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AFRICAN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE STRUGGLE
FOR EMANCIPATION: IMAGE AND REALITY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
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*****

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ABSTRACT

African women have been studied by many scholars and from many different perspectives, but very few of these studies have been done by African women themselves, due to economic and other constraints. The representation by outsiders as well as by African men has been blamed for perpetuating an image of African women that does not correspond to who they really are. The only way to correct this image is for African women to speak for themselves. If research has been accessible to only a few of them, the writing of fiction has given many more an opportunity to express themselves, beginning in the 1960s when women entered the literary scene.

The study is undertaken on the premise that an examination of fictional writing by African women can contribute to a better understanding of their condition and aspirations. The notion of situated knowledges is used to validate self-representation by women and to show why they are able to write more realistically about themselves. The notion of habitus is used to by-pass the difficulty inherent in any discussion of reality, since the habitus is shaped by reality as it is experienced in everyday life. Writing is considered emancipatory if it addresses the changing conditions of the material and social environment to reveal possibilities for a change of habitus, or if it exposes the mechanisms that perpetuate the oppression of African women through the production of a compliant habitus.
Even though many cultural differences exist among African women, researchers have seen patterns emerging in their condition under neocolonialism that allow for certain generalizations. The study examines fiction by francophone writers from Cameroon and anglophone ones from Kenya, countries with different colonial histories and from opposite ends of the continent, to see whether these patterns emerge in literature as well, and how women are negotiating their lives within the changing societies. A life cycle approach to women’s lives is used to organize the study of the texts, which are discussed under the categories of adolescence, marriage, motherhood, women and work, and woman’s body and sexuality. An examination of the various stages of a woman’s life as portrayed by the writers reveals how a woman’s habitus is shaped throughout her life.

The works considered range from the early ones published in the 1960s to recent ones published in the 1990s. The generation of the writers is taken into account when assessing their representation of women. What emerges is that while the authors strive to give realistic representations of aspects of women’s lives, not all of them challenge the status quo or propose strategies for change. In order for an author to produce writing that can contribute to the emancipation of women, she has to write self-consciously to avoid falling into the traps of her own habitus with its internalized dispositions. Knowledge of feminist theory can help reveal the discrimination against women that is embedded in customary norms, modern law and social conventions. The question of canonization is also raised: in order for works by women to contribute to social change, they have to be read by a wide audience. Unfortunately, few women writers have found a place in the canon of African literature.
TO THE MEMORY OF MWAITU
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FIELD OF STUDY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Studies on African women

African women have been studied by many scholars and from many different perspectives. Descriptions of the economic, political and cultural activities of African women during the colonial period can be found mainly in ethnographies. However, "ethnographers were generally men, talking through male interpreters to male informants, about men's affairs. Rarely did an ethnography look specifically at women" (O'Barr, p.14). But beginning in the 1960s, and motivated by debates on women's positions in Western countries, scholars began to look directly at African women. The publication in 1960 of Femmes d'Affrique Noire (translated three years later as Women of Tropical Africa), a collection of essays by female anthropologists, set the stage for a new phase in the study of African women. In the introduction the editor, Denise Paulme, explains the novelty of the approach adopted in the studies and how it differs from ethnographic research which "has almost always been exclusively carried out with the help of, and among, the male part of the population", with the result that "the picture that has emerged has to a large extent been the image which the men
have of their society" (p.1). Thus each essay "deals with woman in her everyday life and with the problems that particularly concern her" (p.1) The studies seek to qualify the usual conclusion arrived at by ethnographers that African women are "oppressed and exploited, have no freedom of action, and are held in low esteem" (p.4).

Efforts to represent African women more "realistically" continued in the 70s and 80s. Studies took into account the changing picture of women in the social, economic, and political setting of their own societies. In the introduction to Women in Africa (1976), Hafkin and Bay describe the papers in the collection as offering more balanced interpretations of women's activities, and criticize some of the earlier literature for being "romantic or historically inaccurate": "In a search for great glories to counteract a past that had ignored and distorted the history of women and of Africa, writers described great queens, amazons, and matriarchy. [...] Other writers gloried in the astonishing independence of West African women and romanticized polygyny because it freed women from having to cook for their husbands every night" (p.4). What emerges from these studies is the complexity of the subject "African women" given the diversity of African cultures. Indeed, most of the essays avoid general categories such as "African women", "Kenyan women", "Nigerian women" and focus on specific groups such as Luo women (Kenya) and Igbo women (Nigeria). While researchers agree that there is no such thing as "the African Woman", that monolithic entity invented by colonial discourse, they nonetheless see patterns that allow certain generalizations to be made about African women. Colonialism and neo-colonialism provide the basis for these generalizations. The essays edited by Hay and Stichter in African Women South of the Sahara (1984) are an example of this trend. They deal with women in present-day Africa and are
grouped under three headings: African women in the economy, African women in society and culture, and African women in politics and policy. The studies show that women today occupy a secondary position in relation to men as a result of colonial policies and contemporary world economy. The deterioration of women's social position under colonialism has been attributed to factors such as the privileging of males in formal education and the introduction of cash crops and wage labor which benefited mostly men.

In the neo-colonial era, most African economies "remain subordinated to Europe and the United States through multinational corporations that profit a tiny upper class" (Robertson and Berger, p.6), as well as through the so-called economic stabilization and structural adjustment policies of the IMF and the World Bank. Researchers agree that poor women are hit the hardest by these policies: "the types of structural adjustments adopted to counter inflation and the pressures of south to north debt repayments have pushed poor women into further subsidizing their national economies and deepened situations of poverty" (Snyder, p.428). The severe economic difficulties that many African countries have been facing since the 1970s due to factors such as high oil prices, falling food production, drought, corruption etc. have made poverty "an everyday reality for most people and starvation for many, but particularly for African women and the children they support" (Robertson and Berger, p.6).

**African women and the question of representation**

Most of the studies on African women have been carried out by Western scholars, especially feminists who took upon themselves the task of fighting women's oppression in
Africa. Some African scholars have accused these feminists of cultural imperialism. For example, Filomina Steady has this to say about them: "The women's movement in the West has displayed, in some instances, a neocolonialist aspect by producing a group of women who seek to dominate or to become patrons and mouthpieces for Third World women" (p.25). Western scholars have not been indifferent to this kind of criticism. In a 1988 article summing up research on African women over the previous sixteen years, Audrey Wipper says that more attention needs to be paid to "closeup pictures of women's daily lives" to find out about their concerns, goals, views and values. But she adds that this kind of research requires familiarity with the culture in question: "This kind of research, often done through participant observation, requires researchers who have a firsthand command of the language and culture - obviously Africans. It is time that they carried out more research" (p.414).

The founding in 1977 of the organisation called AAWORD, acronym for Association of African Women for Research and Development, is evidence that African women have been aware of the need to speak for themselves. Unfortunately, the few who are in a position to carry out research do not always have access to the necessary funding. Achola Pala explains how funding for research in Africa is determined by what happens to be "politically and/or intellectually significant in the métropole", and adds that "such continual redefinition of research priorities means that African scholars are forced into certain forms of intellectual endeavors that are peripheral to the development of their societies" (p.210-211). Thus even though African women social scientists have published essays in books and journals, they have hardly produced any book-length studies on African women. In the introduction to a 1996 special issue of Africa Today entitled "Reconceptualizing African Women, Toward the Year
2000", Bessie House-Midamba draws attention to problems facing African women scholars: "African women have been marginalized not only as participants in the global capitalist world economy but also in studies and analyses of which they are the major subject. It is particularly troubling, then, that in 1996 most studies written about African women have come from outside the African continent" (p.220).

**Representation through literature**

This study is undertaken on the premise that literature can be used to study women. If research has not been accessible to many African women, the writing of fiction has given many more an opportunity to express themselves. As Irene d'Almeida affirms, "there is no doubt that for the last two decades female voices have sprung up to revive the role women have traditionally played as producers of orature, but that these voices now tell their 'modern stories' through the medium of the written word" (p.7). As far as the novel is concerned, the pioneers in Anglophone Africa were Flora Nwapa of Nigeria with *Efuru*, and Grace Ogot of Kenya with *The Promised Land*, both works being published in 1966 (Brown, 1981). In Francophone Africa, Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury from Cameroon published an autobiographical novel entitled *Rencontres Essentielles* in 1969 (d'Almeida, 1994). Critics who have written about fictional works by African women agree that they are mostly informed by the life experiences of the authors. In her anthology, Lilian Kesteloot discusses the majority of works
by women authors under the category of "l'honnête roman de moeurs, où l'on se contente d'évoquer [...] l'Afrique quotidienne dans ses micromilieux, urbains de préférence" (p.482).

She lists several female authors, and describes their writing as follows:

Toutes restituent avec des talents divers les affres du mariage, avec l'amour, la jalousie, la concurrence, l'adultère, l'abandon, la stérilité, et puis les enfants, les tensions, les ruptures. Dans le contexte du conflit tradition/modernisme, elles abordent les problèmes des croyances et pratiques traditionnelles, de la condition féminine, de la famille étendue et ses contraintes. (p. 482)

In Women Writers in Black Africa, one of the few critical works devoted to women's writing, Lloyd Brown emphasizes the contribution that women writers can make towards a better understanding of African women:

The neglect of the woman as writer in Africa has been an unfortunate omission because she offers self-images, patterns of self-analysis, and general insights into the woman's situation which are ignored by, or are inaccessible to, the male writer. And these self-descriptions provide us with useful contexts within which to assess the frequently uniform generalizations about African womanhood. (p.495)

Following Brown, other critics agree that women are offering different images of themselves.

According to Deirdre LaPin, an examination of women's writing today shows that "as women began to enter the ranks of published authors, they took the old images, prised them apart, examined them critically, and frequently denied them outright" (p.111). Or, in the words of d'Almeida, there has been a quest for self-knowledge that has led African women "to begin representing themselves in fiction, and to gradually call into question the male view of themselves as mythical and symbolic figures" (p.8). Davies and Fido even go so far as to affirm that African women "write of realities in ways male African writers do not" (p.311).
Theoretical Framework

This study will examine the validity of these claims about writing by women as opposed to that by men from the point of view of representation of women. Before this can be done, it is important to define two notions that enter into the theoretical framework of the study. The first of these is the notion of "reality" and its representation in literature or any other discourse. Indeed, to be able to agree or disagree with Davies and Fido's claim above, we need to determine what is meant by "reality" as well as how it can be represented in literature. The second notion is that of "habitus", which will be used to discuss "images of women" in African literature that other studies have identified, as well as to assess the aspects of women's writing that critics have lauded as emancipatory.

The notion of "reality"

It was stated above that the premise for this study is that imaginative writing by women can contribute just as well as research by social scientists to an understanding of African women. It could be argued that current theories of discourse make it possible to consider these two types of discourse equally valid in the representation of African women’s realities. Indeed, postmodern theories of discourse have redefined the notion of “reality”, with the result that it is no longer a question of objective, referential reality, but of discursive reality, or reality constructed through language. One of the proponents of this view is Hayden...
White, who deconstructs the so-called factual accounts such as historical narratives and their claims to "truth". In a chapter entitled "Fictions of factual representation", Hayden White collapses the distinction between the "facts" of history and the "fictions" of novels:

"...Viewed simply as verbal artifacts, histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of "reality". The novelist may present his notion of this reality indirectly, that is to say, by figurative techniques [...]. But the image of reality which the novelist thus constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less "real" than that referred to by the historian." (p. 122)

In the above quote, the words "reality" and "real" are in quotation marks for the good reason that "reality" is a difficult concept to apprehend. Indeed, one can say that "reality" exists only as far as it is articulated by language, or, as White explains, "discourse itself mediates between our apprehension of those aspects of experience still 'strange' to us and those aspects of it which we 'understand' because we have found an order of words adequate to its domestication" (p. 21). Thus according to this view, "reality" or "the world" are not objective entities for the writer to label or describe, much less to hold a mirror to and reflect, as Ngugi (1983) describes them in the essay "Freedom of the Artist". In the words of Catherine Belsey, "if by 'the world' we understand the world we experience, the world differentiated by language, then the claim that realism reflects the world means that realism reflects the world constructed in language" (p. 46). Citing different critics, Karlis Racevskis takes this argument to what would appear to be its logical conclusion:

"Our mental habits are so deeply ingrained and have been assimilated so thoroughly that they have become a part of our very selves. As a result, we are not even aware of the process that makes possible our impression of "knowing" reality. Indeed, it makes no sense to even talk of "reality" since the talking is itself always/already a
part of the reality it addresses. Thus, when we really think about it, “what reality is “in itself” is unsayable” and any attempt to pose a question about the nature of reality is incoherent because “the very attempt to answer it already violates the conditions being excluded by the question, namely to say what ‘things-in-themselves’ are without using language”. (p.8)

It is clear then that the notion of reality is a highly problematic one. The logical question that arises for our study is the following: if there is no reality we can speak of that is situated outside language, how can the counter-discourse offered by women writers be considered more valid as far as the representation of African women is concerned? How can we justify the claim cited above that women “write of realities in ways male African writers do not”? We are proposing the notion of habitus, discussed below, as a way of by-passing the difficulty, since the habitus takes into account the material effect of “reality” as it is experienced in everyday life.

"Reality" as a discursive construct

In an article entitled “Discourse”, Paul Bove discusses the postmodern view of “truth”, a notion often associated with that of “reality”: “For poststructuralism, all ‘truths’ are relative to the frame of reference that contains them; more radically, ‘truths’ are a function of these frames; and even more radically, these discourses ‘constitute’ the truths they claim to discover and transmit (p.56). Thus according to this view, discourse can construct realities by producing knowledge about humans and their society. This capacity confers a unique kind of power to discourse, and all societies are familiar with this power of discourse, as Foucault explains in L’ordre du discours: “Dans toute société la production du discours est à la fois
Repressive African regimes are all too aware of the power of discourse which they try to control through censorship of publications considered dangerous to the well-being of the regime. The fact that some of these publications are imaginative works goes to show the role that literature can play in societal transformations. For example, Ngugi wa Thion’go’s novel *Matigari* was banned by the Kenyan government in 1987. In the introduction to the English edition, Ngugi explains how Matigari, the fictional hero, came to be construed as a “subversive political character” by the authorities:

The novel was published in the Gikuyu-language original in Kenya in October 1986. By January 1987, intelligence reports had it that peasants in Central Kenya were whispering and talking about a man called Matigari who was roaming the whole country making demands about truth and justice. There were orders for his immediate arrest, but the police discovered that Matigari was only a fictional character in a book of the same name. In February 1987, the police raided all the bookshops and seized every copy of the novel. (p.viii)

As far as African women writers are concerned, this study will examine the extent to which they have utilized discourse to "produce through fiction a kind of social reality, one having the power to expose, to modify, and even to subvert preexisting reality" (d'Almeida, p.22).

**Validity of self-representation by women**

The question might be asked why the portrayal of African women by African women writers should be deemed any better than that offered by their male counterparts or by
Western writers. Indeed, one problem posed by postmodern discourse theory is that attempts to offer a vision that is truer or more emancipatory than that conveyed by the dominant discourse may sometimes be seen as no more than an exercise in reversing terms and replacing one discourse with another. This can be a demoralizing position for marginalized groups seeking to affirm their identity, and we agree with Nancy Hartsock’s critique of postmodern theorists that they “fail to provide the ground for alternative and more emancipatory accounts of subjectivity” (p. 19). Citing what she considers to be the position taken by Rorty and Foucault that “if one cannot see everything from nowhere, one cannot really see anything at all”, Hartsock concludes that for these theorists, “once reason has been exposed as biased rather than neutral, the very possibility of knowledge must be abandoned” (p. 21).

Hartsock suggests that there is a way out of the impasse created by the postmodern rejection of the “god-trick” or the view of everything from nowhere. She affirms that alternative understandings of knowledge are possible, terming them “situated knowledges” because they are located in a particular time and space. As such, these knowledges are partial, and do not see “everything from nowhere but they do see some things from somewhere” (p. 29). Thus, while they “recognize themselves as never fixed or fully achieved, they can claim to present a truer or more adequate account of reality” (p. 30). Using this notion of “situated knowledges”, we can now answer the question as to why writing by African women should be seen to offer a more correct representation of women, and not just a counter-discourse to men’s writing. It was mentioned earlier that African women tend to write about what they know best, that is their lives and those of people around them, showing that they are engaging in the production of situated knowledges, a first step toward changing the status
quo: “As the knowledges that recognize themselves as those of the dominated and marginalized, these self-consciously situated knowledges must focus on changing contemporary power relations and thus point beyond the present” (Hartsock, p.30).

The representation of “reality” in African literature

Critics of African literature are in agreement as to the role played in their writing by the writers' experiences of their world, or, as Irele puts it, “the manifest concern of the writers to speak to the immediate issues of social life, to narrate the tensions that traverse their world” (p.xiv). Talking of his own writing, Soyinka says: “I have long been preoccupied with the process of apprehending my own world in its full complexity” (p.ix). Thus a critique of African literature has to take into account not only the text but also the social context that informs the text. But in what way can African literature be said to reflect African societies? In the light of the preceding comments about “reality” and “realism”, it becomes clear that there can be no such thing as a mirror reflection of society in a literary text. In the West, fiction by African writers has sometimes been viewed as a document of social facts and realities, qualifying it for study in such departments as history, anthropology, and sociology. According to Ogundipe-Leslie, “African literature was so much explored in such an anthropological manner early in this century and in the early history of African literature in European languages, as to arouse the resentment of Africans” (p.44).
Critical theory: sociological approach vs sociocriticism.

The use of African literature as a social document can be understood in the context of critical theories such as the reflectionist theory and the sociological approach to literature which, in their preoccupation with the content of a literary work, fail to take into account the creative process. Jacques Dubois points out the shortcomings of the sociological approach: “Accaparée par la recherche du référent exact de l'oeuvre, sollicitée par la comparaison avec d'autres écrits et d'autres faits sociaux, la critique sociologique court le risque de se voir déportée vers une périphérie où le littéraire se trouve confondu avec des phénomènes d'une autre nature” (p.55). Julie Emeto expresses similar sentiments in her critique of what she terms “l'approche sociologique du reflet”: “Cette approche dans son fonctionnement ne suffit pas pour rendre compte de tous les aspect de la littérature et donne souvent des résultats fort regrettables. Tandis qu'elle s'intéresse à la fonctionnalité, elle ne se pose pas la question de l'aspect imaginaire et artistique de l'oeuvre”. (p.36)

Bernard Mouralis explains the limitations that criticism based on these approaches has imposed on African literary texts: “Mais ces recherches ont en commun de reposer sur le principes discutable à notre avis selon lequel l'écrivain africain viserait avant tout à exprimer quelque chose et quelque chose d' “aficain”. De ce fait, elles ont contribué à répandre largement dans l'esprit du public l'idée que la littérature africaine devait nous révéler tel ou tel aspect de la réalité de l'Afrique noire” (p.9).
Sociocriticism

Beginning in the 1970s, the critical approach known as sociocriticism was formulated to remedy the shortcomings of the sociological approach. Proponents of this approach do not deny the relevance or importance of the social context in a literary work, but as Claude Duchet explains in the introduction to Sociocritique, "s'il n'est rien dans le texte qui ne résulte d'une certaine action de la société ... il n'y est rien, en revanche, qui soit directement déductible de cette action" (p.4). Régine Robin and Marc Angenot are more specific on this point, referring to the role of language in apprehending reality: "Sans doute, la question de la référence du texte littéraire au monde concret mérite d'être posée, mais c'est après avoir bien compris que cette référence au réel s'opère dans la médiation des langages et des discours qui, dans une société donnée, "connaissent", différemment et même de façon antagoniste, le réel" (p.53).

Robin and Angenot's article is entitled "L'inscription du discours social dans le texte littéraire", and the theory about the representation of reality that they formulate will be used as the model for reading the texts in this study. They define "discours social" as "l'immense rumeur fragmentée qui figure, commente, conjecture, antagonise le monde" (p.54). A writer listens to this fragmented social discourse that constitutes representations of "reality", and selects those aspects of it that he or she wishes to textualize. The literary text thus becomes "un dispositif interdiscursif et intertextuel qui absorbe et reémet de façon spécifique ... et singulière les représentations du réel présentes dans le déjà-là du discours social" (p.81). Robin and Angenot give some examples of what the writer might hear:
Dans ce qui vient à l'oreille de l'écrivain il y a des lieux communs, des clichés, des maximes qui balisent l'ordre doxique, le “mentalitaire”; il y a aussi des paradigmes plus construits, de l'opinion publique et des savoirs disciplinaires, des thèmes en migrations avec leur cortège de prédicats et d'épithètes, des slogans politiques, de grandes doctrines construites en visions du monde, en historiosophies. (p.55)

To illustrate their theory, the two critics make brief studies of the Hero in 19th century Russian fiction, and the Prostitute in French literature after 1870. They use the notion of “sociogramme”, term coined by Claude Duchet, whose definition they quote: “Ensemble flou, instable, conflictuel, de représentations partielles centrées autour d'un noyau, en interactions les unes avec les autres” (p.57). Or, in their own words: “Il s'agit de l'ensemble des thématisations que la fiction et les autres discours inscrivent sur un sujet donné, de l'ensemble des vecteurs discursifs thématisant cet objet” (p.61). Thus under the “sociogramme de la prostituée”, they discuss five “vecteurs porteurs de représentations de la prostitution”:

1. men's conversations or “l'oralité masculine bourgeoise”.

2. medico-administrative discourse.

3. literature and the press of the period, “où se chante l'apothéose de la cocotte, de l'horizontale, du Paris des plaisirs” (p.68).

4. newspaper reports covering “le thème de fait-divers de la prostituée égorgée”.

5. socialist discourse, which constructs “l'image d'une double exploitation des fils et des filles du peuple, ‘chair à usine, viande à plaisir’” (p.68)

Following this model, our study will examine fiction by both male and female writers to see what aspects of the social discourse about African women have informed the representation of women in each text, and how far the reformulation achieved can be considered emancipatory. In the African context, discourses that have contributed to produce
the "reality" of women include the following: colonial administrative discourse and ethnographies; Christianity and Islam; discourses passed down through the oral tradition, such as proverbs, myths, folktales; political propaganda by African regimes; literature and the press.

The notion of "habitus"

In this study, the theory of social discourse as inscribed in the literary text will be complemented by the notion of habitus. Habitus is one of the main conceptual tools in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. In The Logic of Practice, Bourdieu defines habitus as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations" (p.53). A person's behaviour and social interactions are a function of their habitus, which also includes their own knowledge and understanding of the world. The definition of habitus quoted by Schiltz incorporates the important element of internalization: "Habitus denotes 'the culture of an epoch, class or any group as it is internalised by the individual in the form of durable dispositions that are at the basis of his/her behaviour'" (p.729). Thus because of habitus, "individuals or groups may (consciously or unconsciously) tend to reproduce the objective structures that produced habitus in the first place" (p.729). Bourdieu makes it clear that because of its mode of development, habitus is never "fixed" for an individual, either through time, or from one generation to the next. Thus habitus has to be seen as "a mediating construct, not a determining one" (Harker et al. p.12).
Bourdieu shows how domination exists because a “compliant habitus” has been produced in the dominated, and explains “the particularly important role played by the habitus and its strategies in setting up and perpetuating durable dispositions of domination” (p.130). In an article entitled “Appropriating Bourdieu: Feminist Theory and Pierre Bourdieu’s Sociology of Culture”, Toril Moi explains Bourdieu’s understanding of the social construction of gender divisions: “For Bourdieu, then, sexual oppression is above all an effect of symbolic violence. As such, the traditional relationship between the sexes is structured by a habitus which makes male power appear legitimate even to women. Insofar as symbolic violence works, it produces women who share the very same habitus which serves to oppress them” (p.1030). A discussion of the emancipation of African women has to take into account the social mechanisms that ensure the production of this compliant habitus. According to Bourdieu, an elaborate social process of education or Bildung is required to produce a gender habitus. An important aspect of this process is “the inscription of social power relations on the body: our habitus is at once produced and expressed through our movements, gestures, facial expressions, manners, ways of walking, and ways of looking at the world” (Moi, p.1031). The questions posed by Beate Krais in her article entitled “Gender and Symbolic Violence: Female Oppression in the Light of Pierre Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Practice”, would be relevant ones to address in this study: “What mechanisms are at work to make gender differentiation function as a dimension of domination, and where in social practice can we observe this type of domination? Why are women excluded from power positions in most social fields? How are “male” and “female” actions, ways of thinking, and judging reproduced in social practice?” (p. 157).
An initial response to these questions as they relate to African women can be found in an essay by Ogundipe-Leslie entitled “African Women, Culture and another Development”. She gives a generalized view of the woman’s condition by theorizing her oppression under the metaphor of “Six Mountains on her Back”, which can be summed up as follows:

1) oppression by colonial interventions.

2) the heritage of the African tradition.

3) her backwardness due to educational deprivation.

4) her men, steeped in centuries-old attitudes of patriarchy.

5) her race, because the international economic order is divided along race and class lines.

6) herself, because she is shackled by her own negative self-image, by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy.

These categories can be considered the objective conditions that have contributed to the production of a compliant habitus, and from them we get an idea of the diversity of obstacles that stand in the way of the emancipation of African women.

In the light of the above questions posed by Kraus, the notion of habitus will be used to discuss the emancipation of women. Writing shall be considered emancipatory as far as women are concerned if it addresses the changing objective conditions of the material and social environment to reveal possibilities for a change of habitus, or if it exposes the mechanisms that perpetuate the oppression of African women through the production of compliant habitus. Given that habitus is not fixed, it will be argued that literary texts can play a role in changing it by offering new discourses representing women in the changing objective
conditions. Since these discourses become part of the social discourse of which "reality" is constituted, their contribution to changing habitus cannot be denied. Toril Moi touches on this point when she discusses the role that intellectuals can play in social change. What she says about intellectuals can be applied to emancipatory African writers as well, and helps to understand how fiction by the latter can change habitus: "Insofar as intellectuals may contribute to change through the production of discourse, they can only do so when the social structure they inhabit is in an explicit or implicit state of conflict. The very fact of producing a critical discourse, however, helps to *legitimize* the experience which directly or indirectly has contributed to producing the critique in the first place" (p.1029). Thus it is in the legitimization of experience that the value of women’s writing can be appreciated, and many critics have made the point that women writers are contributing to a better understanding of African women by correcting the stereotypes perpetuated by colonial discourses as well as by male writers.

One of the critics to analyze African women’s writing in this light is Carole Davies. In the introduction to *Ngambika*, she states that the examination of stereotypes and images is an important developmental step in feminist criticism in that “it represents the first realization that something is wrong and is usually the first rung of consciousness for the critic” (p.14). The identification of negative and positive images of women in African literature challenges writers to recognize and correct established stereotypes. In an essay entitled “Representations of Urban Life in African Women’s Literature”, Davies shows how, in the fiction she considers, the urban space is portrayed as “a site of contradictions” where life is difficult but challenging. At the same time, rural life is deromanticized: “the rural is
often represented as the site of traditional, binding expectations for women and of difficult life and drudgery” (p.174). Thus she sees women’s writing as providing “more developed representations” of African women, which allows her to argue that “literature is perhaps the most legitimate source for women’s representations of gender, development, and urban life” (p.174).

By using the notions of habitus and social discourse, our study goes beyond an inventory of “images” of women in the texts to show that writers too operate within the schemes of the habitus. A writer's habitus, like everybody else’s, includes his or her own knowledge and understanding of the world “which makes a separate contribution to the reality of that world” (Harker et al. p.11). In other words, this knowledge has “a genuine constitutive power and is not merely a reflection of the ‘real’ world” (Harker et al. p.11). Thus a writer wishing to represent women in a new light and to help construct a new “reality” has to consciously avoid falling into the trap of her own habitus with its internalized dispositions. As Robin and Angenot put it in their article quoted above, “de temps en temps l’écrivain le moins hostile au groupe qu’il décrit et auquel il donne la parole commet une sorte de lapsus, il répète passivement un fragment doxique que le développement même de son texte aurait dû dissoudre, il laisse des éléments dormants, des résidus de clichés non attaqués”. (p.71)

Of course the notions of habitus and social discourse are implied in many of the studies of women’s writing, as the following quote from d’Almeida's work shows:

Thus, having achieved their prise d’écriture ... women are capitalizing on this new medium to see and represent themselves in a femino-centric perspective. They portray themselves as actors instead of spectators. They are at the core instead of the
periphery. They explore, deplore, subvert, and redress the status quo within their fiction. They contend with the problems arising from sex, race, and class even as these exist within patriarchal, "postcolonial" societies. (p.22-23)

In the terms of our study, the "status quo" in this quote would be a function of habitus, which has been constituted by the objective structures of sex, race, class, patriarchy, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Choice of authors and texts

This study will deal with francophone writers from Cameroon and anglophone ones from Kenya. I thought it would be interesting to compare anglophone and francophone women writers with different colonial histories and from opposite ends of the continent, to see how far women's experiences in these countries are similar, and to what extent one can generalize about African women. It was mentioned above that researchers have seen patterns emerging in the condition of women under neocolonialism that allow for certain generalizations. Do these patterns emerge in literature as well? How do the characters negotiate their lives within the changing societies?

In addition to women writers, two male authors will be included, namely Mongo Beti of Cameroon and Ngugi wa Thiong’o of Kenya. The texts by male authors will provide some comparative basis and allow us to assess the view that women writers represent women's reality more accurately than men do. Before giving the list of the authors and texts selected, some general remarks about women writers will be made.
1. Women writers and the canon

Critics who have discussed African women authors are in agreement that not many of these writers have found a place on the critical canon. Davies and Fido see colonial policies as one of the obstacles in the development of women’s writing: “The relative scarcity of women writers in the African literary canon may be partly explained by the opposition of colonial education, family, and gender policies to women’s engaging in pursuits apart from domestic ones” (p.311). One of the consequences of these policies is that more women writers than men will find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to writing in the languages of the former colonial masters. Critics are in agreement that French, English, and Portuguese have become, for many African countries, the languages of choice in education, administration and the business world. As far as literature is concerned, these languages “permettent [aux écrivains], mieux que leur langue maternelle, d’acquérir une audience panafricaine et internationale et paradoxalement, de toucher l’ensemble des lecteurs potentiels à l’intérieur de leurs propres frontières” (Notre Librairie 98, p.4). However, writing in a European language is not a matter of personal choice for African authors, as Alain Ricard points out in an article entitled “Francophonie, Anglophonie, Langues africaines”. Indeed, African writers find themselves in “une situation sociale de domination linguistique, une situation de diglossie, dans laquelle il n’y aurait pour la littérature aucun autre choix possible que celui de la langue dominante” (p.11). And so women, not having had the same opportunities as men to master European languages, have produced very few texts compared to men. In the foreword to a special issue of Notre Librairie devoted to women’s writing,
Eloïse Brière explains the absence of women’s texts in some earlier issues of the journal: “L’absence des voix féminines de l’Afrique Noire, des Antilles, de l’Océan Indien reflète le double mutisme de celles que les situations coloniale et féminine avaient privées de discours, du discours ‘europhone’ qui s’apprenait sur les bancs de l’école coloniale” (p.6).

In a 1993 study of Francophone women writers entitled La Parole aux africaines, Jean-Marie Volet gives examples of critics who consider women’s writing as falling short of the required standard where language use is concerned:

Madeleine Borgomano écrit par exemple au sujet du roman Djibô de l’Ivoirienne Fatou Bolli: “La forme narrative du roman [...] rend compte de façon intéressante de la situation des intellectuels ivoiriens [...]. Mais l’écriture, très scolaire, est maladroite”. Et elle n’est pas plus nuancée avec Le Prix d’une vie de Simone Kaya ou Okoussai de Kacou Oklomin, un ouvrage qu’elle considère comme traitant “de la condition féminine [...] d’une manière particulièrement simpliste et maladroite”. Arlette Chemain affirme quant à elle dans ses réflexions sur une littérature féminine: “L’expression reste sage et appliquée, quand elle ne demeure pas scolaire, comme dans certains (sic) pages de M. Bâ” (p.16)

2. Women writers and literary criticism

Absence from the literary canon has meant that women writers have often been ignored by critics writing about African literature in general, especially by male critics who have dominated the field. According to Florence Stratton, “African women writers and their works have been rendered invisible in literary criticism” (p.1). She supports this charge by citing various critical works from which women writers are notably absent. For example, Eustace Palmer’s An Introduction to the African Novel (1972), “the first book-length treatment of African fiction”, refers only once to a woman writer, “a reference to Flora

To illustrate the fact that African women writers have fared no better in critical journals, Stratton cites *African Literature Today*, which did not publish a full-length article on a woman writer until its seventh volume (1975). A second article appeared in the eighth volume (1976), but not until the twelfth volume (1982) was a third article published. The fifteenth volume (1987) was a special issue entirely on women’s writing. Anne Adams has criticized the introduction to this issue: “In his introduction to *Women in African Literature Today*, the editor, doyen of African literary criticism, Eldred Jones, claims to argue for the respect due to Africa’s women writers, but subverts his own intent by making a patronizing, stereotyped mis-reading out of the job” (p.156). Indeed, Jones is of the opinion that women’s writing is predictable: “Just as some critics complained that it was possible to predict the concerns of almost every African novel of the 1950s and 1960s, so it might be possible to forecast the themes of works by African women writers” (p.3). This is due to the fact that women will continue to write on issues like “polygamy, marriage, love, motherhood and relations between the sexes in general” (p.3). Jones seems to imply that these themes do not make great Literature worthy of the canon, since he hopes that “the day will come when, having put all this behind her, having corrected the misconceptions and set the record straight, the African woman writer will be free to follow her creative impulse and write about what she pleases” (p.3).
It is not only male critics who have discussed women’s writing in a patronizing manner. Reference has already been made to Lilyan Kesteloot’s anthology, in which she places the majority of novels by women under the category of “l’honnête roman de moeurs”, written “sans ambition visionnaire et sans aventure stylistique” (p.482). Once again the impression given here is that these works will necessarily be inferior in quality. She cites some exceptions to the rule, such as L’ex-père de la nation by Aminata Sow Fall, which she describes as “un roman de moeurs politiques, qui aurait bien pu être écrit par un homme” (p.482). This statement is a clear example of the critic’s habitus. She no doubt subscribes to the idea that African women writers cannot handle certain themes adequately.

The good news for women writers is that feminist criticism has begun to re-evaluate “dismissed women writers by providing critical studies which reveal specific woman-oriented configurations” (Davies 1986, 14). Davies cites the case of Flora Nwapa whom she calls “a victim of literary politics”: “Dismissed by many critics as unimportant, after re-vision she is credited with recreating that oral culture that African society is noted for and making important contributions to her genre” (p.14). Indeed, African women’s writing can be seen as “participating in an overall female aesthetic” (p.16) in which various modes of story narration occur. In her 1985 thesis entitled Uhamiri or a Feminist Approach to African Literature, Pauline Navola-Lyonga uses Bakhtian dialogic and feminist literary theory to show that “African women have been and are reacting to cultural and literary traditions in Africa” (p.5), and to demonstrate a thematic and formal relationship between African women’s oral and written literatures. Thus, in order for women’s writing to be fully appreciated, “the same
battle that African literary theorists had to wage to make the European/American critics realize that other African-based aesthetic criteria have to be applied to African literature, in effect has to be waged for African women writers” (Davies 1986, 16).

One of the consequences of these new approaches to women’s writing is that the canon of African literature is being challenged. Florence Stratton is a feminist critic who feels that justice is finally being done to women writers. In the conclusion to her 1994 study entitled *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, she writes: “Women writers have earned a place in African literary history. Writing in the main against the canon, they have redefined the African literary tradition. Uncovering gaps and silences, exposing biases and prejudices, they have renamed it a male tradition and declared the canon an artificial construct” (p.176).

3. Generations of women writers

Critics have tended to divide women writers into two broad categories: the first and second generation. As far as Africa South of the Sahara is concerned, the first generation includes Flora Nwapa of Nigeria, Grace Ogot of Kenya, and Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana, all of whom started publishing in the 1960s (Adams, 1993). Second generation writers appeared on the scene in the later seventies, eighties, and nineties. Adams is careful to point out that “chronology is not to be vested with absolute boundaries for poetics or ideas”, since it does not necessarily follow that the second generation writers “are making radically different statements from those of their predecessors” (p.158). She uses the criteria laid down
by Ogundipe-Leslie in an essay entitled “The Female Writer and Her Commitment”, to explain the discussion of women writers under two generations: “In broad terms her manifesto is appropriate for our generational distinctions in that the first generation African women writers’ works can be regarded as having conceptualized the issues of the manifesto - albeit unconsciously - while the second generation’s works are articulating it - and consciously” (p.159). Thus the second generation’s writing in relation to the first’s can be characterized as follows: “The predecessor’s vision and execution is based in a presentation of the human, particularly the African, experience from the perspective of woman; the successor’s vision and execution bases itself in an alteration of it. The first-generation women are concerned with addressing that experience in literature; the second generation, with redressing it” (p.159).

