

NARRATIVES OF DESIRE: GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN BUGUL, AIDOO, AND  
CHIZIANE

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Colonial narratives and nationalist rhetoric in Africa have always associated female sexuality with male desire and consumption, aberrance, or perversion. While historical narratives suggested that native women's bodies should be tamed and possessed, African nationalist narratives usually equated female bodies with land, nature, and spirituality. In different ways, both colonialists and nationalists appropriated the female body and sexuality to convey ideologies concerning the conquest of distant lands or related to the dignity of the colonized people. This dissertation examines how African women writers' representation of female desire counternarrates colonialist and nationalist tales while disturbing gender conventions and defying social norms in African contexts. By using feminist theories, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory, I examine the ways that Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*, Paulina Chiziane's *Niketche: Uma Historia de Poligamia*, and Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab Fou* reveal female sexuality while simultaneously subverting discourses that often define female bodies as sexual objects or as spiritual entities— as the Mother Africa, a trope widespread in the speeches of the Negritude movement. Through the analysis of these literary works, I present how these African women writers have used discursive strategies about female desire to demonstrate the consequences of the colonial encounter and post-independence policies

on neo-colonial women's bodies and minds as well as to reveal the exclusion of women's voices from national affairs. These works not only confront history but also interrogate the role of literature and the work of art. Through their literary works, Bugul, Chiziane, and Aidoo bring to literature characteristics of African arts, reinventing the literary in order to forge a medium that is able to give sense to African women's experience.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: WRITING ALTERNATIVE STORIES,

#### RE-IMAGINING HISTORY

If anything I do in the way of writing (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams – which is to say yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: If a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted ... It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time. (Toni Morrison, *Rootedness*, 345).

In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” African American writer, Nobel Laureate, Toni Morrison affirms that her literary work has been directed to a specific community. She suggests that literature not only educates, informs, and soothes the American black community, it also undoes stereotypes created over the course of history. Thus, literature forges new myths through which a people are able to re-imagine themselves. Morrison's literary works enable Black Americans to see represented their cultural values, their songs and rhythms, and their ways of life. Morrison acknowledges that her literature gives readers the opportunity to own stories and become characters and writers at once. When she writes “it seems that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (345), she suggests that her literary work is able to fulfill Black Americans' imagination and also deconstructs historical stereotypes and reinvents literature adding an African worldview to the novel, a genre that was created to fulfill European's middle class imaginations. By using “unorthodox novelistic characteristics,” writers like Toni

Morrison bring to light what she calls “characteristics of black art” (342); providing another perspective about history, literature, and the work of art.

In this dissertation I examine how three African female writers—the Senegalese writer Ken Bugul, the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo, and the Mozambican writer Paulina Chiziane—make a political use of literature as a site of memory in order to “right a wrong, make visible the invisible, or give knowledge where ignorance has reigned” (Khanna 13). By using their stories to rethink history, these writers offer themselves and their communities a means of recognizing and interrogating the female body and sexuality. Most importantly, female characters in these stories do not act in accordance with expected norms, but rather challenge societal rules and open up a space for change. In this sense, the literature of these three writers is not only an expression of their personal vision and aspirations but also offers hope for other women.

Deciding on the theme for this research project was quite a challenge for me. On one side, I am convinced that the important issue of the colonization of the female body deserves to be investigated, but on the other, Black women’s bodies have been associated with sex and sexuality for so many years that approaching this subject might seem a setback. However, the further I delved into these stories, the more I comprehended the importance of investigating female desire. These stories, in many ways, help readers come to terms with what is often hidden and not discussed, and what is considered inadequate.

In order to examine these stories critically, it is necessary to reconsider the role of literature, the work of art, and the literary critic. Drawing from Victor Turner’s anthropology, the literary critic Thomas Pavel remarks on the fallacy of attempting to

read literature as raw reality or attempting to rely on the author's intention. Nevertheless Pavel affirms that, in many ways, literature provides valuable data to help us comprehend social facts. For Pavel, Victor Turner's anthropology offers some appropriate responses to some of these problems that remain part of the preoccupations of critics of African literature:

[Turner's anthropology] avoids the hyperrealist fallacy which consists in closely matching narrative categories and raw facts and believing that the former describe the latter: for instance, that a conflict in a story necessarily refers to a real one. But neither is Turner tempted by the self-referential fallacy, which assumes that since narratives constitute a self-enclosed world, their categories form an algebraic structure lacking any links to the actual universe. For him, stories represent the real social life so effectively because social life itself is organized according to cultural categories. These are established along the same line as narrative categories. (64)

As Pavel explains, Turner's anthropology locates a liminal space where the literary is neither raw reality nor completely detached from the social scene. African writers have profited from this literary space to counteract narratives that efface African people's agency. In this sense, creative practice is a medium to revise history, redefining the space, and giving voice to different narrators who will be able to interpret their reality.

Through their literary works, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ken Bugul, and Paulina Chiziane reinterpret reality and deconstruct history. As their stories unveil female bodies and explore notions of female sexuality, they also undo sexual colonization by revealing sexuality as part of the female self, thus reconstructing their subjectivity and giving them agency. Through their literary works, these authors rewrite female bodies not in a utopian way, but in a way that acknowledges that pain and suffering are part of the process of dealing with such a difficult issue. While their female characters unveil and explore their

sexuality, they attempt to answer a question that resonates in all these works: What is an African woman?

To understand how these literary works undo stereotypes and reconstruct female subjectivity through the unveiling of female sexuality, I also ask the following question in this dissertation: How do these representations of female sexuality deconstruct colonial and patriarchal narratives, thus giving birth to new myths? How do these stories undo sexual colonization and challenge prevailing notions of an “African woman”? In what ways, do these literary works reconstruct female identity? Which sites are endangered when they explore sexuality as part of the female self? How do these stories write new histories? How does female desire become an allegory for women’s empowerment and inclusion of female voices in the national construction?

### **Historical Trends: The Female Body in Colonial and Nationalist Discourses**

Female sexuality played an important role in defining the emptiness of colonized territories, and, in many colonial narratives, female bodies were treated as synonymous with colonized land. One of the notions spread by European colonialism on the African continent was the myth of the “virgin land” that implies a blank territory in which colonized populations “cannot claim aboriginal territorial rights, and white male patrimony is violently assured as the sexual military insemination of an interior void” (McClintock 30). Metaphors of the colonized land as a woman ready to be deflowered have been part of colonial discourses around the globe. As a virgin, a woman is dispossessed of sexual desire and agency and the colonized land becomes embedded in patriarchal tales of male sexual fantasy; the land also turns into a site for the male

colonizer's most perverted desires. As, McClintock affirms, women become "the earth to be discovered, entered, named, inseminated, and above all, owned" (McClintock 31).

During the nineteenth century sexuality and race functioned as prominent markers of *Otherness*, setting parameters for what was normal and acceptable and what must be regulated and brought into normality. In 1898 Joseph Conrad published *Heart of Darkness*, a novel that would become a landmark for colonial studies. The novel emerged from Conrad's travels to what was the Belgian colony, Congo, which served as his main inspiration. Though the novel has been acknowledged as a critique of King Leopold's abuses in Africa, Conrad also portrays a darkness of the continent and an African people deprived of humanity, as the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe remarked almost sixty years later (Achebe 1977).

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, the narrator, describes the apparition of a native woman who disturbs him. For Marlow, the woman appears to be as mythical and frightening as Africa, thus embodying what is unknown and obscure as the mass of land itself. While Marlow contemplates the woman, he thinks about Africa as "the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body that look at her, pensive as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous soul" (Conrad 132). For the narrator, the woman and the mass of land are equated. Both of them bear an emptiness and darkness that are almost palpable, and both of them are under the European male gaze as objects of desire. Through Marlow's narration, the native woman is gradually dehumanized, her body appropriated by his language and discourse that seeks to define the unknown. Narratives like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* not only invent Africa for European and for native people, but they also disseminate the image of a lascivious and

fearful native woman who must fulfill colonial desires. Through discourse, the white male subject creates and objectifies the native woman who becomes the embodiment of an untamed blank space, a space that gradually takes form through Marlow's narrative.

European cultural texts have historically constructed African sexualities as dirty and impure. In this sense, Christianity and colonization have linked African female sexuality to danger, violence, or death, and "to the missions, excessive African sexuality was to be restrained as a salient element of their 'civilizing mission' project" (Becker 37). In many ways, colonized women's bodies needed to be under control as they represented a danger to social order, thus stereotypical images of depraved women have long been part of Western imagination. In many ways, colonial history has been written on female bodies that often serve as the metaphor for the conquered land, an untamed space that must be regulated. Like native lands, female bodies become properties of a patriarchal colonial system.

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, scientific research attempted to document the abnormality of black women's bodies. Sander Gilman points out that scientists tried to prove that the size of Black women's genitalia was as excessive as that of lesbians who were identified as having a disease or a congenital error (Gilman 89). In the book *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, Gilman tells the story of Sarrtjie Baartman, known as Sara Bartman or The Venus of Hottentot, where he shows how the nineteenth-century scientific discourses attempted to prove that Black women's bodies represented deviant sexuality and primitivism. Saartjie Baartman was taken from South Africa to London and Paris in 1810 for exhibition of her naked body, and five years after exhibiting her genitalia publicly as a symbol of aberrance, Baartman

died. By having her humanity thus denied, Baartman existed for Europeans only as “a collection of sexual parts” (Gilman 87-88). Her story is only one example of Western representations of Black women as symbols of abnormality or perversion.

In addition to colonial discourses, nationalist narratives also constructed female *Otherness* in various other ways. The first generation of African writers, who were predominantly male, produced stereotypical discourses concerning women’s sexuality. For instance, in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1959), women function as mere objects to be traded by fathers and husbands who have ownership of female bodies. Often portrayed as empty vessels, lacking any desire, in Achebe’s novel, women are “excluded from the political, economic, the judicial, and even the discourse of the community life” (Stratton 25). Achebe’s depictions of pre-colonial Nigeria as a place with a very systematic economic, social, and juridic organization might suggest that women did not have any power in that societal organization. However, this may not be the case.

