

The female protagonist's intersection with the African world of actuality in Beyala's novel *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* by Jessica Glaeser

Abstract

In order to overcome the silence that had been instilled by colonialism, several postcolonial female writers employ fiction to restore their local culture and reflect on their representation in historical writings. For female writers, literature often becomes a medium through which they can become active agents of their own destiny by establishing a voice for themselves. Writing becomes a means of reclaiming traditional discourses relating to women. The following study is primarily focused on Calixthe Beyala, a Cameroonian novelist, and specifically concentrates on the manner in which Beyala makes use of her female protagonist in *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* to portray the realities facing African Francophone females. The study aims at illustrating that the female protagonist plays a critical role in mirroring both the conditions of females in African societies and the conditions pertaining to Womanism in a universal context. Through the role of the protagonist, the study reveals that there seems to be some relationship between fiction and society which is definitely enough for fictional characters to be used as prototypes for social roles and attitudes. In order to further investigate the manner in which African actualities are able to exist in fictional narratives, the study draws an extensive comparison between the fictional narrative *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* and selected non-fictional Cameroonian laws ranging from 1980 to 2017. By addressing the intentions of fictional narratives, the study reveals a possible association between Beyala's fiction and the African world of actuality relative to the African females' predicament that is associated with patriarchal dominance, prostitution, the lack of agency as well as economic exploitation. To conclude, the paper maintains that Francophone African female novelists, and in particular, Beyala, make use of fictional narratives to not only highlight the pivotal issues regarding the status of African women but also creates a voice for future female generations to become empowered through the act of narration.

“Books can be a weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps, but they are a weapon. Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress. They enable you to better yourself. What society refused you, they granted...”—Mariama Bâ (33).

The above statement, made by one of the first African Francophone female novelists to bring about the reappraisal of gender within the African novel, marked the turning point for African women whose voices were made heard for the first time. For a long period of time, African literature was a terrain dominated by male authors as female writers were constantly excluded from and not accorded a space in this domain. Several reasons have been offered to explain the reasons behind women’s lack of prominence on the African literary scene, all alluding to the colonial time period which favoured the schooling of men and patriarchal African societies which often ascribe traditional roles to women linked to domesticity. The depiction of women in the writing and thinking of male authors also contributed to the belief that African women are silent observers who fulfil their duties without questioning or resisting the structures that they were assumed to undertake. Despite this, African female writers today are redefining and reshaping inaccurate images of their womanhood and portrayals of African women in fiction. Several postcolonial African Francophone female writers employ fiction to restore their local culture and reflect on how they are represented in historical writings. For female writers, literature offers a medium through which they can become active agents of their own destiny by establishing a voice for themselves; thus, writing becomes a means of reclaiming traditional discourses as it relates to the African woman. According to Mouralis, literary fiction acts as a means by which African writers are able to make their worldview known by becoming forefront figures in patriarchal societies. It has an epistemic and exploratory function as literary narratives may provide insight “into the structures of the world, society, mental structures, existing conventions, rules and laws” (Van Dijk 292).

The following essay primarily focuses on Calixthe Beyala and the manner in which she makes use of her female protagonist, Tanga, in *Your Name shall be Tanga* to portray the realities facing African females in Cameroon. My essay demonstrates that the female protagonist plays a critical role in anchoring both the conditions of

females in African societies and the conditions pertaining to Womanism in a universal context (the macro level of the novel). Through the role of the female protagonist in the novel, this essay reveals that there seems to be some relationship between fiction and society which is definitely enough for fictional characters to be used as prototypes for social roles and attitudes (Rockwell). Through a close reading of the fictional narrative, *Your Name shall be Tanga*, the study reveals a possible association between Beyala's fiction and the larger African world of actuality relative to the African females' predicament which is often associated to patriarchal dominance, prostitution, the lack of agency as well as economic exploitation. To conclude, this essay maintains that Francophone African female novelists, and in particular, the author Beyala, make use of fictional narratives to not only highlight the pivotal issues regarding the status of African women in the African landscape but also creates a voice for future female generations to become empowered through the act of narration.