In Femmes Rebelles, a 1996 study focussing on works by second generation writers (1984-1994), Odile Cazenave is more specific about what differentiates the two generations of writers: “En l’espace de dix ans à peine, la voix des écrivains femmes s’est affermie, montrant un engagement plus franc et une rébellion ouverte, dans sa thématique comme dans son expression” (p.13). “Rebellion” is a key concept in this study, and the author is very clear on what constitutes rebellious writing:

Un tel processus de rébellion s’inscrit, selon moi, dans une provocation systématique, elle-même articulée sur deux temps, à travers le choix de protagonistes féminins en marge de leurs sociétés et l’exploration de zones culturelles taboues ou taxées jusqu’ici d’insignifiantes, une réflexion sur les mécanismes cachés qui expliquent les déséquilibres croissants dans l’Afrique moderne, et la recherche d’alternatives à certaines questions socio-politiques d’une Afrique post-coloniale stagnante, ainsi que la création d’une voix féministe/féminine propre qui tranche avec l’autorité masculine canonique. (p.14)
4. Women writers and cultural taboos

Studies have shown that in many societies women do not talk the same way as men. Writing about the French, Hajdukowski-Ahmed affirms that "la femme parle une 'langue tournée', c'est-à-dire par euphémismes et périphrases, pour se référer à ce qui est innommable et socialement inacceptable ou à ce qui évoque la crainte. Il s'agit le plus souvent de ce qui touche à son corps". On the other hand, "l'homme ne se prive pas de détailler le corps de la femme, ayant à sa disposition un vaste répertoire culturel qui renvoie une image dégradée de la femme" (p.55). African women writers have had to surmount the obstacles posed by the cultural taboos of their societies on matters of sexuality. Bernard Mouralis (1994) sees Awa Thiam's *La Parole aux négresses* (1978) as the first work to break sexual taboos through its discussion of excision and infibulation, thus paving the way for later texts: "L'essai d'Awa Thiam a rendu possible une liberté de ton et d'écriture qu'on retrouvera dans de nombreux textes publiés par la suite. En effet, *La Parole aux négresses* élargit le champ référentiel à des domaines trop souvent passés sous silence jusqu'aujourd'hui, par conformisme ou fausse pudor" (p.27).

The texts analyzed by Odile Cazenave in *Femmes Rebelles* are examples of the growing freedom of expression in women's writing, and can be considered "rebellious" precisely because they transgress cultural taboos on what women can openly talk about:

C'est en adoptant au départ une démarche de marginalisation de leurs personnages, d'exploration audacieuse de zones interdites, telles la sexualité, le désir, la passion, l'amour, mais aussi la relation mère-fille, la mise en question de la reproduction et de
This breaking with societal taboos as far as language is concerned constitutes a major difference between first and second generation writers.

**Texts by women authors**

**Cameroon:**
- Calixthe Beyala. *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* (1987)
  
  *Seul le Diable le savait* (1990)

**Kenya:**
  
  *The Other Woman* (1976)
  
  *Island of Tears* (1980)
Male authors

In addition to texts by women writers, two works by male authors will be studied, one by Mongo Beti of Cameroon - Perpétue ou l’habitude de malheur (1974), and one by Ngugi wa Thiong’o of Kenya - Devil on the Cross (1982). Beti and Ngugi are two male writers considered by critics as being sympathetic to the condition of African women. As Stratton puts it, while feminist critics have denounced Senghor and Okot for their “reductive, stereotypical images of women”, they have lauded Sembene, Farah, Beti, and Ngugi for their portrayal of “complex, realistic, or politically committed women” (p.50). Both Beti and Ngugi have expressed their concern over the oppression of women. Beti considers women to be “the most oppressed class of people in contemporary Africa” (Bjornson, p.342). In an interview with Kembe Milolo, in answer to a question regarding the novel Perpétue, Beti explains how total liberation from imperialism cannot be achieved in Africa without the emancipation of women: “Et c'est pour cela que je montre d'une part en quoi consiste l'oppression de la femme chez nous et, d'autre part, pourquoi il est urgent de libérer nos femmes” (p.282). A little further he adds: “En tant qu'homme, je ne peux que déplorer l'oppression de la femme. Aux femmes elle-mêmes de trouver les voies de leur libération. Et c'est pour cela que l'arrivée des femmes dans le domaine de la création romanesque est un pas en avant” (p.283).

Ngugi too has made non-literary declarations in favour of the emancipation of women. In Barrel of a Pen, he speaks of the “double oppression of women”: “As suppliers of labor in colonies and neocolonies, they are exploited; and as women they suffer under the weight of male prejudices in both feudalism and imperialism” (p.41). Similar sentiments are to be found
in *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, where Ngugi explains the choice of Wariinga as the central character of *Devil on the Cross*, the novel written in prison: “Because the women are the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being” (p.10).

An examination of Beti's *Perpétue*, and Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* will show how the authors' concern for the emancipation of women is inscribed in their fiction, and the extent to which their writing can be considered “feminist” as far as women are concerned. Both Beti and Ngugi have been committed to the struggle to liberate their countries from the repressive regimes maintained in place by imperialists. Kandioura Dramé refers to them as “visionary novelists” who “had to exercise a profound skepticism in the face of the current political discourse of African officials and their advisors (many of whom are European), a discourse that is aimed at painting a harmonious, static image of Africa while the societies are torn by tremendous upheavals”. (p.2)

But how does the feminist cause fit into Beti's and Ngugi's political project? Critics are in agreement that the main female characters in both novels (*Perpétue* in *Perpétue*, and Wariinga in *Devil on the Cross*), have a symbolic function. According to Bjornson, the story of Perpétue “allegorically encapsulates the history of neocolonialist domination in Cameroon” (p.335). In our analysis of *Devil on the Cross*, we shall examine Stratton's claim that “gender functions as a metaphor for class” and that, despite his evident concern with gender reform, “Ngugi's portrayal of Wariinga, in both her original and her transformed character, can be seen to operate in the interest of preserving patriarchal relations” (p.160). Indeed, a
contradiction between Ngugi's theoretical stance on women and his literary practice can be seen in an essay entitled “Writing against neo-colonialism” (1988), in which he outlines the development of African literature since the Second World War. He does not mention a single woman writer, but feels the need to add a note at the end of the essay: “The terms ‘he’ and ‘his’ as used above are not meant to denote the ‘maleness’ of the person. It should be read to indicate an individual person, whether male or female” (p.103).

Setting of the texts

The texts selected deal for the most part with the neocolonial period, and are mainly set in urban areas. Even though rural women's lives are changing too, urban women experience more rapid change, as Kenneth Little explains in his study entitled The Sociology of Urban Women's Image in African Literature: “It is the city that provides the best guide to current social attitudes and trends. It is there that the major decisions are made, that social change is most rapid, and that considerations of traditional origin have been partially superseded. In the city, women are brought into new and different relationships with the opposite sex” (p.2). Thus it is in the urban areas where women's habitus is likely to change first given the changing structures. In Little's words, the city provides a frame of reference that “enables women to be regarded as participants in the kind of milieu that is developing out of the older order of society” (p.2). Or, as Davies (1993) puts it, “African women writers
examine urban life within the context of changing societal patterns, oppressive economic
systems, and traditional expectations of women's place and role in society as they interface
with contemporary, liberatory attitudes concerning womanhood” (p.171).

Organisation of the study

Texts by women authors will be analyzed over the next two chapters: chapter two will
deal with the Cameroonian writers and chapter three with the Kenyan ones. The works by the
two male authors will be analyzed in chapter four.

A life cycle approach to women's lives will be used to organize the study of the texts.
Jean O'Barr (1987) uses this approach in an article entitled “Feminist Issues in the Fiction of
Kenya's Women Writers”, and justifies it as follows: “Sociological research has shown that
'all women' cannot be grouped into a single category; rather, one must look at each woman’s
(or set of women's) place in the life cycle and the social structure” (p 57). She adds that “the
novels divide themselves readily into the particular stages of women's lives: they deal with
how female children become women; with what marriage means for women; with where
women's work fits into their lives” (p.57). In the conclusion to her study, O'Barr observes:
"The literary data show that Kenyan women define certain life tasks -entering adulthood,
going married, finding work - as the places where the contradictory demands of old and new
clash most painfully. Individual women protest against the injustices, then acquiesce,
reconciling contradictions more often through avoidance than positive action” (p.68). Thus
an examination of the various stages of a woman's life cycle as they are portrayed by writers of fiction should reveal how a woman’s habitus is shaped throughout her life, and the discourses that contribute to the internalization of certain dispositions.

The texts in our study, by both Cameroonian and Kenyan writers, deal more or less with the same life’s stages as those analyzed by O’Barr. But we have identified more issues in the texts than O’Barr does, and these will be discussed under the following five categories: adolescence or becoming a woman, marriage, motherhood, women and work, woman’s body and sexuality.
CHAPTER 2

CAMEROONIAN WOMEN WRITERS

Introduction

In a 1993 study entitled Le Roman camerounais et ses discours, Eloïse Brière speaks of two kinds of literary revolutions in Cameroon: “La première révolution littéraire camerounaise, née du croisement entre l’écriture europhone et la tradition orale du Sud-Cameroun, est essentiellement d’expression masculine” (p.201). The second revolution happens when women start writing:

Se dire, prendre en charge un discours, l’enraciner dans la subjectivité féminine, remettre en question la vision patriarcale du monde, est la deuxième révolution littéraire engendrée au Sud-Cameroun suite à la rencontre coloniale. Celle qui était définie dans les récits des autres se définit elle-même. Celle qui était perçue comme un espace vide où s’écrivait les textes masculins, écrit son propre texte. Celle qui créait jadis dans l’oralité, entre aujourd’hui dans la société du discours écrit. (p.201)

Brière is careful to point out a misconception about women’s silence on the part of critics who have quoted, out of context, a beti proverb which says that “les femmes n’avaient pas de bouche”. While this proverb refers to the absence of a woman’s voice within a marriage, some contemporary criticism has equated it with creative silence: “Celle-ci tend à voir le mutisme féminin comme caractéristique principale de la femme traditionnelle. Si ce mutisme
Many critics consider *Rencontres essentielles* (1969) by Thérèse Kouh-Moukoury as the first text to be published by a woman writer from Cameroon. But Brière starts her exploration of women’s writing with *Ngonda*, an “autobiographical novella” (Bjornson, 43) by Marie-Claire Matip published in 1954 while the author was still in high school. The critic divides Cameroonian women’s writing into three phases, beginning with *Ngonda* and ending with the novels of Calixthe Beyala, and explains the division as follows: “Les trois étapes que nous avons choisies marquent une évolution chronologique du discours littéraire féminin au Sud-Cameroun qui s’ouvre en 1954. Ce discours s’exprime d’abord à travers le témoignage direct (*Ngonda*), se muant ensuite en fiction autobiographique/didactique puis – dans un troisième temps – il prend une allure proprement littéraire” (p.202). While the periodisation adopted by Brière is useful in showing the evolution of women’s writing as far as different genres are concerned, it is also problematic in that her comment about “allure proprement littéraire” seems to imply that works in the categories of “le témoignage direct” and autobiography have no literary qualities. In this study, the question of literary merit shall not be raised, and autobiographical/didactic texts shall be considered works of literature.

Two of Calixthe Beyala’s novels will be analyzed in this study: her first novel, *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* (1987), and her third, *Seul le Diable le savait* (1990). To date, Beyala
has published seven novels, but these two texts have been selected because the stories are set entirely in Cameroon, and the women characters are all black Africans. They will be contrasted with Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury’s *Rencontres essentielles* (1969), and Delphine Zanga-Tsogo’s *Vies de femmes* (1983), both of which fit into the second phase identified by Brière, that of “fiction autobiographique/didactique”. According to Joseph Ndinda, *Rencontres essentielles* was all but ignored by critics and the public when it first came out, precisely because of its autobiographical nature: “l’horizon d’attente du public camerounais était orienté vers des ouvrages s’intéressant à l’histoire se déroulant immédiatement avant ou après les indépendances. Un roman posant les problèmes d’une femme qui lutte pour sauvegarder son foyer n’attrirait pas les faveurs des critiques” (p.7). Critics of African women’s writing have commented on the writers’ preference for the autobiographical genre, and according to Irène d’Almeida, “Francophone African women have been attracted by the genre of autobiography, more so than their Anglophone counterparts” (p.32). Odile Cazenave explains the reasons for this preference:

Les premières œuvres à caractère autobiographique permettaient à ces femmes de passer le barrage du silence et le tabou de prendre la plume. De fait, elles ont été alors à même d’introduire, de manière indirecte, certaines réflexions sur leurs sociétés, sans faire l’objet d’un refoulement immédiat de la part des éditeurs ou des critiques masculins qui auraient vu là une audace dangereuse. (p.18)

Zanga-Tsogo’s novel, *Vies de femmes* has a clear didactic slant to it, as Eloïse Brière (1993) explains: “L’intention morale de cette histoire, écrite lorsque Delphine Zanga-Tsogo était au gouvernement du Cameroun, est claire: la polygamie n’est plus une option valable

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pour la femme moderne alors que l’est la solidarité féminine. De même, le mariage n’est pas une sinécure; la femme doit d’abord compter sur elle-même pour assurer sa vie au Cameroun contemporain” (p.219).

Brière’s explanation is echoed by Nfah-Abbenyi, who shows how Zanga-Tsogo used her privileged position to give voice to other women:

As a woman, a writer, and a powerful political figure, Zanga Tsogo had to lend her ears to “women’s affairs”, to stories of women’s lives told by women and about women. As the Minister of Social Affairs, she was in a unique position to learn more about polygamy, prostitution, conjugal violence, infidelity, rural exodus, and illiteracy [...], and how these issues directly affected the lives of women. [...] Zanga Tsogo could therefore integrate the lives and experiences of other women into her own and rewrite these stories in fictional ways, thus unburying buried lives. (p.74-75)

For Anny-Claire Jaccard, a major difference between Rencontres essentielles and Vies de femmes is in the way reality is represented in the two novels, which is either “sous l’aspect d’une histoire d’amour de type intimiste ou sous la forme d’un récit réaliste conventionnel” (p.157). Thus even though Vies de femmes reflects “une attitude comparable à celle de Rencontres essentielles quant à la problématique feminine”, the first novel offers more “descriptions réaliste et critiques de la société ce qui modifie sensiblement l’éclairage du problème” (p.159).

Beyala’s first novel, C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée, was not well received in Cameroun either, as Ndinda explains: “Ce roman a reçu un accueil favorable de la part du public et de la critique occidentale. Paradoxalement, certains critiques camerounais considèrent que le livre était provocant et provocateur” (p.7). The provocative nature of Beyala’s writing is due to the way that she writes about the body and sexuality: “L’écriture de Beyala s’enracine dans le corps féminin, pour créer un discours qui se différencie clairement du discours
"masculin" (Brière 1993, p.231). The review of Beyala’s first novel by David Tagne explains why African audiences would apparently be uncomfortable with this kind of writing, in which the author “s’élance vers ce qui, sous les tropiques, n’est que pure perversion. La masturbation, les différentes scènes érotiques […], soulèveront certainement des grognements scandalisés par un penchant pornographique prononcé” (p.97). Indeed, Beyala is a second generation writer who has broken African cultural taboos on sexuality in her texts, where she writes about the body (male and female alike) without recourse to euphemisms. In the words of Odile Cazenave,

on comprend mieux encore combien la démarche de Beyala tranche avec les normes de la bienséance littéraire, tant sur le plan culturel que sur celui du langage. En effet, Beyala introduit le corps et le rend visible de manière systématique, qu’il s’agisse du corps de l’homme ou de celui de la femme. Plus encore, elle les représente dans leur intimité la plus cachée, démontrant pour nous lecteurs, les implication de ce langage corporel, dans ce qu’il traduit de passion, de violence, de soumission ou de manque. (p.217)

Thus in regard to the use of language, the characterization of Western feminist writers by Hajdukowski-Ahmed can be applied to Beyala: “Les auteures féministes ont créé des personnages et des discours qui s’attachent à nommer avec précision, à appeler les choses par leur noms, à repousser consciemment l’euphémisation du langage” (p.56).

It is mainly because of Beyala’s novels that “sexuality” is included in our discussion. The other authors write about the body with the reserve characteristic of sub-saharan African writers: “Contrairement à la littérature maghrébine où il existe une tradition d’écriture et de

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2 The generations of women writers are discussed in chapter one.
poétique du corps et de la sexualité, les écrivains d’Afrique subsaharienne ont toujours montré une certaine réserve à en parler” (Cazenave, p.180). Eloïse Brière (1993) also comments on this absence of the body and sexuality in African literature:

La stratégie de Beyala frappe d’autant plus que, sauf quelques exceptions notoires comme dans *Le Devoir de violence* de Yambo Ouologuem ou *Les Soleils des indépendances* d’Ahmadou Kourouma, les romanciers africains ne s’attardent que peu sur les questions de sexualité, et du corps à proprement parler. Mohamadou Kane a signalé que cette réserve pudique a longtemps fait école chez les écrivains masculins. (p.235)

Another major difference between Beyala’s first novel and those of Kuoh-Moukoury and Zanga-Tsogo is in her narrative technique, which has been called “innovative” by critics. Anny-Claire Jaccard comments on the importance of form over content in the novel:

Le niveau événementiel est infiniment moins important que la façon dont la romancière rend le vécu quotidien de son héroïne, une jeune fille habitant un bidonville camerounais. Le personnage est tantôt décrit par un narrateur occulte (mais non omniscient), tantôt il est comme dédoublé par un ‘esprit’ qui commente, à la première personne, les actes et les pensées de l’héroïne. (p.159)

Thus we can conclude that the “allure proprement littéraire” to which Brière refers has to do with the originality of narrative technique. Jaccard explains what constitutes this originality:

L’alternance des modes de narration est pratiquée de façon originale, car l’auteur n’attribue pas les passages à la première personne à son héroïne [...] Et, en outre, les passages à la troisième personne ne sont pas le fait d’un narrateur omniscient mais d’un narrateur qui est l’égal des personnages. Cette relativisation du narrateur contribue d’emblée à créer un univers qui n’obéit pas forcément à un ordre logique et qui n’est pas à priori doté d’une cohérence et d’une finalité intelligibles. (p.159)

Departure from reality is also to be found in Beyala’s third novel, *Seul le Diable le savait*. Writing about the characters in Beyala’s novels, Ormerod and Volet affirm that “les
personnages des deux premiers romans de Calixthe Beyala n’ont rien de banal: ceux de son troisième roman sont plus troublants encore car ils appartiennent à un monde où la réalité et le surnaturel se chevauchent sans cesse” (p.45).

The representation of women and their experience in the texts will be studied under the five categories mentioned at the end of chapter one, namely adolescence, marriage, motherhood, women and work, and woman’s body and sexuality.

**Adolescence**

The stage of adolescence or becoming a woman is a crucial one, especially for girls growing up in urban areas where women’s lives and expectations are changing most rapidly. Girls realize that their destinies need not be as programmed as those of generations before them. The world is changing around them, and more choices are open to them. But with this realization comes an identity crisis that is not easy to resolve, given the absence of suitable mentors. What emerges from the novels is that the values defined by a patriarchal society do not disappear with urbanisation, and this makes it difficult for a girl trying to escape the destiny traditionally prescribed for women by African society.

The search for an individual identity is a guiding theme in Beyala’s novels. It is especially important in *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée*, in which the protagonist, Ateba, is extremely conscious of her entry into womanhood, and of the limited choices open to women in her particular environment. The anguish she feels is due to the fact that she cannot relate to any of the women she knows, all of whom seem to lead miserable lives controlled by men,
starting with Betty her mother who is abandoned by Ateba’s father and turns to prostitution. Betty’s life is summed up as follows: “Son amour pour un jeune flic, le bonheur, l’enfant, l’abandon, la honte, la haine” (p.125). But even as a prostitute, Betty feels she needs to have a regular man, “un titulaire” as she calls him: “Elle soutenait qu’une femme pouvait faire ce qu’elle voulait mais à condition d’avoir un homme sur qui elle pouvait compter” (p.106). One thing she can count on is being beaten: “Elle pleure souvent, sa maman, à cause de son ‘titulaire’ qui la bat tous les quinze jours” (p.111).

At age nine Ateba is abandoned by her mother, and goes to live with her aunt Ada and Ada’s succession of live-in lovers. Ada’s only communication with Ateba consists of orders for chores to do, or of interrogations seeking to know where she has been. Otherwise she does not see Ateba as a person: “Elle ne lui a rien demandé sur sa vie, ses angoisses, ses désirs” (p.43). But she thinks she is doing an excellent job of preparing her niece for womanhood: “J’ai réussi à lui programmer la même destinée que moi, que ma mère, qu’avant elle la mère de ma mère. La chaîne n’est pas rompue, la chaîne n’a jamais été rompue” (p.6). Thus Ada is ensuring the transmission of the kind of habitus intended to prepare Ateba for her woman’s role in a man’s world. Her pride in a job well done is evident when she tells Jean, her new lodger, that Ateba will show him around the house: “Ma fille s’en occupera... Tu verras, elle est gentille” (p.13). The word “gentille”, “dans l’énormité de sa banalité” (Volet, p.281), sums up Ateba’s submissive attitude, a prerequisite to winning a husband. Ada, who would like to get her niece off her hands, is no doubt thinking about Jean as a
potential candidate as she tries to classify him: "Ada l’écoute à la fois inquiète et admirative [...] Elle en a vu des hommes dans sa vie [...] Mais, celui-là est inclassable. Certainement un produit d’importation". Her conclusion: “C’est Dieu qui t’envoie, mon fils” (p.13).

The role that women play in maintaining patriarchy has been noted by critics such as Béatrice Gallimore who writes:

Dans la société africaine, c’est souvent à travers la femme que tout le comportement féminin se trouve réglé. La mère, la tante, la grand-mère, la matrone, constituent une catégorie d’anti-mères qui servent de points de repère à la société patriarcale. Sous la pression de l’homme, ces femmes ont fini par rationaliser et par accepter -consciemment ou inconsciemment - la prédominance du masculin sur le féminin. (p.58)

Jean Volet explains the role Ada plays in Ateba’s life: “Pour Ateba, Ada est une sorte de ‘mère sociale’, une forme de conscience inhibitrice qu’elle a été amenée d’intérioriser petit à petit” (p281). Under Ada’s watchful eye, Ateba has slowly internalized societal norms, as she realizes after undergoing the “rite de l’oeuf” or test of virginity to verify that she is still intact: “Se retrouver. Faire revivre le morceau de soi qui s’est absenté. S’agiter pour se dégeler. Marcher hors de la coutume. Mais ses pas qui la fuient la ramènent vers elle, vers ses lois, vers ses interdictions” (p.70). She knows that according to the laws governing girls’ behavior, “les filles ne sortaient pas, ne se posaient pas de questions. Elles ne demandaient qu’un bon mari et des enfants” (p.66). Jean insults Ateba when, in the interest of affirming some sort of autonomy, she insists that Ada is her aunt, not her mother. He accuses her of trying to adopt “la pensée européenne” (p.15), of moving away from Ada’s values. Thus every adult around Ateba has a vested interest in the kind of woman society expects her to be, and her search for her own identity is thwarted at every turn. Her suffering and loneliness
are like a leitmotif running through the novel: “Ateba tournoie sur elle-même, livrée à l’angoisse. Partout, elle se heurte aux écueils de la tradition. Partout, ils s’amoncellent, bouchant la vue, obstruant la gorge, éraflant la main timidement tendue vers la lumière. Seule” (p.74).

In the four novels, adolescence emerges as a time when a girl is most susceptible to accept her prescribed destiny as a woman, for the simple reason that she becomes more aware of her body and its sexual yearnings. Since sexuality is not a subject that is openly discussed in African societies, a girl is not allowed to acknowledge sexual desire. Instead she is encouraged to think in terms of marriage, and to save her body for her husband and reproduction. This is the case with Flo, the narrator in **Rencontres essentielles**. She belongs to the Cameroonian middle class, and has assimilated certain aspects of French culture, for example discourses on romantic love and marriage, derived no doubt from books and films. She has decided that she cannot live without loving and being loved by a man: “Pour moi, au contraire, ma vie tourne autour de l’amour, pour l’instant d’un amour, d’un grand, pour lequel le mariage est la seule issue honorable” (p.22). Thus even though she is in Paris as a student, far from parental authority, when she meets Joël, she is careful to point out that “Joël et moi sommes des amoureux fous mais sages” (p.27). Sex will not happen until their wedding night.

Unfortunately for Flo, Joël does not share her romantic ideal, as he explains later when their marriage is in trouble: “Nous nous sommes engagés dans deux systèmes différents. Pour toi, ton mariage avec moi est l’aboutissement d’un amour” (p.77). As for him, the only thing he is sure of is that “il fallait bien un jour que je me marie”, and he chooses her, not out
of love but because “ta beauté, ta distinction, ta culture ont été de si gros atouts” (p.78). Shaped by African custom, Joël’s upbringing dictates marriage for a man at a certain age. He therefore evaluates Flo and decides she will make a suitable wife for the doctor he is studying to become, and since she will not sleep with him without marriage, he offers it.

Richard Bjornson explains the role that Western culture played in what he terms the “pursuit of the self” among Cameroonian writers in the 1960s and 70s:

The idea of individual choice and responsibility is central to the modern self-concept that the younger generation of Cameroonian writers implicitly defended in their works, and it became particularly prominent in their portrayals of romantic love. Influenced by the European cultural assumptions they had absorbed in the schools and by the French popular literature they had read for entertainment, young Cameroonians tended to believe they should be free to choose a marriage partner on the basis of strong emotional attachments. Many assumed that their own self-fulfillment was contingent upon their success in exercising this freedom. (p.232)

But as Joël’s and Flo’s case illustrates, the choice of a mate based on love seems to be more important for women than for men, which leads to unhappiness in marriage for the women, whose expectations are different.

Deirdre LaPin too sees a link between romantic love and self-affirmation in the fiction by women writers of the first generation, of whom Kuoh-Moukoury is one: “Romantic love became a focal point in the budding feminist debate; it challenged family authority in marriage and extolled the virtues of individual freedom. The idea was new to African literature. Traditional folktales argued that private desire, fulfilled without public sanction, isolated young people, made them vulnerable, and thereby posed a threat to social cohesion” (p.114).

The story of Dang in Vies de femmes is intended to teach young women about the dangers of succumbing to desire. Dang is aware of teenage pregnancies around her, and
knows that the only way to complete her education is to keep away from men. But when she finds herself alone with Kazo, a persistent young man, she gives in: “Il insista, me prit par le bras, m’attira à lui, m’embrassa avec force. Une étrange chaleur m’envahit. Ma volonté faiblit puis fondit. Je finis par perdre la tête... Je céda!” (p.13). Of course she becomes pregnant, and has to drop out of school, and winds up abandoned by Kazo. Dang’s pregnancy illustrates the need to educate young people about the consequences of teenage sex. When Kazo reappears in Dang’s life nine years later, he still accepts no responsibility for making her pregnant: “Lorsque j’allais avec toi, je n’avais aucune intention délibérée de te mettre enceinte. La grossesse a été une surprise pour nous tous [...] Vous les femmes, vous voulez toujours nous faire endosser vos responsabilités. Tu n’avais qu’à ne pas concevoir après tout!” (p.32).

Through Kazo’s character, the author is highlighting the fact that it is girls who pay the price for teenage sex when their education is cut short and they are burdened with a child to support, while boys are never held accountable. In her discussion of this text, Nfah-Abbenyi emphasizes the need for both young men and women to be educated: “Kazo rightly points out his ignorance about the consequences of teenage pregnancy. Most young men view sex with a girl as play, without any conscious awareness of the potential tragedy that lies ahead for the young woman. More importantly, they view it as a stepping-stone to the discovery and affirmation of their manhood” (p.78).

As a protagonist in a didactic novel, Dang will suffer three more unwanted pregnancies and no marriage to show for them, before the author rescues her by making her realize that she can live without a man. Through Dang, the author shows that women’s emancipation cannot be easily achieved without education. Once a girl gets pregnant and
drops out of school, she is caught in a vicious circle: she needs men for economic survival, but such relationships lead to more pregnancies and children to support. As Dang tries unsuccessfully to look for a job in the city, she accepts to befriend Evoundi who promises to help her find one:

Evoundi me fit constituer un dossier. Il se montra plein de sollicitude, mais très vite il vint à me parler de lui et de moi. J’hésitai, mais le besoin de travailler était plus fort. Le chômage me pesait terriblement. Je ne l’aimais pas. Mais devenir son amie afin de travailler, ne constituait pas une épreuve au-dessus de mes forces. Nombreuses sont mes camarades qui étaient passées par cette voie, mais je ne voulais pas d’enfant. Cependant je ne savais comment faire pour les éviter. (p.19-20)

Thus love ceases to matter when girls find themselves struggling for economic survival, for which they are willing to offer their bodies, a new form of prostitution in Africa. The tragedy is that nobody teaches these girls how to avoid pregnancies. It is only after the fourth child that Dang is introduced to contraception: “Des amis me fournirent quelques informations sur les méthodes de contraception et me présentèrent à un médecin” (p31). Nfah-Abbenyi explains the vicious circle in which Cameroonian girls found themselves in the years following independence:

The lack of sex education as a social program for young teenage girls had devastating consequences. Those who got pregnant had to submit to older, working, powerful privileged men for subsistence. Dang’s narration brings out how most men use their powerful positions to exact sexual favors in return for job promises that do not materialize. Women therefore have to put their bodies in a position of exchange, at the mercy of men, in order to survive. (p.76)

When Dang finally meets a man who wants to marry her and whom she loves, she turns him down. Richard Bjornson sees the reason for Dang’s refusal of marriage as linked to the corruption in her society:
Scarred by her previous experiences and burdened with several children, she cannot even accept the genuine love that is offered her by a young man from the village where she has obtained a position as a social welfare worker. In the context of contemporary Cameroonian society, women such as Dang are placed before an impossible alternative: either they accept relationships on the humiliating terms sanctioned by a corrupt system, or they maintain their independence by renouncing the promise of romantic happiness. As in L'Oiseau en cage, Zanga Tsogo uses the story of Dang and other women in Vies des femmes to expose the true nature of a male-dominated society and its effects on women. (p.390)

Of all the protagonists in the four novels, Ateba is the one who feels most acutely her condition of becoming a woman and the loneliness it entails. One reason for this is that in C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée, the family structure is reduced to a minimum: mother (or substitute-mother) and daughter. Odile Cazenave explains: “Premièrement, la figure de la grand-mère, lien avec le passé, symbole de l’ordre, a disparu. Ont disparu également les frères, aînés ou benjamins, et les oncles. Il n’y a plus d’homme dans ce qui apparaît un reste de famille, réduit à la mère et la fille” (p.165). One would expect women in a matrifocal family structure to be strong and independent, and good role models for a girl to emulate. But in Beyala’s novel the women have been conditioned by a patriarchal society into pathetic dependence. As Volet puts it: “Victimes de constructions sociales millénaires, les héroïnes perdent de vue leur valeur et s’engluent dans de fausses certitudes. Ada répète: “Il faut un homme à la maison”, quand bien même son premier mari n’était qu’un ivrogne et que le paratisme de tous les amants qui lui ont succédé les rend inaptes à jouer un rôle constructif dans sa vie et dans celle d’Ateba” (p.280).
Thus Ateba only gets to discover men through the lovers of her mother and aunt, and develops an aversion to them. Still, at the beginning, her confused search for an identity, coupled with her sexual yearnings, lead her to ask herself what role men will play in her life, as Volet explains:

Le tumulte des sens et les angoisses de l'esprit qui accompagnent le passage de l'enfance à la vie adulte bouillonnent dans la tête et dans le corps d'Ateba. Les questions se bousculent. Comment va-t-elle vivre sa vie de femme? Va-t-elle suivre les élans de son corps et suivre le premier homme capable de satisfaire son désir ou va-t-elle continuer à “vivre au jour le jour, sans joie [,] sans surprise”, et attendre d'être livrée en mariage à un homme ressentant le “besoin de se fabriquer un double”? (p.276)

In her loneliness, Ateba is even willing to give Jean a chance when he first arrives: “Parler à Jean, Ateba en a tellement envie!” (p.29). But every time she meets him, she seems to be struck dumb: “Toujours est-il que, chaque fois qu’ils se sont croisés, les sons l’ont désertée, les mots sont restés collés à ses lèvres” (p.29). Eloïse Brière (1993) attributes Ateba’s mutism to the fear of rape: “La menace de l’homme, toujours violeur potentiel, est d’autant plus forte qu’un haut prix est attribué à la virginité dans la société où évolue le personnage de Beyala. Valeur traditionnelle transposée dans un contexte urbain, la virginité accroît la possibilité de trouver un parti intéressant” (p.236). This explanation is borne out by the humiliating test of virginity that Ateba has to undergo just because she went out to meet Jean for a drink at a café. Her aunt wants to make sure that Ateba is still intact, and that everybody knows it.

Ateba’s loss of speech is also due to the fact that since her mother’s disappearance she has no real communication with the people around her. In keeping with the rules of good
behavior for a girl, nobody expects her to talk unless she is addressed. In her isolation, Ateba writes letters to imaginary women, and sometimes has attacks of a strange “malaise”, as in the following scene:

Une angoisse subite la paralyse lorsqu’elle pénètre dans la maison. Elle a l’impression d’être plongée brusquement dans une galerie aux ramifications inconnues, Les mânes des ancêtres surgissent. Leurs plaintes illuminent la maison et la transforment en un gigantesque brasier. Ateba hurle, sa voix s’enfuit, les cris refluent pêle-mêle dans son corps, elle ne peut plus les ordonner, elle ne veut plus les ordonner. (p.29)

Brière (1993) has analyzed this departure from reality as follows: “Dans ce passage s’établit un lien entre fantômes et parole refoulée: celle-ci s’intériorisant à leur contact, sa répression devient source de folie, de désordre. La narratrice explique qu’Ateba est sujette à ce type de malaise depuis que “Betty l’a quittée”. Comme l’orphéline des contes, privée de son interlocutrice primordiale, son seul recours provient de l’au-delà” (p.230).

The only person Ateba talks to is her friend Irene, but here there is no real communication because the two young women do not share the same aspirations. Irene is a prostitute who reinvents her identity with each encounter: “Ce soir, Irène sortira. Une autre vie, un autre cycle, un autre cirque. Irène se perdra pour l’homme et se réincarnera. Fille de ministre ici, fille d’ambassadeur là, fille d’avocat et cousine du président de la République là-bas. A chaque aube une nouvelle tenue et l’identité sans cesse perdue et renouvelée à l’intérieur d’un élément invariable: le malheur” (p.99).

Unlike Ateba, Mégri, the protagonist of Seul le Diable le savait does not suffer from mutism, and does not need a double to tell her story. She communicates freely with those around her. Even though, like Ateba, Mégri does not know her real father, she has never been abandoned by her mother. Indeed, Bertha has promised to protect her: “Jamais je ne
permettrai à quelqu’un de te faire du mal” (p.46). Thus, in spite of the unusual ménage à trois between Bertha and her two “husbands”, Mégrì is able to find the love and affection that she needs: “mon corps avait besoin d’un maximum d’affection, d’amour, de sécurité” (p.16). Mégrì has a good relationship with her two fathers, “un bâtard gréco-bantou, éternel fauché à l’esprit court, aux pieds bots”, and “un Pygmée dur d’oreille mais le portefeuille plein” (p.11). Mégrì too has questions about her identity, but she is not a tortured soul in the way that Ateba is. In addition to her family, Mégrì has a friend in Laetitia, a prostitute who reads books and articulates feminist themes: “elle voulait d’abord la reconnaissance de la femme dans la société et en parlait tous les jours” (p.195). Mégrì’s meeting with Laetitia comes at a time when Mégrì is going through a mild identity crisis, complicated by the fact that she has fallen in love with a man who does not seem to notice her. She is asking herself questions such as: “Qui étais-je? Où allais-je? Vers quel but?” (p.74). Laetitia reassures her that “il ne faut pas se laisser mourir pour un homme” (p. 76), and asks her if she has read any books. Unfortunately for Mégrì, formal education proved a stumbling block: “je redoublais ou triplais chaque classe” (p.64); she dropped out of school after failing the “certificat d’études primaires” three times.

Through Mégrì and Laetitia, Beyala shows how the emancipation of women living in a corrupt neo-colonial society is complicated by materialism and desire for what money can buy. When women have no education, their only ticket to material well-being is a man. Mégrì’s dream of happiness is to be Laetitia who, even though she is a prostitute, does not let men oppress her, because she knows how to exploit them: “Si au moins j’étais Laetitia et si Laetitia était moi! Avec sa beauté, ses connaissances, jamais ne viendrait le temps où je
serais recroquevillée sur moi-même en attendant des lendemains fleuris. Il y aurait toujours des hommes, avec les bouches qui sentent bon, ils m’apporteraient des fleurs séparées de leurs feuilles” (p.77). Mégri has no doubt seen western films in which men worship beautiful women, and Laetitia represents the kind of beauty she yearns for in her imagined ugliness as the girl with red hair and gray eyes that make people say she is an albino. She goes to visit Laetitia hoping to learn about life and men, but Laetitia knows that her ideas on the subject are foreign to Mégri’s world, in which girls are socialized to fulfil their destiny as wives and mothers:

Je ne sais pas ce que je pourrais t’apprendre. Parce que je ne suis pas des vôtres, parce que je ne courbe pas l’échine devant les hommes [...] Pour les hommes de Wuel, il y a deux catégories de femmes: celle qui vous vide les bourses à la sauvette derrière un palmier ou dans une chambre de passage et celle qu’on épouse parce qu’elle est travailleuse, a des hanches larges, un dos capable de transporter des charges que refuserait un âne et à qui on fera une flopée d’enfants. (p.196)

Laetitia is a misfit in this community not just because she is a prostitute, but because she is a thinking woman with a sense of self: “Qu’une femme puisse avoir des pensées, un sens aiguisé de la perception des choses, développer une stratégie mentale subtile et prétendre être totalement une femme et jouir de son corps, les déroute” (p.196). But alone in her emancipation, swimming against the current, she cannot survive in this society. She ends up by committing suicide after poisoning the two men who, in their desire to control her, have been competing to marry her.
Marriage

As we have seen in the discussion of adolescence, marriage emerges as the expected destiny of all young women. The importance of marriage in African culture makes it an important theme in the literature, in which it is examined from different perspectives. Through their protagonists, the three authors studied in this chapter offer three different views of marriage. Kuoh-Moukoury presents Flo as a woman whose identity can only be realized through marriage. For Zanga Tsogo, marriage is a necessary evil: women get married for economic reasons, but would be better off if they had the education enabling them to support themselves in the postcolonial world. For Beyala, marriage is either subverted or it is simply out of the question.