Not only did the Nigerian writer misrepresent women’s experiences, but Leopold Sédar Senghor, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, and other male writers who invested their energies in restoring African indigenous cultures through their literary narratives also did so. While their nationalist discourses attempted to resist narratives like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, they replicated the notion that women’s bodies should be appropriated—this time to symbolize idealized new nations. Their nationalist rhetoric frequently utilized women’s bodies as metaphors of the land, and their poems were hymns praising a beloved motherland subjected to patriarchal power. As Bergeron argues, “The nation has often been imagined in terms of metaphors of the family and accordingly has replicated the patriarchy of conventional family forms. Women are

viewed as mothers of the nations, as reproducers rather than producers, as objects of protection rather than agents” (Bergeron 20).

It is worth noting that some male writers and filmmakers have attempted to highlight women’s perspectives on colonialism in African-European encounters and the post-independence period, as is the case with Ousmane Sembene. Sembene started his career as a writer but decided to turn to cinema in order to make his works available to a broader audience. In his film *La Noire de*, the protagonist dreams about having a sophisticated way of life in Europe. In Senegal, Diouana grabs a magazine, starting to imagine the comfortable life she will lead in Paris. But when Diouana arrives in France, she understands that paradise will never be part of her reality as an African maid. Sembene includes in most of his works an examination of how patriarchal and colonial structures pervade women’s lives.

Though there are a few exceptions, nationalist narratives are often created around male heroes who defy the colonizers and denounce the abuses of colonial projects in order to become national subjects. In these masculine narratives, women might occupy an erotic place or a spiritual place, as mothers of the nation or Mother Africa. In these cases, the subjects of the nations are the male heroes. When the trope of Mother Africa is applied to women, their function may be to nurture the males who will be in charge of constructing the new nations. In 1945 the Senegalese Leopold Sédar Senghor, who would become the first President of Senegal, published his first volume of poetry entitled *Anthologie de poesie negre e malagache*, a landmark in modern francophone African literature. In his poem “Femme Noire,” perhaps the most acclaimed poem in the collection, he celebrates the motherland in the form of a naked woman. While colonial

narratives described Africa as the “Heart of Darkness” that caused estrangement and fear in the colonizers, Senghor attempts to reclaim the notion of an Africa where darkness is palpable, praising the motherland’s dark enchantments.

Femme nue, femme noire  
Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté  
J’ai grandi à ton ombre; la douceur de tes mains bandait mes yeux  
Et voilà qu’au coeur de l’Été et de Midi,  
Je te découvre, Terre promise, du haut d’un haut col calciné  
Et ta beauté me foudroie en plein coeur, comme l’éclair d’un aigle  
(Senghor 1945)

The naked woman evokes erotic feelings in the poetic persona who will become a national subject at the expense of the objectified woman. Through the dichotomies man/woman, subject/object, he is represented as a privileged man, an intellectual educated in the West while she is just a sexual or aesthetic object (Stratton 41). Paradoxically this woman both functions as a spiritual entity and evokes sexual feelings in the poetic persona. Most importantly, however, Senghor’s “Femme Noire” would seem not to be capable of desire; she appears to be a voiceless blank space that exists to satisfy the poet and to bear the sons of the new nations. While a spiritual woman might serve the poet’s purposes, actual women had to be confined in domestic spaces in order to serve national purposes. Writers such as Mariama Bâ and Ken Bugul have openly challenged Senghor’s Negritude with its myths about Mother Africa and mothers of Africa. Other writers like Ama Ata Aidoo also questioned the representation of African women in Achebe’s works.

### **Influences and Departures: Black Feminisms, African Feminisms, the *misovire***

Since the 1960s, African women writers published literary works that defied patriarchal, colonialist, and nationalist notions about native women’s bodies and sexuality. My study thus draws from an existing African feminist tradition in order to

examine how female characters in the works of Ken Bugul, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Paulina Chiziane reconcile sexuality and intervene in historical discourses that have narrated female bodies as impure and evil. Although gender hierarchies have been widely explored in African literary criticism, female sexuality has remained largely unexamined. This dissertation aims to contribute to a field that has been under investigation due to many taboos or lack of interest. I will explore how the works of these three writers present innovations to this model as they represent female sexuality in ways that challenge the patriarchal social order and bring women's voices into the narration of African history.

According to Signe Arnfred, one of the factors contributing to this silence about African female sexualities has to do with nineteenth-century racist discourses about the depravity of African sexuality. Arnfred further suggests that "there may be other reasons as well linked to the ways in which sexuality is and has been dealt with in daily and ritual life" (Arnfred 59). The literary critic Odile Cazenave also recognizes the absence of the discussion on African sexuality, thus suggesting that "particularly for an African woman writer to speak about her body and her desires represents a daring act" (126). Cazenave affirms that even when African female writers discuss sexuality in their literary works, it is very difficult for them to disentangle from the "traditional idea of romantic love, heterosexual" (141). As she notes, representing sexuality is still a taboo for African women authors, and very few women dare to take on this issue in their literary works.

While exposing female desire, Aidoo, Chiziane, and Bugul's creative works provide a vehement critique of colonial and post-independence policies, abusive indigenous practices, male privilege, corruption, and bad governance while arguing for

the inclusion of female concerns in the political agendas of African nations. As they criticize colonialism and its influence on Africa and post-independence social institutions, they also struggle with their condition as African writers who feel that they need to utilize the language of the former colonizers to produce their works. Language has been one of the major issues for African writers who have chosen to adopt the language of the colonizer to tell their stories. To write in the colonial languages has been crucial for those who want to succeed in the literary market and find an audience for and reception of their works outside their ethnic groups. Yet these writers have declared that this is a tough decision and not without constraints. For women, the issue is even more complicated because language is an instrument of both patriarchal and colonial domination. However, most postcolonial feminist criticism takes into consideration the role of language in postcolonial women's literatures. Ama Ata Aidoo affirms that, for women, the linguistic issue is more problematic than it is for African male authors because European languages do not only mean colonial imposition, but also patriarchal oppression. Though Aidoo is a privileged and highly educated Ghanaian woman, she shows her frustration with women's conditions by affirming that women's situations are delicate because, in most cases, they were excluded from colonial education and had minimal or no access to the colonial language. When the majority of women are considered uneducated, they become voiceless and disempowered in a context where European languages are crucial for their survival in postcolonial nations. When post-independence governments choose to maintain a European language as the national and official language, part of the population is excluded from the decision-making process, and women are the most affected because they are the ones who are least educated.

Writers like Aidoo have fought for women's rights or have claimed to be part of a feminist struggle or involved in African feminism. Others like Chiziane and Tsitsi Dangaremba have strongly rejected feminism as an ideology (George, Scott, and Dangaremba 93). Some writers and critics refuse feminism because of its implications as a movement, theory, and practice related to white middle-class women's experiences. Some African writers take exception to what they see as Western feminism's exclusive preoccupation with patriarchal power and its failure to take into account categories like race and class which have been crucial to the understanding of struggles of Third World women and women of color. In *Pedagogies of Crossing*, M. Jacqui Alexander remarks that the idea of a Global Feminism, a transnational feminism or the feminism of the majority, often blurs categories of race, culture, and sexuality. She declares that these discourses have been filled with binaries such as oppressor-oppressed. These feminist approaches explain Third World women's oppressions in terms of their relation to traditional practices, and they propose feminism as a way to save women from their own patriarchal traditions. Alexander warns of the dangers of subsuming the local into the global through applying the Western experience to the rest of the world. Certainly, if an ideal global feminism puts all women in one box in order to examine how they are oppressed by nature and culture, these women then become victims to be saved from their own backwardness, ignorance.<sup>1</sup> Jacqui Alexander's work aligns with Chandra Mohanty's in advising us on how to conduct our practices from the perspective by which

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<sup>1</sup> See M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*.

local and global interests might converge and diverge, since categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality are differently nuanced in different locations.<sup>2</sup>

In Africa, the definition of feminism has undergone many interpretations and nuances. The Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo envisages a feminist movement that would seek justice not only for African *women* but for all African *people*, suggesting an inclusive movement that could integrate all people into the construction of the continent. For her, there is no possibility of African development if women do not take part in the project:

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 African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that Africa women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element of our feminism. (African Woman Today, 39)

For Aidoo, African males should be part of the feminist struggle to empower women in the continent. In her creative writing, Aidoo often presents emerging female characters who are searching for new roles within African nations. Similarly, in *So Long a Letter*, Senegalese author Mariama Bâ's narrator argues that "women must be encouraged to take a keener interest in the destiny of the country" (64).

Carole Boyce Davies was one of the first literary critics to use the term "African feminism." Like Ama Ata Aidoo, Davies argues that a genuine African feminism should first recognize the necessity of a common struggle along with African men in order to reconstruct Africa. She states that this movement should not be "antagonistic to men but it challenges them to be aware of certain silent aspects of women's subjugation"(9). For

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<sup>2</sup> See Chandra Mohanty's *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*.

Davies, African feminism is also about the necessity of overcoming those gender disparities brought by colonialism and those that are part of indigenous traditions. Davies emphasizes that the erasure of African cultural traditions is not the point but that women should nonetheless be able to choose what aspects of those traditions remain relevant to them while refusing practices that they consider to be oppressive.

Unlike Aidoo and Davies, Obioma Nnaemeka argues that the concept of African feminism probably does not do justice to the heterogeneity of Africa as a continent with numerous ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. For Nnaemeka, Africa's pluralism must be respected. Thus for her "to speak of feminism in Africa is to speak of feminisms in the plural within Africa and other continents in recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives" (31). Though Nnaemeka cites the inappropriateness of the concept "African Feminism" to define the struggle for women's rights on the continent, she asserts that "naming feminism is an act of (agency), of resistance that sustains its dynamism and expands its horizon" (2). Despite recognizing African heterogeneity and complexities of a diverse continent, Nnaemeka envisions herself as part of a common struggle that has its foundation in pan-African ideals. In so doing, she aligns herself with other literary critics, such as Irene Assiba D'Almeida, who have affirmed that in using the term, her intent is not one of "totalization, but of a Pan-African perspective" (23).

Perhaps one of the most coherent alternatives to feminism comes from the Cameroonian writer Werewere Liking. Rather than using terms like "feminism" or "African feminism" in her writings; Liking invented the word *misovire*, a French neologism that means "male hater." In *Elle Sera de Jaspe et de Corail*, the *misovire* denounces bad governance in Africa, relating it to the inertia of male leaders and

intellectuals. For D'Almeida, Liking's invention is "all the more important as the creation of the word also creates the function, and the possibility of another reality" (20). It is worth noting that while Liking coined a new term to define women's struggle in contemporary African contexts, she had in mind a common struggle among African women; in her work, she avoids examining specific issues of her own country, but rather adopts a Pan-Africanist approach.