The works of renowned Cameroonian-French novelist, Calixthe Beyala, reflect her own journey of discovery through the maze of her own life. Born in 1961 and raised in a patriarchal society in Douala, Beyala's upbringing was marked by poverty and loneliness. It is the experiences of her own disadvantaged childhood that are reflected in the themes of poverty, social degradation and patriarchal dominance that she explores in many of her novels. In spite of receiving significant recognition for her work; she has also been described as a "literary fraud", accused of plagiarism after the publication of one of her best-selling novels *Le petit prince de Belleville*. Hitchcott ("Calixthe Beyala" 100) describes Beyala's situation as "unique, in that she is both a consecrated, best-selling 'authentic' African author and a proven literary fake".

Despite being criticised for her style of writing which is often vivid and pungent, Beyala challenges the cruel realities and violence in which the African woman finds herself. Price argues that Beyala and her contemporaries create a new type of language which places the reader into everyday African life by using adaptations of the French language to give a picture of African realities. Contemporary female writers like Beyala are known to be active participants in the socio-cultural domain and take on themes in their works that address

the contextual issues that several populations are faced with such as the education of women, marriage, maternity and strategies against oppression.

Beyala's defense of women's rights is often depicted by the use of a female protagonist in her works which is clear to see in the discussion of the central novel of this essay *Your name shall be Tanga*. Fatunde argues that it is through the choice of Beyala's characters that the female dilemma in Africa is exposed; it is often children, adolescents or very young adults who do not belong to the middle class or upper class but form an integral part of the urban poor in Africa. The females at the centre of Beyala's work often experience their childhood through prostitution, violence and poverty. It is a combination of intolerable social and political pressures; together with patriarchal values that induce their self-doubt and force them into womanhood too early, depriving them of a formative childhood. The process of becoming a woman is a central theme in *Your Name shall be Tanga*. At a very young age, the protagonist is subjected to female genital mutilation, forcing her to become a woman before her time. Nfah-Abbenyi ("Gender") argues that the excision does not only signify the passage into womanhood but simultaneously, it captures the right of men to possess the protagonist's body; depriving her of her innocence and childhood. One may argue here that the female body becomes a vessel for larger socio-economic issues in Africa as African women and children are generally defined by their bodies.

Despite the bleakness and severity that presents itself in Beyala's work, there is often a glimmer of hope at the end – a visioning of a better world. Regardless of being failed by society and roughed up by life, most characters in Beyala's work survive the abuse of their bodies and the torments imposed on their minds. Nfah-Abbenyi ("Calixthe Beyala" 78) argues that despite persistently portraying the tragic conditions that African women have to live within a postcolonial era, Beyala also "leaves the post-colonial subject with a potential for change". This can be seen in the portrayal of women and children at the centre of Beyala's stories who constantly seek new forms of self-determination and self-liberation.

Published in 1988, *Your Name shall be Tanga* examines the challenges of surviving in an African city which exploits children by

depriving them of their innocence as well as subjecting them to widespread violence and corruption (Arenberg). The novel retraces the life and experiences of a young protagonist, Tanga, who tells her story from behind prison bars. On the brink of death, the young African protagonist recounts her personal experiences to her cellmate, Anna-Claude, a white Jewish woman from France. As a young girl, the protagonist is forced into prostitution by her mother, forcing Tanga to provide for the family. Prostitution, which is one of the main themes of the novel, is not only restricted to the life of Tanga but is connected to a larger social reality which places Tanga as a representative of the grouping, in a widespread network of exploitation (Arenberg). According to Hitchcott (*Women* 130) “prostitution becomes a global metaphor for the commercialization of human relations and, at the same time, the loss of identity”.