Rencontres essentielles opens with an affirmation of the couple: “Aimer, c’est se soucier de l’autre, autant ou plus que de soi, de tout faire pour le sauvegarder de lui-même et du reste du monde. Rien n’est plus beau qu’un couple...”. Flo, the narrator, believes that “men and women complete each other during ‘essential encounters’ that permit them to achieve happiness” (Bjornson, p.232). But more importantly, it is her own identity as a woman that is defined by love for a man, as she puts it the first time she realizes how much she loves Joel: “Je comprends que je suis femme maintenant” (p.35). For her, love has to lead to marriage: “ma vie tourne autour de l’amour, pour l’instant d’un amour, d’un grand, pour lequel le mariage est la seule issue honorable” (p.22). Flo’s belief in marriage as her destiny comes not only from her African culture but also from French culture that she has assimilated. Indeed, before the women’s movement in the West, women’s roles as defined by society in
these countries were not much different than in Africa. Thus Doris, Flo’s French friend, is something of an exception for she does not need love and marriage to feel complete: “Elle tient à son indépendance et n’hésite pas à détruire tout ce qui se met au travers de sa liberté, pour se sauvegarder, telle qu’elle se veut, un être sans amour vrai” (p.22). Flo’s assimilation of French culture adds to her notions on love the idea of chance encounters that can change a woman’s life:

J’éprouve un grand besoin de m’attacher aux êtres et aux choses plus profondément. J’aime me sentir détenteur d’un secret ou d’un espoir. Il faut du courage et de la volonté pour faire son chemin dans la vie. Je crois que, de nature, je n’en ai pas beaucoup. Je suis un de ces êtres faibles. Les autres me poussent toujours, au hasard de mes rencontres, alors elles deviennent essentielles, comme des supports. (p.23)

Joel’s features as described by Flo symbolize the strength that attracts her, as a member of the “weaker” sex, to him: “Je découvre tout ce que j’aime chez un homme, son cou fort, sa nuque droite, ses épaules larges, enfin son visage, un masque d’une puissance indicible” (p.30). Or, as Joseph Ndinda puts it, “Flo applique le stéréotype socio-sexuel de l’homme dominateur, protecteur qui assure la sécurité et l’équilibre” (p.8).

Once Flo is married to Joël, taking care of him becomes her life’s career, which makes the idea of divorce unacceptable to her, despite the unhappiness in the marriage: “Pour rien au monde, je ne cesserai d’être sa femme. Il m’est impossible d’admettre qu’une autre femme prenne ma place, se couche auprès de lui, le rencontre le matin à la salle d’eau, fasse son déjeuner, range ses chemises, veille sur lui” (p.85). Indeed, though Flo had gone to France for higher studies, we are not given any details about her life as a student. She only mentions her education once, explaining briefly what she and her friend Doris are studying: “Elle finit cette année la licence de lettres modernes, et moi je suis en propédeutique” (p.19). Once she
meets and marries Joël, there is no more reference to studies or job for her, even after their return to Cameroon, where an educated woman in the 1960s would have had a role to play. Florence Stratton’s analysis of Ramatoulaye, the main character in Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre, could very well be applied to Flo, since both women have so thoroughly assimilated the pre-feminist western model of womanhood and marriage:

In accepting the colonialists’ derogatory estimation of her culture, she also accepts their view of women’s role and status in society. The traditions, superstitions, and customs of one patriarchal culture have, in other words, merely been replaced by those of another, and these have been so completely assimilated that living her life in terms of them has become Ramatoulaye’s prerequisite for happiness. A victim3 of French colonial education, Ramatoulaye seems to spring full-blown from Beauvoir’s analysis of the condition of middle-class French women. (p.140)

Back in Cameroun, Joël leads a busy life as a doctor at a hospital, and spends his free time socializing with his friends: “Joël travaille à l’hopital central. Il aime son métier, la vie dans cette ville, ses amis, les boîtes de nuit. Il sort beaucoup. Je l’accompagne quand il veut” (p.45). Flo finds herself more and more alone, and blames herself for it, thus revealing her insecurity and inferiority complex: “Je n’ai pas beaucoup de fantaisie et je sais que je dois le fatiguer par moments. Il m’est impossible maintenant de savoir où il est et ce qu’il fait” (p.45). Blinded by her love and by a notion of western expectations for a couple, Flo does not realize that she is living the African reality of marriage, whereby a woman spends more time with her children and other women than with the husband. Unfortunately, Flo cannot have children, and does not seem to have any friends in Yaounde, except for Doris whom she tries to use to win back Joël’s affection. She destroys their friendship in the process. Having no

3 Whether Ramatoulaye would have described herself in terms of a “victim” of French education is debatable.
career to occupy her other than that of being Joël’s wife, she is lonely and unhappy, but divorce can never be an option: “Mais comment puis-je divorcer, que vont dire mes amis, ma famille, la société toute entière?” (p.84). A victim of her low self-esteem, she relies on others to determine her fate: “Les autres me choisissent toujours ou me rejettent, faisant ainsi mon bonheur ou mon malheur, presque malgré moi” (p.84). Since Joël once chose her and sealed her fate so to speak, she cannot imagine starting all over again. Bjornson sees Flo’s unhappiness as arising from a weakness in her character:

There is a contradiction in Flo’s view of the world, and it arises from her yearning for a romantic love that can be sustained only by what she does not possess - a self-confident willingness to pursue the object of her desire. All her essential encounters are accidental, and her sense of helplessness in the face of a hostile destiny suggests that she is incapable of becoming the autonomous individual she would have to be if she is to find fulfillment in love. (p.233)

Flo is a good example of an African woman whose western education, rather than liberating her, contributes to her unhappiness.

The fact that she is willing to live a polygamous arrangement is an indication of the contradictions in Flo’s cultural values. Since she will not divorce him, Joël shares his time between her and Doris: “Le partage est presque harmonieux. Il a envers Doris autant de délicatesse qu’envers moi. Doris l’aime, il l’épouse s’il divorce. Je suis résolument décidée à rester Madame Joël Paka. Dans mon malheur, je reste désespérément attachée à l’homme qui a un jour prononcé les belles paroles déterminant mon destin…” (p.116). She justifies her acceptance of the situation by interpreting her own weakness and insecurity as an essential characteristic of all women, an indication of the discourses she has internalized: “Une vie de partage. Quelle bassesse. Personne n’a le meilleur, l’entier, le total, l’essentiel, mais des
morceaux de liberté, des parcelles, les restes si vous voulez. Il faut être femme pour accepter cela. Les hommes sont plus fiers, forts, solides. Un homme, c'est si voisin d'un dieu” (p.117-118). This is the way she has been socialized to see men, and herself in relation to them.

Polygyny as a reality of marriage in Africa is a major theme in Vies de femmes, in which Dang’s friends share their stories in “des séances de psychothérapie collective qui les équilibre” (p.50). From their discussions, marriage emerges as the dream of all young women, in spite of the problems that married women face: “J’écoutais ces femmes, et je ne regrettais pas tant d’être libre. Le mariage n’était pas donc si drôle. Pourtant, toutes les jeunes filles en rêvent comme la seule condition pour leur épanouissement” (p.50). Messina explains why she married her husband, even against her mother’s wishes:


The above speech raises the major issues examined in this novel. The desire for marriage has to be understood not only in terms of the dispositions internalized by women about their role, but also in terms of the economic context in which they find themselves. Women marry to acquire economic status, and men with purchasing power can have any woman they want. Thus Messina’s husband has a mistress with a degree, a woman qualified to get a job and support herself, but who prefers to take a short-cut to luxury. It does not bother her that she

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4 The term “polygyny”, rather than “polygamy”, will be used in this study. It is a subcategory of polygamy used to describe a situation where a man has more than one wife, while “polyandry” refers to that of one woman having several husbands.
is taking another woman’s husband. Messina, who was not the first wife either, consoles herself with the knowledge that a day will come when the graduate will be dealt the same fate: “Ce qu’elle ne sait pas, c’est que lorsqu’on veut noyer son chien, on l’accuse de rage. Je m’étais moi-même aussi laissée prendre à des flatteries. Il me disait tant de mauvaises choses sur sa première femme” (p.41).

Although age never seems to matter for a man, it becomes a woman’s worst enemy, for the fading of youthful beauty usually means she will be replaced by a younger woman. In confrontations between wife and mistress, the younger woman does not hesitate to remind the wife of her age, as Nnomo tells Edanga’s wife: “Tu es déjà vieille, ton mari ne supporte plus de sortir avec toi; tu es jalouse de moi” (p.64). Thus women are shown to play a role in their own oppression by accepting to play a part in polygamous marriages. Since they marry mainly for economic reasons, they have no choice but to stay married and tolerate infidelity on their husbands’ part. When Edanga demands that his wife apologize to his mistress, she has to obey for fear of being sent away: “Elle venait de démissionner devant la vie, pensa-t-elle. Après tout, elle n’était que la seconde épouse d’Edanga” (p.68). Women come to see polygyny as inevitable, and learn to rationalize their suffering, as Messina’s friends explain to Dang: “Si elle était comme nous, elle ne s’en ferait plus. On souffre au début lorsqu’on découvre cela, mais par la suite, on s’y fait” (p.42).

An interesting view that is implied in Zanga Tsogo’s portrayal of men and polygyny is that men are incapable of fidelity, that they will always be polygamous, a view that is also found in works by Kenyan writers. Mariama Bâ seemed to share it too, as Nicki Hitchcott comments: “According to Bâ’s personal politics, sex and gender are one in the same: it is
man’s ‘physiology’, not his socialization, which explains his sexual infidelity. Polygamy is, then, to some extent, excused as the natural conclusion of men’s uncontrollable instincts’ (p.140). But in her fiction, Bâ tries to show that it is men’s upbringing that is to blame for the way they behave:

Although the reader can disentangle strands of Mariama Bâ’s personal theory that men are physically incapable of sexual fidelity, the structures of her texts undermine this scientifically inaccurate hypothesis and reinforce the feminist view that ‘sex is a biological term: gender a psychological and cultural one’. Men behave differently because society requires them to and because this maintains the asymmetry between women and men. (p.145)

Thus Bâ’s writing can be termed emancipatory since it tries to reveal the mechanisms in society that contribute to women’s oppression.

Zanga Tsogo’s novel is also emancipatory, in that it explores the reasons why polygyny continues to flourish, and makes a plea for change. Men do not always practice polygyny for sexual reasons, but because they have been socialized to equate multiple wives with power and social prestige. The story of Edanga illustrates this point. As a “sous-préfet”, he has seven wives and over forty children: “Il avait coutume de prendre femme à tout nouveau poste d’affectation. C’était pour lui une façon de prouver sa puissance” (p.84), with the result that “aucune résidence de sous-préfet n’était suffisante pour recevoir la famille Edanga” (p.83). Edanga is trying to follow in his father’s footsteps: “Enfant, il avait toujours admiré son père au milieu de ses vingt-cinq femmes. Le vieil homme était servi, adulé, respecté et craint tandis que lui, malgré son prestige actuel, réussissait à peine à mettre de l’ordre dans sa maison, car ses femmes étaient plus vindicatives et moins obéissantes” (p.84). By portraying Edanga as a weak man who cannot control his wives, the author is deconstructing
polygyny, a practice that is bound to be problematic in today’s changing society. Edanga is aware what failing his examination for the third time will mean: “Pourrait-il encore bénéficier de la considération de ses femmes s’il échouait à nouveau à son concours? Il appréhendait le jour naissant et craignait aussi le mépris silencieux de ses épouses” (p.89). When he is relieved of his duties as “sous-préfet” and is awaiting retirement, his life falls apart: “Edanga ne venait plus à son bureau qu’un jour sur trois. Il était devenu le client le plus assidu de son bar préféré. Il passait le plus clair de son temps à boire et à payer à boire aux ivrognes habitués du lieu. Désormais, rien ne comptait plus pour lui” (p.121). Edanga’s disintegration can be taken as symbolic of the future of polygyny in Africa.

In his analysis of Vies de femmes and L’Oiseau en cage, Bjornson explains what he considers to be the author’s contribution to the question of women’s oppression in Africa:

For Zanga Tsogo, feminism implies both a more intense awareness of female individuality and a heightened solidarity among women. Each of her novels focuses on the life of a woman who achieves insight into this imperative by reflecting upon her own experiences and by comparing them with the experiences of other women whom she encounters. The simulated biographies of these women are important for two reasons: they record the unique sensibilities of individual people, and they reveal characteristic features of women’s lives in contemporary Africa. Zanga Tsogo’s implicit thesis is that men as well as women need to realize that dominant attitudes and prevailing social institutions must be changed if Africans are ever to enjoy the fullness of their humanity. (p.389-390)

Marriage in Beyala’s novels is either subverted or rejected as “une forme institutionnalisée de l’oppression féminine, un moyen que l’homme utilise pour s’approprier officiellement le corps féminin” (Gallimore, p.59). In C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée, men are seen as the enemy, and the murder committed by Ateba at the end is meant to symbolize the kind of world she dreams of, a world without men. It also symbolizes revenge against men.
and the ugly society they have created. Bjornson says of the victim: "He is an accidental victim but a symbolic one, for in her mind he represents the male principle that has imprisoned her and all other women in a corrupt, revolting world" (p.418). When Ada throws out Yossep, her live-in lover, for abusing her, Ateba rejoices and celebrates this "jour lumineux, crépuscule sans homme" (p.105), and is convinced that her aunt will learn to live without a man: "Demain les larmes passeront, elle apprendra à se passer de l’homme" (p.106).

As we saw earlier, Ateba, conditioned by society into believing that marriage was her destiny, and driven by loneliness, is almost willing to give Jean a chance. But it does not take long before she sees him in a new light, as a coward who will not stand up to Ada and admit he was the one Ateba went out to meet, and thus protect her from the humiliating test of virginity. She explains why she does not wish to see him anymore: "Parce que tu m’as déçue. Je te croyais combatif, intransigeant. Je me rends compte que je m’étais bâti un mythe. Tu n’es qu’une larve" (86). When he continues to pursue her, she tells him: "Tu représentes pour moi, femme, tout ce que j’exècre chez l’homme, ce mélange d’arrogance et de vanité absurde, de sérieux et d’inanité chaotique, tout ce que je vomis" (p.109). For Ateba, there can never be any real communication between her and men, because, as Fonkoua explains, "les relations sont ‘faussées’ dès le départ parce que les places et les rôles sociaux sont définis à l’avance en fonction du sexe des individus" (p.119).

In the scene where Irene is bleeding to death after a bungled abortion, Beyala shows just how internalized discourses on women and marriage can be. Irene is not so scared of dying as of dying without ever having realized her woman’s destiny: "Mourir ne me fait pas peur. C’est penser que je suis passée sur la pointe des pieds. J’aurais tant voulu avoir une
maison bien à moi, tu comprends? Une vraie maison avec un homme et des enfants” (p.143). Ateba asks if she could bear to have a man around her all the time, to which Irene replies: “Mais c’est lui qui donne la vie. C’est lui qui me rend à la fois réelle et vraie. Sans lui, je n’existe pas, je ne suis qu’une illusion et personne ne me continuera” (143). The view of men articulated by Irene could be irony on Beyala’s part, especially after she has portrayed men so negatively: “L’homme est présenté dans ce qu’il a d’animal, de grossier et de répugnant, sa description étant réduite à des parties de son corps” (Cazenave, p.210). Violence in one form or another is a characteristic of all the men in C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée. Cazenave describes this type of man as follows: “Un homme dur, violent, qui croit faire preuve de sa virilité, de son identité à travers la force, la domination de la femme par la violence, y compris dans ses rapport sexuels” (p.211). This type of man plays the role of “amant temporaire ou titulaire, jamais dans la position de père ni même de géniteur” (p.211).

In Seul le Diable le savait, Beyala subverts the notion of marriage as accepted in African culture by giving Mégri’s mother two pseudo-husbands: “Le narrateur nous confie que Bertha a refusé le mariage basé sur la norme patriarcale. Elle a choisi de vivre avec deux amants, préférant ainsi une forme de polyandrie au mariage monogamique” (Gallimore, p.59). Bertha is able to manage this arrangement because she is dealing with a type of man who does not seek to dominate women. He is “l’homme mou, faible, dominé par la femme, [...] celui qui renonce de son propre gré aux privilèges masculins, abdique le pouvoir, la prééminence du mâle que lui confère traditionnellement l’ordre patriarchal” (Cazenave, p.211). Even though she seems happy with the power she has over her two men – “Dame maman tenait mes papas accrochés à ses reins” (p.12) - Bertha is conscious of her dependence on them, and wishes
a different fate for her daughter: “J’espère qu’elle sera indépendante. Pas comme moi” (p.15). But the need for independence takes second place to economic considerations. After the death of Papa Pygmée whose money supported the family, Bertha arranges for Mégri to marry the son of a chief even though she loves another man and is pregnant with his child, assuring her that “quand il y a l’argent, l’amour suit toujours” (p.238). Indeed, the marriage is all about money. Bertha’s husband owed the chief money, as she explains to Mégri: “Ton père lui devait de l’argent, beaucoup d’argent. Et on s’est mis d’accord que cette dette représenterait une partie de ta dot” (p.238). Thus in this matter Bertha is firmly on the side of patriarchy, and Mégri has become a commodity for exchange.

Unlike the women in *Vies de femmes*, if Mégri has to be married for economic reasons, she will not stay married for very long. The arrival of Magda, a sister she never knew she had, inspires Mégri to revolt. Magda has freed herself from her aunt’s tyranny by finally poisoning her: “Jamais mon imaginaire ne me permattait de l’attraper vraiment et de lui donner le coup fatal, qui me trancherait à jamais d’elle. Sans le vouloir, j’étais devenue sa prisonnière, prisonnière de l’amour maternel que je recherchais dans la violence” (p.255). Remembering Laetitia’s lessons on the liberation of women, and inspired by Magda’s example, Mégri is able to free herself from her immediate environment in which her life is controlled by others. She and Magda run away to a distant village where Mégri is reunited with “l’Étranger”, the father of her child, but who is later killed by the police for alleged crimes. Unlike Ateba, Mégri is able to forge a new identity for herself, to find her place in the universe, as Brière (1993) explains:
Mégri donnera naissance à un enfant. Puis, devenue guérisseuse au cours de son séjour dans le village du père de son enfant, elle passe ses journées dans la nature, à la recherche d’herbes médicinales. Mégrita est alors la figure de la femme liée aux forces telluriques de la nature qui recherche l’harmonie avec l’univers. Contrairement aux protagonistes des autres romans, loin du milieu urbain moderne, Mégrita échappe aux mutilations imposées aux citadines, Ateba et Tanga, par la société contemporaine. (p.234-245)

Motherhood

Like marriage, motherhood is a major theme in African literature. In the four texts studied here, three different views of motherhood are presented.

Flo, the narrator in Rencontres essentielles, represents the view that motherhood defines womanhood. When Flo realizes that she is incapable of having children following a miscarriage, she gets depressed in spite of Joël’s reassurance that he does not mind, that there are childless couples who are happy: “Je le sais. Mais on ne peut vraiment savoir la douleur d’une femme lorsqu’elle se sent incapable de donner à l’homme qu’elle aime le plus beau cadeau du monde, lorsqu’elle se sent incapable d’un acte qui fait justement notre plénitude” (p.42). Her infertility becomes an obsession with her, and she attributes Joël’s lack of interest in her to the fact that she cannot bear a child: “Ainsi donc, je ne suis pas mère et je cesse d’être femme” (p.49). Anny-Claire Jaccard notes the originality of Kuoh-Moukoury’s manner of treating the problem of infertility in her text: “L’auteur présente le problème dans une optique originale. Le mari accepte parfaitement la situation alors que l’épouse la dramatise
au point d’éloigner d’elle son mari” (p.158). In African society, it is indeed the husband and his family who tend to victimize a childless woman. Jaccard further explains the reversal concerning infertility:

Dans ce roman, les accents sont déplacés. Ce n’est pas la société qui exerce une pression destructrice sur le couple, ce n’est pas le mari qui vit mal la stérilité de son épouse, c’est la femme qui invoque des causes irréelles pour justifier un comportement individuel masochiste et asocial. L’originalité du roman consiste à avoir détruit le mythe de la toute-puissance sociale et maritale et d’avoir présenté une femme confrontée à sa responsabilité individuelle. (p.158)

It is true that society does not play a significant role as far as the couple is concerned, but attributing Flo’s suffering to masochistic behavior without a real cause does not seem very convincing. I believe that the real cause for Flo’s obsession and suffering is to be found in her habitus, shaped by both African and western values, which, before the women’s movement in the West, tended to converge on the subject of motherhood. What Simone de Beauvoir says about the perception of woman as mother was valid for both cultures: “It is in maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny; it is her natural ‘calling’, since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species” (p.484). When Flo finds out she is pregnant, her reaction is: “Je me sens bénie, élue” (p.40). Biblical discourse comes to mind here, in particular the angel Gabriel’s words to the Virgin Mary: “...the Lord is with you: blessed are you among women” (Luke 1:28).

In Vies de femmes, motherhood is portrayed as a burden that women have to accept as a consequence of their dependence on men. Dang’s case illustrates the vicious circle whereby befriending men in exchange for economic support and a hope for marriage only results in more unwanted pregnancies. As Brière (1994) explains, “à chaque grossesse, Dang
Dang’s older sisters still live at home and have children too, and their parents cannot support them all. Each girl has to fend for herself and her children, and life is not easy: “J’accompagnais ma mère partout, affublée de mon bébé somnolant dans mon dos. Bien que ma mère m’épargnât des charges trop lourdes à cause de ma jambe claudicante, je sentais quand même peser le poids des dures journées” (p.18). But in this society, girls having babies outside of marriage is an acceptable practice. Indeed, Dang’s mother is envied for her grandchildren: “Ma mère était l’objet de commentaires haïneux de la part de quelques belles-sœurs dont les filles n’avaient pas d’enfants. Elle était accusée de garder pour elle le fétiche de la fécondité” (p.18). The author is showing how African attitudes towards motherhood and the value attached to children can be a real obstacle to women’s emancipation: as long as girls continue to feel that they are accomplishing something important by having unwanted babies instead of staying in school, they perpetuate the conditions for the oppression of women. Girls do not stop to think seriously about the alternatives available to them through education, because the emphasis by society is on their biological role. The widely-held view that children bring joy and comfort to a woman is used to rationalize the acceptance of unwanted babies. Dang articulates this view: “Mes enfants, malgré tout ce que cela me coûte, sont après tout d’un grand réconfort” (p.37).
Motherhood is seen in a completely different light in *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée*, where Beyala presents it as an undesirable condition in the slums of African cities. The life of prostitution that Betty leads makes her unfit for motherhood, which she tries to avoid through abortion: “Ateba sait que le ventre de sa mère est le lieu de transactions commerciales, seule source de survie matérielle pour la jeune femme qui ne compte plus le nombre ni de ses avortements, ni de ses infanticides” (Brière 1994, p.67). Ateba is witness to her mother’s abortion methods: “Elle buvait, elle se purgeait, elle vomissait. Et la vie ne désancrait pas” (p.101). When the abortions do not work and the babies are born, they always die: “Mais la mort aimait les Noëls de Betty, les petits Noëls vivants aux trop grands yeux, aux lèvres fripées. Elle les laissait faire trois petits tours et puis s’en vont, et les prenait. Elle n’avait épargné qu’Ateba” (p. 101). Ateba does not hesitate to encourage her friend Irene to abort. Her reasoning: “Après tout qu’importe la vie d’un gosse dans ce pays où tout est constamment à l’état embryonnaire? Les gosses seront toujours maigres et n’auront jamais le temps de devenir vigoureux. Les adultes auront toujours leurs yeux au bord du gouffre” (p.115).

The relationship between Ateba and her mother is a reversal of what a mother-child relationship should be. Before Betty abandons her at age nine, Ateba is the one who plays mother and looks after her when men have brutalized her: “Son devoir est de veiller sur sa mère, de toujours veiller sur sa mère” (p.111). As Volet puts it, “la mère prend le rôle qu’on croyait réservé à sa fille. Celui de l’immaturité, de l’enfant, de l’être qui se perd ‘dans ses inachevés’” (p.291). Betty does not really see her daughter, is unaware of her suffering:
“Jamais Betty ne s’était aperçue de cette souffrance qui l’irradiait ni même du désarroi qui la ballottait sans cesse, l’entraînant perpétuellement vers des sommets d’extase ou des abîmes d’accablement” (p.107).

In her article entitled “Le retour des mères dévorantes”, Brière sees the reversal of mother-daughter roles as symbolic of the African situation: “Les rôles inversés mère/enfant sont l’image d’une Afrique incapable de se donner des lendemains” (p.68). But the rejection of motherhood in the works of second generation writers like Beyala can also be interpreted as a way of subverting patriarchal society:

Ebranlant ainsi les fondements de la maternité, les écrivains font disparaître l’auréole qui illuminait la figure littéraire de la mère africaine dès les débuts de la littérature africaine d’écriture masculine. Cesser de procréer revient alors à récuser non seulement cette vision de la mère et la primauté des liens de sang, mais aussi l’ordre masculin post-colonial en Afrique. Remettre en question le rôle de transmetteuse de vie est une transformation capitale, manifestation de l’exclusion de la femme du pouvoir post-colonial. (p.66)

**Women and work**

With the exception of *Rencontres essentielles* where there is no discussion of women and work, the texts show that there are not many possibilities for salaried employment available to women without much education. The two major occupations explored in the texts are prostitution and working as a domestic servant, with prostitution as the preferred occupation. In her 1996 study on prostitution in Cameroon, Pauline Songue explains the prevalence of prostitution: “Women, still subject to discrimination in education and employment opportunities, compete at a disadvantage in the job market. Consequently, many
of them turn to the sale of their bodies, which becomes their employment. This *petit-métier*, even if marginalized, is as remunerative as traditional employment and often requires less effort” (p.253). The need for women to work is made more pressing by their family responsibilities, which include supporting not only their own children when they have them, but other family members as well: “Whether single or married, most women have to support family members. Statistics show that unlike single women in the West, single women in Cameroon bear a discriminatory proportion of family responsibility compared to men. At the same time, they head more than one-half as many households as men” (p.246).

In Beyala’s novels, prostitution is a central theme, and a factor in the evolution of the heroines, as Cazenave explains: “Le personnage de la prostituée occupe une place centrale et constitue un facteur déterminant dans l’évolution de la protagoniste dans son passage de l’adolescence à l’âge adulte” (p.81). In *C'est le soleil qui m’a brûlée*, Ateba has a prostitute mother (Betty), a prostitute aunt (Ada), and a prostitute friend (Irene), all of whom contribute to her awareness and eventual rejection of woman’s condition in the slums of QG. During the years with her mother, Ateba is fascinated by Betty’s body, and wants to be just like her: “Enfant, Ateba voulait ressembler à Betty. Elle portait ses pagnes et ses chaussures trop grandes pour ses petits pieds. Devant la glace, elle se maquillait de son fard. Elle s’observait. Elle était femme. Elle était Betty” (p.70). Thus, with Betty as role model, Ateba would be expected to follow in her foot-steps and become a prostitute too. The fact that she does not do so is a result of a higher consciousness on her part which causes her to evolve in a different direction. In the words of Odile Cazenave:
Ici, c’est en fait la mère qui offre le modèle de la prostitution et du corps-marchandise comme philosophie de base. Or, le statut de la mère prostituée joue un rôle-clé en ce qu’il offre à la fille l’image de la soumission incontournable de la femme. Dans cette perspective, refuser le parcours et le devenir de la mère implique une prise de conscience de la part de la fille qui aboutit à un mouvement de révolte, non seulement contre la mère, mais aussi contre l’homme et par suite, contre la communauté entière. (p. 152)

One of the questions that Songue’s study tries to answer is whether prostitution as an income-generating occupation can contribute to the emancipation of women. Her answer is that prostitution can be liberating for a woman, but this liberation has to be put in perspective: “When a woman engages in prostitution, she frees the use of her body from the grip of society. She assumes sole management of her sexuality, since in theory, she decides with whom she will have intimate relations, as well as where and when they will occur” (p. 252).

But the fact that the prostitute cannot function without the client on whose money she is dependent, means that she is not really free: “If the prostitute enjoys the freedom to escape certain social norms, this freedom is nothing but a relative trope, since the man regains his authority and domination by imposing his standards on the situation (the prostitute must please him)” (p. 253).

The question of prostitution as a liberating occupation is also implicitly addressed in the literary texts. In C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée, Irene is portrayed as the blasé professionnal who goes about her job methodically, and seems to take a perverse pleasure in shocking Ateba with accounts of her “parties de jambes en l’air” (p. 76). To protect herself emotionally, Irene has decided she does not believe in love: “Les déclarations amoureuses la révulsent” (p. 76). When necessary, she will fake pleasure to please her client, or, as she puts it, “pousser des cris pour ne pas être vache” (p. 99). But the truth of the matter is that Irene’s
life is just as unhappy as Ateba’s, for both are caught up in the oppressive conditions of life in the slums, a life dominated by men, without a foreseeable way out. Ateba describes her talks with Irene:

Dès qu’elles auront déballé leurs problèmes de cul et de coeur, elles parleront des autres, elles calculeront leur pourcentage de merde, elles feront une étude comparative. Enfin, elles diront tous ces petits mots anodins, impersonnels, que l’on dit quand le ventre de la nuit devient stérile et que l’aube n’enfante plus le soleil, rien que pour survivre, pour s’agripper à la vie, pour voiler la face du désespoir. (p.77)

Thus prostitution does not liberate Irene in any meaningful way, and her death from a bungled abortion is a grim reminder of the occupational hazards that accompany prostitution.

In her grief over Irene’s senseless death, Ateba turns prostitute for a day and goes to a bar in which she picks up the man she kills at the end of the novel. When he approaches her, the only thing he says to her is: “Combien?” (p.149). She gets to experience the alienation and emptiness of the world of prostitution that was Irene’s: “Autrefois, Irène venait ici et faisait fonctionner son sexe dans un vide absolu. Elle perdait le sens de son propre cheminement pour se soumettre à l’homme. Elle élaborait les fondations du vide et oubliait le regard” (p.149). When Ateba kills the man after he forces her to perform oral sex on him, the narrator declares: “Je sens l’apocalypse venir” (p.152). Ateba leaves the man’s house and walks “vers la clarté diffuse à l’horizon” (p.153), symbol of a new day for woman, as Brière (1993) explains:

Le geste meurtrier permet de venger la mort insensée d’Irène, celle de sa voisine, Ekassi, et la dégradation que connaissent toutes celles qui sont obligées de vendre leur ventre pour survivre dans la ville moderne africaine. La solidarité féminine se construit
en supprimant l’homme; c’est en même temps une stratégie pour reprendre la parole: le geste désespéré d’Ateba supprimera celui qu’elle assimile à tous ceux qui empêchent le discours féminin de circuler. (p.239)

In her texts, Beyala uses prostitution to critique society, just as many male writers have used the figure of the prostitute as a symbol of the exploitation of the masses by a capitalist elite in Africa. But Beyala’s treatment of prostitution is different from that of male writers. According to Stratton (1990), in the texts by male authors, “prostitution is not treated as a woman’s issue. Rather it is a metaphor for men’s degradation under some non-preferred socio-political system” (p.124). Thus the figure of the prostitute in these texts remains a stereotype. Unlike male writers, Beyala writes about prostitution from the prostitute’s point of view: “Beyala bâtit des individus et non pas seulement une figure archétype, et leur donne une vie et un développement, créant le personnage de l’intérieur selon un point de vue féminin” (Cazenave, p.92). Also, in texts by male authors, there is always a “good woman-whore dichotomy”. This distinction between good and bad women is absent in Beyala’s texts: “Beyala, contrairement aux écrivains hommes, accentue les similarités entre prostituées et autres femmes, et non leurs différences” (Cazenave, p.92).

In Vies de femmes, Dang is working as a maid for a French lady in the city when the story opens. Her rooming neighbors are prostitutes, proud to live off men: “En tout cas, dit une autre, je vis des hommes. Pour gagner ma vie, je n’ai pas besoin de travailler, il y a bien longtemps que je suis revenue de toutes mes illusions” (p.34). This is the first time Dang comes across professional prostitutes, and at first she does not understand what they do: “J’avais remarqué depuis le premier jour qu’Andela recevait beaucoup. La maison était toujours pleine. Les uns sortaient, d’autres entraient. Elle ne dormait que dans la matinée”
Dang feels ill at ease in their company and distances herself from them. Thinking about one neighbor in particular, she declares self-righteously: “Si elle aime son travail d’objet sexuel, c’est son affaire. Moi, j’ai été bafouée, humiliée. Aussi, je tiens à vivre par mes propres moyens. Il faudra que je tienne bon, même si je suis seule à raisonner ainsi!” (p.36).

Dang’s reaction is interesting because it illustrates the view that only professional prostitutes are used by men as sexual objects, and are thus “bad women” compared to those who give themselves to one man at a time. Now that she has a “respectable” job as a maid, Dang forgets that in the past she agreed to exchange sex for men’s help and support. There was Evoundi: “Je ne l’aimais pas. Mais devenir son amie afin de travailler ne constituait pas une épreuve au-dessus de mes forces” (p.20). After he abandons her, she takes Tata, a man old enough to be her father, as her lover: “Comme Tata, c’est ainsi qu’il s’appelait, était chauffeur et passait au moins trois fois par semaine devant mon village, il prit l’habitude de s’arrêter, puis il en vint à me garder, un jour un peu de poisson, un autre jour, du savon. Sa présence me devenait agréable et j’en fis mon amant” (p.24). Dang is exchanging sex for basic essentials, but it would never occur to her that she is practicing prostitution, or at least “semiprostitution” which, as defined by Songue, “applies to people who prostitute themselves while having another primary daily activity, whether remunerative or not” (p.243).
Woman’s body and sexuality

It is clear from the discussion so far that the body is implicated at every stage of a woman’s life. In African society, like in many other societies, woman’s body plays an important role, as Béatrice Gallimore notes: “En Afrique, c’est à travers le corps de la femme que la société se maintient et se perpétue. Ainsi ce corps doit-il être façonné, contrôlé et marqué” (p.55). The role that woman’s body plays in society has been amply illustrated in the literature, in which “le corps-objet de la femme africaine, représentant l’érótisme, la beauté et la fécondité, tient l’avant-scene de la littérature masculine africaine depuis les premiers poètes des années 1930” (Brière 1993, p.231). Unlike male writers, women writers portray the body from the woman’s point of view, to show how she actually lives the roles defined for her body by society. In the words of Odile Cazenave: “Avec l’affirmation de la présence des écrivains femmes francophones sur la scène littéraire africaine, le corps a pris dans les années 80 une importance accrue. Son inscription textuelle renouvelle le cadre traditionnel du corps-objet pour devenir aussi manifestation de troubles psychosomatiques, expression du désir féminin et création d’un espace propre à la femme” (180).

In C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée, we see one of the most striking examples of control over a girl’s body, when Ateba is forced to submit to a test of virginity because she goes out to meet Jean, and her aunt wants to make sure that she is still intact:

La vieille est assise sur ses talons, devant le feu. [...] Elle demande à Ateba d’enlever sa culotte et de s’accroupir devant elle. Ateba hésite. Elle reçoit une tape dans le dos. Alors, elle roule son pagne sur son ventre, s’accroupit les jambes largement écartées.

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Un excès d’amertume s’empare d’elle et la soumet au rite de l’œuf... Elle cesse de comprendre qu’elle a un corps, que des doigts la fouillent, que le contact de l’œuf est froid. (p.69)

The importance placed on a girl’s virginity by her family underscores the idea of a woman’s body as a commodity: lack of virginity can lower a girl’s value at the time of marriage. When a man marries a virgin, he is sure to have total control over his wife’s sexuality, since all her experience will come from him. In his study of the Beti, Jean-Pierre Ombolo mentions fertility as another factor influencing tests of virginity: “En procédant à cette démonstration de la virginité de sa fille, le groupe familial d’origine voulait administrer au groupe familial dans lequel elle se mariait la preuve qu’elle était physiologiquement intacte et que, dans le cas où elle n’arriverait pas à procréer, les causes de la stérilité seraient à chercher du côté de son mari ou de son groupe familial” (p.245).

In the texts studied, girls are very conscious of their developing bodies and worry about how others, especially men, are perceiving them. The girls have been conditioned to see their bodies as an offering to be made to men. In Seul le Diable le savait, Mégri passes judgement on her own body, and decides that l’Étranger can never be interested in it: “Que pouvait donc apporter une fille de seize ans, longue et plate, à un homme fait? Oui, j’étais longue, plate et je me sentais laide”. But when her obsession with l’Étranger becomes unbearable, she prepares her body to take to him. First she bathes and anoints it: “[...] je pris un bain, m’oignis de produits de beauté de ma fabrication. Du jus de mangue mélangé à un zest de carotte et de citron, mariné dans du miel. Ce mélange apothéotique, sans lequel, pensais-je, je n’aurais pu devenir femme, je le laissais pénétrer dans mon corps, jusque dans ses ramifications”. Then she makes up her face: “à l’aide des petits pots de couleurs, des
flacons, des pinceaux, je façonnais le masque idéal de la séduction”. Finally she puts on her
dress, but takes care to stuff her bra first: “j’enfilais un soutien-gorge, cadeau d’anniversaire
de Dame maman, que j’emplis au préalable de coton” (p.67).