This dissertation also adopts a Pan-Africanist approach as it discusses how women writers from different parts of Africa explore female sexuality in their literary works. While expressing female sexuality in their narratives, Aidoo, Bugul, and Chiziane's female characters struggle to come to terms with sisterhood, friendship between women, and feminist ideologies. Female characters in *Le Baobab Fou*, *Changes: A Love Story* and *Nikette: A Story of Polygamy* defy many conventions and societal norms to have the freedom to make decisions about their sexuality. Even though their decisions may hurt them or the people around them, they are prepared to deal with the pain and suffering of revealing their desire. It is worth noting that the female characters in these stories do not always feel liberated, nor do their attitudes necessarily conform to the feminist ideology some of them preach. Aidoo's protagonist, Esi Sekyi, claims to be a feminist yet as she fights for her sexual freedom, she disgraces the lives of some of the women around her. Bugul's autobiographical journey is so uneasy that it is very difficult to know how to interpret the protagonist's choice and the path that most often leads her to destruction. Ken, a colonized woman searching for sexual experiences with European people in Brussels, comes to the point of wanting to tear off her skin to become White. Chiziane's Rami needs to learn how to have sexual pleasure and does so within a

polygamous relationship. In these novels, female characters struggle to reconcile themselves with their bodies and to reclaim their sexuality, but in order to do this, they need to cope with the ensuing pain and suffering. Exploring their sexuality might not always be liberating, but it is always healing. In these stories, when women challenge societal conventions and attempt to take control of their lives, a question resonates: Are they African women? The question Esi's husband asks her appears to permeate all the stories: What is an African woman? In this dissertation, as I analyze how female characters explore their sexuality and deal with issues such as colonial education, nationalist policies, corrupt governments, and the changes occurring in a modern society, they question themselves and are questioned about their African identity.

### **Chapter Summaries**

My second chapter entitled “Mais Quelle identité? Female Body, Memory and Identity in *Le Baobab Fou*” examines how Ken Bugul rewrites the Africa-Europe encounter. My reading shows how Ken Bugul's experiences reveal the extent of her own colonization and lead her to question her own identity. By exposing her body and her sexual colonization, the narrator is able to reverse the gaze, thus examining Europe's fallacy regarding morality and civilization. Life in Brussels contributes to the protagonist's madness and spiritual death, but her survival depends on her courage to articulate her story. In this work, the Senegalese writer Ken Bugul seeks reconciliation with the self through memory and forgetting, thus creating a literary space to question history by revealing how colonialism affected neo-colonial women's bodies and minds. Though pain and suffering are part and parcel of Ken's experiences in Brussels, the narrative opens up possibilities for questioning colonial violence as well as undoing

sexual colonization. As Bugul voices her story, her text becomes a mirror in which she is able to see herself and to provide the community with tools to see the colonial encounter through other lenses.

My third chapter “Are You an African Woman?’ Female Desire and Modernity in Aidoo’s *Changes*” examines how Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel addresses women’s perspectives in the discussion about African modernities. Aidoo reveals how the female characters in her novel struggle to reconcile with sexuality when modernity interferes in the female perception of the body, beauty, and sexual desire. Female characters experience and rewrite modernity on their bodies through an examination of how capitalism, consumerism, and individualism reshape and regulate female bodies. Through her characters, Aidoo analyzes the role of the traditional institution of polygamy in an environment where women acquire professional success and education through European-modeled institutions. This chapter discusses the ways in which Aidoo’s protagonist uses her sexual freedom and desire to interrogate postcolonial institutions about the actual changes modernity brings to women living in African urban centers.

My fourth chapter is entitled “Rethinking Sexuality and Womanhood in Chiziane’s *Niketche*.” This chapter examines Chiziane’s novel *Niketche: Uma Historia de Poligamia* as a narrative that focuses on female desire as an instrument for women’s empowerment. In her journey to discover sexual desire, Chiziane’s protagonist becomes empowered to fight for the inclusion of women’s voices in national affairs. Rami understands that her lack of sexual desire and pleasure are the result of colonial and post-independence policies. She sees herself as a product of this history and struggles to undo the colonization. Rami’s northern co-wives see her lack of knowledge about her body and

sexuality as a result of a pervasive colonization in the south of Mozambique. In her journeys to rediscover sexual desire, Rami adapts traditions such as initiation rites and polygamy. By recreating traditional practices in urban Maputo, Mozambique, she has the possibility of examining which aspects of these traditions might help women and which traditional practices work to their detriment. While the women teach Rami how to rediscover her body and sexuality, Rami takes advantage of her colonial education and privileged economic status to help the women overcome poverty. Through the bond of solidarity and sisterhood created among these women, Chiziane's narrative effaces the boundary between north and south, giving another perspective to Mozambican history.

My concluding chapter reflects on how these narratives function as a looking glass where the writers struggle to come to terms with the construction of the neo-colonial woman. In the looking glass that is their texts, they are also asking themselves about their fragmented identities. As female characters in these stories expose their sexuality and struggle to feel sexually fulfilled or to reconcile with their sexuality, they redefine their identities and give their community tools to reinterpret history through other lenses.

## CHAPTER II

### MAIS QUELLE IDENTITE? FEMALE BODY, MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN

#### *LE BAOBAB FOU*

Becoming Ken Bugul was like a rebirth. I could then continue to live thereafter. Had I not become Ken Bugul, I would have ceased to exist ... I was in a critical phase of my life in which I had to write or I would die. (Ken Bugul, in Interview with de Larquier 319 )

... I let myself be carried away by these characters that drown me. Thus, writing reveals me to myself, and reveals things buried in my innermost self, my existential secrets. I break free, through being revealed to myself. I feel liberated, in harmony with myself, and that way I can begin the climb to the mountain top from which I will dive into the intoxicating nothingness of life. Nonetheless the path is long and difficult. That is why it is also thrilling, with its ups and downs. (Ken Bugul, in Interview with de Larquier 320)

Les Mystères de l`Afrique, les Secrets de l`Afrique, les Sorciers de l`Afrique, c`était donc de la mystification ? Fabriquons alors, nous-memes, d`autres valeurs, d`autres repères, d`autres références, pour affronter les millénaires à venir ! Fabriquer, mais non importer ! Fabriquer sur place ! (Riwan ou le chemin de sable 65)

The editors of Nouvelle Éditions Africaines, a major publishing house in Senegal advised Marietou M`Baye to publish her story under a pen name because her autobiography included revelations that could scandalize the audience in her country. *Le Baobab Fou* is scandalous not only because the female narrator exposes her body and her sexual desires, but also because it makes the reader reflect upon the ways that colonization have affected women living in independent African countries. To publish her story, Marietou M`Baye chose the pseudonym Ken Bugul, a Wolof expression that means “nobody wants it.” Ken Bugul is generally a name given to a baby who comes after several miscarriages. Giving this name is a traditional way for parents to protect their babies from death, a way to tell the world that nobody wants the newborn, not even

God. By adopting the pseudonym Ken Bugul, Marietou M`Baye is attempting to ensure survival and avoid death.<sup>3</sup> The pseudonym protects the author while revealing her agency and political authority.

The title of Bugul's book *Le Baobab Fou* refers to the baobab tree, considered a symbol of Senegal. The baobab tree is pervasive across the country, and Senegalese people appreciate the juice of its fruit, the *ndiambane*, and use its leaves in local cuisine. A baobab tree can live over a thousand years, but ancient trees are hollow; the wood deteriorates causing a cavity at the core. Due to its unusual appearance, oral stories tell that the devil has turned its roots to the air "causing both the tree and the local populace to both die" (De Vita 35). According to Alexis De Vita, in the Pan-African world, trees are often a way to connect with the ancestors; where the tree is rooted becomes a gravesite, and the tree is able to bridge material and spiritual worlds. In Bugul's text, the baobab becomes a symbolic presence, witnessing the events in the narrator's life. The baobab has human feelings like becoming happy or suffering along with Ken's experiences: "on se demandait à quoi il pensait. Car, parfois, il se mettait à rire, parfois à pleurer et cela arrivait aussi, il s'endormait pour rêver" (25).

Bugul's autobiographical narrative is constructed through the interstices of memory and forgetting, a liminal space in the author's imagination: "*L'imagination et la conscience qui s'entrechoquaient sous le baobab brusquement, ce baobab complice et immense*" (30). Through imagination, she recreates and rewrites the colonial encounter reinserting women's bodies and sexuality in her historical narrative. In *Le Baobab Fou*

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<sup>3</sup> See Ada Uzoamaka Azodo in "Introduction" to *Emerging Perspectives on Ken Bugul: From Alternative Choices to Oppositional Practices*, and Irene Assiba D`Almeida, *Francophone Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*.

the narrator rewrites the colonial encounter on her own body, a sexualized and racialized body that becomes not only an object of consumption, but also avid to consume European countries, to obtain Europe. Ken affirms that “C’était les pays des Blancs qui m’intéressait” (37). Her experiences transform her over time, leading her to madness and spiritual death. However, rebirth and regeneration occur when Ken recovers her subjectivity and when she has the courage to voice her story. In an act of catharsis, the narrator brings the experiences she lived through in Brussels to Africa; her experiences cease to be personal and become collective. The narrative is not only about exposure of the woman’s body, but also about the unveiling of the post-colonial African woman’s self. It is also a narrative about Africa and the submission the continent has undergone through colonization. Bugul’s story, in many ways, challenges the myth of Mother Africa, the myth of that pure, spiritual fertile woman so essential to and silenced by male narratives.

