers. As a musician, his creativity stands out more emotional as he draws our sentiments towards his characters and like a video camera, we follow the women in the market, in the offices of the Government or at the police with much tension. This makes Francis Bebey's style different from that of his other contemporaries. Could we also say that Bebey is a visionary writer? This is to say that in reality, our present day African societies are overwhelmed by several social and political demonstrations organized by various female groups that lead to some changes in Government policies of the day as seen in *La Poupée Ashanti.*

A case in point is the third World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985 which led to the implementation of the 'Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for Advancement of Women.' This was an affirmative action for women's empowerment (Beijing Declaration1995). Consequently, in Nigeria for example, this review influenced the establishment of Ministries of Women Affairs both at the Federal and state levels.

Of all the writers we are studying, Mongo Beti stands out as the writer that uses female characters most to motivate the narration of his novels. These roles subject the women to social harassments as we see in his novel, *Perpétue.* His female characters are projected as very active in the duties the society assigns to them because he believes the woman has more to offer than what she is assigned to do. Since he is a fighter for women's freedom, we do not expect less from him. This

fact makes him accuse his fellow African writer, Camara Laye, as assigning easy life to the woman "A ma mère" (Camara's mother) in *L'Enfant Noir* (Laye 24). Contrary to the role Camara gives his mother, Mongo Beti presents the female characters in all his novels, at least the principal characters as those who persevere. His novel, *Perpétue* is an example.

In Perpétue, the heroine, though dead by the time the story begins, still lives in the memory of all other characters in the novel, especially her brother, Essola. She seems to come alive as her brother tries to find out about her death. We see her through Essola's memory and accounts of her from other characters. She is the hidden motivator of events of the story. Her remembered interactions with people arouse and sustain the various sub-themes of the novel. Maria, Perpétue's mother is a selfish and greedy mother; at least most of her children take her to be so, because some complain about her 'selling out' her female children to make money. Francis Bebey shows that she withdraws Perpétue from the mission training school in order to give her out for marriage. She already gave out Anthonia, her first daughter, to an old man, thus leaving the girl in a sorry situation. Anthonia makes her situation known to their brother, Essola in this way: "La première de ses filles que mère ait vendue, cruellement, c'est moi. J'ai été livrée à un vieil homme, jaloux, soupçonneux, sournois, qui me demandait compte d'une demi-heure d'une absence (…) Mère a vendu Perpétue, j'ignore pour quel prix."(Beti 89) Maria is accused of maltreating her daughters in order to make her son, Martin happy. Unfortunately, she does not succeed because the bride-price of her daughters which she gives to Martin only makes him alcoholic and highly irresponsible. No wonder the title of the novel is sometimes referred to as *Perpétue et son Malheur*,

Maria's failure as a mother stems from her lopsided love for Martin. She sacrificed the interest of three children for just one, Martin the drunk. Anthonia lives as a frustrated and unhappy house wife, Perpétue resorted to extra marital affairs before her death, and Essola, the revolutionary (having taken on Baba Toura's government and lost), murders his brother Martin in cold blood. These intrigues caused a lot of actions, anxiety, and pains suffered by the major female characters in the novel, which could all be attributed to Perpétue, which explains the title of the novel. Both Bebey and Beti are conscious of the important roles they give to their female characters. They are well drawn and they blend well with the story they have to tell. The female characters

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demonstrate their ability to hold the plot together. Through these characters, we gain a new vision of the African woman that can play an important role, if not a leading role in the political affairs of her society. Perhaps, they are projections of the authors' desire for the emergence of a new breed of African women.

We have a similar motivating device in the title of Dipoko's novel, *Because of Women*. The main cause of action, as implied in the title of the novel, is women. Yet, the hero is a male character, Ngoso who goes to any length to have sexual relation with women. This relation, in particular with Ewudu, leads to a lot of ugly scenes because his wife, Njale does not welcome it. The more she fights her husband, the more she is unable to change his behavior. This leaves her in a rather pathetic situation. This implies that Dipoko uses Njale as the focal point of narrating his story. Njale's reactions to her husband's infidelity create room for other events which contribute to the success of the novel. We see her leave her husband's house for her parents' home in an attempt to blackmail Ngoso. In reaction to her threats, Ngoso continues his affairs with other women. This love for women makes Ngoso extremely jealous because he does not tolerate any man who approaches his wife or competes with him for other women. This extreme jealousy is however dangerous and does eventually lead to his sudden and painful death.

