

Objectification, Rejection, Suppression, and Feminine Resistance in African Novel

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a study on the depiction of the position and condition of women characters in the social context of the setting of African novel, *King Lazarus* by Mongo Beti. In most cases in African societies, women are treated as no less consumable sexual objects whose lives are totally controlled by the men. They are also used as mere political collateral by the elders of their respective clans. Beti in the novel treats the dehumanizing conditions African women found themselves in the society. Their personal humiliation, suppression, rejection and suffering are ignored by these men (both the African and the European characters) in the novel. The paper, therefore, examines through the feminist concept of objectification the suffering, humiliation, and rejection faced by the female characters in the hands of both the African and the European characters as demonstrated by Mongo Beti in the novel. It also probes into the resistance put against these unjust acts of repudiation and rejection by the women as portrayed in the novel, which serves as a catalyst for disaster later in the clan. In summary, this article, investigated and examined the author's portrayal of the condition of the female characters in the novel in the hands of both the colonizing men and the colonized men and the form of resistance by the female gender in the African society during colonialism and beyond.

Keywords: Feminine, Objectification, Rejection, Resistance, Sexuality, Suppression.

Introduction

The situation and the condition of female gender in most African societies as represented in most African novels are depicted as commodities of exchange or as mere political collateral by the elders of their respective clans, to settle political scores among the tribes. Therefore, their situations are non-issue to both their clansmen and the European colonizers. Hence, Beti, M. in *King Lazarus* like in his other novels such as *The Poor Christ of Bomba* depicts the treatment and condition of the female gender in the African societies both in the hands of their fellow African men and in the hands of the European colonizers. The female characters are represented as second class people and mere consumable sex objects who are persistently under the beck and call of the male gender in their respective societies.

Hence they are faced with multiple humiliations, suppression and at the end, rejection in the African society. However, some of the female characters resist the maltreatment as we see in the characterization of the Chief's first wife, Makrita. She challenges and

resists their oppression, rejection and repudiation from her marriage by the colonial priest, colonialism and their African clansmen.

As in other Beti's novels such as *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, the opinions and attitudes demonstrated by other characters, especially the male characters, in *King Lazarus* exposes so much about the position and the condition of the female characters in the social context of the setting of the novel. For example, early in the novel, Gustave, the mission boy to Father Le Guen, expresses his opinion about the female gender. Gustave when asked by Father Le Guen about his new-born sibling, he replies, "oh, only a girl" (p. 33). Thus, this signifies the inconsequentiality of the female child in the society.

Likewise, other male characters in the novel, including the elders of the village, reveal a similar condescending and disgusting view of the female gender, as shown in the following dialogue between two of the village elders, Ondoua and Ndibidi, at the time when they were eagerly waiting for the Chief to decide about the repudiation of his wives as instructed by Father Le Guen:

As our forefathers used to say, Ndibidi observed, woman is an ear of maize. Any man with good teeth can have a nibble at her. With this remark he picked out a large hunk of mutton, measuring it up with thumb and forefinger. The thicker the meat, the better he liked it. Gripping it firmly in both enormous paws, he began eating (p. 103).

In like manner, before responding, Ondoua grabs his own piece of the meat and replies with a proverb: "they were right, he said. They had another proverb, too. Woman is a slender palm-tree and any man with a good belt can get up her" (p. 103).

These men create an image which invites a biting criticism of their opinions about women as they share what is considered as "words of wisdom". The way in which they eat the meat indicates the objectifying attitudes of their statements and actions. Thus, the female gender seems to be no less a consumable object than the meat they devour. However, this situation confirms the view of MacKinnon, C. in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989) which says that "all women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water" (p. 124). Indeed, the appearance of these men gnawing away at the meat is similar to a similar incident where a male character, Mekanda notes "with disgust" (p. 103) in the novel.

Nonetheless, such objectifying dispositions are obviously rooted in the society, as shown in the characters of other male characters, including catechist Ezoum. It is worth noting here that Ezoum has made advances to virtually all the twenty-three wives of Chief Essomba. In other words, MacKinnon avers that "women are presented as sexual objects for domination, conquest violation, exploitation, possession, or use" (*Feminism Unmodified: Discourse*, 1987).