*Le Baobab Fou* tells the story of Ken, a Senegalese woman who is educated under the French system and receives a scholarship to study in Belgium. This autobiographical narrative has two parts entitled “Pre-Histoire de Ken” (Pre-History of Ken) and “Histoire de Ken” (History of Ken). In Ken’s pre-history, a sort of myth of origins, the siblings Codou and Fodé steal sugar from their mother to make *ndiambane*, a juice made from the fruit of the baobab tree. When Fode is drinking the juice, he spits a seed and where it lands a baobab tree will grow. This tree becomes witness to major events in the village and it is under the tree that Ken’s ancestor builds a house to settle down with his family. It is also under the same baobab tree that the baby Ken, neglected by her mother, pushes an amber bead into her ear. The episode causes not only physical injuries but is also a

traumatic event that echoes throughout the story. Due to the trauma, her childhood experiences are absent from the beginning of the second part of the book entitled “History of Ken.” Ken was born during the colonial period and was educated in a French school, a traumatic experience that resonates throughout the book. Colonial education taught her to worship Europe and to despise her own culture. Her history starts with the narrator leaving Senegal, the time unspecified in the book, but the narrator gives hints that the story happens right after the country’s independence because she refers to the World Festival of Negro Arts (FESMAN) held in 1966. Approximately six years after the independence of Senegal, she departs on a scholarship to continue her college studies in Belgium. Ken attempts to forget her African culture, thus searching for “her ancestors, the Gauls.”<sup>4</sup> Though she attempts to become as European as she can, the European people she encounters assign her to a racialized category of blackness and Africanness, which mark her as *other*. These experiences of racism and rejection lead Ken to self-destructive behavior, including experimenting with drugs and prostitution. Her sexual experiences with several partners and her drug addiction contribute to the degradation of her soul and eventually to madness. In Brussels, she struggles with her reminiscences of the colonial violence that also gains form through French education and acculturation. Her traumatic experiences in Belgium force a reconnection with what was left behind; flashbacks of her childhood force her to a reconnect with her African culture.

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<sup>4</sup> This is a characteristic of French colonial education. In West African schools, children learned the stock phrase in their history classes: “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois.” Even African school teachers perpetuated this process of assimilation. See David Murphy, “Birth of a Nation? The Origins of Senegalese Literature in French.” *Research in African Literatures* 39.1 (2008): 52

### **Colonized Body/Deteriorated Self**

As Ken searches for her ancestors, the Gauls in Europe, she avoids coming to terms with her identity as a Wolof, Senegalese, and African. Ken was born in *Ndoucoumane*, a village in Senegal, a country located in the northwestern part of Sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of Senegal's population is Muslim. Most people living in Senegal belong to one of eight major ethnic groups: Wolof, Serer, Lebu, Tukolor, Fulbe, Sarakollé, Mandinka, and Diola. The Wolof, the dominant ethnolinguistic group, accounts for 35 to 40 percent of the Senegalese population (Gellar 1-2). The Wolof language, spoken by more than 80 percent of Senegalese people, is the lingua franca in the country. Though French is the official and national language, the language of business and government, the majority of the population cannot speak the European language. Even many educated Senegalese fluent in French prefer to speak their first language at home and communicate with those of other ethnic groups using Wolof. Sheldon Gellar affirms that according to the Applied Linguistics Center of Dakar CLAD sponsored survey done in the 1980s, "less [than] 1 percent of Senegalese households used French as a primary language" (Gellar 97).

Ken's identity loses substance as she seeks to find meaning in her life through association and integration with European people. In Brussels, the protagonist realizes just how hard colonialism has led her to efface her culture and her humanity, gradually replacing her culture with European values. When Ken faces the mirror, she wants to tear off her skin. She does not recognize the image in the mirror because in Europe she turned into a Black woman in a context where her otherness became overwhelming and unbearable:

Cette solitude que j'avais retrouvée durement avec le choc d'avoir perdu, ici, mes ancêtres les Gaulois. Le reflet dans le miroir, le visage, le regard,

cette couleur qui me distinguait en me niant. Cette solitude jusque dans les draps des amants d'un soir, ce besoin lancinant des autres, introuvables. (110)

For the first time, the narrator is forced to see the color of her skin in the mirror. In this new context Blackness is the opposite of beauty and virtue. Thus as Ken sees her ugliness in the mirror, she wants to get rid of her skin. Until coming to Europe, she was not able to understand the meaning of being a Black woman because in Senegal, the overlapping of ethnicity, social class, and cultural hierarchies blur the significance of color skin. Also, French education and acculturation had contributed to make her feel like a French citizen, not a Black person. In Brussels, she is forced to reconcile with the part of the self that French assimilation effaced culminating in an “epistemological violence that results in partial or complete memory loss” (Kalisa 55). The image in the mirror tells her another story, reminding her of Senegal and Africa, of her cultural roots, while demanding the deconstruction of the self. As Fanon, in the book *The Wretched of the Earth*, remarked that the domination of colonialism forces the colonized constantly to ask the question: “In reality, who am I?” (200). The Fanonian question echoes loudly in Ken’s mind, as she does not know how to reconcile herself with a traumatic past where French assimilation, the abandonment by the mother, her French education, and the death of her father have profoundly marked her life. In Europe, she tries to free herself from her past in the company of those who can understand her European language and culture. When she is despised by Europeans, she is forced to look at the image in the mirror. The image reminds her of her situation in Europe or her location among Whites.

Ken’s first experience with racial division in Europe happens when she decides to enter a wig shop. While she is looking at the wigs, an employee tells her that they do not

have any in an afro-style. This shop sells wigs only for White women. The employee makes her understand that this is not a place for a Black woman like her, since no wig in the store will fit her.

- Non, ça ne va pas, disais-je.
- Oui, vous avez raison; pour vous, il faut des perruques afro. C'est votre genre. Ces perruques ici, c'est pour les Blanches qui en portent et vous, vous êtes noire; enfin vous n'avez pas une tête à ça. Je suis désolée, je ne peux rien pour vous. (49)

Ken is surprised by how the store clerk is talking about the color of her skin since she does not see herself as Black or African, but feels French, a descendent of the Gauls. A process of assimilation has taught her how to become French, and she cannot easily accept the effacement of the "Caucasian identity that she had only emphatically embraced without realizing her plight" (Brown 109). With shock and anger, Ken now recognizes her fragile place in this society and how, because of the color of her skin, she will be marked and constantly noticed everywhere.

If she attempts to deny herself as Black or African, the European society will be sure to point out her difference. The shock of this encounter brings to Ken the realization of her status as a colonized woman, a Black woman: "Noire, une étrangère. Je me touchais le menton, la joue pour mieux me rendre compte que cette couleur était à moi" (50). Her reaction is to despise herself as being ugly, that leads to a rejection of her self.

Paradoxically, Ken's black skin, which figures as the evil that sets her apart from Europeans, also attracts them sexually. Sex is the only door through which she may contact and connect with them. She offers her body in exchange for sexual pleasure and acceptance. As she struggles to feel liberated, the narrative is unveiling her body. Julie Ngué has affirmed, "*Le Baobab Fou* represents a testimony of a chronically ill,

traumatized postcolonial subject who searches desperately and in vain for healing, whether in Africa or in the West” (54). And indeed, it is true that Ken’s life in Belgium brings her humiliation and alienation, but I would argue that her search for healing is not entirely in vain. It is the narrative itself that restores her agency.

Ngue points out that Ken’s search for healing is in vain because the narrator cannot find remedy for pain either in the West or in Africa. However, Bugul affirms, in her interviews, that she only found healing for her pain when she was able to write her story. Writing her story not only heals Ken, but it helps her reconcile with her culture. In an interview, Bugul talked about how these revelations provided her with freedom. “Thus, writing reveals me to myself, and reveals things buried in my innermost self, my existential secrets. I break free, through being revealed to myself. I feel liberated, in harmony with myself...” (De Larquier 330). For Bugul, writing has the power to rescue her from her fears, revealing part of the self with which she is not easily able to reconcile. Through literature, she can come to terms with the experiences that she struggles to bury or to forget. As she points out, her writing not only reveals the self to the public but also to herself, thus her writing functions as a mirror in which she is able to examine her deepest fears and cope with her pain. By examining her experience with racism and isolation in Europe, she understands her condition as a postcolonial subject. When she voices her story, she not only heals herself, but she contributes to the healing of other women who go through the same situations. Opening up to tell experiences the ways Ken does in *Le Baobab Fou* is embarrassing for the reader who just does not want to come to terms with her reality.

Ken's narrative retells her life in Brussels where she had many heterosexual relationships, all of which failed. Her most intense relationship is with Jean Wermer, with whom she lives in a love triangle. Living in the same house with Jean Wermer and his partner Francois, she struggles to understand the sort of relationship she is in. Though her relationship with a gay man seems to be open and she wants to feel free like him to engage in other sexual relationships, she discovers in Jean Wermer's house that she is his property. There is a division of race, class, and gender. She is a Black woman, the property of a man who declares himself her owner:

Pendant que je t'héberge chez moi, tu me fais des coups aussi bas et aussi vils. Ken Bugul c'est ma femme, Ken est à moi. Je ne veux plus te voir. Ainsi parlait Jean à François, qui s'énervait, non parce que l'autre le mettait à la porte, mais parce que c'était à cause de lui qu'il était dans tous ses états. (78)

Ken thinks she is free to desire to have sex with Francois and that belief leads her to commit one of her biggest mistakes in Brussels. Her sexual relationship with Francois upsets Jean Wermer so much that he hits Ken. As Jean Wermer misses Francois, he gets more and more irritated, and Ken's presence in the house bothers him. As Ken realizes that the bond between the two men is strong and Jean Wermer is truly suffering with Francois' departure, she leaves the house. Leaving her partner's house means abandoning the luxury and comfort of a safe place, and, from now on, she needs to take care of herself and find a place to live. To cope with her solitude, Ken, who has already experimented with drugs with Jean Wermer's friends, gets more involved with drugs to relieve her pain, but drug use also takes her to a sort of underworld: "Avec la drogue, je découvris le monde des trafiquants, des boîtes de nuit et de la prostitution, le nuits veillées et les journées de sommeil. Le soleil qui avait baigné vingt ans de ma vie, je ne le voyais que sur un poster immense dans un studio" (98).

With drugs, she discovers a West never presented in her textbooks back in Senegal. In this new world, she starts to make new friends and discover a new reality. Ken becomes attracted to the freedom that life on the streets can give her. She loses all contact with other Senegalese or other Africans living in Brussels because she feels that they have different values and cannot understand the life she chooses to live. As she is not able to communicate with Africans, she prefers to isolate herself. Her solitude in Europe leads Ken to find friendships among drug addicts. Doing drugs means relief to Ken, as an anesthetic that makes her forget about her disempowered condition.