Mégri’s efforts to remedy her “flat” chest is an indication of her awareness of the
importance of breasts for a woman as a sexual object. In the adolescent stage, they provide
visible proof that the young girl is developing normally and is turning into a woman. The
narrator in C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée describes the anxiety/impatience experienced by a
young girl at this stage: “la petite qui se tâte constamment les seins pour surprendre la petite
boule qui annoncerait le début de sa féminité” (p.98). Ombolo explains how certain societies
in Cameroon used to control this aspect of a girl’s development: “Il se pouvait que les seins
ne commencent à se former chez la fillette qui pourtant en avait déjà l’âge. Chez les Eton, on
soignait cette anomalie notamment en faisant mordre les mamelons du sujet par les fourmis
piqueuses” (p.84). Once a woman begins having children, her breasts are proof of the ravages
of motherhood on the body, and she worries that men will no longer be attracted to her. In
Vies de femmes, after a man she loves proposes marriage, Dang examines her body and is
displeased with it: “Ma poitrine s’était affaissée, elle qui fut si belle! [...] Me découvrant
abîmée, enlaidie, je me sentis triste. Oserai-je lui présenter ce corps?” (p.75). The idea that
a body cannot be offered to a man unless it is in prime condition determines Dang’s refusal
of the marriage proposal: “Je ne voulais pas le décevoir. J’avais peur de lui présenter ce
corps. J’avais honte de moi-même. Essi m’imaginait autrement” (p.77).

Thus women come to see themselves through men’s eyes, and to evaluate their worth
depending on whether they are attractive to men or not. Men are the ones who do the

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looking, and girls are taught to keep their eyes lowered. The first time Mégri goes to l’Etranger’s house, she finds a crowd of women there all waiting to see him. He greets each woman in turn, but when he gets to Mégri she can neither speak nor look at him: “Je sentis mes joues me brûler tant mon émotion était grande, profonde. Mes yeux fixèrent la pointe de mes pieds et je n’émergeais qu’à l’instant où il déclara qu’il ne pouvait recevoir tout le monde aujourd’hui” (p.69). He chooses Ngono, the chief’s latest wife whose striking beauty Mégri describes elsewhere in great detail, only to declare that it will not last long: “En l’observant attentivement, on pouvait voir qu’à l’approche de la quarantaine cette Vénus de Milo africaine se fanerait. Le visage s’empâterait; ses dents si blanches noirciraient au contact de la prise; sa peau si noire, si luisante, deviendrait grise, peut-être verdâtre. Le ventre tomberait bas. [...] Et les hommes ne la regarderaient plus” (p.19). Gallimore explains how the gaze establishes a basic inequality between men and women: “Ce rapport du corps regardant au corps regardé révèle déjà que la relation entre l’homme et la femme n’est pas un rapport de communication entre deux sujets mais bien un rapport de force entre un sujet et un objet” (p.55).

We have already seen that Beyala’s writing has broken cultural taboos on language and sexuality, to the point where she has been accused of “un penchant pornographique prononcé” (Tagne, p.97). Female desire and its fulfillment are aspects of sexuality that are often expressed and analyzed in Beyala’s texts. In Seul le Diable le savait, Mégri is very conscious of the attraction she feels for l’Etranger, and she does not wait passively for him to initiate love-making, contrary to the usual practice in Africa: “Je voulais l’Etranger. La nécessité de la possession amoureuse s’empara de moi. [...] Sans grande hâte mais sans perdre de temps, l’avidité griffue dans les mains, je l’entraînais vers le lit, le regard crispé et raidi
sous la tension du désir charnel. Bretelles, agrafes, fermetures tristesses, angoisses, étoffes, toutes ces interférences furent balayées par les lames violentes du désir” (p.89-90). In African literature, this is a new way of looking at a sexual encounter between a man and a woman, described from the point of view of the woman. Mégri’s love for l’Etranger is shown as having a positive influence on her and as contributing to her evolution towards her independence. He becomes a kind of mentor, teaching her to love her body and demythifying marriage in which he does not believe.

Ateba in C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée is also very conscious of her sexual yearnings, but unlike Mégri, she cannot develop any relationships with men because in her urban environment where all the women she knows are prostitutes, men are the enemy. Also, her virginity is closely guarded by her aunt. She therefore resorts to masturbation:

Depuis longtemps, Ateba était habituée à se caresser pour s’endormir. Elle fermait les yeux, elle se caressait, elle appelait le plaisir, elle lui disait de venir, de venir avec sa chaleur dans ses reins, de la prendre jusqu’à sortir sa jouissance. Jamais encore, elle n’avait joui de l’homme, de son image ou de ses gestes, de son désir retroussé, imbu d’ingéniosité et de bêtise ou de son besoin de se fabriquer un double. (p.22)

Brière (1993) has analyzed Ateba’s masturbation as a form of liberation: “Le corps qui trouve son plaisir sans agence masculine affirme une identité féminine qui lutte contre l’anéantissement que lui réserve la société” (p.232). Other critics who have talked about the provocative nature of Beyala’s writing are careful to point out that her representations of love and sexuality are meant to be read as a critique of society. For example, Odile Cazenave writes:

Chez Beyala, ces scènes deviennent partie constituante du texte et de son examen de la société. Elles donnent accès aux mécanismes profonds sur lesquels la société fonctionne: inégalité entre homme et femme, domination éhontée de l’homme dans
Conclusion

The notion of situated knowledge was introduced in chapter one to show why African women’s writing should be considered more accurate in the representation of African women’s reality. From interviews given by the authors whose texts are studied in this chapter, it becomes clear that their writing is informed by their experiences, a fact which supports the view that women tend to write about what they know best.

Kuoh-Moukoury gives us the character of Flo, a girl who grows up in privilege, goes to study in France, and eventually marries a doctor, thus continuing her middle-class existence. Since material hardship is not a concern in her life, Flo is free to devote her time and energy to the pursuit of happiness as represented by love between a man and a woman. Once married, Flo seems to have no life of her own. Indeed, she lives to love and serve her husband, showing complete submission to him. Flo’s character is no doubt drawn from the world that was familiar to the author. According to Ormerod and Volet, Kuoh-Moukoury’s father, beginning in 1950, became the “administrateur de la France d’Outre-Mer” (p.89), working mainly in Paris. His daughter, born in 1938, got a chance to study in France: “C’est à cette époque que Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury part pour la France afin d’entreprendre des études secondaires, puis, plus tard, universitaires” (p. 89). In an interview, Kuoh-Moukoury
speaks of her admiration for her father: "J’admirais beaucoup mon père qui lisait et écrivait énormément en dehors de son travail de haut fonctionnaire", and of her parents’ social class: "Mes parents appartenaient tous deux à des milieux cultivés" (Ormerod and Volet, p. 89). 

_Rencontres essentielles_, “écrit en 1956, remanié en 1960, et publié en 1968” (Ormerod and Volet, p. 90), reflects the values of the societies familiar to the author, both in Cameroon and France. Societal expectations for women in Europe at the time were not that much different from those pertaining in Africa. Thus the two cultures are complementary in determining Flo’s habitus.

Beyala’s heroines are the antithesis of Flo. They are born to poverty in the slums of postindependence African cities, and as they grow to womanhood, they have to figure out how to escape the fate reserved for women in their milieux. Without education, these women’s options for economic survival seem to be reduced to prostitution or to relationships with abusive men. As in Kuoh-Moukoury’s case, Beyala is also writing about a world familiar to her. Asked about lasting impressions of her childhood, she replies: “Les difficultés de la vie. Ma famille a été très affectée par la pauvreté qui règne en Afrique depuis l’indépendence” (Ormerod and Volet, p. 43). In an interview with Emmanuel Matateyou, Beyala defends the language she uses in her texts in terms of the situatedness of her writing. When asked to explain the fact that in her novels one finds “le langage de la rue, le langage des bidonvilles, le langage des prostituées, le langage des petites gens”, she replies: “C’est parce que je fais partie des petites gens; c’est très important. J’ai grandi à New-Bell à Douala. L’on ne peut
pas raconter ce qu’on ne connaît pas. Le monde chic africain, je ne le connais pas. Je peux l’observer de mon œil ironique d’un enfant de New-Bell mais je ne peux le décrire de l’intérieur” (p. 606).

Beyala’s writing goes beyond a representation of women’s condition to become a critique of society and corrupt African regimes, one reason why her works are not well received in Cameroon. Fearing censorship from the authorities, she has chosen to live in exile in France, and explains how this allows her to contribute to the struggle against oppression by the ruling classes: “L’exil résout beaucoup de choses... Car quand je vais au Cameroun [...] je peux parler aux gens et ils m’écouteront. Or si j’habitais le Cameroun, je n’aurais pas droit à la parole. L’exil me donne la liberté qui m’est refusée, l’exil me donne la parole qui m’est refusée” (Matateyou, p.613). Writing in exile has also allowed her international exposure and recognition. In 1996, her seventh novel entitled Les Honneurs perdus received the prestigious Prix du roman de l’Académie Française.5

Another aspect of Beyala’s writing that might be disturbing to African readers is the possibility for self-fulfilment she offers her women characters caught up in the struggle to control their destinies in a world dominated by men. In C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée, Ateba kills a man at the end of the story, a gesture intended as revenge for Irene’s senseless death, which symbolizes removal of the oppressor. Indeed, this novel seems to imply that women would be happier without men, at least without the sort of men depicted in the story. In Seul...

5 According to a Web page titled “A Celebration of Women Writers”, there were serious allegations of plagiarism in this novel. See “L’Affaire Beyala rebondit: L’Académie Française a pris le risque de cautionner un auteur dont l’oeuvre est truffée de plagiats”, Lire 252 (Février 1997), pp. 8-11.
le Diable le savait, we are shown women living fairly happily with men, but these men are somewhat unusual. Bertha, Mégri’s mother, practices a form of polyandry, living with two men in the same house. The reason she is able to manage this arrangement is because she is dealing with a docile kind of man who does not seek to dominate women. By reversing the terms of polygamy as accepted in African cultures, Beyala is discrediting men, a tactic that would no doubt offend readers. Mégri finds happiness with L’Etranger, but he is no ordinary man since he has supernatural powers. He helps emancipate Mégri by teaching her to accept herself as she is, and not to seek marriage. After fathering her child, his work is done as it were, and he is killed by the police for alleged crimes. Once again the message seems to be that men, even good ones, are not indispensable.

Zanga-Tsogo dedicates Vies de Femmes to her daughters, her sisters, her friends, and finally to “toutes celles dont l’expérience a suscité et soutenu ce récit”. These are the women to whose stories she had to listen, in her position as the Minister of Social Affairs, “a ministry that had women, and gender issues, on the forefront of its agendas” (Nfah-Abbenyi, p.74). She justifies the title of her novel by her decision to lend her voice to all the women who do not have the chance or the courage to express themselves:

Toute jeune, j’aimais beaucoup lire. J’aime la lecture. Petit à petit, je me suis dit que je pouvais peut-être exprimer et livrer certaines de mes réflexions, d’autant plus que je reçois beaucoup de confidences tant à mon bureau qu’à la maison. Je voudrais partager certaines situations vécues avec un plus grand nombre afin de fixer par quelques récits la vie actuelle de notre société, les mutations que nous vivons et en faire prendre conscience. C’est pour cela que j’ai accepté de prêter ma voix aux femmes qui se confient à moi et qui n’ont pas le courage de s’exprimer directement. (quoted by Nfah-Abbenyi, p.74)
Zanga-Tsogo’s novel, anchored in her experience of a woman’s reality, is a good example of
the way women’s fiction can contribute to a better understanding of African women.
CHAPTER 3

KENYAN WOMEN WRITERS

Introduction

Critics of East African literature have pointed out the advance in literary production that the rest of the continent had over East Africa. Bernt Lindfors, in the introduction to his 1976 collection of interviews with East African writers, publishers and editors, notes: "Twenty years ago East Africa was considered a literary desert. While young writers in West, North and South Africa were busy creating vigorous new literatures in European languages (mainly English and French), East Africa was conspicuous for its lack of even the most rudimentary forms of literary activity" (p.1). According to Arlene Elder, it was not until the 1960s that East Africa began to develop a literature in English "that was imaginative rather than solely historical, anthropological or political" (p.51).

As far as Kenyan literature in English is concerned, it can be said to have truly started in 1964 with the publication of Ngugi's first novel, Weep Not, Child, which was followed by The River Between in 1965. These two works "placed Kenya on the literary map of Africa" (Bardolph, p.37). Women writers were not far behind. Grace Ogot became the first Kenyan
female novelist with the publication of *The Promised Land* in 1966. She followed this novel with a collection of short stories, *Land without Thunder*, in 1968. In her interview with Bernth Lindfors, Ogot speaks about the lack of publishing opportunities in the early days: “Many people writing today simply did not have an outlet for creative writing. If you wrote a story, you kept it to yourself. I think that the lack of publishers with a correct approach to African literature was a major setback for East African writers” (p.124). Colonial publishers were wary of imaginative writing that drew on traditional aspects of African culture, as their reaction to some of Ogot’s stories shows: “They really couldn’t understand how a Christian woman could write such stories, involved with sacrifices, traditional medicines and all, instead of writing about Salvation and Christianity” (p.124). However, with the growth of East African publishing after independence, more writers found their way into print. Arlene Elder notes that much of the output of the publishers went directly into the classroom. Since this continues to be the case today, literature becomes a relevant way of changing attitudes among the youth, hence the need for more emancipatory writing by women.

Although Kenya produced one of the first women writers in Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of women authors, especially novelists, has remained small. Apart from Grace Ogot, the only other writers to receive any critical mention are Charity Waciuma, Miriam Were, Rebeka Njau, Micere Mugo and Muthoni Likimani, who have written novels, plays and poetry. The scarcity of Kenyan women writers can be partly blamed on discriminatory educational policies during the colonial period when only men had the privilege of going to university. In East Africa, students went to Makerere University College in Uganda, and in the 1960s, this institution became “the single most significant educational force” (Elder, p.51)
behind the development of literature in English in this part of the continent. According to one of the British lecturers, “many of the students in the English Department were there reading English literature with an eye to writing themselves” (Elder, p.51). Ngugi wa Thiong’o was one of these students, and if his writing is deemed superior to that of Ogot for example, it is because the exposure to creative writing as well as to the canonical works of world literature that he received at Makerere was an important factor in his growth as a writer.

Ogot has remained the best known woman writer from Kenya, publishing two more collections of short stories - The Other Woman (1976), The Island of Tears (1980) - and a second novel, The Graduate (1980), in addition to the work already mentioned. Ogot’s writing has received a fair amount of critical attention. One of the earliest studies is that by Maryse Condé (1974), in which she compares Ogot’s writing to that of Flora Nwapa of Nigeria and Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana. She begins her critique of Ogot by pointing out that “the first thing one must say concerning Grace Ogot is that she is a Christian” (p.139), and comes to the following conclusion:

Grace Ogot lacks neither style nor imagination. But her talents are totally wasted. She is so blinded by her respect for the European codes of behaviour, so confused as to the place of her traditional beliefs, that her female characters possess neither coherence nor credibility. Through badly digested Christianity and Western values, she sinks down to the level of cheap European literature for “midinettes” and other sub-products of the consumer society. She may believe that she is an emancipated “woman who reads books”, but what she offers her fellow countrywomen is a dangerous picture of alienation and enslavement. (p.142)

Condé’s harsh critique of Ogot does not attempt to understand why Ogot writes as she does.

In her 1995 study, Gloria Chukukere points out the shortcomings of Condé’s critique:
Condé finds justification in her belief that Grace Ogot's heroines are passive and clinging to stereotypical roles which necessitate attitudes supportive of male ego. Where the critic fails is in her loss of perception of the essential dilemma that embodies their actions as well as the strong cultural norms that motivate them. By so definite a negative criticism, Condé also exposes her political bias towards the militant and aggressive. (p.218)

An interesting irony is that Condé as a novelist portraying African women in Segu, an epic set in eighteenth century West Africa, finds it necessary to give them roles that are secondary to those of men. Leah Hewitt (1990) raises this point in her study of Condé's writing:

Condé has placed male characters in the leading roles (as heroes and victims of history), with the muted tales of her female characters (as mothers, daughters, wives) filling secondary roles. In a 1986 interview, Condé explains this gender difference in terms of verisimilitude: for her, contrary to the Antillean literary (and social) tradition, in which woman occupies a central position, African cultural tradition places men in the limelight of social and familial events. (p.164)

If we apply the notion of habitus already presented in chapter one, we gain a better understanding of the ways in which Ogot as a writer, is bound to a certain context shaped by her culture as well as by the colonial education she received in the settler colony that Kenya was. In her stories set in the urban areas, Ogot usually portrays married middle-class women like herself. One can assume that her lifestyle has something in common with that of the women characters in the stories, making her fiction reality-based. In chapter one, we saw that one of the differences between first and second generation women writers is that the former are more concerned with presenting women's experience from women's point of view, with addressing that experience in literature, while the latter are concerned with redressing it (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). As a first generation writer, Ogot presents us with Kenyan women's experience, an important first step in the emancipation of women. Through her
characters, we see what factors contribute to the shaping of women’s identities and to their oppression, as well as what needs to be changed to improve the status of women in the country.

Negative critique of Ogot does not stop with Condé. In Women Writers of Black Africa (1981), Lloyd Brown attributes Ogot’s shortcomings to a lack of mastery of narrative technique:

Kenya’s Grace Ogot is a good example of these minor writers whose protest is subdued or indirect - especially when we consider her novel The Promised Land (1966) and her collection of short stories Land Without Thunder (1968). Generally speaking, Ogot avoids direct protest. Sexual roles and attitudes are described with little or no narrative commentary or political judgement. The kind of subtlety or multiple suggestiveness normally associated with this kind of narrative technique is not particularly evident in Ogot’s work, and this is largely due to Ogot’s limitations as a fiction writer. She relies on an uninspired, rather pedestrian style, and her characters are usually too wooden or underdeveloped to be capable of convincing emotional responses. (p.26)

Like Condé’s, Brown’s critique misses the contribution of Ogot’s writing. Indeed, the negative points he raises, such as avoidance of direct protest, can be seen as positive qualities if we look at these characteristics as telltale symptoms of a habitus.

Florence Stratton (1994), a feminist critic, counters the negative critiques of Ogot by pointing out how her fiction serves to combat patriarchy:

The main ideological function of Ogot’s fiction is to undermine patriarchal ideology by means of a reversal of the initial terms of the sexual allegory. Such an inversion - female and male, good and evil, subject and object - does not resolve the problems of gender, but it is, nonetheless, a subversive manoeuvre. For it exposes the sexist bias of the male literary tradition and creates space for the female subject. (p.62)

Stratton’s study does not dwell on Ogot’s literary shortcomings, but rather on her contribution as a writer to changing the image of African women: “In Ogot’s writing,
inversion is effected in part by the designation of the national subject as explicitly female. Thus Ogot counters both colonial and African male representations of women as passive and ahistorical, as well as providing a critique of colonialism and indigenous patriarchy” (p.62).

Ogot has been one of the few women in Kenya to enjoy a political career. Nominated to Parliament in 1983 by President Moi, Ogot was appointed an Assistant Minister for Culture and Social Services in 1986. This is a clear indication that in spite of her writing, she has managed to stay in the good graces of the regime, unlike Ngugi who has been in exile since 1982. Thus Ogot’s writing has of necessity been seen as noncontroversial, seemingly endorsing the patriarchal order. This is why Ojo-Ade, in his division of women writers into two groups, puts Ogot in the “old guard” category:

Grace Ogot, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, women writers all, constitute the ‘old guard’, steeped in the traditions of the land, complaining of their sufferings as subjects of the male master, but seeking solace in a society that has proclaimed woman the mother. That group’s conciliatory position has been superseded by a current revolt. Compromise is replaced by criticism and condemnation. Respect turns into repudiation. Devotion is buried by divorce. Buchi Emecheta, Nafissatou Diallo, Mariama Bâ, those are the voices currently crying out for the liberation of woman, the second-class citizen. (p.72)

As a male critic interested in the preservation of the status quo, Ojo-Ade sees feminism as “an occidental phenomenon” (p.72), and tries to discredit women whose writing is openly rebellious. However, feminist readings of the “old guard” have uncovered elements of protest in the works by these writers too, thus proving Ojo-Ade’s division to be untenable. In the case of Grace Ogot, it is likely that those aspects of her writing that win her Ojo-Ade’s approval
also coincide with the picture of “enslavement” that Condé sees Ogot as offering her countrywomen, but all these “shortcomings” can be analyzed and understood in the light of habitus.

Three other women novelists shall be studied in this chapter: Charity Waciuma, Rebeka Njau, and Margaret Ogola. Their texts will shed further light on the condition of Kenyan women, and will help us appreciate the relevance of habitus and the difficulties that writers face in their attempts to represent women in a new light. Waciuma’s autobiographical novel, Daughter of Mumbi, was published in 1969. Although set in a rural area in colonial Kenya, this novel is interesting for our study because it deals with the life of a girl in the process of becoming a woman in the 1950s, a difficult period in Kenya’s history during which the war of independence was fought. In his 1984 study of women writers, Oladele Taiwo gives a synopsis of the novel:

Into the narration of childhood experiences are integrated the hopes and fears of a nation in the grip of the worst manifestations of imperialism and colonialism. Christian missionaries collude with the colonial administration to subvert the legitimate rights of the people, deny them every kind of freedom and deprive them of their land. The work devotes a lot of attention to this organised oppression of the Kikuyu and to the people’s fight for justice and equality. Since every form of political association is banned, the resistance goes underground, resulting in the Mau Mau organisation and the period of Emergency which inevitably follows. (p.34)

Taiwo praises Waciuma’s portrayal of her culture: “A special feature of this work is the convincing picture it gives of the original beauty and solidity of Kikuyu culture” (p.35). He does not mention that Waciuma tries to show how part of the solidity of this culture is based on customs which oppress women. Taiwo’s omission is significant because it reveals the patriarchal bias of his critique.
Carole Davies (1991) offers a feminist reading of *Daughter of Mumbi*, to show that there is a “female subtext” running parallel to the surface text, giving rise to a “double-voicedness”:

Waciuma’s autobiography elicits a feminist reading because of this double-voicedness in effect throughout the narrative. Critics such as Neubauer have argued that Waciuma “has chosen to write her life story to document the gradual deterioration of traditional religious and social values within the scope of her own family.” But the detailing of patriarchal dominance, much of it situated within the context of the struggle between Christianity and traditional practices, reveals the other story. (p.282-283)

This “other story” concerns issues affecting women, for example polygyny, clitoridectomy, patriarchal control, and the education of girls. Davies concludes her discussion of the novel with a feminist interpretation of the title:

In a further enlargement of the submerged female story, Waciuma titles her work *Daughter of Mumbi*, encoding another text by tracing her mythical lineage. Mumbi, as wife of Gikuyu, identifies a legendary matrilineage through her nine daughters, who were overthrown by the men. Waciuma’s titling is an explicit reclamation of a female ancestral line at the same time that it is an acceptance of her Gikuyu heritage. (p.284)

Davies’ reading of Waciuma’s novel thus indicates a direction to follow if we are to appreciate the manner in which the author reveals women’s oppression within her culture, and protests against this oppression, given that she is a first generation writer.

Rebeka Njau’s novel, *Ripples in the Pool*, was published in 1975, and has received a good amount of critical attention, making Selina, the protagonist, one of the better-known female characters in African literature. In the words of Bryce-Okunlola, “*Ripples in the Pool* is a profoundly significant novel within the Kenyan literary context, which is entirely dominated by the worldwide reputation and extraordinary achievement of Ngugi wa Thiong’o” (p.208). Njau’s novel is complex and tackles many themes, showing the evolution
of the main characters within the context of a morally bankrupt, neo-colonial society that has abandoned its traditional values. The tragic relationships and Selina’s madness at the end are symptomatic of this state of affairs. For the most part, this is a novel about failure, for both men and women. But it is still interesting to us because it reveals something about the discourses informing Njau’s representation of the characters, especially the female ones. In an article comparing *Ripples in the Pool* to Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*, Abioseh Porter finds Njau’s characterisation of women inferior to Ngugi’s:

The difference between Ngugi and Njau is most obvious when one looks at their portrayal of women: whereas Ngugi continues his tradition of representing “brave, resilient, resourceful and determined women ...,” Njau reduces even her leading women characters to the traditional stereotypes found in all literatures. [...] Both Selina and her mother-in-law would certainly rank among the worst stereotyped women ever portrayed in the literatures of Africa. (p.65-67)

Again, such an evaluation misses a crucial point. Rather than simply dismissing Njau’s female characters as stereotypes, it is important to understand these representations, to show that they are informed by the same discourses that contribute to the shaping of women’s image in Kenya. Thus Bryce-Okunlola offers the following evaluation of Njau’s novel:

The significance of Rebeka Njau’s *Ripples in the Pool* lies in her attempt, not only to confront the objective realities of the social situation in Kenya, but to portray the subjective responses of all those affected by it. While, in Marxist terms, she fails to point to an alternative vision or indicate a route to change, concluding on a mystical note with the renewal of the sacred fig tree by the pool, she does make an important contribution to the characterisation of women in Kenyan fiction. (p.209)

Carole Davies (1993) sees Njau’s novel as contributing to the “deromanticizing” of rural life. Indeed, the move from the city to the village is detrimental to Selina who is “a vibrant, attractive nurse in great demand by men, well liked and admired in the urban center”, but who becomes “an abused, crazed woman when she marries and follows her husband to
the village” (p. 174). Thus the urban/rural dichotomy is neutralized: rural life no longer represents redemption for the “fallen” city woman, and the rural woman, in this case Selina’s mother-in-law, is not portrayed as “the symbol of all that is traditional and wholesome” (Davies, 1993: 173). This is a reflection of the changing conditions in neo-colonial societies, where rural cultures can no longer be portrayed as static and unchanging. The conflict between Selina and her mother-in-law contributes to Selina’s degradation, and provides a good example of woman-on-woman oppression.

Margaret Ogola’s novel, The River and the Source, was published in 1994. It traces the lives of four generations of women beginning in colonial Kenya and ending in the 1990s. In her portrayal of women she reverses most of the stereotyped images found in African literature to create strong, independent women who defy tradition. When the women are not widows, the men in their lives are portrayed as understanding and supportive, even in the traditional setting. This is clearly a didactic novel in which the author wants to show that the emancipation of women has to go hand-in-hand with that of their men.

Ogola’s reversals privilege women in issues such as polygyny - the men married to the main female characters are all monogamous, including a Chief who, according to tradition, should have several wives. Emancipation of women through education is a key theme in the novel, and girls and women are portrayed as excelling in fields such as science and medicine, fields that are normally associated with men. Of the fourth generation women, one works as an electronics expert after graduating from university, and a second one becomes the first Kenyan woman to earn a Doctorate in Medicine.
The role of Christianity in Kenya is evident in Ogola’s writing. Her representation of “good, christian women” lets us see the extent to which Christianity has benefited or disadvantaged them. Since her writing is informed by a Catholic perspective, there is obviously no discussion about the women’s reproductive rights: pregnancies and miscarriages are the lot of all the married women in the novel. There are no unwed mothers in this novel, all the girls being “good girls”. But the world of fiction is in sharp contrast with the reality: teenage pregnancies are on the increase in Kenya today, forcing many girls to drop out of school. If education is a key to the emancipation of women, a point Ogola’s didactic novel clearly makes, it might have been useful to also address the obstacles preventing girls from achieving their goals. Even though she is a medical doctor, Ogola’s stance on sexuality is a moralistic one, informed by Christianity. Since the novel ends in the 1990s, one would have expected the question of AIDS to be given some exposure, but when it does come up, there is no discussion of it, only a brief reference to the death of a female character who has become “promiscuous”.

The representation of women and their experience will again be conducted according to the categories used in the previous chapter: adolescence, marriage, motherhood, women and work, woman’s body and sexuality.
Adolescence

Waciuma’s novel *Daughter of Mumbi*, is the story of a Kikuyu girl’s childhood and passage into womanhood in colonial Kenya. To become a woman, a girl must undergo clitoridectomy, because “it was believed that a girl who was uncircumcised would cause the death of a circumcised husband” (p.61), and would be barren as well. In *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta explains the importance of the initiation of both boys and girls within the context of Gikuyu culture. Indeed, circumcision and clitoridectomy are considered “a deciding factor in giving a boy or girl the status of manhood or womanhood in the Gikuyu community” (p.133). To the colonial government, clitoridectomy was a barbaric custom that had to be stamped out, but as Kenyatta explains, this was no easy task:

In 1930 the question of the custom of clitoridectomy was raised in the House of Commons and a committee of Members of Parliament was appointed to investigate the matter. [...] The writer was invited to attend the committee meeting and give the Gikuyu’s point of view. It was then agreed that the best way to tackle the problem was through education and not by force of an enactment, and that the best way was to leave the people concerned free to choose what custom was best suited to their changing conditions. (p.131)

Unfortunately for young girls, clitoridectomy became a form of resistance to colonial oppression. Kenyatta’s oppositional group, the Kikuyu Central Association, was dedicated to “removing British colonialism and restoring the traditional values eroded under white rule” (Levin, p.209). After independence, one of Kenyatta’s first acts as the new head of state was to lift the ban imposed by the British on clitoridectomy.

In *Daughter of Mumbi*, girls find themselves caught up in the cultural conflict between defenders of the custom and Christian missionaries who are determined to eradicate it. Since
Wanjiku’s parents have converted to Christianity, they do not subject their daughters to the ordeal. In the village, the uncircumcised girls are made fun of: “When the other boys and girls - and their parents - came to realise that we really never would be circumcised it was something of a scandal. We became a laughing-stock, the butt of their jokes” (p.61). At the end of the novel, Wanjiku has to give up the young man she loves. Her parents attempt to console her by invoking the circumcision issue: “My parents told me it was the most sensible step we could have taken, for his parents would never, never have agreed to his marrying an uncircumcised girl” (p.142).

At the mission school, all the girls are subjected to an examination of their genitals by a male European doctor: “We each had to strip and lie on a wooden bench with our feet wide apart while the doctor looked to see whether anyone was circumcised. If they were, a note of it was made on their record cards” (p.83). Here the tables are turned, and it is the circumcised girls who are victimized: “All those who were circumcised were put into one dormitory. They were segregated from the rest and we were taught to despise them. So the situation of the village was reversed. They spent their three years at the school in half-seclusion, where their lives were made a misery and they became very withdrawn” (p.83). Although the narrator does not say so, we can assume that these measures of segregation probably kept a number of circumcised girls away from school, and therefore countered the purpose of missionary education in the struggle to eradicate clitoridectomy. Since this is a custom perpetuated by women on behalf of the patriarchy, with mothers ensuring that their daughters go through it and older women performing the operation, the only hope of breaking
the cycle lies in educating as many circumcised girls as possible, who would then protect their daughters. But the missionaries’ insensitive handling of the situation had the opposite effect, as Wanjiku’s uncle explains to her: “At this time the Church of Scotland missions decided they had to stamp out the circumcision of women. Instead of doing this in a subtle way, they went about it so badly that they actually increased the people’s attachment to their old customs. Both the girls themselves and their parents were turned away from the Church if the girls had the operation performed” (p.95).

Emancipation through the education of girls is a key theme in Ogola’s novel, The River and the Source. Educational opportunities begin with Awiti, the third generation heroine, who at thirteen is enrolled in a newly founded primary school in which English, Mathematics, Geography, Nature Study and History are taught, as opposed to the previous school where “only religion, reading and simple arithmetic were taught” (p.119). The certificate issued at the end of the course is “a carte blanche to literally any job available to an African in those days” (p.119). Awiti is one of two girls in a class of thirty-four students, and it is because of “the pioneering and daring spirit of her grandmother and mother” (p.120) that she gets to go to school, given that “the purpose of female existence was marriage and child bearing” (p.120). Awiti is the best of the five students who pass the final examination and graduate, after which she joins a Teacher Training College.

Awiti’s twin daughters, Vera and Becky, are contrasted in their attitude to education to represent two aspects of Kenyan youth. Vera is the intelligent, motivated one, the sort of person able “to make a success of her life wherever she happens to be” (p.165). The author uses her character to portray an emancipatory stance on the education of girls. After her “A”
levels in Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, she goes on to the University of Nairobi to study Electrical Engineering, an unusual field of study for girls in the 1970s. Writing in 1994, Ogola is obviously addressing a gender imbalance that has persisted in the Kenyan education system. In an essay entitled “Gender issues in education”, Anna Obura (1993) gives the statistics for 1989 with regard to girls and science subjects in high school: “Of all the girls sitting KSCE in that year, only 17 per cent took the 3-science course, the most appropriate for university entrance” (p.95).

Becky is portrayed as the beautiful, selfish twin, impatient to leave school and get a job. She is meant to represent the widely-held view in Kenya that a high school education is more than enough for a girl, given the kind of jobs to which she has been socialized to aspire. Through Becky, Ogola shows how girls internalize this view, thereby creating resistance to their emancipation as women in the work-force. When her father insists that she stay in school and study for her “A” levels, her reply is: “But Father! All I want to be is an air-hostess. Why should I go back to school? That’s for Vera who wants to be a professor” (p.185-186). Although she gives in and takes “A” levels in History, Literature and Geography - the traditional subjects for girls - there is no question of going to university for Becky. She fails in two of the subjects, and only manages to get a weak pass in the third. These results are not surprising, given Becky’s lack of motivation. She runs away to the capital, and explains why in a note to her sister: “I am leaving home to go and stay with some friends of mine in Nairobi. I am determined to become an air-hostess - and they can give me the connections that I need” (p.197). Thus despite progressive parents who want their daughters to excel in their education and be competitive in the job market, Becky is motivated by material interests.
The reasons why girls set low educational standards for themselves can be found both in the society and in the school system. In a 1991 study on the portrayal of girls and women in Kenyan primary school textbooks, Obura explains how textbooks contribute to the internalization of gender roles by both boys and girls:

They present behaviour and thought patterns which they imply are good to copy. The reason why the textbook is able to play this persuasive role is due to the role of school in the process of socialisation. School is an authoritative and prestigious institution in Africa, and at least for the first few years the overt curriculum is taken seriously by the children. [...] The textbook therefore carries authoritative messages on role models. (p. 12)

Given the absence of positive female role models in Kenyan textbooks, girls’ aspirations are more likely to be like Becky’s than Vera’s. Becky’s decision to become an air-hostess, a career perceived as glamorous and suitable for beautiful girls like her, fits in the service role ascribed to women in textbooks: “Girls are little addressed by textbooks. The absence of female images in textbooks is perturbing while the few female images presented tend to be negative in educative terms (images of submissive, solely traditional, serving, reactive women), depriving girls of female adult role models and positive proactive models, and failing to educate on fully participatory roles of the future” (Obura, 1993:94).

In Ripples in the Pool, Njau paints a bleak picture of an adolescent deprived of every opportunity to make something of her life. When we first meet Gaciru, Selina’s sister-in-law, she is sixteen and has failed the examination that would have qualified her for high school. As a result, her days are filled with endless chores:

When Gaciru, Gikere’s youngest sister, failed her CPE at the village school, there was nothing else for her to do except join her mother in carrying out the day-to-day drudgery that was the common feature of village life. She got up early, made a wood fire, prepared the morning meal of boiled green maize, collected leaves from the fields
for two greedy he-goats, made the mid-day meal, then in the late afternoon accompanied her mother to a small piece of land by the side of a small stream where they dug sweet potatoes out of the ground to take to the market for sale. (p.18)

Thus Gaciru is being trained for the only role she can expect to play as a woman without much education, that of wife and mother, as her mother before her. Gaciru's mother is portrayed as the stereotypical village woman who is not open to new ideas: "The old woman was too possessive and did not seem to value what Gaciru had learned at school. Many times Gaciru wanted to put into practice some of the things she had learned to do in her domestic science classes but her mother would not let her." (p.18-19). The mother is above all suspicious of Selina, her daughter-in-law, a former city girl whom her son has married against his mother's wishes, and objects to Gaciru going to live with her brother and his wife: "Selina is too strong-minded. Her influence will not be good for Gaciru" (p.19). But in the end she agrees to let Gaciru go, after predicting doom for her son's household.

The move to her brother's house is initially beneficial to Gaciru. Selina notices and encourages Gaciru's talents: "Selina admired Gaciru's ingenuity. She admired her imagination and creativity. Her skill in fashioning dolls with sticks, grass and pieces of cloth impressed Selina so much that she made her make large numbers of them which Selina then donated to Mbagathi, her old hospital" (p.60). As for Gaciru, she is happy to "find someone who was always ready to encourage her to learn new things" (p.60). Thus she seems to have a mentor in Selina whose plan to open a toy-making school offers some hope for the future, since the school will help "Gaciru and others like her who had failed to find places in formal secondary schools" (p.108). But Ripples in the Pool is a novel about destructive forces, and Gaciru finds herself caught up in a world of dysfunctional adults, and in the end dies by Selina's hand,
never having completed her passage to womanhood. The conflict between Selina and her mother-in-law, which leads to the breakdown of Selina's marriage to Gikere, coupled with Selina's childlessness, contribute to Gaciru's tragic end. Selina becomes emotionally oppressive, informing Gaciru that "I am your mother, your sister, your friend, your everything. You cannot break away from my world" (p.111). Bryce-Okunlola traces Selina's obsessive behavior to the death of her mother when Selina was a child: "Selina's desperate need for 'someone' is depicted as her attempt to compensate for the loss of her mother, whose suicide she blames on her father. When Gikere fails her, she projects this need on to his sister Gaciru, in a sort of perversion of the longing for a child, which here becomes an obsessive possessiveness which leads her to kill her out of jealousy" (p.212). Gaciru's crime is to fall in love with a young man. Selina, in a melo-dramatic ending to the novel, kills both of them and goes completely mad.

