

Women's Objectification as Depicted in Beyala's *The Sun Hath Looked Upon me* and in Phiri's *The Highway Queen*

L'objectivation des femmes telle qu'elle est décrite dans *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulé* de Beyala et dans *The Highway Queen* de Phiri

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Abstract

This article seeks to contribute to literary discourse by carrying out a comparative and contrastive analysis of the image of the rebellious woman in *The sun hath looked upon me* written by Calixthe Beyala and *The Highway Queen* written by Violet Phiri. Drawing from the depiction of the unruly woman in the African society, this article explores the expressive function of literature to define prostitution which is viewed as the most disreputable female career. The objective is to accentuate the instability caused by prostitution on the woman and her family and also on the creation of invisible masculinities. This reading is grounded on De Beauvoir's school of thought "one is not born a woman but rather becomes. Moreover, this work determines that literature has a part to play in our communities. It is concluded that women become prostitutes when the society treats them unfairly.

Keywords : female victimisation, invisible masculinities, prostitution, womanhood.

Résumé

Cet article cherche à contribuer au discours sur la littérature en réalisant une analyse comparative et contrastive de l'image de la femme rebelle dans *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulé* de Calixthe Beyala et *The Highway Queen* de Violet Phiri. S'inspirant de la représentation de la femme indisciplinée dans la société africaine, cet article explore la fonction expressive de la littérature pour définir la prostitution qui est considérée comme la carrière féminine la plus peu recommandable. L'essence de cette recherche est d'accentuer l'instabilité causée par la prostitution sur la femme et sa famille et aussi sur la création de masculinités invisibles. Cette lecture est fondée sur la théorie subalterne de Spivak « les subalterne peuvent-elles parler ? » De plus, ce travail détermine que la littérature a un rôle à jouer dans les communautés. Ce travail conclut que les femmes deviennent des prostituées lorsque la société les traite injustement.

Mots clés : féminité, masculinités invisibles, prostitution, victimisation féminine.

1. Introduction

In Zimbabwe and in Cameroon, as in most conventionally traditional, Christian and Muslim controlled countries, female prostitution is loathed because of societal beliefs since it is considered an improper form of employment. Therefore, the stigma attached to prostitution has a bearing on a woman's decisions on whether or not to take up sex work as a long-lasting way of living. It is questionable in what way the patriarchal fashioned ethical concepts and female personality are sustained chiefly during trying times. Concentrating on the portrayal of the quotidian experiences of the prostitute protagonists, this article ascertains the numerous means in which the novels review conventional opinions of sex workers.

1.1. Issue and methodology

The moral principle is apparently founded on the notion that, when human beings behave selflessly they differentiate themselves from animals and bring order and peace to society. This moral belief is commended for bringing societies into homogenous folds. However, Beyala (2005) and Phiri's (2010) works seem to challenge the presumptuous touting of morality as indispensable to the survival of human beings for its creation of a purported cultured society. This study further contends that in cases where people must select between ethics and existence, the latter conquers. Drawing from the Marxist and feminist theoretical framework, this article affirms that in capitalist situations the underprivileged neglect ethical standards for the purposes of self-sustenance. Marxist feminists have speculated that governing women's sexuality and their access to resources permits men to regulate women's workforce, influence and sexuality. Watkins (2015: 01) believes that "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression." This observation creates a debate on Beyala and Phiri's management of female characters in relation to their approval of prostitution and the moral impasse it presents. Lee (2001) investigates the domination of women and explores Marx's opinion of women. Furthermore, rational integrity and the African perspective of Ubuntu¹ underline the novelists' portrayal of this moral problem. Over and above these issues, this study upholds that the chosen novelists, nonetheless in differing means, portray characters who contemplate that in the face of struggles there are good reasons to be immoral. The analysis of the two novels is achieved through the lens of Simone De Beauvoir and Spivak's schools of thought. Simone de

¹ Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu term meaning "humanity". It is sometimes translated as "I am because we are"

Beauvoir's concept "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes," unfolds the origin of all the factors that subjugate women in society. She further proposes the notion of "consciousness of oppression", which appeals to women to be cautious of their environs and free themselves from all societal standards that trespass on their privileges.