The story, perhaps, would not have ended the way it did if the writer had not brought out the effect of women on men like Ngoso who sexually exploits the women for mere pleasure. Such pleasure does not last and often leads to a tragic end. The simplicity of the style of presentation helps in portraying the author's artistic precision. He makes his principal character, Ngoso, move along with women. For example, Njale seems to have so much hold over Ngoso that she virtually motivates much of his movements (Dipoko 17). Dipoko's narrative technique is realistic because it is almost impossible to portray a man living away from a woman or vice versa. Both were made and meant to live together.

It is also captivating because he is able to combine both pleasure and sorrow. It is here that we find the paradox in the female character. She is 'sweet' when Ngoso is with her, yet she causes pain, when he loses her to other men. This seems to be the general portrayal of women: they are like roses, beautiful to look at, sweet smelling, but having thorny stems, so Francis Bebey and Honoré Godefroy Ahanda-Essomba seem to drive home in their novels *La Poupée Ashanti* and *Le*

fruit défendu respectively. The pleasure of being together as lovers keeps Ngoso moving on and likewise when Ewudu elopes with Ekema, Ngoso is antagonized. His search for her continues. The story ends with Ngoso, though very sick, searching for his women, Ewudu and finally Njale.

In a similar situation, the principal character, Alima, in Ahanda-Essomba's novel, *Le fruit défendu*, ends up in pains in hospital. The story is centered on Mengue-Rose who warns her cousin, Alima to desist from his amorous advances towards her, because this is forbidden by traditions: "Tu ne peux pas m'aimer dans le sens que l'entends. J'en mourrais de honte. C'est défendu. Comprends-tu?" (Ahanda-Essomba 53). Alima refuses to heed all warnings against the illicit relationship between him and Mengue-Rose: "Tu parles comme les vieux. Tout évolue de nos jours. Les traditions désuètes sont appelées à disparaître" (Ahanda-Essomba 53). Consequently he gets punished for raping her and ends up with an amputated leg following a car accident he is involved in, as he leaves the purification ceremony.

Through this purification ceremony we also get to know more about Cameroonian customs as emphasized in the interview of Lydie Dooh, when asked: "Le mariage entre cousins même du second degré est-il toujours considéré comme un incest aujourd'hui?" she replies:

> Même très éloignés, des cousins ne doivent pas se marier.
> C'est toujours valable; avec la différence que certains passent outre.
> Je vous raconterai l'histoire de cette camarade d'enfance qui était "fille naturelle". Elle était couverte de grandes plaques de je ne sais quels espèces de boutons qui lui donnaient une peau de crocodile et aucun médicament n'a jamais pu la guérir jusqu'à présent. Savez-vous que tout le monde attribue cette maladie incurable au fait que sa mère ait eu des relations coupables avec un certain cousin ! J'ai une amie qui contre vents et marées a épouse un cousin de second degré, jusqu'à présent on lui crée des problèmes (Autres interviews publiées par AMINA 78).

We see that these traditions are imbedded in the life and beliefs of the Cameroonian of our time by using Mengue-Rose's personality as a pretext. Her beauty, for example could be likened to that of Esther in *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. Mengue-Rose, like Esther, is good to the point of being bleak. It is however through her moral values which the narrator compares with those of an angel that the story unfolds. We follow her around as she moves: "…comme si un ange venait

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d'être parachuté parmi eux" from the village to the town, where Alima and his parents live and finally to Paris where she joins her husband, Jacques (Ahanda-Essomba 61).