Marriage

Marriage is an important theme in the works studied, a fact reflecting its importance in the lives of Kenyan women, for whom it is a necessary step in the acquisition of social identity. In an essay entitled "Feminist Issues in the Fiction of Kenya's Women Writers", Jean O’Barr explains that the issue of marriage is most often discussed "in terms of whether they 'need a man' to be considered whole" (p.63). In our study, this view is most evident in the works of Grace Ogot, which deal mainly with married women. Her short stories provide many examples of women who see marriage as defining their identity and giving them a sense
of fulfillment. In the short story entitled “The Other Woman” in the volume by the same title, Jedidah declares to her husband: “You have made me what I am, Jerry - I owe everything to you” (p.50). Anastasia, the main character in “The Wayward Father” (Island of Tears), silently gives thanks to God for her husband Mika: “He, if nothing else, was the fulfillment in her life” (p.8).

The manner in which women introduce themselves is an indication of the value they place on their marital status. In “The Honourable Minister” (The Other Woman), June is introduced to the other members of the “Coffee Group”: “Mrs. Osumba, Mrs. Jeneby, Mrs. Mamboleo, Mrs. Karuga, Mrs. Waswa and several more” (p.91). She is not told their first names. While a woman might make her married identity known to a stranger to discourage any advances, in “Karantina” (Land Without Thunder), the way Dora introduces herself to the man who helps her at Cairo airport reveals her pride in the title of “Mrs”: “By the way, my name is Banale - I come from Zambia”. ‘Mine is Dora Owiti - Mrs. of course - I come from Kenya’” (p.76). An interesting example of the attachment to this title can be found in the opening pages to a Kenyan popular novel entitled Businessman’s Wife (1991). After the author’s name, Pat Wambui Ngurukie, the title “Mrs” appears in parentheses, six times in all, including the copyright. Of course Ngurukie might feel that disclosing her marital status is important to the reception of the book, by letting readers know that she is qualified to write about problems faced by couples.

If women tend to value their marital status, it is because they have been socialized to view marriage as their destiny. What the narrator in Daughter of Mumbi says about naming in Gikuyu culture shows the extent to which a woman’s identity is dependent upon men: “In
general a person is known by his or her basic role in life. Thus a girl, being above all somebody’s daughter, is known as ‘daughter of’ her father, or sometimes her mother; when she marries she is referred to as ‘wife of’ her husband” (p.8-9). Indeed, Kenyan society does not let married women forget that they are men’s wives, even in cases where this is not relevant. In an essay entitled “Gender and ideology: The role of language”, Adhiambo-Oduol explains how women with professional titles such as “Professor” or “Doctor” do not escape the married title. She gives the example of the chairperson of the Department of Linguistics and African Languages at the University of Nairobi, Professor Lucia Omondi, whose husband is also a professor: “Although some people address her as Professor (Mrs) Omondi, the more common choices are usually Professor Omondi, Mrs. Prof. Omondi, or Mrs. Omondi” (p.41). Adhiambo-Oduol analyzes this ambivalence in terms of the gender roles sanctioned by society:

The use of Professor alone can be seen as acceptance that women can deviate from fixed gender roles. Since such a woman does not conform to the social preconceptions of gender, she is regarded as genderless. The use of Mrs. Prof. and Mrs. alone are different ways of implicitly evaluating gender roles in society. In both cases, there is the denial or attempt to discredit meanings that threaten the status quo. (p.41)

Thus, acknowledging that a woman is a professor would be threatening to a patriarchal society, and “the simpler thing to do is to ignore the Professorship, even if one is aware of it and to focus on the marital status” (p.41). Indeed, people are more familiar with the kind of scenario described by Ogot in “Love Immortalised” (The Island of Tears). The narrator tells us that her husband is a History professor who comes home each night with “ancient books
on his arm [...], communicating with thoughts that were heavy and far above my head” (p.73).

The idea that women should remain professionally inferior to men is borne out in a study by McAdoo and Were, who interviewed twenty four Kenyan women:

Some women indicated that, with their professional advancement, they met resistance from their husbands. Although the men wanted to marry women who were educated to help them out financially and be able to raise their children in order to succeed, they did not want the women to go too high. Some women indicated that they had met great resistance when they attempted to get advanced degrees or if their jobs became higher in status than their husband’s. (p. 158)

Ogot's women characters are usually middle-class by virtue of their marriage to well-to-do men, and while some of them may be wage-earners in their own right, they all share the belief that a woman’s most important job is to look after her husband. Anastasia in “The Wayward Father” (The Island of Tears) hurries home each day from her office “to be home in good time to rest and be fresh enough to receive her husband in the evening” (p.8). She is portrayed as the submissive wife who, though worried about her husband’s absences from home, knows that “she should never argue, that she ought not to question the husband about where he had been, even when he turned in well after midnight. She knew that she was supposed to wake up humbly, with a smile, and ask him if he had eaten where he had been, and if he had not, to quickly warm his food and serve him” (p.9). This is the only way to preserve her identity as “the ideal Luo woman, treasured and respected by all men, whose praises were echoed wherever men gathered” (p.9). Thus marriage has to conform to men’s expectations, and if the woman feels oppressed in the process, all she can do is “persevere and pray” (p.11).
In an effort to be good wives and keep up the illusion of a perfect marriage for society’s sake, women often condone their husband’s infidelity rather than divorce them. When Anastasia discovers that her husband Mika has made a girl younger than their daughter pregnant and secretly married her, divorce is not an option for her, as she explains to her son: “A divorce case will only drag the family deeper into the mud, my child. By the time we are through with it, nothing will ever remain in our family. You and I would never lift our heads again” (p.18). Ogot’s fiction seems to draw from reality on this point. The women in McAdoo and Were’s study reported that husbands’ girlfriends often were “an established part of their lives and were tolerated but not totally accepted” (p.158). The fact that this attitude was found among educated, professional women only underlines the dilemma faced by most women in Kenya. Indeed, according to the study, many men were continuing the traditional polygamous type patterns in an informal manner. Several women mentioned this competition and their sense of powerlessness to fight it. Legally, husbands could take another wife, although financially this has become impossible. However, if women were not careful and pushed their husbands too hard, the men did not hesitate to remind their wives of the options. (p.158)

Anastasia’s husband is portrayed as being remorseful for what he had done: “A young girl heavy with child on one side and his devoted wife and grown up children on the other! What a mess he had made of his life!” (p.20). In the end it is the pregnant girl who is abandoned. Mika informs his wife: “I have made up my mind. I will stick with you and the children. I will find a way of telling the girl that I have changed my mind” (p.20). Anastasia is willing to forgive him “for the sake of the children”, and also because of what she had been taught about men’s sexuality in preparation for marriage: “Man was cursed by God, even the most loved and most respectable husband will have no shame in dragging the family name in sordid mud.
It is the lot of all women however dignified, and you will learn that soon enough when you are married” (p.15). Since men are socialized to believe this myth about themselves, they are never held responsible for their actions. Indeed, the women often blame themselves and each other.

An example of a situation where the wife blames herself and the girlfriend for her husband’s infidelity can be found in “The Other Woman”. Jedidah’s husband Jerry is sleeping with their maid while Jedidah is at work. When she finally catches them, Jedidah goes after the maid with a kitchen knife and severs her ear. The story closes on a scene of perfect domestic tranquility, with Jedidah waking up in bed where Jerry put her after the drama, Jerry sitting in an armchair at the foot of the bed, and their son playing with a toy car on the carpet. Jedidah remembers her friend’s warning: “When you have no time for him, he will go to another woman” (p.58). Indeed, her friend had given Jedidah the recipe for a happy marriage: “To a man what makes a marriage stable and happy is not the good cooking of a wife or the meticulous way in which his house or clothes are kept. What matters to him most Jedidah is his sexual needs. A woman who satisfies these needs is likely to have a happy and secure marriage” (p.46). Thus marriage seems to be all about pleasing a man, and hoping that each embarrassing escapade will be the last.

One might get the impression from the above discussion that Kenyan marriages are always problematic, but in her didactic novel The River and the Source, Ogola presents an almost utopian picture of marriage. She begins by reversing the traditionally accepted practice of polygamy. The first generation heroine, Akoko, is married to a chief who is expected to have several wives. But Owuor refuses to exercise this right: “How could he tell them that
since he married his wife, he had profoundly lost interest in all other women?” (p.27). Owuor treats Akoko as an intelligent person, and between them there is companionship: “She was unafraid of him, and spoke candidly on almost any subject. She also had an acerbic but witty tongue, which unless she was angry with him, rarely ever failed to make him laugh. Besides her advice on most matters was sound and he formed the habit of going over to her hut after the evening meal just to hear her talk” (p.27).

Thus Akoko enjoys a marriage that many modern-day Kenyan women only dream about, in that she has the companionship of her husband. This is a different picture from the one we usually get about marriage in Africa, especially in the traditional setting, where women exist to serve men and bear their children. Lauretta Ngcobo explains the conception of marriage underlying the practice in many cultures of parents choosing husbands for their daughters: “This emphasizes the paramount reason for marriage itself. It is not marriage; it is the children of the marriage; it is not the companionship, nor the love or friendship, nor the mutual emotional satisfaction of the couple” (p.142). Jedidah in “The Other Woman” articulates the complaint of many Kenyan middle-class wives on this point when she complains to her husband: “You never have time for me, or for the children, or for anything that can keep this home together. It is always meetings, business lunches and parties” (p.40).

Another departure from tradition to be found in Ogola’s novel concerns the practice of paying bride price. When Awiti, Akoko’s grand-daughter, is ready to marry, her mother Nyabera and grand-mother insist upon payment of only a token bride price, which angers Awiti’s uncle: “He himself would have set it twice the normal amount if not more. Who ever saw such beauty, such learning? It was a waste” (p.138). But the two women are adamant,
and inform the prospective in-laws: "For this jewel there can be no price. Therefore we have
decided to give her to you free except for a token bull, two cows and six goats with which
to furnish the requirements of Chik" (p.139). When the time comes for Awiti's son to marry
Wandia, a medical doctor, Wandia's mother wants no bride price: "Her mother informed me
that the only thing she wanted was for me to live in peace with her daughter" (p.255). It is
interesting to note that in both Awiti's and Wandia's case, it is their mothers who make the
decision not to follow the custom of "selling" their daughters. Even though they are widows,
they are able to override any objections from their husbands' male relatives because of
Christianity. Indeed, Christianity is presented in Ogola's novel as offering emancipation for
women, as illustrated by the case of Nyabera, Awiti's mother. After the death of her husband,
another husband, "a second cousin to the dead man", is found for her in accordance with Luo
tradition, to sire children "to maintain the dead man's name and to keep his widow from
wandering from man to man" (p.91). But Nyabera decides to rebel: "She would cut herself
off from her people. She would seek another life, a different way". With her mother's
blessing, she leaves their village to join a Catholic mission, where she eventually makes a
home for her children and their grandmother. Her daughter Awiti is able to attend the mission
school and thus begin the tradition of education for girls in the family.

If the main women characters in The River and the Source are all happily married
(unless they are widowed), it is because the author pairs them with enlightened male
characters. Indeed, this can be considered a novel of men's emancipation as well as women's.
The case of the traditional chief who rejects polygamy was discussed above. Another example
of an emancipated man is Awiti's husband Mark, who helps his wife around the house,
unusual behavior for an African man: “She was constantly overworked in spite of the house help they had. Seven children at home and forty in a classroom are a lot of work; so Mark took to helping her around the house - especially in taking the children off her hands. His friends derided this for a while but when he proved adamant, they gave him up as a lost cause” (p.163). Awiti’s son Aoro encourages his wife Wandia, a doctor, to accept a one-year scholarship to study haematology in the USA, leaving him to look after their children. Aoro, who is also a doctor, is not threatened by the fact that his wife eventually becomes the first Kenyan woman to receive a Doctorate in Medicine.

In Rebeka Njau’s novel Ripples in the Pool, marriage is just another relationship doomed to fail. Njau’s fiction is the most complex of the works studied, and some critics have interpreted it on a symbolic level, as a reading of the Kenyan post-colonial society. According to Bryce-Okunlola, “Njau chooses to explore the communal neurosis of Kenyan society through the psyche of one woman, and through the perversion of all relationships in which she is involved” (p.209-210). The critic adds that “the powerful symbolism of Njau’s narrative suggests that Selina’s neurosis is Kenya’s, and arises from the society’s alienation from its roots, from traditional morality with its healing power” (p.212). Selina, a successful nurse/model/prostitute in the city, decides at the age of thirty-three to get married “to a man she could handle with ease, a man who would idolize her and make her feel indispensable” (p.4). She chooses Gikere, “a man no other woman had ever touched, a man six years younger than she was” (p.4). Since Selina has money that can help him realize his dream of opening a clinic in his village, Gikere marries her against his mother’s wishes, and moves to the village with her.
The conflict between Selina and her mother-in-law makes sense when examined in the light of Bryce-Okunlola's reading of Njau's novel. Njau uses the most stereotypical characterization of both women to achieve the unrelenting negativity of the relationship, which in turn sours other relationships. Selina is obviously a misfit in the village, but with her money, she occupies a privileged position that she could use to gain acceptance, since money is shown to play an important role in the village, just as it does in the city. But this does not happen, because her mother-in-law does not give her a chance to ingratiate herself with the villagers. Gikere's mother is portrayed as a meddling, possessive woman, "one of the most despicable characters in the novel" (Porter, p.68). She cannot accept a city woman as daughter-in-law, and is the first one to insult Selina: "You are not a woman. That is what is wrong with you. You will never bear him children" (p.36). The older woman's intense dislike of Selina is no doubt based on the view held by rural folk that the prostitute embodies the evil of the city, as the discussion by passengers on the bus to Kamukwa reveals: "The prostitute is unclean. She must never get near our children. Her strong-scented body offends the nostrils. Let her remain in the city where the air is dead, where men live who have ceased to smell the freshness of the flowering bean plant. These are her men. They empty their money into her hands when their children are starving" (p.94). The discussion ends with reference to Selina, the "notorious woman at Kamukwa", whose husband has become "a clown, a laughing stock in the whole village" (p.94). Indeed, Selina is already aware of her reputation in the village, as she tells Gikere: "They say I'm mad. They say I'm a witch. I've been called all the filthy names in this village. Men look at me as though I'm dung itself. Women spit
when they see me” (p.67-68). Thus Selina is seen as having brought evil from the city to the village, and the village does not have a beneficial effect on her, as is the case with prostitutes in some male-authored works such as Wanja in Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*.

The confrontation between Selina and her mother-in-law at Gikere’s shop that his mother tends culminates in Selina being beaten by her husband: “For the first time, he felt he had been able to assert his manhood. He had felt new courage come to him” (p.50). This beating marks the beginning of the breakdown of their marriage, which seems almost predestined: “But now he knew very well that beating her up like that was the beginning of a path that led towards a precipice” (p.50). The beating proves to Selina that, as a weak man, Gikere is capable of resorting to violence to assert the domination expected of a husband, and this turns her completely against him, even when he begs for forgiveness. She transfers her affections to his younger sister Gaciru, who is living with them. As Celeste Delgado puts it, “she exchanges the role of dominated woman/wife for a relationship in which she attempts to ‘possess’ the innocence of her husband’s sister” (p.143). She explains to Gaciru why she is attracted to her: “Your hand soothes me because it has the warmth and the innocence of a world which has not been confused; a world which has not been littered with dirt and filth” (p.111). When Gaciru falls in love with Selina’s relative Karuga, Selina murders both of them as the madness that has been slowly taking over her mind finally erupts.
Motherhood

Filomina Steady (1981) underscores the importance of children to African women when she incorporates motherhood into her definition of an African feminism:

The most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role as a whole [...] The importance of motherhood and the evaluation of the childbearing capacity by African women is probably the most fundamental difference between the African woman and her Western counterpart in their common struggle to end discrimination against women. (p.29)

The importance of the theme of motherhood in works of literature by African women is an indication of the extent to which women have internalized the idea that motherhood defines womanhood. In the works by Ogot and Ogola, motherhood goes hand in hand with marriage, as its natural outcome. Njau presents the flip side of the coin, the case of the woman who is unable to bear a child, and the effect that childlessness has on her.

Ogot's married women characters are all mothers, and they take pride in having many children. The fact of living in the city does not seem to affect the size of families, as one would expect. Anastasia in "The Wayward Father" (The Island of Tears), is a mother of seven, despite the fact that she has a full-time job. In the story entitled "In Memorium (Alan Mjomba)" (The Island of Tears), Joan articulates the internalized discourse on the joy of motherhood. When her husband expresses concern over her difficult deliveries, and suggests they stop after the fifth child, she assures him that she does not mind the ordeal, since "having babies was a woman's natural obligation; an obligation that brought with it untold joy" (p.39-
What she has not told her husband yet is that she is already pregnant with a sixth child, because “deep inside, she wanted many children and she would quietly have them without any fuss” (p.40).

In The River and the Source, Ogola initiates an emancipatory discourse on women by reversing the inferior status reserved for female children in Luo culture. Akoko, the first generation heroine, is the seventh child born to a chief who already has six sons. On hearing her first cry, he thinks he has another son, “another rock for my sling” (p.9). Though he is mistaken, he does not dismiss his daughter as unimportant, as would be expected: “Later he would say wisely, with something of a turnabout, that a home without daughters is like a spring without a source; for it was his right as a great chief not only to lead but to utter wisdom as well, change of heart notwithstanding” (p.9). The author is showing the role of traditional discourse in the construction of women’s identity in African cultures, and the process by which the patriarchy puts in place the so-called “wise sayings”. Since most of these saying are used to justify the oppression of women, they have to be challenged as part of the struggle to improve the status of women.

In Ripples in the Pool, Njau does not allow her heroine Selina to experience motherhood, and her three pregnancies all result in miscarriages. On one level, Selina’s inability to bear a child can be seen as fitting into the stereotype of a prostitute, especially as perceived by rural folk, as the following conversation between Gikere and his mother shows:

‘She has just had a miscarriage, hasn’t she?’
‘That was bad luck.’
‘Women like her are sterile.’
‘You do not like her, I know.’
'She will never keep a baby in her womb.'
'How can you be so sure of that, mother?'
'I know her. I know what she has been through. If you do not believe me, I can only say, wait and see.' (p.12)

Though we are never told exactly what Gikere’s mother knows about Selina, the fact that she equates miscarriage to sterility shows how important it is to her that Selina fit the profile of the sterile prostitute as represented in popular discourses about the city and its evils.

It is interesting to note that this view of the prostitute might actually correspond to a certain reality, supported by research. In a study entitled “Women ‘Entrepreneurs’ of Early Nairobi”, Janet Bujra found a clear relationship between prostitution and infertility. But rather than attributing infertility to prostitution, she sees the reverse to be the case, finding that infertile women sometimes left marriages to take up prostitution: “Infertile women are unlikely to enjoy permanent formal marriages, since most men wish for children in such marriages”. Thus, “childlessness is perhaps what drove some women away from home in the first place” (p.225). These women became the most successful prostitutes, simply because it is easier to “operate without the incumberance of children” (p.225).

On a symbolic level, Selina’s childlessness is meant to represent the failure of a corrupt post-colonial society where nothing seems to thrive. The dichotomy “modernization/tradition” is played out through the conflict between Selina and her rural mother-in-law. Gikere’s mother speaks as the voice of Gikuyu tradition, and expresses the view that motherhood defines womanhood:
‘You are not a woman. That is what is wrong with you. You will never bear him children. And do you know what that means?’
‘How dare you say that to me?’
‘Because I know you, and I know where you come from. Your whole generation is sterile!’ (p.36)

According to Celeste Delgano, in the above exchange Gikere’s mother “broadens her critique of Selina’s personal life in the city to encompass the new post-colonial generation Selina represents” (p.140). It is this generation that has experimented with contraceptives in the name of development, tampering with nature and acting contrary to African cultural values with regard to fertility. Delgano gives a brief summary of the history of contraception in Kenya, to situate the old woman’s charge of a sterile generation:

The capital and locus of modernization, Nairobi also served as the national site of contraception. Private physicians began to make contraception available in Nairobi and Mombasa as early as 1950. In 1961, Kenya became the first African member of International Planned Parenthood. By 1974, the time of Njau’s writing, the City Council of Nairobi alone had established forty-three dispensaries, serving 20 percent of the country’s acceptors of contraceptive devices. (p.140)

Thus Selina, representing modernization and the evils of the city, has to be “sterile” in the eyes of her mother-in-law, in spite of three miscarriages, two of them caused by Gikere beating her.

Women and work

On the theme of women and work, the novels under consideration give a broad range of career possibilities for women, depending on their education. These jobs range from domestic service and prostitution for women with little or no education, through teaching,
nursing and secretarial work for those with primary or high school education, to Electronics
Expert and Professor of Medicine for women with a university education. But if many
professions are mentioned in the texts, few are actually explored or discussed from the
woman’s point of view. We are not given as much information about women in the public
domain as we are about their private and domestic lives. This imbalance is not peculiar to
Kenyan writers. In her study on Senegalese women novelists, Susan Stringer found that the
authors tended to concentrate on the particular aspect of a woman’s existence most
interesting to them as social commentators, with the result that “although a good number of
the main female characters in the Senegalese novels by women are professionals and others
are students, this aspect of their lives is mostly mentioned but not shown” (p.153).

In the Kenyan texts, one of the problems faced by women in the work-place is that of
sexual harassment. Grace Ogot treats this theme in the short story “Elizabeth” (*Land without
Thunder*), in which the heroine, a secretary, is raped by her boss and suffers the tragic
consequences of this event. Elizabeth, Mr. Jimbo’s secretary, has already left two other jobs,
first with an American employer and then with a European, because of unwelcome advances
from her bosses: “Both bosses had given her the impression that she ought to be a cheap girl
ready to sell her body for promotion and money” (p.190). But Mr. Jimbo, her third boss and
an African, seems to respect her for her abilities. Indeed, the Labour Officer had assured
Elizabeth that “working for a fellow African with the country’s progress at heart would be
different” (p.199). Mr. Jimbo knows how to win her confidence: “I hate to leave you to walk
to the hostel alone when it is so late, but I don’t believe in giving lifts to young girls. Soon the
town would start gossiping and you would get a bad name for nothing” (p.193). Elizabeth
comes to trust her new boss, and does not mind working late. Thus she is caught completely off-guard when he returns to the office one Saturday afternoon and makes advances to her, and when she resists him, he rapes her. At the Labour Office where Elizabeth goes to look for another job, the Officer expresses her concern at the prevalence of sexual harassment in offices: “I can’t press you to tell me the story, my child - my heart is full to the brim with story after story of you women who have suffered shame and cruelty in this city. You see those young women out there. They are secretaries and typists who want different jobs” (p.199).

Unfortunately for Elizabeth, she gets pregnant from the rape. Rather than face the shame of discovery and explanations, she commits suicide by hanging herself in Mr Jimbo’s laundry room while the family is out, after attaching a note to the door: “I have come to stay, it is chilly standing at the door, so I thought I would wait for you in the laundry-room. It is me, Elizabeth” (p.203). She has taken care to leave her personal journal with Mother Hellena, her last employer, who hands it over to the police after Elizabeth’s suicide is discovered. In his brief mention of this story, Lloyd Brown (1981) is of the opinion that “apart from Elizabeth’s tragic victimization nothing happens in the story. There is no punishment for the man, or even the likelihood of one. We are left with a pious declaration by one of Elizabeth’s older women friends: man has defied the laws of society; God alone will deal with him” (p.30). While this interpretation is indeed justifiable, it is important to ask why the author ends the story in this way. Brown considers this kind of passive piety appropriate in Ogot’s fiction because nothing really changes in her world: “In one sense, the persistence
of the status quo in Ogot's fiction reflects a possible, satiric realism about the persistence of human behavior, especially sexual attitudes, and the basic continuity of human nature. Alternatives, such as they are, are in the hands of God” (p.31).

In this analysis of Ogot's writing, Brown resorts to the kind of facile criticism levelled at Ogot by Maryse Condé (1972) namely, that she writes as a Christian, with the result that “her female characters possess neither coherence nor credibility” (p. 142). Commenting on Elizabeth's suicide, Condé asks: “Is that the solution that Grace Ogot offers to the problems of the growing number of young working women?” (p. 142). By dismissing Ogot in this manner, these critics fail to appreciate the serious issue raised in this story, that of sexual harassment and violence towards women. Considering that Ogot's story was written in the 60s, years before the problem was named and addressed even in the West, Ogot should be given credit for treating it in her fiction, even if she fails to offer a satisfactory solution to the young woman’s dilemma. If there is no question of punishment for Mr. Jimbo, this is because Ogot's story is reality-based, and as the following discussion shows, rape as a crime is not often punished in Kenya even today.

In the West, women are still being educated about rape and encouraged to report it as soon as it happens. They have been made aware that rape is not always committed by strangers, as the term “date rape” implies. But the idea of having to testify publicly in a court of law still keeps many women from reporting rape. If women in the West, with the law on their side, are reluctant to accuse men of raping them, one can imagine the situation in Africa, where women's sexual rights are still a long way from being spelled out. The problem of rape as a crime is further complicated by the silence that surrounds sexual matters in many African
cultures, as well as by the definition of what constitutes rape. As we saw in the section on marriage in this chapter and the previous one, African men are socialized to expect women to cater to their sexual needs, and the question of whether a woman wants sex or not is usually irrelevant. To make matters worse, in certain African cultures, the proper sexual behavior for a woman is to act unwilling and to show no enthusiasm for sex, even if she wants it. Thus a woman who says “no” is hardly ever taken seriously, and rape results. Women are raped daily by men in their lives: husbands, boyfriends, bosses etc.

In Kenya, it was not until the tragedy at St. Kizito High School in July 1991 that violence towards women was publicly addressed. According to the Weekly Review, most of the 306 boys went on a rampage in revenge for the girls’ refusal to join a strike against the headmaster. They broke into the dormitory where the 271 girls had taken refuge, and in the melee that followed, 19 girls were crushed to death, 100 were injured, and 71 were raped. The reaction of public figures to the news of the rape is indicative of the prevailing attitude toward sexual crimes in Kenya: “While politicians countrywide publicly mourned the deaths of the 19 girls, there was hardly any direct response to the report that 71 had been raped or to remarks attributed to the school’s headmaster that the Kizito boys ‘meant no harm; they only wanted to rape’” (Weekly Review, 9 Aug. 1991, p.5). As a result of the Kizito tragedy, the leaders of Kenya’s women’s movement\(^1\) were forced to admit failure as far as gender issues were concerned, as Patricia Stamp (1995) explains: “Reflecting on the massacre, women leaders understood the penalty women were paying for the movement’s quietism. In

\(^1\) The term “women’s movement” as used in Africa has nothing to do with the women’s movement in the West, but refers to women’s associations.
steering clear of strategic gender interests in order not to incur accusations of disloyalty and collusion with selfish Western feminists, the women's movement also had steered clear of the issue of sexual violence” (p.84). The reason why women leaders tend to avoid sensitive gender issues is that the movement is indirectly controlled by men, to whom some of the leaders owe their positions, as one official admitted: “She agreed that some women leaders, especially those in the Kanu Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation, were placed in their positions of leadership by powerful men and, consequently, had no voice of their own” (Weekly Review, 13 Sept. 1991, p.15). The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation, considered the leading NGO for mobilizing women (Nzomo, 1993), was coopted as a wing of the ruling party KANU in 1989, thus losing its autonomy.

Prostitution as a means of earning a livelihood or supplementing a woman’s income has become an important category of women’s work all over Africa, especially with worsening neo-colonial economies. In the texts studied in this chapter, we do not encounter any full-time prostitutes; the women practicing prostitution do so in addition to their other jobs. In Njau’s Ripples in the Pool, we have Selina, a nurse by profession. Before marrying Gikere and moving to the village with him, Selina is a financially independent woman in the city, thanks to the extra money she makes by offering herself to men who can pay well and treat her to nice things: “I love beautiful things. [...] But I make men pay for them. If they want me, they must spent their money” (p.2). Although Selina seems to enjoy the sexual power she has over men and which makes them empty their wallets so willingly, she resents the fact that they are using her, as she later tells her husband in an affort to explain why she has lost all interest in men, including him: “I feel sick, very sick, when I remember how they
used me like a dog just to satisfy their hunger and never allowed me to satisfy my own desires” (p.66). In the final analysis, sexual power is subordinate to financial power, with the result that it is men who control the game, and a woman has to please them if she is to get her reward.

In The River and the Source, the author hints at prostitution through the character of Becky, one of the fourth generation heroines. As Vera’s beautiful twin, she is not really interested in higher education, and runs away to the city after high school to train as an air hostess. She meets and lives with a white man who keeps her in great comfort: “Becky’s flat, from the carpet on the floor, to the pictures on the wall spelled one word - money. Vera stood dumbfounded in the doorway. She had thought that only ministers and directors of large companies could afford to live like that” (p.206). Becky eventually marries her white boyfriend, but the marriage breaks up after a few years, and John returns to Canada. Left alone, Becky begins dating a lot of different men, as her sister explains: “Since she and John broke up she has thrown all caution to the winds. It’s almost as if she hates herself. Everytime I see her she has a different man and she doesn’t care who knows it and that includes her own children” (p.261).

This brief allusion to semi-prostitution in Ogola’s novel would not be worth mentioning except for the fact that Betty dies of Aids. Appearing in a didactic novel written in the 90s by a medical doctor, and given the seriousness of the Aids epidemic in Africa, the treatment of the issue is disappointing. The first reference to Aids is in a conversation between Wandia, a doctor, and her friends, about a mutual friend who is cheating on his wife:

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"He’d better be careful; I hear there’s a disease called Aids waiting to pounce on any careless person these days."
"I have heard rumours also; but most say it is just Western propaganda. Anyway, you doctors can do miracles these days. A mere VD cannot elude a cure for too long."
"Thanks for your touching faith." (p.246)

Wandia goes on to talk about other things, without bothering to set her friend straight on the seriousness of Aids. Ogola’s stance on the issue seems to be a moralistic one, with Aids being viewed as a punishment for promiscuity. The only other mention of the disease is in connection with Becky. Wandia has just told Vera that she suspects Becky to have Aids, given her promiscuous lifestyle, and adds: “Aids is spreading faster than wildfire. Sexual behaviour and attitudes are very hard to change. For a long time people only feared pregnancy. Once that fear was supposedly banished and antibiotics became available to cure all manner of venereal disease - anything went. As for God - hasn’t he been completely forgotten if he ever existed?” (p.262). The discussion then moves on to the existence of God. Since Ogola’s novel is populated by “good women” except for Becky who receives her “wages of sin” so to speak, the author is understandably loath to dwell on the problem of Aids or its prevention. Sex is supposed to be limited to married partners, and in this novel there is no question of professional prostitution, since all girls are provided the opportunity to get an education and subsequently a job. The novel foregrounds women’s emancipation through education aided by supportive men, the ideal situation in an ideal world. But the reality for many African women is that they have little or no education, and prostitution happens to be one profession where having a body is all that is required by way of qualifications.
Critics who have written about prostitution in Africa have raised the question of its potentially liberating effect for women. In her study entitled “Women ‘Entrepreneurs’ of Early Nairobi”, Janet Bujra argues that prostitution definitely benefitted women during the colonial period when towns grew to service the colonial economy. Since women were not allowed to have salaried employment in town, they earned money by catering to the needs of male migrant labor through prostitution and other domestic services. The strategy that the women adopted to gain the necessary respectability was to convert to Islam since “Muslims were a good deal more tolerant of prostitution and of illegitimacy than were Christian missionaries” (p.229). Over time, some women were able to save money and build lodging houses which served migrant workers. Given the relative success with which these “entrepreneurs” negotiated their lives, Bujra can affirm that far from being degraded by the transformation of sexual relations into a sale of service, they held their own in “respectable society” with men. From being passive sexual objects, they became actors in a social drama of their own making. And in a very real sense prostitution allowed them an independence and freedom from exploitation that would not have been possible had they chosen any of the other socio-economic roles open to them - as wives, or as workers in the formal economy of colonial Kenya. (p.215)

Thus sex as a salable commodity went hand in hand with urbanisation in the early colonial period, and prostitution, as Eleanor Wachtel puts it, “was built into the socioeconomic structure of the Kenyan town” (p.38).

In independent Kenya, prostitution continues to flourish, even though men in towns are free to have their wives and families with them, and salaried employment is open to women. One reason for this is the gradual deterioration of many post-independence African economies, resulting in rising unemployment for both men and women. More and more
women are being forced into activities in the informal sector of the economy, and prostitution is one of the most accessible ways of earning money, since it requires little investment in terms of capital. We have not come across a recent study on prostitution in Kenya, but what Pauline Songue (1996) says of Cameroon could also apply to Kenya: “Participation in semiprostitution is spreading and merits greater attention in the political and economic frameworks of researchers. Prostitution affects more and more people in Cameroon, especially young girls; there are girls who are already prostitutes at thirteen” (p.254).

If more women are going into prostitution, the changing socio-economic conditions have negatively affected the benefits described by Bujra, and today prostitutes are marginalized, symbols of all that is evil in the country. But images aside, prostitutes are working at a higher risk, mainly due to the spread of Aids. Since sexual contact is the primary means of transmission in Africa, prostitutes constitute a high-risk group, with higher chances of being infected than their partners, since “the virus is more likely to travel from men to women than the reverse” (Songue, p.254). Thus Aids has become the latest occupational hazard of prostitution, given that it is the paying client who is in control of the sexual encounter. Songue explains why prostitutes engage in unprotected sex even when they know better:

Economically, a prostitute is dependent on her client for material survival, whether he is an occasional customer or a “sugar daddy”. Consequently, she must submit to his sexual desires without always considering her risk of infection. Although prostitutes in Yaoundé and Douala are aware of the importance of using condoms, clients often refuse to cooperate. Men frequently propose a higher payment to keep a prostitute from insisting on a condom. They make offers attractive enough for many prostitutes to accept and thereby expose themselves to undue risk. (p.254)
In her conclusion, Songue makes it clear that AIDS should be considered when examining the link between women's liberation and prostitution, and is of the view that “the financial independence that prostitution can bring is only an illusion” (p.255). Carole Davies (1993) is expressing similar sentiments when she qualifies prostitution as a “questionable possibility of liberation” (p.179).

This section began with a discussion of sexual harassment and violence towards women in Kenya, and the relative lack of recourse for victims. Having seen the role that prostitution plays in the economic survival of many African women, it is useful now to bring these two themes together to show how the prevalence of prostitution in its various forms has contributed to the difficulties experienced by women in trying to deal with sexual harassment in and outside the workplace. The fact that there are women willing to offer sex in exchange for jobs, promotions, money or things makes it very hard for those who refuse to play the game. Men do not want to believe that these women are sincere, and sexual harassment ensues. To make matters worse, the term *prostitute* in African contexts is not as specific as it is in the West, as Carole Davies (1993) explains: “it is often used loosely to refer to a wide range of women who are not under the protection of patriarchy ... In some places, college students, actresses, women out alone, professional women, and other educated women, are referred to as prostitutes” (p.179).

One consequence of the extension of the semantic field covering the term *prostitute* is that many more women in the city have had to endure harassment by police. An incident narrated to Bernth Lindfors by the late Ugandan poet Okot p’Bitek to explain the genesis of his book *Song of Malaya* will be cited to illustrate the point:
Malaya refers to those great prostitute friends of ours, on whom we live and thrive in the city. They also thrive on us, of course; it’s a mutual thing. Just before the book was written, the Kenya Parliament passed a vagrancy act, the aim of which was to get rid of all prostitutes in all Kenyan cities and towns. I remember being in a drinking place in Kisumu called Cool Inn when all of a sudden the police burst in and arrested all the women in the bar, including people’s wives, daughters, girlfriends, workers - every female was arrested. Some men followed their women and got them released, but I was fuming because this had happened when we were doing nothing more than having a peaceful drink and chatting with friends ... I was furious about the whole thing, so that’s why I started writing Song of Malaya. (p. 142)

Discrimination against women is the order of the day when it comes to prostitution. Unlike in the West where men are prosecuted for soliciting prostitutes and their role thus acknowledged, in Africa women alone bear the blame. Okot p’Bitek points out this anomaly in his interview with Lindfors: “I used Malaya here to show that it’s the bishops, the politicians, it’s you and me who pretend we don’t do these things, who are really sustaining prostitution” (p. 142).

Woman’s body and sexuality

Unlike francophone women writers who began to write more explicitly about the body following Awa Thiam’s La Parole aux negresses published in 1978 (Mouralis 1994), Kenyan women authors continue to write with the reserve dictated by cultural taboos on matters of the body and sexuality. In chapter one, there was a brief discussion of the two broad categories into which critics divide women writers, that is, first and second generation writers (Adams 1993). The first generation writers were the pioneers who started publishing in the 1960s, while the second generation appeared on the scene in the later seventies, eighties and
nineties. One of the major differences between these two generations is that second generation writers are transgressing societal taboos on what women can openly talk about (Cazenave 1996). Although the authors discussed in this chapter could be classified into the two categories, with Grace Ogot and Charity Waciuma in the first generation, Rebeka Njau and Margaret Ogola in the second, there is no remarkable difference in their handling of the theme of the body. None of the authors transgress cultural taboos when talking about the body, since they limit their descriptions to outward appearances from the point of view of male expectations. The female body as a woman lives it is not really discussed, except for a few references to sexual desire, some of them by way of euphemisms.