Arenberg maintains that Tanga is caught up in an inverted economy in which children are responsible for the survival of their family. This is not only relevant to the life of the protagonist but also to other children and young women who are dragged into this distorted socio-economic structure. This is addressed by the heroine throughout the novel when she defines the status of a child in her country “In my country, a child is born an adult, responsible for its parents” (Beyala 66).

The question that arises is whether Beyala’s novel *Your Name shall be Tanga* portrays a detectable relationship to the actual world which validates the use of fictional narratives to illustrate something about the African world of actuality. According to Rockwell fiction provides the reader with two categories of information about society: first and foremost, it provides facts about laws, customs, social structures and institutions, secondly, it offers information about societal values and norms which becomes most visible in literature when it is represented through different characters in fictional narratives.

According to Volet, *Your Name shall be Tanga* does not overlook the everyday reality of the African female but instead makes the realities visible concerning contemporary social corruption and human loss of dignity. The fictional world created by Beyala is therefore “a disturbing yet perceptive echo of the ‘real world’ (Volet 309). In comparing *Your Name shall be Tanga* to non-fictional narra-

tives which depicts the multifaceted context of African women in Cameroon relative to issues such as prostitution, rape, domestic violence, female genital mutilation it becomes evident that the novel manifests as a resonance of reality, particularly a Cameroonian reality in relation to black women; thus this community context signals the meso-level of the novel.

It is therefore important to draw attention to the fact that *Your Name shall be Tanga*, as a novel, functions at different levels which explains the depiction of the African actuality. At a macro level, the novel can be read as a political manifesto which draws attention to the civil rights of children and the economic rights of women. At a meso-level in this particular community of *Your Name shall be Tanga*, the novel ought to be read as a manifesto against adults which acts as a reminder that children have no childhood without care from adults. Most significantly, at a micro level, *Your Name shall be Tanga*, portrays, through the bonding of the female protagonist and a European woman, Anna-Claude, the theme of female survival and the concept of sisterhood which trespasses diverse paradigms towards a collective consciousness (Darlington). Nfah-Abbenyi (“Gender”) argues that it is through this representation of female bonding between Tanga and Anna-Claude that Beyala makes a global political statement about the concept of ‘woman’ and the experiences that women are faced with. She argues that “Beyala is trying to create an essentialist feminist utopia for marginalized women or those Others of society” (Nfah-Abbenyi “Gender” 110).

Through the use of the female protagonist in *Your name shall be Tanga*, a solution is also offered to women’s victimization. The protagonist becomes a spokesperson for several disadvantaged women and children through sharing her story (Tanga’s story functions at the micro level of her personal experience). By choosing to talk about the collective plight of African women as a powerless and exploited group, both protagonist and author become agents of social change by firstly representing the social conditions of females in some African societies and secondly developing the necessary mindset and strategies to create more awareness, for future generations, on the importance of de-shackling oneself from undesired circumstances. Arenberg maintains that Beyala demonstrates that by means of storytelling, women have the power to defeat the patriar-

chal system by refusing to remain passive and devoid of speech. Telling a story is therefore not a mere form of fictionalisation but one of the ways whereby social realities are produced, value systems created, and desired behavioural standards confirmed (Longo).

Nnaemeka suggests that works produced by African women writers show that there are other channels such as writing through which women survive and gain freedom. Ondo argues that writing becomes a means of experiencing liberation for both author and protagonist. In agreement with Ondo, Mariama Bâ, describes the act of writing as a weapon that can be used by African female novelists to paint a realistic image of the conditions of the African woman. All in all, it becomes evident that there is a moral dimension prescribed in the art of writing which highlights the plight of some women and children in some African societies. Through the study of *Your Name shall be Tanga*, it can be argued that literature becomes a powerful means by which a vision can be positioned to ignite action through a metaphorical character, which is created by a novelist to bring forth the realities faced within a particular society.

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