We should also note that part of her compound name; 'Rose', symbolizes beauty. In her first contact with Alima, it is her beauty that strikes him. He affirms this fact in this remark: "ton nom te va bien, tu es belle comme une rose" (Ahanda-Essomba 39). Mengue-Rose, though naïve, is not embarrassed because she is aware of her beauty, and so simply reacts by not replying: "Mengue-Rose baissa les yeux sans répondre, car elle était consciente de sa beauté dont tout le monde disait qu'elle était légendaire" (39).

Indeed Mengue-Rose's beauty is legendary because, just like the thorns hidden under the beautiful rose flower, Mengue- Rose's beauty is bedeviling because it harms. It is an all party curse because whenever she comes into contact with a man, she captivates him and leaves him to suffer. It is a type of poisonous beauty because she herself becomes a victim, losing her eye due to her husband's extreme possessiveness and jealousy.

In the case of Alima, there is a double jeopardy that may emanate from the African taboo that forbids marriage between close relatives. Again, if Africa is painted beautiful, perfect and endowed with glory, then it seems some writers are not sincere to her. We believe that the African society has its shortcomings and so also the woman who represents the African world. This means, the image of the woman should be painted objectively, or could be taken as the writers' mere embellishment. Mengue-Rose seems to be a false representation of Africa, thus, she remains a legendary figure.

In *La Brise du jour* by Lydie Dooh, the principal female character, Zinnie, though much less lively than Mengue-Rose, dominates the story. She is the character through whom we follow the story and frequently, we are influenced by her judgments and views. In this way, the writer's point of view is easily and subtly transmitted to us. Her function in the novel is in some way dependent on the male character, Pat. Though Zinnie is the heroine, she reacts only when Pat disappoints her. She loves Pat to a fault because she does not even retaliate like Njale in *Because of women*. She instead turns the other cheek to Pat to slap (Dooh 256). If only Zinnie, after several disappointments in her relationship with Pat calls off that relationship earlier, she would have

saved her honour. Zinnie realises her foolish submission to Pat too late. She then yearns to be free from Pat, yet she cannot forget him.

It is always easy to proclaim freedom but it does not necessarily mean that one enjoys that freedom. She has no one to run to and is lonelier than Perpétue who has Anna-Maria by her side to advise and console her. Zinnie's loneliness draws no sympathy from the reader because the story line is uninteresting and monotonous. The only possible sympathy she may earn is that of being a misfit in her society. We learn that Zinnie is living in a milieu that seems too far removed from being African. Her educational background and interests do not resemble those of a typical African woman. Lydie Dooh's presentation of Zinnie as a heroine does not excite us but rather makes her unbecoming of the usually respectable African woman.

This makes Lydie Dooh's style of writing boring at times and certainly pedantic as portrayed in her interview where she confesses that she puts in a lot of sentiments into the story because: "A vrai dire c'est une histoire qui a empoisonné les 20 premières années de mon existence et qui a longtemps collé à ma peau" (Autres interviews publiées par AMINA 78). However, Lydie Dooh succeeds in one thing. She is able to romanticize the love between cousins which is forbidden in some parts of Africa and the Cameroonian society today.

CONCLUSION

In all the novels we have studied, the female character is effectively used as an agent, or a tool to create action in the story. Sometimes she becomes the pivot of the story, from where every event takes root. The writers use the woman not only as a motivating technique in their story, but also put her on the borderline of affairs which all societies must cross. First, she complements the man in building up the society, though some of the female characters we see may fall by the wayside, they are likely to join the horde of those living in the twilight zone of the society. Secondly, she is a pointer to a new Africa. The woman we see demonstrating in the streets, (Edna in *La Poupée Ashanti*), the one turning her two cheeks to the man to slap (Zinnie in *La brise du jour)* all have their credits in making the novel a work of literature, as well as a political and social activism. Our study has raised certain ideologies about the Cameroonian authors and writings in general. Though they do not have the monopoly of the theme on women, their common penchant towards

the future of the woman is evident. The ideal image given to the woman by the writers of Negritude like L. S. Senghor, Aimé Césaire, to depict the pure and authentic African values, is now that of compromising two civilizations as presented by these Cameroonian writers.

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