With drugs she discovers pleasure, but this pleasure leads her to prostitution. As a prostitute she feels empowered because powerful White men desire her. When she starts working as a prostitute, Ken confesses that the pleasure of having sexual relationships with White men and being accepted by them is stronger and more powerful than getting the money she receives. With these men, she discovers the power of her attraction, she is pleased to know that White men are attracted to her body and to the color of her skin. However, she cannot choose her partners and feels anguish when her job in the sauna forces her to please men whom she despises, but her instructor Gaelle teaches her that what is most important is the money:

Le premier jour où je me m'étais présentée, je fus aussitôt "remarquée". Et je me retrouvai dans une cabine minuscule et immaculée, en compagnie d'un gros homme rouge, les chairs ballantes, respirant très fort, les yeux affamés d'une faim originelle. Gaelle m'avait expliqué que pour le massage simple je gagnais le tarif normal et si le client se montrait plus entreprenant, je demandais trois ou cinq fois plus et s'il voulait plus, il fallait exiger le minimum du seuil c'est-à-dire le calepin entière. (86)

Ken is trained to deceive men and take their money. With prostitution, she gets the acceptance she has been seeking for so long. Ken reproduces and reinforces stereotypes

of a sexual, easy Black woman. When one of her customers asks what she wants as a payment for her sexual work, she says, “Je faillis lui répondre que je ne voulais rien d’autre que d’être avec un Blanc, que je cherchais à être reconnue, que je voulais me faire accepter. Il me voyait hésiter” (126). She reveals to the man and reiterates to herself that all she wants is to be with a White man, who is enough. Ken uncovers her mental colonization, revealing the mental disease of a neo-colonial woman. While Fanon has theorized about the paranoia of men under the colonial system, not much has been researched to uncover how the female mind is affected by colonialism.

Ken wants to fit into a society, and she makes every effort to fit in, she deforms her body through drug addiction; she distorts and exposes her mind. She wants to have what European people have. The only thing that helps her fit into the society is consumption; she wants to consume and to be consumed. Consumption makes Ken closer to Europeans. Consumption of drugs, sex, and Western luxury items make her feel empowered. As a payment for her sexual favors, she asks for a fur coat from one of her clients, “C’est le prix d’une cape en vison, qui se trouve dans la vitrine d’un magasin de l’hôtel, lui dis-je” (126). She thinks the fur coat can compensate for the humanity taken away by colonialism. When she is able to consume, she feels like a human being just like anybody else walking on the streets of Brussels. Colonialism left Ken with a feeling of incompleteness that she tries to cure with the fulfillment of her desires, whether sex, drugs, or luxury items. As she fulfills her sexual desires, she deteriorates to the point of madness and death becomes inescapable. As she goes through deep degeneration, her narrative contributes to the healing of those who go through the same experience.

The deformation of the self takes place when Ken is confronted with the reality of a place where people despise her. In response to this antipathy she begins gradually to deform herself in order to fit into society. Deterioration and deformation of the female self has been a recurrent theme in literature authored by African women. In Dangaremba's novel *Nervous Conditions*, the protagonist Nyasha deforms herself in order to fit into society, starving herself to death. Nyasha becomes one of the most conscious characters in the novel, as she recognizes the role of her father as a transmitter of European values, her mother as an educated oppressed African woman, and her own position as one who is between two worlds—African and European. Like Ken, Nyasha is displaced in her own family and in the community. As a result of her father's oppression, Nyasha falls victim to bulimia, purposely vomiting all the food she eats and becoming cadaverous. Nyasha's dramatic weight loss can be interpreted as women's struggle to fit into a nation where masculinity becomes the norm and femininity a deformity. By the end of the novel Nyasha's body is truly distorted as a result of men's appropriation and imposition of patriarchal values. Like Nyasha, it is through spiritual death that Ken is able to regenerate, undergo a rebirth, and reconstruct her subjectivity. Like the baobab tree that silently observes all the changes in the village, but in the end is hollow and dies, Ken needs to complete a journey that leads to self-destruction before undertaking the difficult reconstruction of a corrupted self.

The reconstruction of her subjectivity becomes possible when the narrator is able to examine her situation and when she attempts to connect with other women. In many ways, Ken finds that being a Black woman or a foreign woman in Brussels contributes to her situation. By examining the situation of other women, she starts to gain

consciousness. “Une Italienne venait les voir, ils me la présentèrent juste au moment de mes ennuis. Cette rencontre m’apporta une idée plus nette des rapports entre femmes. Ma conscience féministe était née” (63). Ken affirms that her feminist consciousness begins when she discovers friendship among women. However, her feminism does seem to notice barriers of class and skin color, and gradually Ken starts to perceive that she has a different condition. Though she is a woman, she can share with other women some of her pains, her skin color, her alien status and find a place for herself in Europe.

In one situation, she has the opportunity to reflect upon her difference as a woman when she meets other foreign women waiting to get abortions at a doctor’s office. When Ken gets pregnant by Luis, her first boyfriend in Belgium, she decides that the best way to maintain her freedom is to get an abortion. By going through the abortion process, she is humiliated by a White doctor who proclaims that an African should not get pregnant by a White man, and Black people should be with their own race: “Je suis absolument contre le mélange. Chaque race doit rester telle. Les mélanges des races font des dégénérés; ce n’est pas du racisme. Je parle scientifiquement. Vous êtes Noire, restez avec les Noirs. Les Blancs entre Blancs” (60).

The episode raises in Ken a feminist awareness. She sees that all the poor and foreign women in the room are at the mercy of racist doctors who perform abortions. In this traumatic experience, she remembers Senegal, her African culture and the doctor whom she compares to a hyena. The hyena in Senegalese culture is a symbol of corruption and dirt. Ken sees in the waiting room of the doctor’s office many pregnant women, all of them foreigners needing abortions. The racist doctor is there to perform the work of eradicating from the European world any “mélange.”

Il y avait quelque chose qui ressemblait à une salle d'attente, mais on aurait dit plutôt une pièce d'un bureau de recrutement où s'alignaient des femmes de toutes les couleurs: des Arabes, des Africaines, des Antillaises. Chacune avait l'air de vivre une tragédie propre à elle. (55)

Ken feels not only her pain, but the pain of all the other women who are in the same situation. She reflects upon their condition as foreign women in Europe. Their disempowered condition has put them in this situation. By recognizing that other women are in a situation similar to her own, she feels connected to them.

Ken's feminist consciousness not only contributes to her liberation but also becomes a way for her to survive. Her female friends take care of her during an overdose episode and when she attempts to commit suicide. Among women, she finds shelter, love, friendship, sisterhood, and sexual desire. Her sexual relationships with women give her life new meaning and hope. Her regeneration starts when her feminist consciousness begins to restore her humanity. Among women, she does not need to wear so many masks or be the erotic body. Her feminism provides her with an opportunity to undo her sexual colonization. Through a relationship that goes beyond sexual desire, but is firmly based in sisterhood and friendship, Ken is able to begin to reconstruct her identity.

Je découvrais l'amitié entre femmes et me disais que les femmes devaient rester ensemble.

Que de sottises, il restait encore pour l'ignorer! Les femmes se haïssent, se jaloussent, s'envient, se fuient. Elles ignorent qu'il n'y pas "des femmes", il y a seulement la femme. Elle devaient se retrouver, se connaître, s'imprégner. Elles ont des choses à se dire puisqu'elles sont toutes semblables. Se libérer n'est pas se détacher de ses semblables pour chercher l'amitié, la compagne de l'homme. (100)

Friendship and sexual desire between women awaken her feminist consciousness in ways that allow Ken to start to rethink the problems of jealousy and competition among women and how patriarchal culture focuses on women's separation. She starts to

advocate that women join together in order to get stronger while separating themselves from heterosexual relationships. In Brussels, all her relationships with men fail, even her love with Jean Wermer does not survive as gender hierarchies come into play in their relationship. Her relationships with women like Laure soothe her pain:

Laure, que j'avais rencontrée entre deux coupes de champagne à une rétrospective, galerie Empain, avec ses cheveux longs comme les lianes de la savane, son visage presque beau, ses yeux qui riaient avec ses dents, brune comme une Polynésienne, ... Elle était disponibilité et tolérance je la fréquentais assidûment. Sa façon de vivre me convenait. (73)

Feeling disempowered among men leads Ken to reflect on her situation. She trades her body to and is humiliated by men who are only interested in her body. When she gets involved with women, there is no monetary exchange or idea of consumption; she is not being consumed and for a few moments she is able to experience pleasure.

By writing about desire between women, Bugul opens new spaces to discuss a subject that remains a taboo in many African countries. These representations bring to the public the awareness that in African female literature some "spaces remained unexplored and ignored" (Sow 217). For Natalie Etoke, Bugul comes to terms with sexuality in a way that transcends boundaries, but she notes that Bugul theorizes "African sexuality that is neither exclusively heterosexual nor openly gay or bisexual" (176). Etoke's analysis follows the same line of critics and writers who prefer to deny homosexuality in Africa, avoiding a theme that is still considered inappropriate in many regions of Africa. When Etoke says that sexuality in Africa is ambiguous, she denies that same sex desire is part and parcel of African realities.

Even as she discovers same-sex desire as a way of liberating herself, Ken realizes that race as well as class play a crucial role in her relationships with women. "Ce qui

nous différenciait, c'était qu'elle était Blanche, mariée, riche et j'étais une Noire 'deséquilibrée', une aventurière" (74). For European women, as well as for European men, her body may be a source of curiosity and may trigger hidden sexual fantasies. Same-sex desire gives her a way to counter the loss and solitude she experienced trying to acculturate to White society. Same-sex desire becomes a tranquilizer, an anesthetic to her pain. She gains some agency, but she is aware that even with women she keeps playing the erotic body or the exotic African. This causes frustration and alienation. Ken is not merely a woman, but she is an African, colonized, Black, poor, foreign woman. All of these other categories mark her difference in relation to White middle-class women. Her challenge is to cope with these differences while maintaining some connection with White women. She is increasingly aware that despite speaking the same language as European women and feeling united with them in a major struggle against gender oppression, her race, her colonized status, and her class might also be factors that contribute to her oppression.

In *Le Baobab fou*, Bugul offers an alternative to Western feminism as she acknowledges her status as an African, colonized, Muslim woman. All the categories in the making of her identity contribute to envision a sisterhood and a female solidarity from a different perspective. Her feminism might be compared with the proposal of Werewere Liking's *Elle sera de Jaspe et de Corail* in which the term *misovire* is presented as an alternative to the term "feminist." Liking envisages a new race where women get together to change the destiny of Africa. Liking's work is a response to nationalist discourses. It is an attempt to rescue Africa from impoverishment, corruption, and bad governance through dismantling masculinist ideologies and including women's voices in national

affairs. The *misovire* is a sort of spiritual entity who represents the motherland.