2. Novels' summaries

In *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me*, the narrator tells the story of Ateba a teenage daughter of a prostitute mother who lives in a shantytown in "a world where the future for women is bleak because they have less opportunities than men." (Mutunda 81). After her mother disappears, Ateba's aunt takes her in and she exposes her to male abuse from her clients. In light of lack of prospects, Ateba and her associates make their living from prostitution. All the women around Ateba are emotionally and physically abused by men. In this regard, Ateba endeavours to end the abuse and the oppression of men since Betty dies while aborting an unwanted pregnancy. *Highway Queen* recounts the Zimbabwean dilemma through Sophie, a once fervent wife, who in spite of all the woes around her holds on for the love of her family. The intrigue takes place during Zimbabwe's economic meltdown to demonstrate how cultural texts grapple with the discourse of female sex work in contemporary Zimbabwe. The storyline takes place at the pinnacle of the Zimbabwean economic crisis. As a result, industry and production crushed to a complete standstill turning shops into empty passages. As the only employed person in the family, Steven's retrenchment leads to disastrous consequences which in turn lead to the removal of the children from school, food shortages and failure to pay the mortgage.

3. Women's Objectification in *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me*

In *The sun hath looked upon me*, Beyala's emphasis is on men who control and abuse women. Jean Zepp represents all the men who believe that they can sleep with any woman they like. Yet, they are overlooked and are ignorant of the fact that in sexual relations, the woman has to consent. One day, when Ateba goes to Jean Zepp's room to convey a message, he believes that she has ulterior motives. Hence, he sexually assaults her, as indicated in the narration: "he grabs her by her hair. He forces her down low, forces her to crouch with her head into his manly smells, her mouth against his penis" (24). Jean simply wants to mete out pain on Ateba and embarrass her rather than to have sexual gratification. His violent attack on Ateba displays his ignorance on how to seduce women. He merely sees women as sexual entities that have

to be subjugated and views his organ as the ultimate weapon with which to fulfil his fantasies without consent. As highlighted in the narration that “a woman was good only in the evening; melting into the dark [. . .] the daytime was absolutely not made for her. Who said that a woman was beautiful? The guys must have two black holes instead of eyes!” (43). Jean just like the other men exercise power, control and authority over women.

What toughens Ateba’s case is the fact that the only source of security turns into a source of threat and menace. After the police attack the shantytown where Ateba lives, one of them forces Ateba to go with him into a dissolute cabin, where he sexually assaults her (70-71). This act raises questions as to whether this is really a police headquarters that the narration describes. Normally, the police provide protection to the citizens but in this case, it is different. The police actually perpetrate crimes against women. This molestation is likened to *Highway Queen*, where the author underlines the violence that Sophie undergoes at the hands of the men that she meets. This highlights the predicament of masculinity which results from the transformation of private and public spaces as women’s roles evolve and metamorphose. In the case of Sophie, her role as a housewife changes when her husband is incapacitated by retrenchment. On the other hand, Ateba does not have the capacity for empowerment to change her life.

Men often claim possession of female bodies as in the case of Ateba’s client that she gets after her friend’s burial. He claims “your body belongs to me until dawn. Another day, I might have been able to let you go. But tonight I need an imprint of a woman in my bed” (118). She tries to resist but he is too strong and orders her to perform oral sex, claiming that “God has sculptured woman on her knee at the feet of man” (118). This act on its own is derogatory and profanes even the words that emanate from the woman. His objective is for the woman to lose confidence in herself as articulated by Beauvoir who states that, to lose confidence in one’s body is to lose confidence in self. Through his riches, this man paradoxically believes he can use his manly supremacy and affluence to pacify Ateba. This mind-set validates what is articulated by Jean Zepp who defends his domineering behaviour against women by arrogantly uttering the following: “since time again, woman has prostrated herself before man. It’s no accident that God created her from the rib of man.” (84) He ironically implies that the inferior status of women was pre-designed by God hence they just have to live with this decree. Watkins (2015:xiii) affirms that “in return for all the goodies men receive from patriarchy they are required to dominate women, to exploit and oppress us using violence if they must to keep patriarchy in tact.” Hitchcott (2000) believes the patriarchal society maps women’s destinies; hence they have to follow the plan. However, Beyala in harmony with

Simone De Beauvoir discards this notion as a result they urge women to be negotiators of their own destinies regardless of their status and their environment. It is ironic that the male characters view their power and influence over women as God given consequently they consider that it was designed that women should gratify men's sexual craving. In his article entitled *Free at last: a feminist insight into Beyala's the sun hath looked upon me and el saadawi's woman at point zero*, SylvesterMutunda (2015) asserts that women are "kinds of currency that help men display their sexual prowess, thus improving their ranking on the scale of masculinity" (84). Nonetheless, Ateba who has been through a lot of abuse finally overthrows the male subjugation when she overpowers and murders a man she meets at a bar. This is how the murder scene unfolds:

She had crouched down, grabbed the man's head and with two hands she is beating it against the stone floor. The blood gushes out, splatters, sullies. She gives a beat to her blows, scanning 'Irene, Irene' and as she still notices signs of life under her hands, she picks up a knife and, overcome with joy, she begins to strike, to strike with all her might. At last, the final spasm. Her kidneys give way; piss floods the corpse beneath her. (119)

To deconstruct this literary myth of the beautiful and submissive woman, Beyala depicts strong women who fiercely oppose the domination of man. By killing her rapist, Ateba refuses the position of "the kneeling woman at the feet of man" (Beyala, 1997: 121). On the other hand, unlike Ateba, Sophie tries to fight her assailant but fails. When she establishes her fish vending business, Sophie leaves the home which is a domestic place usually reserved for women, to the city centre which is dominated by men, especially the truck-stop where she meets Dhuri. This place is unfriendly to the well-being of a woman. As soon as Sophie arrives at the truck-stop there is a noticeable quietness, the men do not welcome her but just "open their mouths [and] anxiously stare" (Phiri 13). Dhuri is an ill-disposed and bad-mannered man who says that she should "spend just ten minutes" with him because she does not have enough money to buy the rice and fish (18). Even though Sophie fights back, even to the extent of biting him, he does not surrender; he goes on to rape her and boasts that he does not use condoms "purely on principle" since he believes that AIDS does not exist (Phiri 19). In De Beauvoir's words, a man attaches himself to a woman, not to enjoy her but to enjoy himself. The comparison of these two characters shows that women can shape their destinies. The depiction of Sophie as a dual casualty of two historically decipherable forces, the post 2000 financial collapse and the patriarchal community makes the decrypting of her anxiety and choices easier. The character of the prostitute is believed to be negative in relation to the African traditions and customs. As a novel character, the prostitute woman is seldom heroine, by making her a heroine in her novel, Phiri also demonstrates her

rebellious nature as an African woman. Lorde (2015 :40) stresses that “women need to transform silence into language and action.”

3.1.1. The metamorphosis of the African woman in *Highway Queen*

In *Highway Queen*, Sophie also shows her rebellion when she reverses all her feminine roles to become the breadwinner. With this development, she incapacitates Steven who has become a househusband. This change makes her become more assertive. She doesn't ask for permission anymore from the husband especially when she goes on her cross-border trips. She writes: “Steven Dear, I have gone to the South Border town to find goods to sell. I will be back tomorrow. Please look after the children. Make sure that mother takes her medication. See you soon.” (Phiri 23) From her utterances, it seems that she is now decisive contrary to the expectations of a traditional wife. This situation exhibits the modification in Sophie's presentation of femininity, since she is no longer the submissive wife. Her current status demonstrates the disrupting of gender norms due to ailing economy. Using the first person narrative voice of a mother-turned prostitute, the novel discloses in what way lack pushes a woman to abandon respect in exchange for a meagre living made from prostitution. More notably, the text exhibits how men and women answer to the re-gendering of private and public spaces and underlines the apprehensions lived by some men when they lose their leading statuses in their families.

Sophie has a clear impression of her independence and autonomy. She sets herself to buy a residential stand and she constructs a house so that she moves in with her family and she opens “a home industry of batik making and chicken rearing, besides tuition payment, food and medication for her mother-in-law” (88 – 89). She clearly fluctuates between her body transacting business and her domestic activities and responsibilities.

When Sophie's metamorphosis is reached, she now makes decisions on behalf of the family, a role that is reserved for the men. She decides to permanently move the family to the village when all their determinations to stay in the city fail. Previously, her husband would have made such resolutions. Nonetheless, the shortcoming to the women empowerment during the crisis is that they go into urban work and business places troubled with worries and pressures. The truck drivers Dhuri, Samson and Danny, epitomize a hegemonic masculinity which is ferocious to which Zenenga advocates is a consequence of the existing “discourse of manhood which is premised on [violence] virility and aggressiveness” (141). The trio rape, beat and disgraces Sophie so much that the position of men as heads and fathers of families is questioned. Connell(2005) defines hegemonic masculinity as a

diagnostic mechanism used to detect the attitudes as well as the men's practices that propagate gender disparity. This also encompasses the control of some men over other men.