In another briefly mentioned revelation we also see that Cecilia and Maurice, daughter and son of the Chief, make their living as "a whore and a pimp" (p. 51). Even the daughter of Chief Essomba is most easily described by her role as a sexual object whose life is surely influenced by her "pimp" (p. 51), Maurice. Thus, the male dominated society sees them as irresponsible for living independently in the city.

More so, this view about the female gender is most strikingly stressed by the decision of the Chief of Essazam, Chief Essomba, to renounce his first wife, Makrita, and his other twenty-one wives who were married after her. The Chief's choice of the beautiful and young Anaba, the most recently married wife, strikes the Chief's brother, Mekanda, who describes the Chief's choice as logical:

“Which one?” Mekanda repeated. “Which one? Anaba, obviously” (p. 111). The narrator as well describes the Chief's choice as both logical and legitimate: “obviously legitimate and completely natural, being given the merit and the great beauty of the young woman (p. 142).

However, through the characterization of Maurice, Ezoum, and Mekanda, Beti reveals an objectifying opinion of female gender among the native men of the setting of the novel, an opinion which portrays female characters as nothing more than commodities to be exchanged, oppressed, consumed, or that can be discarded at will. This demeaning vision of the female gender is not exclusive to the African male characters of the setting of the novel. In a dialogue with Father Le Geun, Joseph Schoegel, a missionary, appears envious of the ostensibly stress-free lifestyle of African men like the Chief, the comfort of which can be traced, largely, to his many wives:

They must last better here than at home. Well, why not? They don't give a damn about anything. Wives are left to do all the work—especially the Chief's. No worries, no emotional strain; a nicely balanced nervous system. No need to come daily grips with complicated industrial problems gives them quite an advantage, Your Reverence (p. 36).

The remark, openly unchallenged by Father Le Guen, depicts among these European visitors their own objectified opinion of the female gender of the African continent. Thus, their identity emerges from their role as sources of labour that make life much easier for the male gender.

It is obvious in the novel that Father Le Guen's enslaving focus on Chief Essomba's urgent repudiation of his wives and his insistence that each of the repudiated wives is sent back to her native clan is an impetus for disaster. The Father's uncompromising insistence also makes it very obvious that his desire on this matter stems from his focus on doctrine instead from a concern for the well-being of any of the female characters themselves. Despite the fact that he says that he discover “eternal opposition” of man against woman in Essazam community, the Father makes no clear effort to resolve this identified injustice.

The merger of these two equivalently detrimental sources of attitudes towards the female characters of the novel, that is, the attitudes of the colonising men and of the colonised men, buttresses the issue of double oppression. This according to Abubakar M. S. *et al* in an article titled, “The Doubly Oppressed: The Portrayal of Female Characters in Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*” published in *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* (2015), “the treatment and role women played as portrayed in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (Beti & Moore, 1971) can be seen from

twofold oppression, of the colonisation and native culture” (p. 89). This amplified the claim that the African woman is doubly oppressed in the society.

Similarly, McLeod, J. in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000), double colonisation of the female gender in postcolonial criticism recognizes “the fact that women are twice colonized-by *colonialist* realities and representations, and by *patriarchal* ones too” (p. 74). Thus, from whatever perspective we view it, the status of the female gender is that of exploited and suppressed from both the colonial and the traditional systems.

More so, there is no other moment when the consequences of the oppression and colonisation of the female gender are more obvious than after when Chief Essomba renounces his twenty two wives and accepts the Christian marriage with only one wife, Anaba. In the ambiance of polygamy in which the Chief’s wives live, their departure, as orchestrated by Father Le Guen and the Chief’s aunt, Yosifa, is evidently destructive for the renounced wives. The day Chief Essomba decides to send the wives away, we see him moving from the home of one wife to another, “into the next-door hut, where he proceeded to humiliate another woman who had been his wife for many years” (p.115).

According to Malone, T. in *Mongo Beti: Man and Destiny* (1971) the decision by the Chief to ask his former wives to return to their respective clans is “great humiliation for them” (p. 194), to their respective families and clans. More so, we notice that none of the wives shows any hope in having been freed from the system, instead “the Chief’s other wives maintained a hopeful silence” that she will be the choice of the Chief for keep and marry (p. 108). The probability of being sacked from the matrimonial home of Chief Essomba is visited with fear and degradation, not the delight of freedom from the polygamous system.