Throughout the chapters of Liking's book, this *misovire* develops her project of creating a new race that shall be of jasper and coral, a race that overcomes the dichotomies of Black versus White created by the colonizers and maintained by nationalists. In this project, the term "race" no longer refers to Black and White; these categories have been gradually erased and replaced by a multitude of bright colors.

For the *misovire*, hope for a new Africa will be created not only through women's participation in power, but also through the participation of the whole community. In many ways, one of the truths that the *misovire* proposes is that despite all odds, Africans will not disappear from Earth because they have the power to overcome the obstacles and emerge triumphant. People emerge through their cultures, traditions, languages, and beliefs. Liking's text struggles with idea of a project that involves written language but also orature, songs, poetry, and drama. A crucial aspect of this experiment is the centrality of women's contribution to the creation of a new reality or a new race. A new race can only be created through the inclusion of women in all aspects of African affairs. Like Ken, the *misovire* opens up a new and previously unexplored space for a discussion

Bugul's narrative brings to light many themes that other African women have dealt with such as the complicated mother-daughter relationship as a metaphor of the relationship of African women with the motherland or Mother Africa, women's oppression by patriarchal societies, and the influences of colonial and nationalist policies. As Ken is going through her journey of self-destruction, she also discovers her self and needs to understand the making of the self. Throughout her journey through madness and alienation, Ken remembers the absence of her mother and the incisiveness of French

education. In the next sections of this chapter, I will discuss how these traumatic events deteriorate Ken's self to the point that she is haunted by the past.

**“Ken Bugul se Souvient.”**

As Ken forgets most of her childhood—it is erased from the beginning of her story—“Ken Bugul se souvient” (33) becomes a paradoxical statement. “Ken Bugul remembers” indicates the role of memory, but also suggests forgetting. It implies that the narrator remembers some events and forgets others, ones that are silenced. Memory and amnesia play an important role in *Le Baobab Fou* as the narrator selects the experiences she wants to disclose, thus “memory is called upon to claim or disclaim an official past, its resonance as counterfactual narrative becomes extremely important, especially in conditions of the suppression of truth” (Khanna 13). In this process of folding and unfolding her story, amnesia becomes part of the process of writing her autobiography. Forgetting becomes essential to survival, thus Ken's autobiography is replete with gaps where words cannot translate her pain and trauma. However, the autobiographical narrative is written within a tension where traumatic events haunt Ken and disturb her story:

*Tout revint. Le baobab. Le soleil. La natte de Soudan. Le cri perçant. La perle d'ambre. Le bêlement désespéré du mouton égaré. Les réacteurs. La petite place. Descartes. I, u, o, a, e, é, è, t-o, to. Le coq gaulois. L'athlétisme. Le capitalisme. La guerre de Troie aura lieu. Charlemagne. Le pas vers les bâtiments, le seul, l'unique dans la brousse aux senteurs de l'infini et aux buissons de Nguer. L'école française. La chute de nuages. Les étoiles qui s'arrachaient du ciel saignant.* (60 italicized in original)

Memories of colonial violence are part of Ken's story and come into her consciousness every time she faces difficulty in Brussels. In flashbacks, elements that contribute to her painful situation come together and resonate in her mind. Ken resorts to memory to write

her story and her experience under colonialism. The narrator demonstrates the ways in which colonization and neo-colonization constructed her identity.

. . . memory is understood as the responsibility to understand the historical burden of colonialism that affects everyday life in most African countries. To understand contemporary political problems in Africa in terms of colonialism is to draft memory as genealogy of the present. (Khanna 13)

To understand her condition as a Black colonized woman living in Europe in the late 1960s, Ken needs to understand colonialism, the role of colonial education, the meaning of speaking the French language, and acquiring Western cultural values. She concludes that the French school where she studied in Senegal was one of the forms of violence through the implementation of colonial propaganda. "La vraie solitude c'était le départ de la mère, l'école française, la mort du père et toujours la solitude" (98). French education gave Ken a sense of solitude, a sense of displacement.

As part of the tiny fraction of her country educated in French, she learned that the Gauls were her ancestors. She therefore looks for her ancestors in Brussels. On the one hand, the French language provided her with a feeling of being part of a community whose members would praise her efforts to speak their language and understand their culture. On the other hand, the narrator also learned in school that African cultures should be replaced or forgotten. Her culture, still vibrant, is treated like something from the past and characterized as a non-civilization before contact with Europeans. After several racist encounters with Belgians, her dreams of reuniting with her ancestors, the Gauls, gradually collapse, and the narrator becomes aware of her condition and begins to reflect on French assimilation policies and how they contributed to the construction of her own identity. As a Muslim, she was expected to attend a Koranic school. By deciding to go to a French school, she gave her life a different direction. French education provided her

with the opportunity to get a scholarship to Belgium, but it also instilled in her a disregard for her own self, a deep frustration about the color of her skin, her first language, and her culture. She thus comes to realize that the very basic education that children receive in school is largely responsible for the way adults see themselves in the world. In Europe, she has a deep sense of inferiority and remembers how the French books instilled this feeling in her since very early in her life:

Dans tous les manuels scolaires que j'avais eus, le Noir était ridiculisé, avili, écrasé: Toto a bu du dolo. Toto est malade, Toto a la diarrhée, Toto pleure, ou bien les Noirs étaient mis uns contre les autres: Toto tape Pathé, Pathé tape Toto. (106)

The stories of Pathé and Toto, apparently mere characters in her childhood books, instilled in Ken a feeling of inferiority. Pathé and Toto were the opposite of any politeness, intelligence, or civilization, or as Karen Brown suggests,

The picture of Toto – “hideously conceived” – is acknowledged on a universal level as the very antithesis of refinement: a function of the supposed Western monopoly not only on beauty, but also on personal dignity during colonial occupation, and even long afterwards. (104)

By the end of elementary school, Black children learned how to avoid those stereotypes, how to distance themselves from those who could be seen as the characters in the stories, or better, how to distance themselves from one another and from Blackness. As Brown suggests, by avoiding to look like Toto, Ken “is not referring to his intellectual ineptitude, but also to his physical appearance” (105). As an adult, Ken desperately tries to avoid any resemblance to the characters in her childhood books, and she realizes that delinking herself from Pathé and Toto is crucial to her survival, thus she would struggle to become more like the White children in her classroom or her French

professors. As these stories inculcated in her that Blacks like her are ugly and intellectually inferior, she struggled to be civilized—French, European.

Ken expected that being with European peers would provide her with Whiteness. She arrived in Europe determined to be like a White person by being in the presence of Europeans and mimicking their actions. When she gets rejected by Europeans, her narrative brings moments of reflection about the construction of her identity. In these moments, she gets upset with her education, despising not only Pathé and Toto, but also those in France who wrote the books.

Times of anger against French colonization function as moments of healing when the narrator attempts to free herself from the weight of colonization, searching for ways to restore her humanity throughout her narrative. The healing process of writing has the power to exorcise the phantoms that have been part of a life that led the narrator to succumb to madness and spiritual death.

In many ways, Ken embodies Africa's destiny by having her body exposed, displayed, and objectified. She mirrors how African institutions were shaken up by a system in which Africans had to go through a process of loathing their own culture. The narrator struggles to digest the colonial distortions that contributed so much to her current situation and her state of mind.

Le colonialism avait tout ébranlé. Et la conscience s'était noyée dans l'aliénation d'une troisième dimension fascinante et atroce. Mais je ne voulais pas être consciente de tout cela et réagir. Je refusais de croire que le colonialisme en était la seule cause. (64)

The narrator emphasizes how Africa had to go through profound transformations. Not only were its political and economic systems reshaped or replaced, but main components of African cultures, religions, philosophy, and social institutions were impacted by

European colonizers—mostly missionaries—who saw African culture as evil and barbaric. In the Conference of Berlin, European powers scrambled the Africa continent, partitioning it without considering its ethnic communities, geographical diversity, or historical process.

In Africa the results of colonialism were devastating as one of the main goals of colonizers was to prove that Africa was a blank space, without history. For the colonizers, it was their task to give meaning to this space. The German philosopher Hegel was one European intellectual who tried to prove Africa's lack of historicity. In his work *Philosophy of History*, he wrote:

Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the unhistorical, undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History. Having eliminated this introductory element, we find ourselves for the first time on the real theatre of History. (99)

It is worth noting that Hegel delinked Egypt from Africa as one of his methods of proving Africa's lack of civilization. Today it is possible to recognize the racism of Hegel's theory, however, for a long time many historians relied on his theories to come to terms with Africa and African people. In many ways, Hegel's ideas not only justified the slave trade, colonialism, racism, and Europeans' presence in the continent, they also opened a path to a history that condemned African men and women to immobility and silence.

For theorists like David Spurr, philosophers like Hegel created an image of Africa as an uncivilized place that supported colonial powers' use of military force to annihilate colonized people. In addition he suggests in the *Rhetoric of the Empire* that colonizers spread their ideologies, a less obvious form of colonization. For Spurr, the colonizers'

hegemony was also imposed by culture. As effective as oral communication, teaching of literature created channels for the exchange of colonial ideals. Thus, in their various romances, memoirs, adventure tales, and poetry, the metropolis sent its view of the world to be consolidated in the colonies. Through these methods, Spurr claims that “the writer is the original and ultimate colonizer, conquering the space of consciousness with the exclusionary and divisive structures of representation” (92). Through their written language, Europeans formulated a strategy of negation, conceiving the *Other* as absence or emptiness. Culture becomes a means of domination to propagate ideologies such as European superiority and African inferiority. The image of Africa and its people was not only to be disseminated in Europe, but also used to convince Africans about their own lack of civilization. European colonizers saw Africa as a *Blank Darkness*, as Christopher Miller has termed it, ready to be invented. In many ways, colonizers considered Africa, with its numerous oral languages, an empty space. In this open or empty space, written languages played the role of creation.

One of the main struggles of nationalism across the continent has been the decolonization of culture. Since the 1950s, African intellectuals have reflected on the role played by culture and emphasized that culture becomes a way toward decolonization. In the case of Senegal, Bugul’s country, African writers and filmmakers such as Aminata Sow Fall, Ousmane Sembene, Mambeti, and others have contributed to decolonization of the culture through their politically oriented creative practices. Through the appropriation of European languages and media as expressed in literature and filmmaking and introduced by the colonizers, writers, playwrights, and filmmakers deconstruct language and reinvent literature and cinema with characteristics of Black art or African art. The

utilization of devices from oral tradition, such as rhythm, repetitions, the inclusion of oral tales, and other indigenous cultural devices allow those writers to refute European depictions of Africa as the "dark continent" populated by people who needed to be "enlightened" by European civilization, a notion that European creative practices helped to disseminate.