Breasts are one aspect of a woman’s body that women authors can talk about comfortably, no doubt because in many African cultures they are considered the visible mark of womanhood and potential motherhood, and are an accepted topic of conversation. In Waciuma’s Daughter of Mumbi, young girls are aware of the importance of breasts in their culture, as Wanjiku the narrator comments: “One girl showed me the pretty marks she had made round her flat chest so that one day she would have large breasts. I said I was not worried about that. I knew I would have a big bust like my mother and my grandmother” (p.53). Later in the story, there is a competition in Scottish Country Dancing between Wanjiku’s school and a white girls’ school, which gives her an opportunity to compare breast development between the two races, and to feel superior for once:

Our white mistresses had been telling us that white girls are better than us in every respect but this day we proved the lie in it. As they were dancing I noticed their flat breasts. What a sad thing when almost all of us had such a full bust to show off, as well as our Scottish style. Perhaps the busts were why we won? We certainly deserved it after that whole year of practice. (p.108)
The question about the role of breasts in the victory shows that Wanjiku and her friends are becoming aware of western perceptions of female beauty through their colonial education, and beginning to appreciate the power of a body that is attractive to the male gaze. Thus instead of being outraged, some girls consider it an honor to be molested by the missionary husband of their teacher: "he squeezed our hands or winked at us and sometimes tried to kiss a girl, who would then tell the whole school with such a proud, happy air" (p.109). When Wanjiku describes her appearance at age eighteen, it is clear she has both Kikuyu and western standards in mind: "I am quite good looking, have a nice figure with a bust almost as big as my elder sister's for which she is famous, and my father tells me I am intelligent" (p.126). The remark about her intelligence reveals two things about the way girls are socialized: the body is what matters, and women are only as intelligent as men allow them to be. It is obvious that these attitudes will be detrimental to the emancipation of women, as the discussion in the conclusion to this chapter suggests.

We have already seen earlier that a major duty of a wife is to cater to her husband's sexual needs, whether she wants sex or not. Women writers have introduced the question of female desire in their fiction, some less timidly than others. In "The Wayward Father" (The Island of Tears), Ogot's character Anastasia reviews the blessings of her marriage, especially her husband Mika, who knows how to satisfy her sexually: "He ... was the fulfilment in her life, and her happiness doubled each day as he quenched her restlessness. To a woman this formed the foundation of a joy, dearer to her than material gains" (p.8). When Mika starts seeing another woman and no longer responds to his wife, Anastasia cannot articulate her sexual frustrations directly, but resorts to obscure, would-be poetic prose: "When the nights
came she tucked herself next to him like a burden, her body aflame with expectation unfulfilled. Gradually he would fall asleep, leaving her hopes hanging up in the air, her efforts thwarted. A rose nipped in the bud, before blooming to a full blossom, to kiss the sun still bathed in the morning dew (p.11). Anastasia has been brought up to believe that women cannot demand sexual satisfaction: “She was too proud to go begging for her own rights. It was improper to do so” (p.11).

In “The Other Woman”, Ogot touches on the problem of a woman’s sexual pleasure, which some women have never experienced. Jedidah is complaining to her friend Anna that she cannot keep up with her husband’s demands for sex, which she finds a chore. Anna is trying to persuade her that sex is fun:

“After all sex is not work. Sex is pure relaxation which one should welcome after a day’s stresses and strains. Don’t you feel like that, Jedy, when you have gone through the experience?”

“No, Anna, I have never felt anything like that and so I really don’t understand what you are talking about. For me the whole exercise is exacting and painful” (p.46)

Due to the silence surrounding sex in many African cultures, it is difficult to verify the extent of the problem. But no doubt Jedidah’s complaint can be echoed by many Kenyan women, and the absence of pleasure for women could partly explain why sexual encounters are often perceived as a duty by married women, or as transactions where women expect some sort of payment, and men expect women to be ready to offer sexual favors on request.

In Ripples in the Pool, the most complex of the works studied in this chapter, Njau presents Selina as a woman tormented by her inability to find fulfilment in relationships with men, either as a successful prostitute in the city, or as a married woman living in the village. She explains to her husband why she is no longer sexually attracted to him: her life of
prostitution and the way men used her body without any concern for her sexual pleasure has turned her against all men. With the breakdown of her marriage, coupled with the inability to bear a child, Selina shifts her affections onto Gaciru, her sixteen-year old sister-in-law: "Your hand soothes me because it has the warmth and the innocence of a world which has not been confused; a world which has not been littered with dirt and filth" (p.111). Carole Davies (1993) sees Njau’s novel as deromanticizing rural life in its reversal of stereotypes attached to village life which is usually presented as good and wholesome as opposed to the city, especially by male authors before Njau. The fact that Selina’s lesbian attraction takes place in the village makes the transgression on cultural taboos even more meaningful. In the words of Davies:

Although the narrator is critical, to a certain degree, of Selina and her inability to become a “village woman”, she allows Selina space to explore a lesbian relationship with her sister-in-law. With the inclusion of this lesbian scene, often overlooked by most critics, Njau becomes the only African woman writer in this group who attempts to provide even a small glimpse at the lives of women whose sexuality and lifestyle do not center only on men. (p.175)

However, Selina’s quest for purification through contact with Gaciru fails because the younger woman falls in love with Karuga, who condemns Selina’s attraction for Gaciru: “Her passion is sickening. It is not the normal type of love” (p.118). Karuga proposes to rescue Gaciru from Selina, but this union will not be realized since Selina strangles Gaciru out of jealousy. Celeste Delgado (1997) explains the failure of the “normal” relationship: “This return to normalcy through the mating of innocents fails as innocence collapses as a category. The justification of Karuga’s love for Gaciru as normative indicts the union in the system of compulsory heterosexuality that insures manhood only through a violent imposition of
womanhood” (p. 144). Delgado reads Selina’s story as a metaphor for the Kenyan nation, and concludes that “Njau refracts the nationalist pedagogies through the body of Selina, exposing not only the official fictions of womanhood, but the ruptures those fictions sustain” (p. 145).

Conclusion

Although the works studied in this chapter have given us an idea of the concerns of Kenyan women at various stages of their lives, it is clear that this is only a partial representation of Kenyan women. One of the criteria for the choice of texts was their portrayal of women in the urban environment, since it is in the city where conditions are changing most rapidly. Given that the authors tend to write about what is familiar to them however, what we get is a representation of women belonging to the same class as the writers, especially in the case of Ogot and Ogola, whose works are set mostly in the city. As a result, the fiction does not give us any insight into the lives of poor urban women and their struggle for economic survival, especially single women supporting dependants. Sociological research has shown that poor women have suffered the most in the deteriorating neo-colonial economies. Indeed, the severe economic difficulties that many African countries have been facing since the 1970s have made poverty “an everyday reality for most people and starvation for many, but particularly for African women and the children they support” (Robertson and Berger, p. 6).
The role of Christianity in the writing by Kenyan women deserves mention. With the exception of Rebeka Njau’s novel, the texts studied portray mainly Christian girls and women. The question one might ask is to what extent has Christianity helped in the emancipation of women. The answer is neither a clear-cut yes or no, but must be qualified. During the colonial era, girls who attended mission schools and then underwent some kind of professional training were able to enter the job market after independence and hold salaried employment. In theory, this should have ensured their economic independence from men, but in reality it did not, because of the nature of the education received. Indeed, Christian missionary education emphasized the role of women as wives and mothers, and thereby reinforced African gender values, with the result that women saw marriage and motherhood as their destiny, and unattached women got a bad name. In Ogot’s fiction, women turn to religion for solace, which means that they do not really act on the injustices they suffer. Ogola’s didactic novel is coherent in its portrayal of characters who live by their Christian principles, and so we have marriages that work because men are faithful to their wives, and by implication, wives are submissive to their husbands; and mothers-in-law get on wonderfully with their daughters-in-law. The link between education and the emancipation of women is clear in this novel: Ogola gives us women with good jobs because as girls they never had to drop out of school because of pregnancy. Unfortunately, the reality is very different from the kind of utopia depicted by Ogola, and the problems facing Kenyan women today cannot be solved by the Bible alone.

The absence of direct protest that Lloyd Brown (1981) noted in connection with Ogot’s writing seems to apply to the other writers as well. Indeed, one can say that Kenyan women write conservatively, no doubt because they feel the need to protect their image in the
society. Even as they write to disclose societal biases towards women, they are still privileged members of the middle class, unwilling to criticize the system openly. It was pointed out in the discussion of sexual harassment that Kenyan women leaders have tended to avoid sensitive gender issues, because the major women’s organization, Maendeleo ya Wanawake, has been disempowered through affiliation to the ruling party. As a result, Kenyan women have not been able to articulate a clear feminist agenda, as Patricia Stamp explains:

At the level of national politics [...] women have found it difficult to create and sustain an explicitly feminist challenge. Indeed, women’s associations have been slapped down or coopted when they appeared too threatening to the collaborative hegemony of state and local kin-based power. Right-wing and sexist forces attack self-proclaimed feminists - whether they are inspired by Western feminists or not - as yet another tool of imperialist domination undermining authentic African culture. (p.83)

Thus the lack of direct protest in Kenyan women’s writing is linked to the fear of being labelled “feminist”, as well as to the writers’ habitus shaped by African cultural values and Christianity.

Lack of political power and the ensuing marginalization of women in public decision-making have been a major obstacle to the emancipation of Kenyan women. Although women as voters play a major role in all elections, very few women are elected to parliament. For example, in 1991 there were only two elected women members of parliament, in a House of about two hundred members (Nzomo, 1993b). Even with the change to “democratic” multi-party politics in 1992, women’s representation was not much better. In April 1997, Phoebe Asiyo put before parliament a motion calling for affirmative action at different levels of leadership “to correct the imbalance in the Kenyan political landscape by putting in place legislation requiring political parties to nominate women candidates in Presidential, National
Assembly and Local Authority elections” (Daily Nation online, April 27, 1997). Such affirmative action has apparently been successfully implemented in Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa. Unfortunately, Kenyan patriarchal society is not ready to empower women: the motion was defeated, and it was obvious from some male reactions that men did not take the women’s concerns seriously. To quote two examples from the Daily Nation article: “Butere MP Martin Shikuku, who once said he has four wives and therefore knows women very well, said that women had no right to ask for preferential treatment as they made up 52 per cent of the population and could therefore vote out ‘every man in this House’ if they chose to”. Moody Awori, an Assistant Minister, told the House that “women prefer to be led by men and therefore it would be wrong to force women leaders on them”.

Going by opinions expressed in the daily press regarding women and political power, Mr Awori’s sentiments seem to reflect the attitude of the majority of Kenyan men. The decision by Charity Ngilu to present herself as a candidate for the presidency in the 1997 elections was received as a big joke, to quote a male reader: “The suggestion that we should elect a woman President is a far-fetched idea and the joke of the year. Who will vote for her? Kenyan women? Many women lack confidence in themselves and in fellow women” (Daily Nation online, May 1, 1997). The sad fact is that women themselves have become conditioned to accepting male discourse on their inferiority. The leader of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, Mrs Zipporah Kittony, is quoted by an angry female reader as one of those who tried to put down Charity Ngilu by advising her that “top leadership positions should only be left to men” (Daily Nation online, August 29, 1997).
CHAPTER 4

TWO MALE WRITERS: MONGO BETI AND NGUGI WA THIONG’O

Introduction

Mongo Beti of Cameroon and Ngugi wa Thiong’o of Kenya are among the best known male African writers. They have published extensively, and are both committed political activists against the repressive regimes that have been in place in their countries since independence. Indeed, the critique of neocolonialism and the ruling African classes has become a defining feature of Beti’s and Ngugi’s writing, both fictional and non-fictional. They are included in this study because of the concern they have expressed over the oppression of women. If the representation of women by male writers is not always accurate (hence the need for women writers to correct certain images), does this shortcoming apply even to those male writers who are sympathetic to women? The study of Beti’s and Ngugi’s novels will help answer this question. The following brief introduction to their work focuses mainly on their novels in order to situate the two works selected for study, namely Perpétue et l’habitude du malheur and Devil on the Cross.

1 Examples of their declarations on the subject are given in chapter one.
Beti’s first novel, *Ville cruelle*, was published in 1954 under the pen name of Eza Boto. Three other novels followed, signed Mongo Beti, which means “son of the Beti people” (Conteh-Morgan, p.84): *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956), *Mission Terminée* (1957), and *Le Roi miraculé* (1958). After these four “anticolonialist novels for which he has become known throughout Africa” (Bjornson, p.88), Beti maintained a fourteen-year silence. The publication in 1972 of a polemical essay entitled *Main basse sur le Cameroun. Autopsie d’une décolonisation* inaugurated a second creative phase, and marked the direction that Beti’s subsequent fiction would follow. The trial and execution in 1971 of Ernest Ouandié, the last of the leaders of the nationalist political movement, the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), provoked Beti into writing *Main basse*. The Ouandié affair and its coverage by the French press convinced Beti of the failure of the decolonization process in Cameroon. Bernard Mouralis discusses the way that writing the essay, as well as the ban placed on it by the French government, modified Beti’s vision of Africa:

Car, en définitive, de quoi s’agissait-il dans cet essai? Non de célébrer les mérites de la tradition africaine, mais de montrer, à travers un exemple précis, le rôle que pouvait jouer une grande puissance, dans un pays du tiers monde. Et, sur ce plan, *Main basse sur le Cameroun* traduit un élargissement et une mutation de la vision que l’écrivain s’était forgée de la situation de l’Afrique. En effet, à une interprétation que lui-même qualifie de “conjoncturelle” et qui tendait à expliquer la dépendance actuelle de l’Afrique comme la persistance des structures coloniales, succède désormais une conception plus systématique (et plus pessimiste) centrée sur les notions d’impérialisme et de néo-colonialisme. (74-75)

The three novels that followed *Main basse* are, to a large extent, fictionalizations of the ideas presented in the essay. In an interview, Beti explained his return to fiction: “J’ai voulu mettre sous une forme romanesque toutes les idées que j’avais mises sous une forme d’essai, de pamphlet, dans *Main basse sur le Cameroun*. Pourquoi? Parce qu’en France il y
a une tradition de ne pas saisir tout ce qui est romanesque, tout ce qui est une oeuvre d’art.” (quoted by Mouralis, p.75). The three novels, to which Kandioura Dramé refers as the “Reuben Trilogy” are: Remember Reuben (1974), Perpétue et l’habitude du malheur (1974), and La Ruine presque cocasse d’un polichinelle:Remember Reuben 2 (1979). Ruben Um Nyobé, leader of the Union des Populations du Cameroun, was assassinated by French security forces in 1958, but Beti remained “committed to Um Nyobé’s vision of a free Cameroonian nation that would emerge naturally as an expression of the people’s will” (Bjornson, p.327). Three other novels followed the trilogy: Les Deux Mères de Guillaume Ismaël Dzewatama: Futur Camionneur (1982), La Revanche de Guillaume Ismaël Dzewatama (1984), and L’Histoire du fou (1994). The last novel was written in Cameroon where Beti returned in 1991 after “thirty-two years of self-imposed exile in France” (Conteh-Morgan, p.83).

Ngugi’s first two novels, Weep Not, Child (1964), and The River Between (1965), marked the beginnings of Kenya’s literary history.² In Bardolphe’s words, “with these two novels very high standards were set and for a time no one seemed to follow Ngugi’s lead” (p.38). Both novels are set in colonial Kenya, and explore the conflicts between colonizer and colonized. Kenya, as a settler colony, experienced an especially brutal form of colonization whereby Africans were dispossessed of their land and forced to work on it as “squatters”. It took armed struggle, dubbed the “Mau-Mau rebellion” by the British, to achieve independence. Growing up, Ngugi had a first-hand experience of these events, and they are important themes in his early fiction. His third novel, A Grain of Wheat (1967), covers the

² Referring here only to literature written in English.
historical period of the Emergency (1952-1960) and ends with Kenya's first independence celebration in 1963. Although the title is symbolic of hope in a new beginning, the novel questions the real meaning of independence, and introduces the critique of the ruling classes that will be developed in later works. According to G.D. Killam, the novel "forecasts at its close the development of the political context in which Kenyan will be ranged against Kenyan", with the result that in subsequent fiction, Ngugi "evokes a wholly contemporary setting, theme and treatment. The setting is the Kenya created out of Kenyatta's repudiation of his revolutionary sensibility and his collusion with former political rivals and international finance capitalists" (133-134).

The fourth novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977), continues themes introduced in *A Grain of Wheat*, and is "Ngugi's most direct attack on the inequities and hypocrisy of the post-independence era in Kenya" (Cancel, p.547). It received a wide variety of critical reviews which Joseph McLaren summarizes in an essay entitled "Ideology and Form: The Critical Reception of *Petals of Blood*", affirming that this work "provoked a much stronger critical reaction than did earlier novels", because it was a turning point in Ngugi's "conception of novelistic form and his presentation of political ideology of the left" (p.74). The publication of the novel preceded the author's year-long detention which began with his arrest in December 1977, and was part of the "literary-political background of his incarceration" (McLaren, p.74). In *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981), Ngugi documents his arrest and detention, reflects on the country's history, and offers an analysis of the socio-political situation in postindependence Kenya. It was the production of the play entitled *Ngaahika ndeenda* (published as *I Will Marry When I Want* in 1980), that provoked his arrest. Of the
play, written in Gikuyu and performed by the rural people of Kamiriithu, Ngugi says that it "could never have called into being what was already there [...]

Classes and class struggle were the very essence of Kenyan history. The play did not invent that history. It merely reflected it - correctly" (p.72).

The Kamiriithu experience and his imprisonment marked the beginning of a new phase in Ngugi’s literary career. He decided that if he was to continue writing about class struggle and the exploitation of the people, his novels should reach as wide an audience as possible. In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1981), Ngugi analyzes his decision to write in Gikuyu. Citing his novels written in English, he explains his concern about intended audience: “After I had written *A Grain of Wheat* I underwent a crisis. I knew whom I was writing about but whom was I writing for? The peasants whose struggle fed the novel would never read it” (p.72). *Devil on the Cross* (1982) is the English translation of Ngugi’s first novel in Gikuyu, *Caitaani Mutharabaini*, written in prison and published in 1980. It is dedicated to “all Kenyans struggling against the neo-colonial stage of imperialism”. A second novel in Gikuyu, *Matigari ma Njiruungi*, appeared in 1986, followed by its English translation *Matigari* in 1989. The novel treats the return in the 1980s of a freedom fighter, Matigari, who has been living in the forest since the Emergency, and who is seeking truth and justice. In a note to the English edition, Ngugi explains the reaction of the Kenyan authorities to the novel:

By 1987, intelligence reports had it that peasants in Central Kenya were whispering and talking about a man called Matigari who was roaming the whole country making demands about truth and justice. There were orders for his immediate arrest, but the
police discovered that Matigari was only a fictional character in a book of the same name. In February 1987, the police raided all the bookshops and seized every copy of the novel. (p.viii)

Before embarking on the detailed study of Perpétue and Devil on the Cross, it is useful to mention some differences in form and content between these texts and those by women writers. As far as content is concerned, the texts by women basically treat themes related to women’s lives, tracing the socialization of girls into their adult roles of wives and mothers. They show the problems that women have to cope with in these roles, and explore the strategies that women use to survive in less than ideal circumstances, as well as to fight oppression. Although Beti’s and Ngugi’s texts have women at their center, they are not really about women, and the lives of women are used to illustrate the bigger political picture, namely the failure of post-independence African regimes. Several critics are of this view, for example Eloïse Brière, who says of Beti’s text: “Il ne fait aucun doute que les personnages féminins de l’oeuvre de Beti existent moins pour illustrer le sort de la femme en elle-même que pour exprimer les idées socio-politiques du romancier” (p. 73). Writing on the same text, Florence Stratton comments on the symbolic role played by Perpétue, whose death serves as a pretext for the quest carried out by the protagonist: “The real object of Essola’s quest, however, is to discover what has happened to his nation during the first decade after independence. And Perpétue’s story, which he reconstructs, is an allegory of that history” (p.47). Stratton makes a similar comment about the heroine of Devil on the Cross: “Sexually abused and exploited by the men of the new ruling class, Wariinga provides a useful symbol for the degraded state of neo-colonial Kenya” (p.160). She explains that despite his evident concern with gender reform, Ngugi’s portrayal of Wariinga can be seen to operate “in the
interest of preserving patriarchal relations, the very relations that confirm Wariinga as a sexual object” (p. 160). The reason for this paradox can be found in Ngugi’s “commitment to a class analysis of history and theory of revolution, a commitment that leads him to conflate patriarchy and neo-colonialism and to impose a single narrative on his heroine’s struggle against her oppression: that of class conflict” (p.160). Thus in both texts, the representation of women will have to be analyzed on two levels, the realist as well as the symbolic, to see whether the symbolic use affects in any way the efficacity of the realist representation.

Another difference between the texts by women and the two authors in question here concerns narrative technique. Beti’s and Ngugi’s texts are more complex, in that they do not follow a linear narrative style, and the authors use literary devices such as irony and satire to make their socio-political critique more effective. Although Perpétue is written in a realist mode, there is a movement back and forth in time and space as Essola conducts the investigation into Perpétue’s death and reconstructs her story. This movement gives rise to what Mouralis (1974) terms “le caractère discontinu du récit, le découssu de la chronologie” (p.59). According to him, the different explanations that Essola receives from various people who knew Perpétue are all acceptable versions of the reality, if not the truth: “Perpétue ne vise à rien d’autre en définitive que de mettre en œuvre et de confronter les récits possibles d’un même événement. [...] Chacun de ces récits doit être considéré comme une interprétation suffisante de la mort de Perpétue et se référant par conséquent à un des niveaux possibles de la réalité” (p.59). As for truth, the question will be raised as to whether Essola did not know from the start who was responsible for his sister’s death. If this is the case, then the
investigation serves the purpose mentioned by Stratton above, which is to expose the state of the country ten years after independence. The fragmentation in the narrative is symbolic of the chaotic nature of the regime.

Ngugi’s decision to write *Devil on the Cross* in Gikuyu had important implications for the novelistic form, one of which was a partial departure from realism. Since he thought consciously about his audience and the reception of his work, he decided to use Gikuyu oral traditions such as fables, as well as biblical elements such as parables, that were familiar to the people for whom he was writing. He intended for the novel to be read aloud, given that the majority of these people are either illiterate or cannot afford to buy books. In her analysis of the use of orality in *Devil on the Cross*, Eileen Julien affirms that “through its allegiance to a tradition of speech, Devil identifies itself with a class of people who, heretofore, have been literarily disenfranchised (in written literature, that is). The use of Gikuyu would make it available to those people, first and foremost” (p.146). In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi explains the use of the fantastic in his novel, which tends to blur the line between real and surreal. Citing the blatant corruption and other evils of the African ruling classes, he asks: “How do you shock your readers by pointing out that these are mass murderers, looters, robbers, thieves, when they, the perpetrators of these anti-people crimes, are not even attempting to hide the fact? [...] How do you satirise their utterances and claims when their own words beat all fictional exaggerations?” (p.80). Ngugi finds one solution in Gikuyu fables, in the character of the *marimu*, “a cannibalistic ogre who has a mouth both in the front
and the back of its head. It serves as a model of greedy consumption and corruption, mirroring Ngugi’s view of his country’s ruling classes” (Cancel, p.551). Thus in Ngugi’s text there is a relationship between form and content.

An examination of Perpétue and Devil on the Cross will show how the authors’ concern for the emancipation of women is inscribed in their fiction, and the extent to which their writing can be considered “feminist”. We will also endeavor to understand how the feminist cause fits into the authors’ political project. The representation of women in these texts will be examined according to the categories used in the previous chapters: adolescence, marriage, motherhood, women and work, woman’s body and sexuality.

Adolescence

In both texts, the authors hold strong views about the fate of young girls in neo-colonial Africa. In order to make the point more strongly, they portray heroines in a precarious situation, alone or abandoned, lacking the nurturing support of a family structure and so liable to become victims. In Perpétue, the father is dead and Perpétue is at the mercy of Maria, her tyrannical mother who “sells” her in marriage at the age of fourteen. Of course, there is no guarantee that the father would have acted any differently, given the way the older generation is usually portrayed in Beti’s works. But Perpétue’s tragedy is directly linked to the departure of Essola, her elder brother, who leaves home to join the Rubenists. He is later arrested and spends six years in prison, and it is the news of Perpétue’s death that makes him recant Rubenism in exchange for freedom. Antonia, his other sister who was also sold in
marriage, blames him for leaving: “tu étais celui qui devait nous servir de père et non seulement, tu ne te penchas jamais sur nous, mais, pire encore, en sortant du collège, qu’as-tu donc fait sinon nous quitter, nous abandonner? Oui, je sais, tu combattais avec Ruben, mais qu’en savions-nous, nous autres?” (p.88-89). She explains how oppressive Maria was: “mère a toujours broyé quiconque lui tenait tête”, how she sold her daughters without any concern for their happiness: “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’absence” (p.89)

The harsh critique of the institution of “la dot” is a major theme in this novel, where girls are portrayed as serving one purpose only, and that is to bring wealth to the family by being “sold” in marriage. Perpétue is pulled out of school at age fourteen, a month before she is to take her exams, to be married off to Edouard, in spite of her pleas to be allowed to finish her education. The hundred thousand francs paid to her mother is supposed to be used to acquire a wife for Perpétue’s older brother Martin. Perpétue is powerless as her life is negotiated away: “Par la suite, personne ne s’adressa plus à Perpétue […], personne ne songea à la consulter. Elle dut assister, impuissante, au bâclage de sa propre vie” (p.112). Once the money has changed hands, Edouard is not expected to wait for the wedding ceremony to start enjoying the sexual services of his future wife. Perpétue is awakened in the middle of the night by her mother and ordered to go to Edouard’s bed. The narrator’s comment about Maria’s behavior on this occasion, and the choice of metaphor, is an example of Beti’s scathing critique of “la dot”: “Maria se conduisit en cette occasion comme un commerçant résolu à honorer un contrat en livrant la marchandise dont il vient de toucher le prix” (p.113).
The irony of the whole incident is that Edouard did not ask for Perpétue (in fact he later tells her that he was shocked to see her come to his bed), and is struck by temporary impotence for a few nights.

On his return to his village after his release, Essola confronts his mother about Perpétue’s marriage: “J’avais juré que Perpétue n’épouserait jamais que l’homme qu’elle voudrait épouser [...] J’avais juré que Perpétue ne serait pas vendue; que personne ne toucherait un centime sur sa tête; qu’elle serait une épouse libre” (p.45). Essola is voicing one of the ideals of Rubenism which advocates a new society in which there will be none of the customs that oppress women. The irony here is that it was his absence from home in pursuit of these ideals, and imprisonment for them, that resulted in Perpétue’s tragedy, as Laure Hesbois points out: “Par une cruelle ironie du destin, c’est dans une certaine mesure parce que son frère luttait afin d’obtenir un régime où les femmes ne seraient plus vendues que Perpétue a été sacrifiée” (p.66). But initially, Essola does not reason this way, and is convinced that only his mother is to blame for his sister’s death: “Après ma déportation, tu as cru que tu aurais désormais les mains libres [...] Finalement, tu l’as vendue en faisant des calculs en faveur de ton fils bien aimé. Et voilà le crime d’où devait découler la tragédie. Alors, je déclare ceci, maman: parce que tu as vendu Perpétue, eh bien, l’assassin de Perpétue, c’est toi ...” (p.45-46).

Beti’s novel makes a powerful statement about the status of girls, portraying them as objects of exchange without a say in their own fate. In a family, girls do not really count, as the narrator points out in the case of Perpétue: “elle n’avait jamais compté, elle avait toujours compté moins que n’importe lequel des deux garçons, fût-il à la mamelle”. The only time
people start noticing a girl is at puberty when nature begins to prepare her for market. Even Essola, for all the love that he claims to feel for his dead sister, cannot remember what she looked like before he left home: "Ce qui redoublait sa désolation, c’est que, il eut beau tâcher à se rémémorer Perpétue, il constatait avec surprise que son souvenir n’en gardait pas d’autre image que celle d’une enfant fragile, silencieuse, vite effarée" (p.48-49). The reason he cannot remember her is that he never really saw her, as he admits to Crescentia: “Je n’arrive justement pas à me souvenir, figure-toi; elle avait peut-être onze ans, douze ans au plus; c’était une très jeune enfant. Je ne me rappelle même pas l’avoir vraiment regardée, ni même vraiment vue. Je pensais à tant d’autres choses. J’ignorais qu’elle allait mourir prématurément” (p.54). Thus the future Rubenist has no time for his sister, who is left at the mercy of Tradition as represented by their mother. References to the father-figure in this novel make it clear that enlightened male protection is necessary for the survival and emancipation of girls. But the same father-figures are too busy with the project of nation building, which is their first priority. Essola, realizing his share of the blame in Perpétue’s death, will try to ease his conscience by using the accounts he has obtained from various people who knew her to write his sister’s story, especially the events surrounding her death, in order to confront his mother and the custom she stands for: “Il tint à faire le point, et s’il se pouvait, la synthèse des informations recueillies, espérant se mettre ainsi en position d’accabler sa mère et, avec elle, l’affreuse tradition qui lui avait permis, sous prétexte de marier Perpétue, de livrer une enfant pieds et poings liés à son tortionnaire” (p.91). But while Essola is engaged in this academic exercise, tradition endures and other patriarchs sell their
daughters. The title of Beti’s novel seems to imply that the “habit of unhappiness” will continue for many, but especially for girls, as long as the socio-political conditions do not change.

In the texts by women, the education of girls was an important factor in the emancipation of women. This is not the case in the male-authored texts, in which the heroines are not given a chance to finish school, even though the authors take care to invest them with superior intelligence and dreams of a career. At her mission school, Perpétue is inspired by the French doctor, Mademoiselle Delestrane, whom the girls take turns helping in the dispensary. She dreams of working in the medical profession one day, with her brother’s help: “Perpétue avait espéré qu’Essola alors favoriserait l’ambition qu’elle caressait en secret de tous, excepté Crescentia, en protégeant et en facilitant ses études. Perpétue rêvait de soigner les malades” (p.93). But she is doomed to failure, given her brother’s arrest and her mother’s sentiments about education in general and for Perpétue in particular: “cette fillette me navre avec ses livres, son école, cette femme docteur. Voilà bien des idées étranges pour une petite fille de chez nous” (p.97). Perpétue’s failure to achieve her dream is symbolic, as Stratton explains: “In her optimism and enthusiasm as a school girl and in her ambition to train as a medical doctor so that she can replace the expatriates she believes will soon be leaving, Perpetua embodies the national mood and the nationalist goals of the Rubenists at the time of independence” (47). It seems surprising that when her mother comes to take her away from school, nobody at the school intervenes, given that missions could sometimes provide a refuge for girls threatened by traditional customs, as was the case in
Ogola’s *The River and the Source*. But it turns out that on the day her mother comes for her, Perpétue does not tell anybody that she is leaving, not even her friend Crescentia, who explains to Essola:

- Je me rappelle encore fort bien Perpétue se levant, demandant à sa voisine de s’effacer pour la laisser passer, foulant l’allée à grandes enjambées, franchissant le seuil, s’abîmant dans le grand jour, happée par cette chose cruelle qu’on appelle le destin d’une femme. Jamais plus, je n’allaïs revoir Perpétue en écolière; elle ne rentra même pas dans la salle de classe, pour y ramasser ses affaires que je trouvai intactes, à sa place, le lendemain. (p.58-59)

In the interest of creating what Ambroise Kom terms “personnages-symboles”, Beti displays a fatalistic streak in his portrayal of women in *Perpétue*. The heroine is already condemned to a miserable life by her destiny as a woman, which other events simply exarcebate. Essola’s arrest, which meant the end of Perpétue’s dreams, is given as the motivation for her submission to her mother’s will, for her apparent willingness to abandon her studies without complaining to anybody:

Perpétue fut inconsolable; à deux jours de poignantes crises de larmes, succéda une désolation plus secrète, dans laquelle elle parut se retrancher sans s’y égarer, conservant une décence et une dignité qui lui gagnaient l’admission. Devina-t-elle alors qu’elle était vouée au sacrifice? Crescentia confia que, pendant les quelques quinze mois qu’il leur restait à vivre ensemble, elle n’allait plus l’entendre énoncer le plus petit projet, ni formuler un soupçon de désir, comme si elle se fût rangée parmi ceux qui n’ont rien à attendre de la vie. (p.98)

The sacrificial role played by Perpétue means that Beti often portrays her as a victim, destined to fail, in spite of all the qualities that distinguish her from other girls. Indeed, the narrator paints a glowing picture of Perpétue’s physical and moral attributes: “Sa grâce, sa sveltesse, son extrême pudeur, une application austère même dans les moindres besognes, un détachement sans exemple qui faisait croire à tort à de l’insensibilité, tranchaient sur le tour
The author thus isolates the heroine from other girls and elevates her on a pedestal, the better to critique the society that allows her to be sacrificed to die at the young age of twenty. By lumping all other girls together and dismissing them as clumsy and stupid, Beti betrays his preoccupation with creating symbolic characters rather than trying to represent the reality of women’s lives.

In Devil on the Cross, Ngugi’s heroine suffers abandonment too. Wariinga’s parents are arrested and detained during the Emergency, her father in 1954, and her mother a year later. Wariinga, then only two, is taken in by an aunt. Her parents are released in 1960, “only to find that their small piece of land at Kaamburu had been sold to the homeguards by the colonial regime” (p.140). This misfortune sets the stage for all the others that are going to befall Wariinga. Because she is doing very well at school, her parents decide to leave her with her aunt in Nakuru while they go to found a new home at Ilmorog. We are left in no doubt as to Wariinga’s intelligence: “Wariinga was quick at learning, and she was often top of her class. In fact, it was Wariinga who often coached her cousins at maths, even those who were a class ahead” (p.140). She has dreams of studying at the university one day, and not just the subjects often associated with girls, but engineering. But this dream is shattered when Wariinga gets pregnant in the third year of high school and has to leave school. Just as in Perpétue’s case, adolescence seems to be a dangerous age for a girl, for then nature intervenes and people begin to notice and exploit her. Wariinga’s blossoming beauty is hard to ignore: “By that time her breasts had developed. Her hair had grown long and brilliantly black. Her cheeks had blossomed, smooth and luscious like fruits in a good season” (p.141-
142). The man responsible for Wariinga’s pregnancy is a friend of her aunt’s husband, and in the story is known only as the Rich Old Man. Unbeknownst to her, Wariinga is the return favor promised to the Rich Old Man by her “Uncle”: “Uncle did not simply pick up good fortune from the ground for free. Oh, no. He promised his wealthy friend from Ngorika some ‘veal’ or a ‘spring chicken’. Wariinga was going to be the chicken whose feathers would be plucked one by one, leaving the flesh naked and unhampere, soft food for a toothless old man” (p.142). The Rich Old Man symbolizes the corrupt ruling classes, whose greedy consumption includes the sexual exploitation of young girls. By introducing these girls to a life of luxury, the men turn them from their goals and thus cause them to be dependent on men for the rest of their lives. Even before Wariinga gets pregnant and has to leave school, she begins to hate it, preferring to be with the Rich Old Man than at school, with the result that “her dreams of learning and of ending up at the university to read for a degree in engineering vanished into thin air” (p.144). But when she tells her lover about her pregnancy, he denies being responsible, and Wariinga finds herself alone with her problem. She tries to commit suicide on two occasions, but is rescued both times by Muturi, the man who later plays a crucial role in her transformation. Thus Wariinga, as the symbol of the country’s exploitation an degradation, is not allowed to enjoy a care-free adolescence: “Was she fated to walk forever along thorn-covered avenues? Was she destined to carry a heavy load in her heart forever?” (p.150). The fatalistic nature of the destiny of young girls is underscored by Wariinga’s use of a Gikuyu metaphor: “If a clay pot is broken, it can never be mended. That’s how the dreams of us sugar girls are destroyed by sugar daddies” (p.137).
Although Ngugi raises the problem of teen pregnancy in this text, the object here is more to illustrate the exploitation of the poor by the rich, than to represent the reality of girls in this situation. Indeed, when Wariinga starts telling her story, she replaces herself with Mahua Kareendi, the archetype of all victimized girls: “Take a girl like me [...] Or take any other girl in Nairobi. Let’s call her Mahua Kareendi. Let’s assume that she was born in a village or in the heart of the countryside” (p.17). Kareendi’s name is symbolic and means “a young girl beautiful like flowers” (Meyer, p.48). Women appear to be subject to a certain kind of biological determinism in Ngugi’s work, since the blossoming girl’s body spells doom for her: “Before she reaches Form Two, Kareendi has had it. She is pregnant” (p.17). Or, as Wariinga explains later: “At the time a girl is dreaming of a bright future filled with heroic deeds, her breasts have not yet developed. But just wait for them to develop. Wait for her cheeks to bloom” (p.136). Kareendi’s peasant origins are made to fit the pattern of Ngugi’s critique of Kenyan society according to which peasants and workers are the principal victims of oppression. Devil on the Cross is organized around the dichotomy between the rich and the poor, the oppressors and the oppressed. There is an oversimplification of issues: the rich are bad and the poor are good, and this lesson is brought across through the use of a few representative characters. Thus we are shown one peasant girl whose life is ruined by a rich man. Unlike what happens in Petals of Blood where the heroine also gets pregnant while in school but kills the baby after delivering it, Kareendi/Wariinga keeps her baby: “Let’s say Kareendi refuses to take drugs. It is appalling that babies should emerge from their mothers’ wombs as corpses. Kareendi has the baby. And she doesn’t throw it into a pit latrine, nor does she abandon it at the roadside or in a bus” (p.18). In this novel, Ngugi adopts the discourse
of his intended audience in reference to abortion: only prostitutes and "bad" city girls have abortions. Wariinga's parents, though dispossessed of their land and no doubt struggling, offer to take care of the baby while she goes back to complete high school, take a typing course, and work in Nairobi. Thus peasants come across as mainly decent human beings in their struggle and poverty. In the conflict between the rich and the poor, the author grants the poor a symbolic victory through his heroine. At the end of the novel, the older, transformed Wariinga kills The Rich Old Man. Cook and Okenimkpe explain the "melodramatic finale":

She guns down the Rich Old Man as retribution for the social evil he epitomizes. Wariinga and the Rich Old Man are stereotypes in a stylized enactment. So there are none of the moral or human complexities which surround the dramas of Waiyaki, Njoroge, Mugo. The issue is stark, clearcut, readily comprehensible by a wide-ranging readership. The Rich Old Man is the enemy and he is struck down without regrets, without reservations. (p.138)

Marriage

In Perpétue, the heroine seems to abandon herself to her fate as a married woman once the negotiations for her life are finalized, "parlant de son mari sans haine, les premières répulsions maintenant surmontées", and appearing "telle qu'une femme résolue à réussir sa deuxième vie" (p.118). No doubt once she loses the fight against her mother, her conditioning as to her woman's role takes over, and she accepts her new life. But Perpétue is shocked when she joins Edouard in the city to find that, contrary to what his brother Zambo had led people in her village to believe, Edouard lives in the terrible conditions of the slums of Zombotown:
En entendant dire, au début de son aventure, qu’Edouard était un fonctionnaire privilégié, dont l’Etat défrayait toutes les dépenses, elle n’avait pas imaginé qu’elle ferait le feu de la même façon que Maria, mais avec du plus maigre bois, sous un trépied plus étroit, supportant des casseroles et des chaudrons minuscules, dans un local où elle pourrait à peine se redresser. (p.124)

Perpétue’s life and eventual death in Zombotown provides the author with an opportunity to critique the neo-colonial regime on various levels. Indeed, Zombotown has only been in existence since independence, and represents the worst aspects of urbanization. Kandioura Dramé explains the name: “The veiled reference to the myth of the zombie becomes important in the novel for it speaks of the struggle of the alienated person to regain his consciousness and power of creativity. René Depestre defines the zombie as the colonized, alienated person who should seek out the revitalizing grain of salt” (66). Having to live in the worst part of Zombotown, under the rule of an oppressive husband, Perpetue has little opportunity to be a salt-seeker. Her death after a married life of only six years testifies to this, and is symbolic of the nation’s destiny.