However, at this juncture, it is worthy to note that the repudiation of the Chief’s wives who each comes from the different clan in the complex political structure that formed the bases for the marriages embodies an affront to the women in particular and to the clan they come from in general. Consequently, those who have come from the different clans, on hearing about the illness of the Chief now depart, each “decided that the repudiation of a woman belonging to their own clan was a personal insult” (p.119), creating a “great anger” that has not been seen among the Essazam tribe for a very long time (p. 118).

The representatives hold that the marrying out of these women to the Chief embodies a kind of political accord that is being ruptured by the repudiation of these women. For instance, the representative of a particular clan, the Ebibot, Makrita’s clan, asserts that in giving out their daughter in marriage, they have virtually “made a life-alliance with him (Essomba), sealed and reinforced by the birth of Maurice and Cecilia” (p. 124). The clan continues to make claims as to the ignored “unalterable rights” (p. 125) of a woman such as Makrita.

After all, the narrator immediately elucidates that the elders of the clan are most concerned with the “terms” of the alliances and that “these characters were not inspired by the slightest respect” (p. 125). But already Father Le Guen has moved for the disintegration of these marriages without given recourse to the personal consequences for each woman affected by the decision. It is at this juncture that the representatives of

the clan struggle for the preservation of the marriage, but they are also motivated by other factors rather than the well-being of the individual woman involved. Instead, their reaction depicts that wives such as Makrita are solely being used as political ancillary by the men of their individual clans.

Despite the personal suffering and disgrace of these women is overlooked by the men of the setting of the novel, the novel portrays many female characters that furnish the reader with the insight into their personal conditions. The conditions of female characters seem to be of little relevance to either Father Le Guen who is determined to send them out of their marriages or to the clansmen who are determined to keep them in their marriages for their personal reasons. The women are left to struggle for their survival in the polygamous system.

For example, in Makrita, the Chief's first wife, we see a woman who is a victim of both the traditional African polygamy and of the colonial priest's determination to terminate the polygamous system. Actually, she does enjoy some status of being the Chief's first wife, both as "the only one Le Guen agreed to baptise" (p. 11), and, more importantly, as the woman that holds the traditional duty and status of having been the first wife of the twenty-three wives of the Chief. But, subsequently, we shall find that this amount to nothing to her because doesn't enjoy the matrimonial company of her husband.

The Chief takes himself to her house when he falls seriously ill "rather than that of his other wives" (p. 28). This is not a house he usually visits in the late of the night, but, in a situation such as this, he turns to the first wife, Makrita. Actually, when the Chief is seen in Makrita's house at this late hour of the night is enough reason for the village elders to be disturbed about his condition of health (p. 27).

In other words, Makrita is not the woman he would turn to for intimacy, but only for guidance or care in critical situations like this. Thus, the response is enough testimony not only to the status of a caregiver that she holds as the Chief's first wife, but also to the status as a companion that she has lost with each younger wife taken by her husband, Chief Essomba.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of the novel, Makrita is seen as a defeated woman, the condition which is stressed by the portrayal of both her mental and physical conditions. The "shrunk thighs, scrawny buttocks and other unfortunate points" (p. 27) is a contrast to the beauty of the newer, younger wives and, most importantly, Anaba the chosen wife of the Chief.

But when Chief Essomba returns to her during his illness, it signifies an opportunity for her to overcome her state of humiliation and futility of her arranged marriage when she was as young as Anaba, many years ago. The narrator reports Makrita saying that, "I may have been kicked out of the bridal bed to make way for younger women," she would remark, "but when there's a real crisis I shall be the who answers the call" (p. 28). This signifies that despite the disgusting situation she receives from the men the African woman is still at the beck and call of her husband.

It is obviously clear that she has been abandoned in her marriage long before the issue of the Chief's conversion to Christianity. His choice of Anaba as his Christian wife is the only recent in a long trend of rejections that have evidently left Makrita defeated and

bitter. But in his state of crisis such as illness, she is the one who will respond “present” as his caregiver. However, she sees this as an avenue for her to re-establish herself as the most important wife to both the Chief and to the tribe as a whole.

In spite of the pains and humiliation polygamy has caused her, she sees it as a way of life that every African woman has no option but to accept and remain with it. As a result, she has no hope after being rejected by the man she believes to be responsible for her suffering. But to Makrita remaining in polygamy is still better than being sent home as a result of foreign influence, when she informs her nephew, Chris: “a woman without a husband is nothing. I couldn’t marry again; I’m too old” (p. 117).