Use of indigenous creative practices should be able to reverse acculturation, mainly through a sharp critique of colonial policies as well as an appreciation of African culture, languages, institutions, and philosophy. African intellectuals, educated through the colonial system were, in many ways, products of colonial education. Their creative practice did not target local audiences, instead it reached the European public. Writing in European languages and mainly to European audiences caused frustration for many of those who intended to decolonize culture. For Fanon, it is with frustration that the colonized intellectual realizes that s/he has to employ the colonizer's tool in a creative practice that intends to dismantle colonial power. As he says, "At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realize that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger" (180).

Making use of colonial techniques and languages, the colonized will probably reproduce the Eurocentric epistemology. This suggests that s/he will enter a process of mimicking the colonizer's discourses, turning the native's culture into a simulacrum of the metropolitan culture. However native intellectuals used some strategies to make native culture part of their creative practice, as is the case of Ken Bugul who introduces words and expressions in Wolof, her native language. As she tells her story, she brings to the center of her narrative important aspects of her culture, as is the case of the baobab

tree that is very symbolic to Senegalese people. By giving voice and sentiment to the baobab tree, Bugul struggles to restore a culture that should have power to restore her dignity and cure her alienation.

Nevertheless, Fanon emphasizes that the attempt to incorporate indigenous culture into African literature is a strategy that tends to fail because the native intellectual is very disconnected from the people's lives. Fanon warns of how the focus on some details of African cultures might not be significant enough to achieve the author's goal of connecting with the people:

Sometimes he has no hesitation in using a dialect in order to show his will to be as near as possible to the people; but the ideas he expresses and the preoccupations he is taken up with have no common yardstick to measure the real situation which the men and the women of his country know. The culture that the intellectual leans towards is often no more than a stock of particularisms. He wishes to attach to people but instead he only catches hold of the outer garments. (180)

For Fanon, by attempting to bring cultural devices to their creative practices, the native intellectuals emphasize what is not very significant to the people because colonial education has contributed to make them aliens in their own country. Frantz Fanon, who argues that the true revolutionary literature is forged within the people and to the people, asserts that people from the masses should be part of the reconstruction of history and the reassertion of African identities. The writer should learn from the people, and their agency should be present in this literature. When African intellectuals produce their work, people's voices will resonate in their works. As Fanon says, the only way to produce a national culture is to learn from people, living with people, and feeling their anxieties.

As Bugul's *Le Baobab Fou* was published in 1986, approximately 26 years after the independence of Senegal, perhaps she does not strive to decolonize culture in Fanon's

terms. Her project is much more complicated as she unveils her condition as a colonized woman. It is worth noting that Fanon did not pay attention to the complexities of women's problems under colonial systems. Fanon's native appears to be a man, and his work is centered on male issues under colonialism. In Bugul's text, she reveals the various levels of her colonization that are not merely centred in her intellect, but mainly on her sexuality and on her body. Colonization transformed the narrator into a non-being who searches for the meaning of her existence outside her culture. By showing the annihilated self that many intellectuals strive to hide, Bugul's text is a mirror in which other colonized women can reflect how acculturation is able to deteriorate the female self.

Bugul writes in French, paradoxically, as her narrative struggles to distance itself from the standards of the French language, culture, and Western norms of literature in an attempt to resist colonization. At the same time, she expresses herself in French and uses autobiographical fiction, a form of expression foreign to her Senegalese culture. Bugul attempts to mitigate this problem by incorporating Wolof language throughout the text, bringing her culture to the center of the narrative. Many African writers include sentences and expressions from their own languages, sometimes, but not always, providing translations in a glossary. Peter Vakunta calls the incorporation of African writers' own languages "Africanisms" (11).

Most African writers straddle indigenous and European language divides. The resulting ambivalence manifests itself in the writer's urge to have recourse to Africanisms to express concepts that seem to defy definition in the European languages in which they write. The use of Africanisms offers creative writers the opportunity to bridge the

conceptual gap created by the use of European languages considered too poorly equipped to convey African thought patterns and socio-cultural realities (Vakunta 11).

Bugul generally makes sure that words in Wolof will be understood by the reader; she often provides immediate translation or compares words in French and Wolof. By making sure that her readers will understand her work, Bugul appears, at first glance, to be directing her text mainly to European audiences. Thinking of *Le Baobab Fou* as a text that aims to target the European public gives room to understand the irony, and maybe cynicism, with which Bugul draws on African language. Bugul's use of Wolof in the narrative not only integrates her cultural background within the narrative, but also questions the power of language and the ways in which African languages get discredited under European colonization. As her body becomes an exotic product that she trades in Europe to attain material and emotional gains, language becomes materialized as an exotic product of consumption, part of an African difference that can be sold or traded in Europe.

Avec Jean Wermer, j'avais l'habitude pour l'exotisme, - moi aussi je m'en mêlais – de dire des mots de mon dialecte et quand je lui dit 'dof', ce qui voulait dire fou, l'Afrique s'ejecta comme un diable de sa boîte. (89)

Language is part of her exoticism and she makes use of her language to call attention to and to emphasize her difference. The role of language is not just about communication as it does not seem the people around Ken in Belgium are interested in speaking her language. Rather some words on certain occasions function as cultural artifacts. Language becomes a cultural artifact to be displayed in Europe; it is part of her exoticism. She gets accustomed to it. As she calls attention to herself, she calls attention

to Africa. Though she speaks Wolof, a language of one ethnic group in Senegal, in this context she represents all of Africa.

Bugul's very approach to language gets complex and differs from many other postcolonial or African writers. While she includes expressions in Wolof in her narrative, she does not appear to celebrate the use of Africanisms in African literature written in European languages. Unlike many other postcolonial African writers who celebrate their native languages as a mechanism to restore culture and disturb European languages, Bugul also questions the role of African languages. As postcolonial authors rely on Western audiences, these authors seem to be accusing the West, but also flirting with it. They are teasing Europe and expecting to engage in a conversation through their literary works. Postcolonial writers depend on Western audiences to be acknowledged as writers and have their works recognized in an international market.

Bugul breaks so many conventions that while she depends on critics to recognize the literary value of her art, she also challenges the literary market. By writing a text that has been considered a scandalous narrative that has raw and vulgar language and exposes the sexuality of a Muslim woman, her text gets censored in Senegal because of religious issues and is also discredited by Western critics who do not consider *Le Baobab Fou* a work of art. By challenging literary and social conventions, Bugul writes to the West, but does not give Western readers the expected answers.

Though Bugul interrupts the narrative in French by including a number of expressions in Wolof, she does not do this in a romanticized way. She questions the role of her native language in Europe as a cultural device that provokes curiosity. The Wolof language in her text also functions as a cultural element, an exotic element that provokes

Western readers. She keeps questioning both the role of Europeans in Africa and of Africans in Europe.

In Bugul's narrative, language plays a huge part in a multi-layered power system. Whereas speaking European languages in Africa turns out to be a highly valued status symbol, if she pronounces even one word in Wolof in Brussels, this utterance turns into another marker of her difference or makes her an object of jokes. Her difference is mainly traded among people like Luis, her first boyfriend in Brussels, a young man who fetishizes Africa, always regarding the continent as an element that brings redemption and purity to Europe. Not only Luis, but almost every friend she makes in Brussels regards her as an African object, an exotic body worthy of display.

Like Bugul who gives the question of language in African literatures a new dimension, other female writers have also proposed a new way to discuss language in African literatures. This is the case of Werewere Liking in *Elle sera de Jaspe et de Corail*. While some African writers acknowledge the value of writing to a broader audience, others disagree, justifying that African literary works written in European languages are not accessible to African people, only to a small group of privileged people across the continent. In *Elle Sera de Jasper et de Corail*, language is crucial to the survival of the people and Liking proposes the creation of a new language:

Oui ça me plait  
Elle me plait l'idée d'un nouveau langage  
Un langage qui s'adaptera à notre situation de mutants  
Un langage plein et agressif qui s'adressera à tous nos sens à toutes nos facultés à la fois pour les désencrasser et les affûter à nouveau un langage capable de nous secouer secouer secouer jusqu'à l'évacuation totale de croûtes d'ignorance d'indifférence de limitations et de complexes inculqués par deux siècles d'inactivité obligatoire des périodes de non-creativité des temps sevrés d'originalité. (106)

While writing in French, the only means by which she can make herself heard, Liking shows her frustration by proposing a new language that is able to heal the scars created by the humiliation of being forced to speak a European language. Though Liking needs to use French, she attempts to show her frustration with the medium once used to colonize and efface her own native language.

For Liking's narrator, the *misovire*, Africans were deprived of their imagination and power to create and learned to mimic the European colonizers. In many ways, Liking's work is connected to those African writers who admit the impossibility of using European languages to fight oppressive discourses since those languages are the very instruments of oppression. Women might be in charge of crafting a new language, and it must replace the European and masculinist medium in order to suit African people. One of the strategies for recreating language in Liking's work is through the creation of new words such as *misovire* which Liking's uses to mean man-hater, a paronomasia based upon the word misogynist that means woman-hater. The term *misovire* is another attempt to break with linguistic conventions by creating terms that could not be part of a patriarchal language.

As with Liking who recreated language and invented terms, Bugul also manipulates language to rewrite a history that does not erase female desire and female agency. Besides language, Bugul employs strategies from African oral traditions. Bugul gives rhythm to the narrative through the repetition of key words or sentences throughout the text. Peter Vakunta finds that such repetitions are one of the main elements from African orality that writers incorporate into their written texts. Among structural elements that African novelists tend to borrow from oral tradition is parallelism or repetition. In

African verbal arts, repetition is an essential component of African oral narrative because performers generally assume that the listener needs this repetition in order to retain what has been said (Vakunta 9). Often repetitions give important clues to the audience about the story, indicating elements to which the audience needs to pay attention. Borrowing from oral tradition links Bugul's text to oral performance and storytelling as the writer assumes the role of a *griotte* who has a very specific cultural role in preserving history through memory and storytelling. With the rhythmic repetition of certain fragments, the storyteller makes sure that she has the attention of an audience.