Unlike the traditional woman, Sophie fights against lack and the heartless socio-economic Zimbabwean environment. She assumes different personalities and adjusts to diverse circumstances in the fight for existence. She gets rid of the restrictive personality of 'house-wife' when the breadwinning initiative appeals. In turn, she participates in activities that are crucial for her survival and that of her family. According to Chitando (2012:50), "she meets chauvinistic violent sexual predators," as well as prejudiced masculinities. The narration exposes that Sophie "tried all sorts of odd jobs" (p. 10) but with no victory before she engaged in prostitution. On this backdrop prostitution is viewed as a snare and an activity that one is obliged to do by difficult situations. For Beauvoir, the wings of a woman are cut and then she is blamed for not being able to fly.

It can be argued that, morals are defied since the contentious deed of selling sex paradoxically turns into a means that emancipates Sophie and offers her agency. The narration highlights this fact through the diction. Initially, Sophie is called a 'prostitute' but later she is called a 'sex worker'. The change in how she is called also shows the change that is taking place in her character. She is conscious that, her body is the "only commodity that no one [has] control over except [herself]" and she wants to be paid for selling sex (88). She takes control of her body and makes astute decisions regarding her business transactions. Sophie is likened to most of the men in the novel who live dual lives. Initially, she is a wife and mother and then she becomes a woman who sells sex for existence. In this optic, there is a reconfiguration of gender in relation to women because the features that define womankind such as marriage and maternity are no longer sufficient. It is well realized that the woman attributes to herself characters that are considered by society as those of the other sex. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that in Beyala and Phiri, women acquire a man's temperament. The latter is represented, not as an object of speech, but as a subject that leads the actions of great importance. The study by Engels cited by Bender (2012) opens the door to a wide range of analysis concerning the metrical conditions of women's lives and labour.

After agonising for about a month, I made a decision which was very hard to take. I came up with an idea to mop up Rands. I wasn't interested in local currency as its value was unpredictable. To achieve this I would sell my body... That was the only commodity that no one had control over except myself... (88)

Sophie is mindful of all the dangers tangled in sex work. For this reason, selling herself is not a choice that she assumes carelessly as she ponders over the matter for about a month. Choosing to trade one's body is frightening,

nonetheless several women have assumed the approach owing to lack. Muwati *et al.*,(2013: 127) believe that “Sophie’s narration of her own story focuses the audience on the humanity of the female figure, and to view the survival activity of commercial sex merchandising through the “prism of the incapacitating social and economic environment.” Munyoro (2018) asserts that “Sophie epitomises women’s struggle for survival in a dominantly patriarchal society. Her ingenuity out-manoeuvres the phallogocentric system to carve survival space for herself and her family.” Shahrzad (2015) interrogates the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and how the creation of a feminist project can be adopted to emancipate both women and society.

4. Stylistic analysis

In *Highway Queen*, Sophie, does not refer to herself or the other women who are involved in sex selling as prostitutes, nonetheless as “selling sex”, engaged in “sex work”, “work” or “sex selling scheme” (89, 102, 114). On the other hand, the male characters who call Sophie a “whore, bitch, cow, stupid cow , old cow” (20, 63, 104, 135, 136). Dhuri calls Sophie a “whore” and a “bitch” in order to avoid paying for the services he receives. In addition, Danny calls her a “cow” since he wants to avoid paying. Finally, Peter refers to her as a “stupid cow” as she has no money. The pejorative nouns show how the female character is regarded in society. On this background, the novelist accords narration control to the woman character so as to correct the views and understanding of the conditions that have compelled her to sex trading.

On the other hand, when Sophie finally decides to trade using her body, her attitude and her language change. She believes that her body stops to be a place of simply sorrow and exploitation, nonetheless her body transforms into a business spot, since she views herself as “conducting business”, the “commodity” being “selling sex” or “sex work”; to willing men. Furthermore, she gets herself “a room, two thin blankets and a pillow”, these correspond to a functioning office and equipment to use in her business (88 - 89).

5. Conclusion

The novels studied invoke the extraordinary circumstance caused by the crisis, which exposes the dangerous limits of socially-produced and regulated female identities, to advance a re-conceptualization of prostitution. Phiri’s depiction of the female prostitute figure as the chronicler of her own life does not allow the prostitute figure voice and agency to reflect on the nature of her subordination, but it can be read on a symbolic plan as foregrounding the prostitute’s ability to reconfigure normative identities of female sex workers and sex workers. It can be concluded that Sophie’s and

Ateba's plights are aftermaths of adopting capitalist systems which disadvantage women. For future studies, researchers may investigate more on subdued masculinity in African literature and how this aspect compromises patriarchy.

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