She confirms further to Chris, her nephew that the only way for a woman to escape from this condition is to be born a man. She remarks that “if, one day, you have children-and that’s something I desire with all my heart-make sure they’re all boys, Chris. I know you: if you had a daughter, you’d certainly end up killing some man just because he’d made little girl suffer” (p. 116). At this point, Beti summarises the level of suppression, rejection and the inner bitter feelings of the female gender in the settings of the novel, Africa. It also depicts how the society places more emphasis and respect to the male gender above the female gender.

In spite of all these years of humiliation, rejection, and suppression her spirit remains undefeated, she, however, distinguishes herself from the other women in the society. She does that by the manner she resists the Chief’s decision to repudiate his wives including her. Makrita is the only one among the Chief’s twenty-two wives, who are asked to return to their parents, that resists the move.

Makrita was the only one who took up a stand. She remained behind, denying hotly that her house was not her own property; maintaining eloquently that she belonged permanently both to the Ebazok clan and to suppose that the Chief was not her husband for keeps (p. 120).

Thus, Makrita presents a kind of feminine resistance in African novel. Therefore, instead of accepting the disgrace of returning to her parents, she refuses to easily accept her fate. She struggles to remain in a marriage that she wanted to be part of and which has also stripped her of much of her dignity. And if she has being suppressed in the hands the African patriarchy, she will not accept being victimized by the colonial system as well.

Therefore, like Marguerite in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, Makrita revolted by way of resistance to the Chief Essomba’s repudiation of his wives, including her. She tells the clan’s elders that after been “chased from the bridal bed”, she plans to remain the wife of Chief Essomba and the one in control in the situation of crisis. And she makes it clear that she intends to be the one to care for the ailing Chief Essomba, her husband.

As a result, she ignores the spiritual status of Father Le Guen hence she challenges and accuses him as the person who initiated her “expulsion” and that of the other Chief’s wives:

You find no fault with me, you say, yet you have taken sides against me! And for whose sake? A slip of a girl who has never even learnt how to cross herself! A child of the Devil who's never been to Communion! A creature who don't even know! Do you have to practise ingratitude just because you're White and a European? Think of all the favours I've done you...remember? Your duty is to protect a Christian soul-especially when a pagan, a child of Satan, tries to evict her! (p. 121).

Therefore, she did not only actively resisted and revolted against the decision of the colonial priest, Le Guen, but she as well “challenged the failures of the natives to defend the female gender” in the society, thereby challenging and resisting the oppression of both the oppressors. Thus, the suffering, humiliation, and objectification of the female gender in the novel are ignored by the men, both the Africans and the Europeans, in the novel. In addition, Beti portrays many female characters who give us insight into their personal situations such as Yosifa, the Chief's aunt. Their situation is of no importance to the men; both the colonial priest who desires to remove them from their marriages and the colonized men who desire to maintain them in their marriages.

Conclusion

Finally, Beti as in his other novels such as *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, he also in *King Lazarus* portrays the condition of the female gender in the African societies both in the hands of their fellow clansmen and in the hands of the European colonizers. The female characters are presented as nothing but mere consumable sex objects who are totally under the control of the male gender. They are also used as commodities of exchange or as political collateral by the elders of their respective clans.

Their situations are anon-issue to both their clansmen and the colonizers. Hence they are faced with multiple humiliations, suppression, and rejection in the African society. However, some of the female characters resist the maltreatment as we see in the characterization of the Chief's first wife, Makrita. She challenges and resists their oppression, rejection, and repudiation from her marriage by the colonial priest, colonialism and their African clansmen.

Beti seems to be suggesting that the situation of the female gender in the African society should be a thing of great concern by all. There is the urgent need to give the African woman a voice in order to speak for herself and for her fellow African women. This can only be attained when they are provided access to education which can lead to their quality condition of living. The male gender should consider the female gender as partners in progress not as mere sex objects who are used and abandoned when they grow old.

Moreover, the female gender should also strive to challenge some of the cultural norms hindering their progress in the society as see in the representation of Makrita by Beti in the selected novel. Beti believes that a good blend of the African and Western cultures can lead to the improvement and advancement of the living condition of not only the female gender but even that of the male in Africa. Thus, the female gender should be

seen and taken as part of the society, therefore should be involved in the decision process of the home in particular and the society at large.

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