Perpétue’s life with Edouard is characterized by cruelty and domination. At the beginning, he treats her as a servant and nothing else. Anna-Maria, her neighbor and friend in Zombotown, remembers Perpétue always on the run: “Elle courait [...] pour servir une espèce d’homme, un soi-disant mari qui l’interpellait de loin, dans la journée, comme on siffle un médor, et qui, la nuit, s’endormait près d’elle maintenant sans plus se soucier de sa femme que si elle n’avait jamais existé” (p.122). When Perpétue humiliates her husband in public by brilliantly analyzing a question on French grammar as well as one on mathematics that had confused him in his exam, his cruelty intensifies. He stops giving her money for household expenses, and takes a mistress in town just to humiliate her: “Il prit soin d’être aperçu au
centre de la ville en compagnie de sa maîtresse, surtout les jours où il ne revenait pas auprès
de sa femme, ou le lendemain” (p.147). As though this were not enough, Edouard brings a
prostitute into the house one night, acting as though Perpétue were not even there: “Incapable
de s’endormir, elle dut subir comme un supplice le grouillements de leurs ébats provocateurs.
Un moment, elle se surprit à sangloter en silence, non de jalousie ni même d’indignation, mais
de honte, persuadée qu’elle n’aurait jamais le courage de confesser à qui que ce soit ce bain
d’abjection” (p.149). But as soon as Edouard falls asleep, Perpétue begins to beat up the girl,
and the ensuing commotion brings in the neighbors. Anna-Maria recommends that the girl be
punished: “Cette fille mérite une punition, pour lui apprendre à porter le trouble dans les
honnêtes ménages” (p.152). After a suitable cane is found, she is given “vingt-cinq coups bien
ajustés sur sur les fesses” (p.152). The fact that nobody says anything about Edouard’s part
in the affair seems to imply the same tolerance towards male infidelity that emerges in the
texts by women authors. It is also interesting to note that the punishment for the girl is
suggested by a woman.

Betí uses Perpétue to critique the form of cultural imperialism represented by the
system of education in the country, especially the teaching of French grammar. Perpétue’s
brilliant analysis and explanation of the agreement of past participles in a sentence from
Edouard’s exam provides the narrator the opportunity to denounce the role of the French
language in Cameroon:

Comme sous la colonisation, mais avec aujourd’hui la bonne conscience outrecuidante
de l’aide aux pays pauvres, on desséchait les cerveaux de la jeunesse africaine, grillés
par les aridités superfétatoires et quasi facétieuses d’un idiome étranger disqualifié au
Perpétue becomes the symbol of young African minds being wasted on irrelevant studies, one of the problems of post-independence Africa: “L’Afrique est ravagée par trois grands fléaux, la dictature, l’alcoolisme et la langue française, à moins que ce ne soient trois visages d’un même malheur” (p.132). One wonders whether Beti’s style of writing and show of mastery of the French language is not meant to illustrate the fact that he too was a “victim” of the same type of education his heroine has received. On a personal level, Perpétue’s superior intelligence and courage do not seem to benefit her at all, although the author is careful to point them out: “Bien qu’élevée en brousse, la jeune femme, d’une intelligence aussi foudroyante que pénétrante, ne se laissa point décontenancer par ce qui aurait pu lui paraître comme un folklore intellectuel particulier à la ville” (p.135-136). Thus her education does not emancipate her in any way, but serves only to intensify her persecution by Edouard, a paradox intended to serve the overall design of the novel.

Perpétue’s marriage would not be complete without the trials of polygyny. Indeed, Edouard instals a second wife in the house while Perpétue is away at her mother’s having her first baby. On her return to Zombotown, she learns about the new wife from her friend Anna-Maria, who tries to get her to accept the situation: “Vous serez deux à vous partager le même bonhomme. Voilà, c’est tout. Ce n’est pas pire qu’autre chose, sais-tu, quand on y réfléchit. Et dans un sens, c’est peut-être même une chance. Il y a des bonshommes qui sont vraiment trop lourds à porter pour les frêles épaules d’une seule femme” (p.176). Although Anna-
Maria does not have a co-wife and seems to be well treated by her husband Jean-Dupont, in her advice to Perpétue she is obviously repeating the arguments that are used to justify polygyny. The author is questioning the kind of reasoning that contributes to the formation of women’s habitus, the mentality conditioning them to accept oppressive marital arrangements. In this novel, the role played by women in maintaining patriarchal institutions is clear. It is Anna-Maria who engineers a reconciliation between Perpétue and the new co-wife, and instructs her on how to get back in Edouard’s bed. The two co-wives settle down to share their man, and we get a glimpse of the harmony between them in the following description of the end of a typical evening when Edouard has had company: “Etendues toutes les deux sur le lit qui avait été installé dans la salle de séjour depuis le retour de Perpétue au foyer, les deux jeunes femmes finissaient de guerre lasse par s’endormir. Parfois, l’une d’elles, restée éveillée, signalait fraternellement à sa compagne, s’il le fallait, la sortie des visiteurs: car, elles alternaient toutes les nuits auprès d’Edouard” (p.202). The critique of polygyny in Beti’s novel is very subtle, and the image of harmony becomes a deceptive one since it is one of the practices of the traditional society that Beti is writing against. What appears to be a defense of polygyny is presented in an imaginary speech that might have been made by Essola’s country cousin Amougou, and invokes tradition as a reason for continuing the practice, thus disqualifying the argument: “Ce jeune homme est-il le premier à prendre plusieurs femmes? Nos ancêtres n’en ont-ils pas toujours usé ainsi? Bien ne nous en a-t-il pas pris? car, autrement, qui peut dire si la race eût été sauvegardée? Et, en définitive, n’est-ce pas là l’essentiel?” (p.179).
In marriage, Perpétue becomes her husband’s property to dispose of as he pleases. After failing his exams for the seventh or eighth time, he decides to secure a post by bribing M’Barg’Onana, the police chief, using his wife. As Evelyn Ellerman explains, “Perpetua is ‘sold’ twice: first by her mother to Edward and second by Edward to M’Barg Onana. Maria extracts a substantial dowry from Edward’s brother as the price of her fourteen-year old daughter, and Edward ‘sells’ his own wife in the hope of achieving an advancement in his career” (p.31). When Perpétue, indignant, confronts Edouard for an explanation of his behavior, he mocks her naivete: “Comme tu retarde vraiment! Ce que je t’ai demandé, un peu sournoisement il est vrai, n’a rien de monstreux. Cette pratique est maintenant monnaie courante partout dans le pays, et surtout dans la capitale même, depuis l’indépendance” (p.211). Perpétue accepts the arrangement with M’Barg’Onana only because he promises to help her get in touch with her brother in prison. Since her letters to Essola are never delivered, the only people who benefit are the husband and the lover. In this incident Edouard represents the corruption of the neo-colonial regime in which everything is for sale, and the author’s point of view is expressed by Jean-Dupont and his friends “qui voyaient un retour à la barbarie dans une pratique abandonnée même par les clans ruraux” (p.214). Indeed, Beti sees the country as moving backwards, and the statement that things are worse than before independence is made several times in the novel by different characters.

In her symbolic role of sacrificial victim, Perpétue will not be allowed any escape from her oppressive marriage. When she falls in love with Zeyang and becomes his mistress of her own free will, the experience has a liberating effect on her: “Perpétue, qui avait souhaité connaître la saveur des choses qu’on accomplit de sa propre initiative, dut trouver dans sa
liaison un véritable ravissement. Comment [...] évoquer l’épanouissement rayonnant de la jeune femme maintenant méconnaissable, sa beauté transfigurée, son assurance soudaine, sa vitalité?" (p.246-247). However, she will not enjoy this new-found happiness for long: Edouard catches her with Zeyang, and triggers the events that bring about her death. The first thing Edouard does is to move the family to a big house which he reckons to be in keeping with his position: “Il avait donc bien fallu qu’Edouard, presque à son corps défendant, se mette dans une maison convenant mieux à son nouveau personnage et symbolisant son étonnante ascension” (p.250). Perpétue becomes a virtual prisoner in this house and is forbidden all outings or contact with her friends. Edouard brings in his young cousin Madeleine to do the shopping and keep track of any visitors to the house. He becomes physically abusive:

Il la souffletait pour des raisons anodines, et même en présence des enfants. Dès que lui venait un soupçon, il recourait au nerf de boeuf pour arracher à sa femme ce qu’il nommait emphatiquement la vérité. Des visiteurs confirmèrent ce dernier détail, disant avoir entendu la jeune femme gémir de douleur tandis qu’un fouet, qui claquait distinctement, lui cinglait le dos ou les fesses. (p.253)

As he oppresses Perpétue and abuses his power as a police officer in Zombotown, Edouard symbolizes Baba Toura’s tyrannical rule over the country. When he fires his gun into the air after his fight with Zeyang, sending people scattering for cover, we are told: “C’est ainsi qu’Edouard eut la révélation de son pouvoir, vraiment illimité dans sa sphère de Zombotown, tout de même que celui de son maître sur la nation. Edouard était proprement la réplique zombotownienne de Baba Toura; c’était un Baba Toura en miniature” (p.250).

Although the issue of divorce is brought up in the novel, it is more to satirize avidity and greed than to provide a solution to Perpétue’s misery. Edouard’s reaction to Zeyang’s
offer to reimburse him the hundred thousand francs his brother paid for Perpétue is a critique of the mercantile aspect of divorce. Indeed, Edouard is not content with this sum, and has prepared documents itemizing expenses incurred on behalf of Perpétue and her relatives, which brings the grand total to the round sum of two hundred and fifty thousand francs, without counting “les dépenses touchant l’entretien même de Perpétue” (p.256). Once again these negotiations highlight the role of woman as a commodity to be disposed of without her having any say in the matter: “Perpétue n’avait pas été invitée à prendre la parole. On venait une nouvelle fois de décider de son destin tout près d’elle, mais sans elle” (p.257). Of course, Edouard’s intention is to never let Zeyang have Perpétue: “Edouard avait décidé que ce serait une entreprise sans issue [...] Quand le jeune champion aurait réuni deux cent cinquante mille francs, ricanait le policier, qu’est-ce qui l’empêcherait de réévaluer, avec de nouveaux documents, le coût de sa femme, et de le fixer, cette fois, à trois cent mille, à quatre cent mille francs?” (p.258). Perpétue, pregnant with Zeyang’s child and forbidden by Edouard to go to her mother’s to await the birth of the baby as the custom would dictate, seems to lose the will to live: “elle devenait telle qu’une épave à la dérive dans une eau stagnante” (p.260). Victor Gnaore analyzes Perpétue’s death as voluntary, and sees in her brief liaison with Zeyang the explanation for her desire to die: “Porté à son point le plus élevé de conscience et d’expression au contact de Zeyang, le besoin d’identité de Perpétue ne pouvait plus s’accommoder d’un retour à l’asservissement anonyme à la Tradition sociopolitique” (p.90).

Perpétue dies alone one night, and is discovered by the houseboy in the morning: “Constatant que le soleil, inondant la pièce, n’avait pas réveillé la jeune femme comme il arrivait habituellement, l’adolescent s’approcha du grabat où gisait sa maîtresse, l’appela
plusieurs fois par son prénom, comme une grande sœur, et, comme elle ne répondait pas, il se pencha et toucha timidement sa main; elle était glacée” (p.264). The fact that there is no witness to Perpétue’s death is significant because it justifies the investigation carried out by Essola, during the course of which he takes stock of what has happened to the country since independence. All the evils in the country are traced back to the murder of Ruben on 13 September 1958 by the French, an event that made possible the corrupt regime of Baba Toura, which put a stop to any progressive changes the country might have seen. Essola had faith in Ruben and believed in the possibility of a new society, which makes him link Perpétue’s death to Ruben’s. As Bernard Mouralis explains:

L’engagement aux côtés de Ruben signifiait d’abord qu’on allait lutter contre le colonialisme et rendre le pays indépendant. Il signifiait aussi que l’arrivée au pouvoir de Ruben conduirait à la mise en place d’une société nouvelle, que des relations d’un autre type que celles dont on s’était jusqu’alors contenté seraient désormais instaurées entre les individus. La lutte menée par les militants impliquait ainsi le rejet de certaines pratiques traditionnelles. (p.100)

Maria represents the older generation that continues to perpetuate oppressive practices, and Essola’s tirade to her makes this point: “Vous avez tué Ruben ou bien vous vous êtes accommodés de son meurtre pour continuer à vendre vos filles, sans pour autant avoir à répondre des souffrances infligées à ces esclaves par la cruauté de leur maris” (p.294-295). The symbolism of Perpétue’s unborn child that dies with her is another important element in Beti’s narrative and will be discussed in the section on motherhood.

In Devil on the Cross, marriage for Wariinga does not materialize, even though she goes through a courtship period and Gatuiria, her boyfriend, takes her home to meet his parents. But it is during this visit that Wariinga discovers that Gatuiria’s father is the Rich Old
Man who got her pregnant and abandoned her. Overcoming his initial shock, the Rich Old Man has the audacity to suggest that Wariinga leave Gatuiria, and become his mistress: “Gatuiria is almost your child. So your plans are impossible as long as I’m alive, for it would be like a child marrying his own mother. [...] Be mine. Remember, you once belonged to me. I believe I am the man who changed you from a girl to a woman. And you are the mother of my child, although I’ve never set eyes on it” (p.250-251). Oliver Lovesey is of the view that in this scene Wariinga “has been constructed as a commodity of exchange between father and son” (p.159, note 9). Of course Wariinga rejects this arrangement, but because it rekindles old memories, it provides the necessary motivation for her act at the end of the story. She shoots the old man in cold blood as he kneels at her feet begging for her body, but not before speaking to him “like a people’s judge about to deliver his judgement”:

You snatcher of other people’s lives! Do you remember the game you and I used to play, the game of the hunter and the hunted? Did you imagine that a day might come when the hunted would become the hunter? What’s done cannot be undone. I’m not going to save you. But I shall save many other people, whose lives will not be ruined by words of honey and perfume. (p.253)

Thus Wariinga’s transformation as a female revolutionary is complete, and she walks away from the murder scene knowing “with all her heart that the hardest struggles of her life’s journey lay ahead” (p.254). In her critique of Ngugi’s representation of women, Elleke Boehmer does not consider his treatment of Wariinga as emancipatory in any meaningful way: “Instead of questioning processes of objectification, he places a male weapon in the hands of his women characters and sets them on pedestals as glorified revolutionaries, inspiring symbols for a male struggle” (p.195).
In the texts by women authors, the idea commonly held in Africa that women cannot live without men was amply illustrated, marriage being the desired relationship between the sexes. In Ngugi’s novel, though Wariinga starts out needing and receiving men’s protection, by the end of the story she does not need men any more, having been transformed into an “honorary male” in order to “acquire heroic status” (Stratton, p.162). But the transformation process takes time. When the story opens, Wariinga is portrayed as a weak female overwhelmed by her problems, contemplating suicide as the only way out. Indeed, within a period of two days, she is fired from her job as a secretary in Nairobi for refusing to sleep with her boss, then her boyfriend leaves her since she is no use to him without a salary, and finally she is evicted from her room by her landlord for refusing to pay a higher rent. It is interesting to note that Wariinga’s problems in the story are always caused by men. This oversimplification of the reality arises from Ngugi’s analysis of class conflict, whereby he subordinates gender to class, as Stratton explains: “Gender functions as a metaphor for class in the first section of Devil on the Cross. Sexually abused and exploited by the men of the new ruling class, Wariinga provides a useful symbol for the degraded state of neo-colonial Kenya” (p.160).

It is through male tutelage that Wariinga gains the political awareness that leads her to carry the revolutionary torch. The man responsible for her transformation and empowerment is Muturi who, in his blue overalls, represents the working class. Herta Meyer explains the symbolism of his full name: “We can distinguish callings as names, signalling the membership of a class. This applies to Muturi [the one who forges hardware from steel], the worker [...] whose full name is Muturi wa Kahonia Maithoni [son of someone who treats sick
eyes - makes people see well - the ‘conscientizer’]” (p.48). At the feast of thieves and robbers, Muturi, fearing arrest, entrusts Wariinga with his gun and confides that he is a “delegate from a secret workers’ organization in Nairobi” (p.212). But he only does this after she meets with his approval: “I observed you last night in the matatu, and I’ve watched you throughout the day in the cave, and I’ve decided that you can be trusted with a worker’s secret” (p.211). Thus Muturi’s validation is a necessary step in Wariinga’s transformation from symbolic victim to actor, and the gun symbolizes her induction into armed struggle: “This gun is an invitation to the workers’ feast to be held some time in the future” (p.211). The empowering effect of the gun on Wariinga is immediate: “Wariinga felt a strange sensation come over her. Her heart trembled. Then she felt a courage course through her whole body. She thought that there was not a single danger in the world that she could not now look in the face” (p.211).

Gatuiria, as an intellectual, also plays a role in Wariinga’s prise de conscience, but he is discredited in the end no doubt because of his bourgeois origins. He is portrayed as the “African artist in the process of rediscovering his Africanness” (Gurnah, p.154), having spent fifteen years out of the country studying European music. His dream is to compose a piece of music grounded in Kenyan culture and history. But his composition, inspired by his love for Wariinga, does not materialize, anymore than the wedding does. After Wariinga shoots his father, Gatuiria’s indecision is contrasted with her purposefulness: “Gatuiria did not know what to do: to deal with his father’s body, to comfort his mother or to follow Wariinga. So he just stood in the courtyard, hearing in his mind music that led him nowhere. [...] Wariinga walked on, without once looking back” (p.254). Brenda Cooper sees Gatuiria’s character as
a problematic one for Ngugi: “Ngugi begins by portraying him positively within the ethnic aspect of the novel, as a participant in the creation of a new national culture. But in the belatedly socialist aspect of the same novel Gatuiria becomes problematic in that he fails to ground his score in the needs, symbols and interests of the oppressed workers and peasants” (p.56). Thus, even if the transformed Wariinga were to get married, Gatuiria would not be the appropriate husband for her.

After the Devil’s feast, the politically aware Wariinga returns to Nairobi and takes charge of her life. When we meet her two years later, she is no longer a victim: “Today’s Wariinga has decided that she’ll never again allow herself to be a mere flower [...] The Wariinga of today has decided to be self-reliant all the time, to plunge into the middle of the arena of life’s struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realize her true humanity” (p.216). But in order to realize her potential, Wariinga has to cross over into male territory. She has “said goodbye to being a secretary” (p.218), and is now a part-time mechanic while completing an engineering course at the Polytechnic. She is “Wariinga, the worker!” (p.218), and at the garage people watch her in wonder: “By now all the other mechanics and even several passers-by had stopped whatever they were doing and had crowded around the lorry to watch a woman daring to storm a man’s citadel” (p.220). Wariinga’s ascent to the status of an honorary male involves not only doing a man’s job, but also adopting a certain behavior associated with men. She has become a judo and karate expert, and when a man tries to harass her, she assults him “with so many judo kicks and karate chops that for a time he saw stars” (p.221). As Stratton explains, Ngugi’s heroine is required to undergo “a transformation in character - to convert stereotypical feminine qualities into equally stereotypical masculine
ones. Whereas the younger Wariinga is passive in her response to her oppressors, the mature Wariinga is aggressive - even violent” (p.162). Wariinga’s identification with male values is embodied in the language the author uses. In her role as symbol of the oppressed, she is “Wariinga, heroine of toil”, but in her transformed state, she becomes “Wariinga, our engineering hero!” (p.217).

Motherhood

In Perpétue, Beti presents a critique of the attitude toward motherhood whereby a woman’s worth is seen only in terms of her capacity to bear children, thus assuring the continuity of her husband’s name. Perpétue is married off to Edouard to fulfil this function, as Edouard’s brother Zambo explains to her people: “Je cherche une jeune fille reservée, qui puisse nous assurer une lignée” (p.99). Even though Zambo has four wives, none of them has managed to conceive, which means the problem must lie with him, hence his eagerness to find and pay for a wife for his brother. Perpétue’s pregnancy transforms her in the eyes of society: “Avec sa grossesse maintenant publiée, Perpétue acquit une position plus élevée en dignité comme si elle eût bénéficié d’une initiation. Bien que, aux yeux d’un témoin non averti, son aspect fût toujours celui d’une fille gracile au visage à la fois grave et enfantin, elle accéda brusquement au rang d’adulte” (p.155). For the first time in her life, she is treated with consideration, even by her husband: “Edouard n’osa plus la faire courir. Quand elle exprimait un désir, le plus innocemment du monde, on s’empressait autour d’elle [...] Edouard tint à combler sa femme de cadeaux pour la première fois de sa vie” (p.155). Perpétue successfully
fulfils her role by giving Edouard a son whom he names Charles, but whom she calls Wendelin, after her brother Essola. In Edouard’s village, Perpétue is “gâtée par tous” (p. 172), and Zambo’s joy and gratitude for the family heir is evident in the care he takes to transport mother and child back to Zombotown: “Enfin un petit transporteur africain, à qui on proposa un pont d’or, consentit à emmener Perpétue et son fils assis sur la banquette, entre le chauffeur et le patron, privilège à défaut duquel Zambo eût refusé de laisser voyager Perpétue et Wendelin, les deux êtres auxquels le patriarche maintenant valétudinaire tenait peut-être le plus” (p. 172). But Perpétue does not remain on a pedestal for very long, returning to Zombotown to find that Edouard has taken a second wife. The contrast between Edouard’s treatment of Perpétue during her pregnancy and after his son is born can be seen as a critique of societies where a woman is valued only for her biological role of reproduction.

Perpétue’s pregnancy provides the occasion for a discourse on the failure of medical care in the country, due to the corruption of the ruling classes. Perpétue, mindful of the advice her teacher Mademoiselle Delestrane used to give pregnant women, goes to the hospital but waits in line all day, and is never examined, the reason given being that there are no drugs: “Nous n’avons pas reçu les médicaments attendus. Impossible de vous admettre dans la salle de consultation. Comme hier en somme. Comme demain peut-être. Revenez quand même voir” (p. 162). But a few women do get to see the doctor without waiting, and these are the wives of police and military officials who get preferential treatment, in contrast to what used to happen during colonialism: “A cette époque-là, les faubourgs n’avaient pas encore totalement perdu le souvenir des moeurs de la colonisation, grande dispensatrice de soins médicaux, à défaut d’autre chose, égalitaire dans l’accueil des patients” (p. 156). Baba Toura’s
regime is responsible for the degradation in medical care, a fact that is articulated not only by militant Rubenists, but by the waiting women who are the most affected by the lack of drugs: “On dit que Baba Toura et son ami Langelot ne cessent de parcourir le monde, à quémander des médicaments soi-disant pour soigner les pauvres Africains; et on leur en donne, paraît-il! [...] Mais une fois revenus ici, au lieu de les distribuer, ils les vendent. Et à quel prix encore!” (p.159). Zeyang and his Rubenist friends discuss medical care within the context of corruption and exploitation of the country’s ressources that have been the reality since independence. Nothing gets invested back in the country for the people’s benefit, and rhetorical questions abound, for example: “pourquoi notre président tout-puissant [...] au pouvoir depuis dix ans, n’a pas créé une seule usine de médicaments?” (p.77).

Perpétue’s experience on this occasion turns her so completely against doctors and hospitals that she never comes back, even during subsequent pregnancies when she could have received preferential treatment given Edouard’s position in the police force. But the second pregnancy goes well too, and Perpétue is delivered of another son, fathered by M’Barg’Onana, the police chief: “L’enfant auquel Perpétue donna le jour, un autre garçon, offrait une telle ressemblance avec M’Barg’Onana qu’on ne l’appela bientôt plus à Zombotown que Komeça, déformation de ‘commissaire’” (p.229). The third pregnancy is by Zeyang, the Rubenist football player that Perpétue loves. The fact that Perpétue is impregnated by three different men does not surprise entirely, the irony of the situation having been hinted at in a one-line paragraph: “Et Perpétue devint la femme de trois hommes”
She dies pregnant with Zeyang’s child, and the symbolism is obvious: the new society envisioned by Ruben will not materialize. The death of Zeyang at the hands of the regime has to be read the same way:

Zeyang fut convaincu non seulement d’opposition au régime de Son Excellence Bien-Aimée Cheik Baba Toura, crime capital à lui seul, mais, plus grave encore s’il se peut, d’appartenance à la subversion clandestine. Après avoir été longuement torturé par la Sécurité de Fort-Nègre [...] il fut à la fin amené par avion à Oyolo pour y être fusillé [...] dans son pays natal et sous les yeux de membres de sa tribu. (p.268)

Just as the French killed Ruben and brought the dictator to power, Baba Toura continues to eliminate opposition to his regime. Victor Gnaore sees Perpétue’s death as elimination too:

"La mort de Perpétue renforce, en l’illustrant, la systématique de l’élimination. Par sa forme et son sens, elle se révèle objectivement solidaire de celle de Zeyang intervenue beaucoup plus tard" (p.91). Once the opposition is removed, the regime is free to perpetuate the evils that have plagued the country since independence, hence the pessimistic tone of the novel. Even if Perpétue had lived, her life would have been one of misery, judging by the way women in Zombotown look:

Que fût devenue Perpétue autrement? Pour le savoir, il suffisait d’ouvrir les yeux sur Zombotown, ce cimetière de morts vivants du sexe féminin grouillant de fantômes éloquents de Perpétue. Malaxée, broyée par la vie, avilie, aveuglie, à trente ans gonflée d’eau et de mauvaise graisse, ayant cessé d’inspirer le désir [...] cette admirable femme n’eût survécu qu’au prix d’incarner l’avatar trivial de la femme profanée. (p.265).

The symbolism about perpetuation of the old is also evident in the fact that Perpétue’s children who are born without any problems and who flourish are those fathered by Edouard and by M’Barg’Onana. Edouard, as a “Baba Toura en miniature” (p.250), is renewed through Charles, also named Wendelin for Essola. The ironic twist here is that Essola no
longer represents the ideals for which he was imprisoned, having recanted Rubenism in exchange for freedom after hearing of Perpétue’s death, and now secretly working for the regime. Thus Essola’a ambiguous situation is implied in the fact that Edouard’s son answers to his name too. As for Komeça, he is the incarnation of corruption, being the result of Edouard prostituting his wife to M’Barg’Onana.

In Devil on the Cross, motherhood is not treated at length, and is brought up more for its symbolic value than for a representation of women’s reality. It was mentioned in the section on adolescence that when Wariinga gets pregnant by the Rich Old Man, there is no question of abortion for her, even though her lover abandons her. She has a baby girl, Wambui, whom she leaves with her parents while she finishes school and goes to work in Nairobi. Since Wariinga is transformed from victim to revolutionary leader, it can be assumed that her daughter represents the future generation of girls that will grow up in the new society without fear of exploitation. In Detained, Ngugi explains the creation of the character of Wariinga: “Because the women are the most exploited and oppressed sections of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being” (p.10). It is not surprising then that the heir to this woman is a girl, born to carry the torch after her mother. The killing of the Rich Old Man by Wariinga removes her daughter’s connection to the oppressor, purifying her as it were, and is symbolic of a new era when the oppressed will achieve their freedom and dignity through armed struggle.
Ngugi’s stance against birth control is also reflected in his novel, albeit in a satirical reversal, since he puts a speech in defence of the Planned Parenthood Association in the mouth of Mwireri wa Mukiraai, one of the capitalists at the Devil’s Feast:

We of the Planned Parenthood Association have only one desire: to find ways and means of decreasing conflict between nations, and especially conflict between those of us who have grabbed wealth and those from whom we have grabbed. That’s why we who belong to the Association maintain: let the wives of the poor bear only the number of children that they can support with the food we have left them in their granaries, or according to the size of their salaries. (p.161)

Ngugi’s rejection of family planning as a capitalist conspiracy ignores the realities of the class of women he portrays in his works. Childbearing becomes a form of resistance in the struggle, but just how poor women are supposed to cope with the problems of daily survival for themselves and their many children does not seem to concern the author. In Ngugi’s text motherhood plays a symbolic role that goes hand in hand with the nationalist project. In a tearful speech in which Wariinga laments the fate of young girls, motherhood is equated with heroic status: girls “dream of the heroic deeds they will do on behalf of their country, deeds that will inspire later generations to sing their praises thus: ‘Oh, our mother, a self-made national hero!’” (p.136). Nationalism being a male affair (the gender of the word “hero” is revealing), a woman can only qualify by fulfilling her biological function of reproduction. Ngugi expresses similar anti-family planning views in his other Gikuyu novel Matigari, and Brenda Cooper’s critique of this novel seems relevant here: “Nationalist assertions of African women’s sacred duty to bear children and to stand in this role as a symbol for the continent
as a whole are not new. But it is disturbing and surprising that a gender-sensitive socialist writer like Ngugi should express such views. This can be accounted for, at least in part, by the novel’s political agenda of mobilising popular sentiment” (p.176).

Women and work

In Perpétue, there is no discussion about women and employment, the job of women being to bear children and take care of their husbands. But Perpétue, wishing to occupy her free time at the beginning of her marriage, borrows Anna-Maria’s sewing machine and begins a modest dress-making business. Anna-Maria sends her customers, in exchange for half the profits. Perpétue’s qualities and application are exemplary: “Elle s’archanait sur la petite table de son misérable salon transformé en atelier de couture, avec une obstination, une ponctualité, un zèle que les femmes de Zombotown n’avaient pas coutume de témoigner dans leurs entreprises” (p.164). Once again, Perpétue is distinguished from others to serve a symbolic role in the critique of the regime. Her first encounter with police corruption comes when she and Anna-Maria are arrested for conducting a business without a licence, and they and their husbands are offered the option of becoming police informers:

L’homme à lunettes leur exposa avec enjouement [...] qu’ils avaient le choix entre le paiement d’une amende considérable pour avoir exercé sans licence une activité commerciale ou l’engagement d’animer à Zombotown une cellule du parti unique en même temps que la lutte contre la subversion - et, dans cette deuxième hypothèse, les services compétents délivreraient aussitôt une licence pour l’exploitation de la machine à coudre. (p.167)
Perpétue and Anna-Maria decide to pay the fine, even if it means using up all their profits. They are held up as examples of the decent element that the regime has not yet managed to corrupt: “Au chantage du pouvoir, ces deux femmes africaines sans éducation politique répondraient spontanément comme la plupart des petites gens dont la dignité, encore chatouilleuse, mettait régulièrement en échec les élans conquérants de Baba Toura en mal d’assises” (p.167).

Perpétue’s business is meant to illustrate the ways in which Baba Toura’s repressive regime has frustrated initiative and contributed to the deterioration of the economy. Edouard’s oppression of Perpétue is parallel to that of Baba Toura over the nation, with identical consequences. After Edouard catches Perpétue with Zeyang and moves the family to the big house where she becomes a virtual prisoner, Perpétue’s business which had grown to include an employee and an apprentice, suffers due to the rules laid down by her husband: “Perpétue n'eut la permission d'accueillir ses clientes que l'après-midi, et seulement jusqu’à six heures: elle dut renvoyer ses employées et rendre à Anna-Maria sa machine que le jeune domestique lui porta chez elle” (p.251). Edouard restricts Perpétue’s movements and contact with the outside world, just as Baba Toura has declared a state of emergency requiring special passes to travel from one region to another. Essola, on his way home after his long absence, notices that a lot of small businesses have closed down, and immediately sees a link between the repressive laws and the failed businesses: “Peut-être l’obligation faite à chacun de porter un sauf-conduit et une carte d’identité, en décourageant les villageois de s’éloigner de chez eux, avait-elle tari la circulation des personnes, de telle sorte que les artisans-couturiers dont la clientèle était entièrement paysanne, avaient renoncé à leur profession après s’être ruinés”
In Main basse sur le Cameroun, Beti had spoken out against the trial of Bishop Ndongmo, whose real crime was to promote “economic initiatives among groups that prospered without foreign investment or the active support of the government” (Bjornson, p.330). In his fictional work, Beti is illustrating how the ruling classes of a neocolonialist regime work to oppose “economic independence and social equity, because their personal wealth and status depend upon maintaining the status quo” (Bjornson, p.328).

Devil on the Cross is constructed around the dichotomy between the rich and the poor, the rich being the capitalist oppressors who live off the sweat of the poor. The oppressed poor comprise the workers and peasants, who are presented as good and noble, in contrast with the evil exploiters. But although the discourse on workers and exploitation is key in the novel, it is not very clear who the workers are, or what jobs qualify one to be termed a worker. Wariinga starts out working as a secretary for the Champion Construction Company in Nairobi, but she is fired for refusing to sleep with her boss. But at this stage the label of “worker” is not applied to her. The job of secretary to a male boss serves to illustrate the sexual exploitation of women by men, symbolic of the oppression of the powerless. In keeping with the gender determinism that was mentioned before, Ngugi presents a very narrow view of women and work. From the text, it would appear that the only jobs women are engaged in are those where they are likely to be sexually exploited: “The abilities and potential of our women are enslaved to the typewriter, the bar or the beds in those hotels we have put up in every corner of the country for the pleasure of the tourists. How insulting to our national dignity that our women should have become mere flowers to decorate the beds
of foreign tourists” (p.245). There is no mention in this novel of any other jobs such as teaching, nursing, or domestic service that are usually associated with women and that were explored in the texts by women authors.

When the transformed Wariinga becomes a mechanic at a garage, the narrator praises her as “Wariinga, the worker!” (p.218). The question one might ask here is whether Wariinga the secretary was not a worker. According to Stratton, “In Ngugi’s conception, secretaries are not ‘workers’, a concept which he defines from an exclusively male perspective, hence excluding what are traditionally considered to be women’s occupations [...] from his definition” (p.162). Thus Wariinga has to cross over into male territory before she can become a worker. In the novel, Muturi is the archetype of the worker, and is dressed to reflect the part: “He had on blue overalls, which were worn out at the knees and elbows. His shoes were covered with ashy dust” (p.34). He has a history of political involvement, and goes to the Devil’s Feast as a delegate from a secret workers’ organisation in Nairobi. In the speech he makes to Wariinga before giving her his gun for safekeeping, we get some idea of who workers are in this novel: “We, the workers, have always made things that end up oppressing us! But now look at the product of a worker’s hands back in his own hands. It was iron pipes like this one, in the hands of the workers, that saved Kenya from the old colonialism” (p.211). Thus workers make things in factories, are engaged in productive labor but its results only go to benefit the rich: “Look at the fruits of the combined labour of many hands: roads, and rails, and cars, and trains [...] If the fruits of that co-operation had not been grabbed by the clan of parasites, where do you think that we, the clan of producers, would be today? Would we still know the meaning of cold, hunger, thirst and nakedness?” (p.52-53).
The world of workers is portrayed as some sort of utopia where exploitation is unknown. Indeed, the garage where Wariinga works is a “microcosm of Ngugi’s ideal” (Cooper, p.55), which is made evident in the text: “No one in that community of workers lived on the sweat of another. Everyone received according to his ability, his reputation and the quickness of his hands. When one of them had a lot of customers, he would pass on some of the work and the benefits to others with less work” (p.222). The masculine pronouns underscore the fact that this is a man’s world, and it is not Wariinga’s presence that is going to change it. Another contrast between this utopia and the world of corrupt capitalism is that there is no sexual exploitation either. The other mechanics welcome Wariinga as one of them, and respect her for her ability: “From that day on, a deep friendship developed between Wariinga and the other workers. The more they saw Wariinga at work and observed that she did not avoid any type of work, the more they respected her” (p.221). Only good-natured camaraderie exists between them: “They exchange good-humoured remarks and jokes, including some that touch on the subject of men and women. But the playful remarks and the ribald jokes are based on mutual respect. They take her to be one of them. They feel she belongs to them all” (p.222). But why does she have to “belong” to anybody at all? No doubt Ngugi wishes to safeguard the total acceptance of his heroine by the audience, since in Gikuyu culture, like in many African societies, every woman has to belong to a man, either father or husband.

Wangari, the other female character in the novel, is the stereotype of the peasant woman, barefoot even when she goes to the city, and a proud participator in the liberation struggle: “I, the Wangari you see before you, was a small girl then. But these legs have
carried many bullets and many guns to our fighters in the forest” (p.40). Even though she is “Wangari, the tiller” (p.44), we do not get to see her life as a peasant, for when the story opens, her land has just been repossessed by the bank for non-payment of a loan:

My small piece of land, two acres, had just been auctioned by the *Kenya Economic Progress Bank*, as I had failed to pay back a loan I had burdened myself with so that I could keep grade cows [...] The cow gave birth to a bull. The milk brought in only enough money to cover the monthly interest payments to the bank. My cow caught gall fever. The vet did not arrive until the cow had died and been buried. I had not even paid a quarter of the debt. (p.41)

The hyperbolic accumulation of troubles that befall Wangari is meant to capture the sympathy of the readers/listeners and make them appreciate even better the lesson that Ngugi is putting across. Wangari represents the peasants who fought for independence but find themselves dispossessed in the postindependence era. Using an illiterate, widowed peasant woman as the victim of a capitalist banking system makes capitalism all the more odious. But Wangari’s story gets only worse. Since she knows that she has to repay the loan, she goes to the city to look for a job: “So, alone in my hut, I told myself this: I can’t fail to find a job in Nairobi. At least I could sweep out offices or wipe children’s bottoms. I don’t mind what job I do” (p.42). Wangari’s fortunes do not improve in Nairobi, where she goes in vain to various hotels and shops in search of a job, until she is finally humiliated by a black shopkeeper: “He told me that the only job he could offer me was that of spreading my legs, that women with mature bodies were experts at that job” (p.42). Thus in Wangari’s case too, woman is reduced to her sexuality. One wonders whether there are no female bosses for whom the Wariingas and Wangaris of Kenya might work without harassment. But the point here is not so much getting the job as the discourse on capitalist exploitation that the process of
looking allows. Wangari as symbol enjoys her brightest moment when she is arrested at the Devil’s Feast for having made the naïve mistake of calling in the police to arrest the thieves and robbers: “And she was led out, still singing her defiance, her chained hands raised high above her head, the links gleaming like a necklace of courage. Wangari, heroine of our land!” (p.198).

**Woman’s body and sexuality**

In *Perpétue*, the heroine is presented as beautiful, in keeping with her role as the symbol of a beautiful country that has been plundered and sacrificed at the altar of neocolonialism. It is Perpétue’s beauty and character that attract the attention of Zambo, Edouard’s brother: “La réputation de beauté et de décence de Perpétue était parvenue aux oreilles lointaines d’un brave homme depuis longtemps en quête d’une épouse pour son frère cadet” (p.99). Zambo confirms that beauty is indeed an important factor in the choice of a wife for his brother: “Je cherche une femme élégante et belle, qui sera l’ornement du foyer de mon jeune frère” (p.99-100). Thus Perpétue becomes Edouard’s wife, with the tragic consequences that have been discussed above. Since she is only twenty when she dies, she is spared the deterioration that other women in Zombotown seem to go through. Indeed, her beauty only matures:

Malgré ses deux maternités, Perpétue n’avait rien perdu de sa beauté; avec l’âge, elle avait même acquis, sans s’en douter, sans le vouloir, cette irradiation capiteuse dont les toilettes provocantes ni les autres soins ne possèdent le secret et dont la vertu est telle que tous les inconnus rencontrés sur son chemin quand elle allait au centre de la ville ou en revenait se retournraient sur elle sans raison apparente. (p.231-232)
The narrator is careful to point out that Perpétue, even though living in the city after her marriage, has not adopted city ways: "Perpétue n’avait jamais été capable de s’habiller comme une vraie femme de la ville" (p.232). As a symbol, she is beautiful in the African way, untouched by foreign "corruption". She hardly ever wears the clothes in fashion, but draping her body in simple dresses manages to provoke men’s desire. The unblinking male gaze is obvious in the long sentence describing Perpétue as object of desire:

Perpétue portait le plus souvent des chaussures de toile ainsi qu’une robe ordinaire, moulante et assez courte à la mode des faubourgs, s’arrêtant au-dessus des genoux et dégageant ses grandes jambes très droites, dont le profil un peu monotone et maigrelet contraste tellement avec le galbe tendu, congestionné, à la fois musclé et potelé de la cuisse au-dessus du jarret que, fasciné, on était envoûté en imaginant les rondeurs plus rebondies qui, dans la marche, se dandinaient et se trémoussaient sous la toile tourmentée. (p.232-233).

Ironically, when it comes to breasts, support is enlisted from a Western invention: “Anna-Maria lui avait appris à prendre soin de ses seins en gardant toujours son soutien-gorge, au contraire des mères de l’arrière-pays auxquelles la méconnaissance de cet accessoire, en provoquant un relâchement excessif des muscles des mamelles et en faisant bringuebaler celles-ci comme des outres crevées, donnait des poitrines à peine moins plates qu’une planche à laver” (p.233). Beti’s representation of Perpétue as a symbol of the degradation of Cameroon/Africa fits into what Stratton terms the “Mother Africa trope” and its requirements regarding the herione: “One of these requirements is that she provide attractive packaging. She is thus constructed as beauty, eroticism, fecundity, the qualities the male Self values most in the female Other. She is the emblem of male desire” (p.52).
In Devil on the Cross, the male gaze is constantly on Wariinga, validating her beauty through the various stages of her transformation. At the beginning, she is portrayed as a brainwashed young woman who is ashamed of her African hair and skin:

Whenever she looked at herself in the mirror she thought herself very ugly. What she hated most was her blackness, so she would disfigure her body with skin-lightening creams like *A*mbi and *Snowfire* [...] Now her body was covered with light and dark spots like a guineafowl. Her hair was splitting, and it had browned to the colour of moleskin because it had been straightened with red-hot iron combs. (p.11)

But the narrator assures us that Wariinga is anything but ugly: “Her eyes shone like stars in the night. Her body was a feast for the eyes. Often, when she walked along the road without self-consciousness, her breasts swaying jauntily like two ripe fruits in a breeze, Wariinga stopped men in their tracks” (p.11). Wariinga’s political awareness is signalled by a changed perception of her body: she takes pride in her natural look, and no longer straightens her hair or bleaches her skin. In other words, she becomes culturally liberated. At the end of the story when Gatuiria takes her to meet his parents, she is dressed in the traditional way, which the author describes in great detail:

Wariinga was dressed the Gikuyu way. A brown cloth, folded over a little at the top, had been passed under her left armpit, the two ends gathered together and held at the right shoulder by two flower-shaped safety pins, so that her left shoulder was bare. [...] On her feet she wore leopard-skin sandals. Around her neck were necklaces of white, red and blue beads, which sat beautifully on her breasts. She had Nyori-like earrings. Her hair was smooth, soft and black.

As she walked, Wariinga appeared to be the child of Beauty, mother of all beauties, just created by the creator of the twins, elegance and beauty. (p.242)

Wariinga’s Gikuyu dress is meant to contrast with the Western clothes worn by Gatuiria’s parents and their friends, thus making a statement about cultural imperialism. This is clear from the comments of passers-by: “You see, there’s no tradition that can’t be developed.
Wherever she goes, people will defer to the beauty of that young woman” (p.243). With reference to the passage describing Wariinga in traditional dress, Brenda Cooper points out a contradiction in Ngugi’s portrayal of the heroine: “The minute attention to a woman’s physical beauty and clothes as a nationalist symbol contradicts Ngugi’s simultaneous attempts to move away from stereotypical portrayals of women” (p.55). The emphasis on Wariinga’s clothes leads Florence Stratton to affirm that “the manner in which she expresses her newfound revolutionary consciousness tends to be reduced to an improvement in her fashion awareness” (p.163). Indeed, we are left in no doubt as to the suitability of her liberated wardrobe: “These days all her clothes fit her perfectly. Wariinga has dresses made for her or she buys them ready-made, but they always suit the shape, colour and movement of her beautiful body” (p.217-218)

Wariinga the “worker” dresses for the part too. When she is going to work at the garage, she wears jeans and shirt which only enhance her looks: “She puts on her blue weather-beaten jeans and a khaki shirt. Look at her! Her clothes fit her so perfectly, it’s as if she was created in them” (p.217). In other contexts blue jeans might be considered the connotation of imperialism, but no doubt it is the worker image that Ngugi wants to highlight here. Thus even dressed as a mechanic, Wariinga still turns heads: “As Wariinga walks along, people stop to watch her” (p.217). Ngugi is careful to portray his heroine as an attractive woman in her transformed state and so keep her sympathetic to an audience that has a preconceived notion of femininity. Elleke Boehmer’s critique of Ngugi’s portrayal of Wariinga sums up this point:
Yet, though she is said to engage enthusiastically in the struggle with nature that Ngugi has previously cast in terms of the male generic pronouns, she is reclaimed for womanhood; despite her hard labour in the workshop, she remains sexually attractive. [...] She is the exemplary female revolutionary, a fighter and 'still a woman', as perfect and untouchable as a holy image and made to order like her clothes. (p194)

Conclusion

An examination of *Perpétue* and *Devil on the Cross* provides ample illustration of the symbolic role played by women in both texts. While the authors’ concern about the oppression of women is evident, these are not novels about women’s condition in postindependence Africa, but about the corrupt and repressives regimes that have been in place in Cameroon and Kenya since independence. Thus the discourse on the oppression of women serves as a starting point for the larger discourse that is the critique of neocolonialism. Because the authors’ purpose is not to portray women’s lives in their daily reality, more often than not the oppression of women remains at the level of the language and is not enacted in the text. One consequence of this approach is that strategies that might provide viable solutions to women’s problems remain unexplored. Beti’s text, by telling the depressing story of a heroine who has already been oppressed to death, offers no strategies for survival, immediate or long-term. Perpétue’s silence in death is that of the nation under a repressive regime: “Silencieux comme Perpétue, le peuple végète, emmuré vivant, incapable de dire sa propre histoire; it doit - comme elle - s’en remettre à une tierce personne afin qu’on l’entende. Le mutisme de Perpétue est celui de la nation Camerounaise qui ne sait, ni ne peut s’enfanter” (Brière, p.79). In an interview with Kembe Milolo, Beti explains what he perceives to be his
role as a male writer. "En tant qu’homme, je ne peux que déplorer l’oppression de la femme. Aux femmes elles-mêmes de trouver les voies de leur libération. Et c’est pour cela que l’arrivée des femmes dans le domaine de la création romanesque est un pas en avant" (p.283). Beti’s portrayal of Perpétue seems to be in keeping with this sentiment.

Ngugi’s portrayal of women, though more positive than Beti’s, suffers from the fact that his socio-political critique is only along class lines and does not take gender into account. Thus there is an oversimplification of issues whereby women are portrayed as belonging only to the oppressed class, a view that Ngugi has expressed in his non-fictional writing too. But the reality is that there are middle-class women too, living in privilege, if only through marriage to men of this class. Brenda Cooper makes this very point: "While it is true that African women have been doubly oppressed, a further qualification has to be made: they have not all been equally oppressed; there are important social differences between African women themselves" (p.78). But in Ngugi’s novel, there is no mention of women from the privileged classes, or the part they might play in the emancipation or oppression of poor women. Both gender and class are conflated in Wariinga as the symbol of exploitation and eventual triumph, with the result that Ngugi’s portrait of the emancipated heroine does not ring true. Wariinga’s transformation as a gun-packing revolutionary may provide a melodramatic ending to the story, making it more enjoyable to readers/listeners, but it remains purely fictional. In the minds of Ngugi’s audience, the new Wariinga is more likely to be perceived as a larger-than-life character in a new postindependence fable of liberation, taking her place among other famous characters in the oral tradition.
One of the consequences of writing *Devil on the Cross* in Gikuyu with a specific audience in mind is that the portrayal of women suffers from the oversimplification of issues. The novel becomes almost didactic, exposing the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation in a simple way that poor peasants and workers can understand. Wariinga is used to illustrate a lesson, and it is the lesson which is central to the work, not Wariinga herself. We agree with Kathleen Greenfield’s summary of Wariinga’s character:

> We follow Wariinga, the central character, from her near suicide at the beginning to her execution of the Rich Old Man at the end, but even she is not a fully drawn character. Above all, she is a victim of corrupt men and the corrupt system they represent and, with her, we learn the lessons which lead her to comprehend the nature of the system which has oppressed her and to strike out against its most heinous human agent. (p.38)

The use of oral traditions arising from Gikuyu culture may be an effective literary device, but it could be damaging to an emancipatory representation of women. In African societies (and no doubt in many others), the status of women as secondary to that of men, and the resulting oppression, are often reflected in the language, especially in proverbs and other “wise” sayings originating with the patriarchy. *Devil on the Cross* makes ample use of the sayings of Gikuyu, the founder of the group, and while none of the ones used in the novel imply condescension toward women, the fact of invoking Gikuyu’s authority has the effect of reinforcing such discourses, both positive and negative. Reference to Gikuyu is just one indication of the patriarchal nature of the novel. Patriarchy is also reflected in the fact that Wariinga has a man to thank for her transformation into a revolutionary. Muturi chooses and approves her, before entrusting her with his gun, symbol of phallic power. Wangari, the older woman, is never given a chance to talk to Wariinga directly and impart any wisdom she might
possess, given that she is the symbol of resistance, elevated to "heroine of our nation" (p.198). Thus women remain subordinated to men, with men determining their emancipation. There is no doubt that Ngugi meant for his novel to be emancipatory as far as women are concerned, but his socio-political critique undermines his feminist project. By his own admission, writing about the emancipation of women is not easy: "I am not always consistent nor do I claim to look at every aspect of the woman question but I am always conscious of it" (quoted by Lovesey, p.154).
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The examination of the literary texts in this study allows us to answer questions posed in the introductory chapter, and to draw certain conclusions regarding the representation of women in fiction by women writers. On the whole, we agree with the claim made by Davies and Fido that African women "write of realities in ways that male African writers do not" (p.311). This claim is supported by the notion of "situated knowledges" introduced in chapter one to explain why self-representation by women should be deemed more accurate than representation by male writers. Indeed, African women usually write about what they know best, that is, their own lives and those of people around them, thus giving us a realistic picture of women's condition in specific cultural contexts at a particular time in history. For example, the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta confirms the situatedness of her writing: "I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know" (quoted by Nfah-Abbenyi, p.7). The texts in this study are set mainly in the post-independence era and in urban areas, and they expose the problems and challenges that
women are facing in their domestic and public lives. Texts such as these contribute to a better understanding of African women in changing societies, by showing how women’s lives are also changing and adapting to new circumstances.

But while women writers can be said to portray women more realistically, it is still necessary to qualify the representations that emerge from the texts. There is no question that the authors all give us realistic representations of women’s lives (or aspects of them) as they are experienced on a day-to-day basis, and what becomes clear is that there are more problems than causes for celebration in the lives of African women today. The question then arises as to what women are doing to find solutions to these problems, and this is where differences in writers’ representations of women occur: what fictional strategies do authors make available to the characters to enable them to cope with, or even to change, the status quo. The distinction that Ogundipe-Leslie draws between first and second-generation women writers provides one explanation of the differences in representation. From her perspective, the writing of the two generations can be characterized as follows:

The predecessor’s vision and execution is based in a presentation of the human, particularly the African, experience from the perspective of the woman; the successor’s vision and execution bases itself in an alteration of it. The first-generation women are concerned with addressing that experience in literature; the second generation, with redressing it. (p. 159)

If we consider first-generation writers as those who started publishing in the 1960s and early 70s (Adams, 1993), in our study these would be Thérèse Kouh-Moukoury, Rebeka Njau, Grace Ogot, and Charity Waciuma. Their writing seems to fit Ogundipe-Leslie’s description in that it presents women who are caught up in the dilemma of living traditional gender roles in a changing society, and are faced with the challenges of new roles in urban settings. If the
characters do not actively seek to alter situations that oppress them, it is because they are in a sense pioneers in post-independence societies, taking on salaried employment alongside men in addition to their roles as wives and mothers. In the conclusion to her study of Kenyan women writers, most of whom are first generation writers, Jean O’Barr affirms that “collectively, Kenyan women, as portrayed in the novels, do not act”, even though “individual women protest against the injustices, then acquiesce, reconciling contradictions more often through avoidance than positive action” (p.68). She gives examples of some of the contradictions these women have to live with, and explains their inaction in terms of distrust:

The distrust of the new and larger social system which is encompassing them is pervasive. The distrust is based in part on lack of knowledge about how to work the new system and in part on the awareness that the system itself is based on contradictory expectations of women, expectations which when grafted on to traditional gender role arrangements produce an even more debilitating situation. (p.69)

Whether it advocates direct protest or not, there is no doubt that the first-generation writing was instrumental in raising consciousness by articulating the inequities experienced by women, thus paving the way for second-generation writers to redress the situation.

The notion of habitus was introduced in chapter one as a means to assess the emancipatory nature of the fiction, and to show that a writer wishing to represent women in a new light has to avoid falling into the trap of his or her own habitus with its internalized dispositions. The reasons given by O’Barr to explain the absence of direct protest among first-generation writers can be complemented by the notion of habitus. If women’s writing is informed by their experiences, it follows that something of the writer’s habitus will be revealed in the creation of characters. Some of the factors that might have shaped the habitus
of the older generation of writers include African cultural values, European colonial education, and Christianity. In addition, given that these writers were entering a male-dominated field in which African male writers had created and perpetuated certain images of women, it is understandable that women writers would subscribe to these images and sometimes reproduce them without question as the reality of their fellow women. Elleke Boehmer explains the differences in the way men and women are portrayed in what she terms the "African literature of independence": "whereas men are invoked as leaders and citizens of the new nation, women are widely regarded as icons of national value, or idealized custodians of tradition" (p. 225). If second generation women writers are questioning the images of women circulating in these narratives and replacing them with new, more accurate ones, it is because they have the benefit of a women's literary tradition to follow, thanks to first generation writers. They have also benefited from feminist debates that began with the women's movement in the West in the 1970s.

The question was raised at the beginning of the study as to whether it is possible to generalize about women in postcolonial Africa. From the fictional representations of women's lives in urban areas of Cameroon and Kenya, the answer would appear to be a definite yes. Once again, the notion of habitus can be used to explain the similarities that emerge in the way that women perceive their roles. For example Grace Ogot and Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, though from different countries with different colonial histories, have created characters who seem to hold similar views when it comes to women's roles. In the texts studied, they write mainly about middle-class women who find their greatest fulfilment in marriage and motherhood. The fictional characters are submissive to their men, and try their best to keep
them happy, always putting the men’s interests before their own. Even when their husbands are unfaithful to them, divorce is not an option because marriage gives them their identity and status in society, and so they tolerate infidelity. In Ogot’s fiction, the women turn to religion for solace and strength. Though both writers give us a detailed picture of women in their domestic roles, we only get a very sketchy one of women in the public sphere. This is a man’s world, and women are content to let men occupy unchallenged positions of power in it. Thus we get characters who have been socialized into accepting their gender roles as defined by society, and would never dream of challenging the status quo. In a 1973 interview, Kuoh-Moukoury explains how colonial education reinforced African values with regard to the role of women: “A mon époque, l’éducation donnée aux filles était orientée vers leur futur rôle de mère, d’épouse, de ménagère, tâches nobles, mais insuffisantes” (Jeune Afrique 693, p.58).

As we saw in chapter one, the singular advantage offered by the notion of habitus is that it presents the awareness of one’s position in society not as something fixed, but as a condition subject to constant change. Thus even first-generation writers can modify their stance on gender roles as time goes by and as more and more women challenge the dominance of men in public life. Grace Ogot is a good example: praised by Ojo-Ade as one of the “‘old guard’, steeped in the tradition of the land, complaining of their sufferings as subjects of the male master, but seeking solace in a society that has proclaimed woman the mother” (p.72), she nevertheless published The Graduate in 1980, a novel dealing with the political marginalization of women in post-independence Kenya, in which the main protagonist is the first and only woman to be named a cabinet minister. Although the work
can be considered “speculative fiction” (Stratton 1994:73) in that Kenya did not get a woman minister until 1994, and though it is written conservatively because it still upholds the woman’s traditional roles (the protagonist is a devoted wife and mother, and the graduate in the novel is a man), Ogot’s novel is still a good example of writing that addresses changing circumstances and possibilities for women. Thus while a writer may share something of her characters’ habitus, it does not necessarily mean that she is unaware of the discriminations and limitations inherent in gender roles as prescribed by society. But many factors determine how an author writes, literary influence being one of them. Ogot’s earlier fiction that won her Ojo-Ade’s praise was largely influenced by men’s writing, whereas by 1980 women had begun to challenge the representations of women in male-authored texts.

As more women receive a university education and hold careers that allow them a certain autonomy, society’s views about gender roles are also bound to change, as are the expectations that girls grow up with. Some second-generation writers already reflect women’s changing conditions in their writing, portraying strong women who take action to end injustices in their lives. At the same time, Obioma Nnaemeka (1994) points out an interesting paradox about the representation of these strong women. According to her, strong women who do not conform are always marginalized, while those who represent “tradition” are placed at the center of the narrative: “How can one explain the pervasive marginality and subalterity of radical women characters who symbolize change? Why do female protagonists consistently remain what I would call ‘characters of affirmation’ in the sense that they reaffirm the commonly accepted notions of women and women’s ‘reality’?” (p. 143). Nnaemeka proposes one explanation for the way radical women are portrayed: “The marginalization of
non-conformist characters might reflect the dilemma of women writers who are still striving to understand who they are, especially in relation to liberation and feminism” (p. 151). In the terms of our study, we could say that these representations are still a function of the writers’ habitus, which has to change enough to allow them to comfortably foreground the voices of radical women. Nnaemeka’s allusion to feminism is important, since it is clear that a knowledge of feminist theory can help a writer produce a more self-conscious fiction that avoids the traps of her habitus. However, the question of African women and feminism is a complex issue that a number of critics have addressed in an effort to explain the ambivalent position taken by many African women with regard to this question. While feminist critics agree that feminist theory can be a useful analytical tool in understanding women’s oppression, and that a knowledge of feminist theory can contribute to the production of emancipatory discourses, some African critics have pointed out that theories advanced by Western feminists do pose difficulties for African women who frequently manifest a reluctance to be called feminist. The views put forward by these critics are relevant to our study because they problematize the complex issue of the oppression of African women while pointing to possibilities for the formulation of a feminist agenda to which African women can relate.
African women and feminism

African critics agree with Western feminists that feminism is an important critical perspective. Obioma Nnaemeka (1995) speaks of the "possibilities and potentials of feminist scholarship", but cautions that "feminist critical theory is a formal, legitimate, analytical tool that must be learned" (p.82). Similarly, Abena Busia affirms her commitment to feminism: "I am comfortable with the term feminism... Feminism is an ideological praxis that gives us a series of multiple strategies (of reading, of analysis) and what those strategies have in common is that the woman matters" (quoted by Kolawole, p.8). But if the ultimate aim of feminist research is to create social change, critics have wondered why many African women have been reluctant to call themselves feminist, and why feminist research has been "so controversial among large groups of African scholars and activists" (Hale, p.25). Irene d'Almeida points out the fact that "African women, although recognizing the need to address the issues of exclusion, exploitation, and the multiple colonizations faced by women, nevertheless have been suspicious of Western feminism, and at the extreme, have rejected it altogether" (p.12). Some women writers have declined the label of feminist even though their works "have been hailed as feminist or stemming from a feminist consciousness" (Nfah-Abbenyi, p.6). One often quoted example is Buchi Emecheta who, after talking about the situatedness of her writing and how she chronicles the little happenings in the lives of African women, concludes with a disclaimer: "I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f" (quoted by Nfah-Abbenyi, p.7). Mary Kolawole addresses this reluctance to profess feminism:
"From personal discussions with several African sisters, they are not rejecting the process of fighting for women’s self-definition and assertion, but they have problems with the definitions and conceptualization of feminism as it is transmitted from the West with the presumption that this perception of women’s issues is universal and relevant to all women globally” (p.8).

Other critics who have analyzed the question have argued that one reason why African women hesitate to identify with feminism is that they are uncomfortable with the analytical categories imposed by Western feminists to theorize the oppression of women, for example the category of “the Other”. Sandra Hale explains how proclaiming the alterity of women might make Western-style feminism unattractive to African women:

The problem with using that metaphor of alterity is that the West has imposed its metaphor as reality. The result is that African women have been deemed “the Other” within their own societies. Such alterity defies African notions of family and community life, reduces women to subordinates, represents African men as antagonistic to the well being of women, and removes agency from the women. (p.25)

The alterity of women often goes hand in hand with the view of women as victims of male dominance. Hale terms this strategy “victimology”, and adds that African women scholars have objected to this approach “not only because it shows African women as victims, but because they are seen as the victims of men, thus dividing African women and men” (p.27). Once again, a response given by Buchi Emecheta will be cited to illustrate the point. Gwendolyn Mikell explains how, even though Emecheta’s writing seems to be informed by feminism, when asked about the feminist label, Emecheta responded saying that “I have never called myself a feminist. Now if you choose to call me a feminist, that is your business;
but I don’t subscribe to the feminist idea that all men are brutal and repressive and we must reject them. Some of these men are my brothers and fathers and sons. Am I to reject them too?” (p.406).

African women therefore feel that the feminist debate as carried out in the West does not adequately address their experiences. But while the feminist label continues to pose a problem for most of them, the reality is that African women continue to struggle to improve their lives, something they have always done. Some critics have argued that African women were feminist before the fact. In the words of Nfah-Abbenyi, “before feminism became a movement with a global political agenda, African women both ‘theorized’ and practiced what for them was crucial to the development of women, although no terminology was used to describe what these women were actively doing, and are still practicing, on a day-to-day basis” (p.10). Mary Kolawole supports this view, and cites research that is bringing to light women’s resistance against oppression, resistance that is not usually documented in history books, thus giving rise to the image of African women as passive and submissive. She mentions Nina Mba’s Nigerian Women Mobilised (1982), characterizing it as a book that “unravels the unacknowledged invincibility of Nigerian women in pre-colonial and early colonial periods. Their collective actions made them a threat to kings and an obstacle to colonial administrators” (p.26).

Separate-gender organizing allowed women certain powers within their communities to carry out activities for the betterment of themselves and the community. It is important to point out that the label of African women’s “movement” applied to these associations has nothing to do with the women’s movement in the West. In an article entitled “African
Feminism: Toward a new Politics of Representation”, Gwendolyn Mikell cites Nina Mba’s research to show how the women’s movement in Nigeria today actually consists of a broad continuum, which includes “women’s associations with largely traditional frames of reference, the organizations and activities of educated women who were often engaged in overtly political or advocacy work, as well as the activities of urban women whose realities straddle these cultural worlds” (p.406-407). She points out that neither end of the African continuum aligns with the Western feminist continuum, but that it does reflect African realities.

What emerges from these critical discussions is that African women want to assert their own notion of feminism, “as redefined and articulated by them for their particular concerns” (Egejuru and Katrak, p.9). This brand of feminism has to include all women, unlike Western feminism that often has a class bias, excluding working class women. More importantly, it cannot afford to exclude men either, since ultimately the empowerment of women has to be ratified by male dominated governments and other policy-making bodies. Also, if the oppressive forces of “patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and gender imperialism all combine to act against the African woman’s self-assertion” (Kolawole, p.25), it is recognized that some of these forces oppress men too, hence the need for them to join women in the struggle for better conditions for all in the neo-colonial era. The Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo articulates this need: “When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that
every woman and every man should be a feminist - especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives, and the burdens of our own development” (quoted by Egejuru and Katrak, p.9).

The question of terminology has also preoccupied critics who feel that the term “feminism” carries with it an imperialist charge that they cannot accept. Ogundipe-Leslie, reacting to the rejection of the term by other critics, proposes the acronym “Stiwanism”:

I have since advocated the word “Stiwanism”, instead of feminism, to bypass these concerns and to bypass the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa... Some who are genuinely concerned with ameliorating women’s lives sometimes feel embarassed to be described as “feminist”, unless they are particularly strong in character... “Stiwa” is my acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa”. (quoted by Kolawole, p.22-23)

The term “womanism” has been adopted by some critics who find it more appropriate to the African context. According to Carole Davies (1986), it was first defined by Alice Walker and comes directly out of African-American and Caribbean culture. She adds that it is “a qualification, a search for new terminology to adequately convey Black women’s feminism and a recognition of the limitation of the term ‘feminism’ for our purposes” (p.12). In Walker’s words, a womanist is, in part, “a black feminist, or feminist of color ... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Davies 1986, p.12).

Whether African women have found the terminology to fit their feminism or not, the reality is that they are becoming increasingly involved in the legal and political affairs of their countries, demanding to be represented in policy-making. We saw in chapter one how colonial policies contributed to the declining of African women’s political status. After independence, political power became the prerogative of men, despite the contributions
women had made to the struggles for independence. We also saw that women, especially poor women, have suffered the most from the economic difficulties that have been the reality for most African countries since the 1970s. The failures of male-dominated African regimes have pushed women to seek public office, in spite of the harassment that women activists face in some countries. Mikell explains how politics is becoming "the central point around which a new feminist consensus is emerging":

The harsh pressures exerted by contemporary national economic crises and political failures have removed some of women's fears and much of their reluctance to seek public office. [...] They appear strengthened in their beliefs that women's performance can be no worse than those of earlier male politicians, and is likely to be considerably better. Many women are saying that more assertive female actions are necessary to ensure gender-balanced approaches in the aftermath of the 1980s' economic collapses, military coups, civil wars, refugee crises, feminization of poverty, and structural adjustment programs. (p.409)

Kenya's elections in 1997 in which a woman presented herself as candidate for the presidency are a good illustration of the fact that women are tired of men's leadership. At first Charity Ngilu's decision to stand for election was treated as a big joke, especially by men, but when the results came in and she was ranked third out of more than ten candidates, people realized that the idea of a woman president was not such a far-fetched one after all.

If African women are going to work for change in their condition, it seems that some knowledge of feminist theory, regardless of labels, is necessary to help them see the discrimination against women that is embedded in customary norms, modern law and social conventions. This is especially true for educated middle class women who, because they are spared material hardship and the struggle for daily survival, are therefore in a better position to affect change by getting involved in the public life of their countries. However, because
many are connected in some way to the men in power, they are reluctant to engage in overt activism against any injustices for fear of being labeled “feminist” and thereby embarrassing or alienating their men. But even for women who want to stay out of the limelight, a feminist consciousness can help raise awareness in other ways. The emergence in Africa today of professional women’s groups struggling against the marginalization of women, as well as gender centers to combat gender inequalities, is one evidence of the positive influence of feminism, named or not.

Women’s writing informed by feminist theory becomes a strategy of protest or, in the words of Mariama Bâ, a weapon: “As women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon” (quoted by Schipper, p.47). If many African women shy away from overt feminism and activism for fear of being stigmatised, then writing offers them an alternative method of contributing to the struggle. In the introduction to her study of Francophone women writers, Irene d’Almeida explains the importance of writing for women: “West African society is strongly patriarchal, and so, for contemporary women writers, writing becomes a crucial step in challenging those patriarchal restrictions. Thus, writing becomes an extraordinarily liberating force because what you cannot do or say, you can write. Writing makes it possible to dire l’interdit - speak the forbidden” (p.11). But in order for women’s writing to play the instrumental role of weapon or tool and contribute to the emancipation of women, it has to be read in Africa and by a wide audience, which brings us to the question of canonization.
In *Canonization and Teaching of African Literatures* (edited by Raoul Granqvist), the canon of African literatures is loosely defined as those works that are studied in secondary schools and universities throughout the continent. Going by this definition, it is clear that works by African women writers need to be featured on the canon if their writing is to play a role in changing attitudes and contributing to social change, for what better place to start than with the minds of the young people who will be the future leaders and decision makers. Unfortunately, few women writers have found a place on the canon. Raoul Granqvist sums up research carried out by Berth Lindfors in 1986, covering twenty-six universities in fourteen anglophone countries to study how far “the literature syllabus at African universities had been decolonized since independence”: “His data demonstrate that African literature is being taught everywhere. But they also show that the canon adopted is conservative and little different from the one generally used in the West, with Soyinka, Ngugi and Achebe in the top and only four women writers - out of 26 - ranked” (p.3). The question of who decides the canon is an important one, and Lindfors’ findings would seem to justify Ogundipe-Leslie’s view on this matter: “At the moment, I would say it is not even the African critics who decide who is great and who is not, it is the Euro-American critic” (quoted by Davies 1991, p.254).

Critics of women’s writing have addressed the question of women’s exclusion from the canon. Obioma Nnaemeka (1994) points out the reversal that took place with the advent of written literatures, whereby women lost their privileged position as story tellers or “speaking subjects”:
In African oral tradition, women were very visible not only as performers but as producers of knowledge, especially in view of oral literature’s didactic relevance, moral(izing) imperatives and pedagogical foundations. Researchers in the field of oral tradition have documented the active participation of women, at professional and nonprofessional levels, in the crafting, preservation, and transmission of most forms of oral literature. (p.138)

We have seen earlier how colonial policies regarding the education of men and women provide one explanation for the late arrival by African women writers on the literary scene. But given that women have been writing for three decades, it is important to understand why their works have not achieved the same prominence as those by men. Elleke Boehmer explains how colonial policies of gender discrimination were carried over into the independence period: “Nationalist movements encouraged their members, who were mostly male, to assert themselves as agents of their own history, as self-fashioning and in control. Women were not so encouraged [...], they were marginalized both by nationalist political activity and by the rhetoric of nationalist address” (p.224).

If the canon of African literatures is decided largely by Western critics, it follows that the critical criteria applied are those of the Euro-American literary establishment. This kind of criticism has been blamed for failing to appreciate African women’s writing. Carole Davies (1986) points out that African women’s writing displays narrative strategies found in other women’s writing, strategies that contribute to “an overall female aesthetic”, for example “the epistolary form, the journal, the letter”, and adds that “the inclusion within the narrative of ‘small talk’ is often considered a weakness in the writing of women who have not ‘mastered form’” (p.16). She therefore advocates the adoption of other criteria for the criticism of
women's writing: "The same battle that African literary theorists had to wage to make the European/American critics realize that other African-based aesthetic criteria have to be applied to African literature, in effect has to be waged for African women writers" (p.16).

One might assume that the importance of African women's writing today would be recognized by "post-colonial literary theory" which, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, emerged from "the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing" (p.11). But critics have also pointed out how the homogenization effected by the notion of "post-colonial" has made it ineffectual in accounting for differences within the societies so termed. Arun Mukherjee questions "the totalizations of both the post-colonialists and the postmodernists that end up assimilating and homogenizing non-Western texts within a Eurocentric cultural economy", and adds that

> when post-colonial theory constructs its centre-periphery discourse, it also obliterates the fact that the post-colonial societies also have their own internal centres and peripheries, their own dominants and marginals ... When it focuses only on those texts that "subvert" and "resist" the colonizer, it overlooks a large number of texts that speak about these other matters [of race, class, gender, language, religion, ethnicity]. (quoted by Nfah-Abbenyi, p.19)

Among the writing overlooked or marginalized by post-colonial theory would be post-colonial women's texts, since they do not necessarily write back to the empire. Elleke Boehmer explains the nature of women's writing:

> Many postcolonial women writers are concerned to bring to the fore the specific textures of their own existence. Both as women and as postcolonials they concentrate [...] on their own "distinct actualities". Often this signifies a political commitment, a way of noting the validity of the buried, apparently humble lives of the women who
have gone before them and who perhaps helped to make their own achievement possible. In their work they retrieve suppressed oral traditions, half-forgotten histories, unrecorded private languages, moments of understated or unrecognized women’s resistance. (p.227)

African women critics, as we saw earlier, are aware that existing theories, including feminist theory, are not always adequate for reading African women’s texts. One scholar who has taken up the challenge to develop new theories is Juliana Nñah-Abbenyi. In a 1997 study entitled Gender in African Women’s Writing, she makes a case for indigenous theories that “have always been there, in the languages and cultures of Africa, in orally transmitted texts, and later on in published fiction”, and adds that “when I read the texts in this book as fictionalized theory or as theorized fiction, feminist gender theory will find itself both alongside and embedded in the texts” (p.20). Her assessment of the contribution of her work to the literary debate underscores the need for theory that is relevant to the works being read:

My critical analysis, sometimes grounded in my everyday experience as African woman, can only enrich the arguments that will be made, given that I will be “finding and naming critical theory which is African, melding it with western feminist theory and coming out with an overarching theory that enriches both western and African critical perspectives; [breaking] the cycle of dependency on western critical theory. (p.21)

If we consider the above comments as indicative of a trend among African critics as makers of theory, we can conclude by saying that the future looks promising for African women writers, as far as recognition and even canonization are concerned.
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