While Ken celebrates the struggles of decolonization against the French, her critique is not solely directed at the colonizers. She refuses to believe that Africans did not contribute to their own destiny, as she paved her way toward self-destruction in Brussels. She states that even after the decolonization of Africa, colonization of the mind has remained one of the main problems that haunts the continent. How could African people decolonize their minds? Is it only Europeans who see Ken as a blank darkness? Most importantly she has learned to see herself that way, “que je plongeais dans les bas-fonds de l'autopsychanalyse : être une femme, une femme rigide, être une enfant sans notion des parents, être noire et être colonisée” (136). In many ways, she feels that the entire system has made her impotent and that independence did not bring many changes. “Je ne constatais aucune acquisition d'identité propre, aucun souffle. L'indépendance était comme la reconnaissance et l'officialisation de la dépendance” (144).

Ken affirms that independence is only another stage of domination. Economic affairs have not changed, nor have the minds of her people. Ken acknowledges that the consequences of colonialism are still present and visible; it is premature to proclaim the

end of colonization. Some critics argue that before proclaiming postcolonialism, one should consider that after independence African nations gained political sovereignty while remaining largely economically and culturally dependent on the former colonizers. Ken understands that assimilationist policies and French education have colonized her in ways such that the acquisition of European culture has become part of her identity. In this sense, she becomes more and more delinked from her African cultural roots or from Mother Africa.

### **The Absent Mother**

In Ndoucoumane, under the baobab, Ken goes through the first traumatic experience in her life. Neglected by her mother, the baby Ken is playing by herself under the baobab tree where she finds an amber bead in the sand and pushes it into her ear to the point of causing an irreversible injury.

Soudain un cri! Un cri perçant. Un cri qui venait briser l'harmonie, sous ce baobab dénudé, dans ce village désert. L'enfant s'enfonçait de plus en plus profondément, la perle d'ambre dans l'oreille. (25).

At this moment Ken ceases listening to the community. She does not learn how to communicate with her people, thus disconnecting from her culture. As Amy Hubbell suggests, "Bugul's originary myth inscribes her into African history and simultaneously separates her from her community" (86). At that very moment, her mother ceases to be a nurturing presence and becomes a deep absence in Ken's life. The lack of protection the baby felt under the baobab tree provides her with an unrelenting feeling of solitude and abandonment: "*Comme je voudrais dire à la mère qu'elle ne devait pas me laisser seule à deux ans jouer sous le baobab! Ce baobab dénudé dans ce village désert*" (30 italics in original). The forced disconnection from the mother marks the starting point of the

deformation in the narrator's identity. The delinking appears to be irreversible, and, as she becomes a teenager and adult, she gets more displaced and more disconnected from the mother.

According to Odile Cazenave, Bugul is the first writer to bring to light the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship in African literature. Ken is left with a feeling that "the mother betrays the institutionalized notion of maternal love" (101). Throughout the narrative, the absence of the mother contributes to Ken's feeling of abandonment. The mother who neglects the baby under the baobab tree later departs from the compound when Ken is five years old. Her father does not mention any desire to stop his wife from leaving the family. The absence of the mother becomes a specter in Ken's story, interrupting a narrative that is constructed through memory and forgetting.

Ah! mère! Pourquoi partais-tu? Pourquoi devais-tu t'en aller? Pourquoi me laissais-tu? Je me blotissais contre elle, souhaitant ardemment que nous soyons collées pour la vie. Je ne me souvenais pas beaucoup de la vie à la maison, dans le village depuis la perle d'ambre dans l'oreille. (80)

The anguish of having an absent mother leads Ken to search for protection and acceptance outside her culture. The cry for the mother in the narrative assumes an ambiguous tone as Ken gradually disconnects from her culture; her questions about her neglectful mother become questions about mother and the motherland. While in the writings of Negritude by writers such as Senghor, the mother is equated with purity and fertility, Ken accuses her mother of abandonment, unveiling the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship. In her narrative, the mother also is a metaphor for Africa, but she does not fit into the trope that Senghor and Negritude nationalists generally use to describe Mother Africa. Unable to understand her culture, she cannot come to terms with the rules to survive in Africa. Ken feels neglected by Mother Africa which gradually

loses her spiritual power and is unable to help her cope with her anguish and solitude. By questioning maternal love, Ken is also questioning patriarchal structures in Africa and “attacking the traditional foundations of society in its myths and beliefs” (Cazenave 101). In an environment where she feels unprotected, Ken starts to seek refuge in other cultures; she goes to find her ancestors in Europe.

By attempting to fit into Europe and by adopting the colonizers’ cultural values, Ken deconstructs the idea of Africa as home—a place to get spiritual strength. As Carole Boyce Davies in the book *Black Women Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* suggests, when women write their stories “Home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement ... The family is sometimes situated as a site of oppression for women” (21). For women who have to cope with patriarchal structures that reinforce myths and oppressive traditional practices, home and family become a site of suffering. When her mother’s polygamous marriage crumbles, Ken is forced to live with her father and his co-wives. Later, the women send her away from the compound and she starts living in different places. Without her mother and a home, Ken as a child and a young adult has to struggle to survive. In many ways home is equated with pain. Thus as Davies suggests, “the mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized moorings to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways” (21).

For the narrator, patriarchy has defined the destiny of the continent in such ways that Africa becomes a site of pain and anguish for women. As she describes her anguish, Ken deconstructs notions of home, family, motherland, and Mother Africa. Bugul’s narrative exposes an alliance between two men, one in the African village and one from

the North. In the first part of the book, Ken's pre-history, Fodé spits the seed of the baobab on a place where the tree grows to become a spiritual presence to observe all the events the village goes through. After a fire in the village and all the families are obliged to leave, Ken's ancestor—always described as a man from the land where the sun never goes—comes to the village and builds a house for his family under the baobab tree. The baobab gives shelter to the man, thus accepting the newcomer as a legitimate settler for the ravaged village. Though the settler gives a new beginning to the place, this new historical period was only made possible because Fode spit out the seed of the baobab. However, the baobab permits the presence of the settler, thus becoming an accomplice in its own destruction. When Fode provides a space for the newcomer, the narrative suggests that patriarchal society in Africa has created a deep relationship with the settler. The nature of this relationship, in many ways, defined the destiny of the continent. By showing how Fode spits out the seed of the baobab tree that will give shelter to Ken's ancestor, the narrative exposes an alliance between two men, one in the village and the other who came from the North. The text explores the notion that when men trace the destiny of the continent, women like Ken do not feel like daughters of Africa—they feel like outcasts, rejected daughters, outside the masculine alliance. As both men establish a kind of pact, the narrative gives a hint that the man in Africa welcomed the outsider. By welcoming the outsider, Africa starts writing a new chapter in her own history.

Nationalist discourses such as Negritude have often portrayed Africa as motherland where her children come back to be nurtured and get strength. Ken challenges this perspective because she blames Africa for her degradation and alienation. As Africa contributes to her alienation, it does not make much sense for the protagonist to return to

a place of suffering. For women writers, the portrayal of Africa gets more complicated than in male narratives. While women may not despise their cultural roots, some also cannot accept the image of a fertile, nurturing mother who has been often present in many nationalist narratives, as is the case in Senghor's Negritude writings. As men struggle against the injustices of colonialism and search for the spirituality of Mother Africa to give them strength to fight the colonizers, women's struggles are much more complex:

This dilemma is that where male nationalists have claimed, won and ruled the "motherland," this same motherland may not signify "home" and "source" to women. To "Third World" women and women of color these concerns speak with particular urgency, not only because of their need to resist the triple oppression or marginalization that the effects of colonialism, gender and a male-dominated language create, often usefully adopted from the older and more established nationalist politics of "their men." (Boehmer 5)

Boehmer emphasizes the ways in which nationalist politics in Africa excluded the discussion about gender hierarchies and the need of female participation in the spheres of power. Though women participated in struggles of independence, their efforts were frequently not recognized by their male counterparts who became the leaders of the newly independent states. This situation generated criticisms by women who fought against colonial rule but also needed to counteract internal patriarchal structures that impeded female participation in the construction of the new nations. Francophone African women writers, feminists, and activists vehemently criticized the nationalist movement of Negritude that was founded in the 1930s by the Senegalese Leopold Sedar Senghor, the Martinican Aime Cesaire, and the Guyanese Leon Damas when they encountered racism as students in Paris. With a goal to confront French racism, these and other young men founded a literary, ideological, and political movement to restore African culture and reunite African people on the continent and in the diaspora.

According to Abiola Irele, Negritude forges a solidarity among Black people from Africa and the diaspora to acknowledge Africa as a common mother that “instead of being source of shame, it becomes source of pride” (49).

Irele suggests that in spite of Negritude’s attempts to undo stereotypes and negative images related to Africa, the movement ended up “reinforcing the antagonism created by the colonial situation, between the White master and the Black subordinate” (48). In *Le Baobab fou*, Bugul writes that Negritude is a way to expose and display African difference.

... je voulais me regarder dans le reflet du miroir qui m’avait aveuglée. Le mouvement noir né en ces années-là aussi ne me convainquait pas. Il reflétait le stéréotype du mouvement occidental. C’était encore une forme d’aliénation, tout cela avait été fomenté par le Blanc, pour mieux camoufler ses ravages et faire dévier le Noir d’un vrai éveil à une conscience depuis que des oracles avaient trouvé l’idée de negritude que le Blanc noya dans l’embryon sous ses applaudissements. (89)

For Bugul, Negritude was a mimicry of Western thought. An intellectual educated in France reproduces the images of Blackness created by colonial discourse. Senghor becomes part of the lineage of males in Africa who strengthen the relationship with Europe even if the alliance works to the detriment of the continent and its people. Thus the Negritude movement echoed the colonizers’ voices and their perspectives about Africa. Senghor extolled African women as goddesses, symbols of pure sensuality or as icons of fertility.

Irele remarks that in Senghor’s poem *Femme Noire*, the poet’s feeling toward Africa is not erotic but filial, thus he sees Africa as an image of a mother. The Mother Africa trope that Senghor employed relegated women to the spheres of abstraction, far away from any concrete power in modern Senegalese society. Like the former President of

Senegal, most first-generation male writers treated women as if they were invisible or incapable of speaking with their own voices. Their works reflect men's sufferings under colonialism, and their struggle for independence. Women are portrayed as property to be bought and sold, or as mothers, symbols of fertility and sensuality. The nationalist literature of Senghor and others claimed masculine identity as the norm; women's place in the construction of the nation was for the most part merely to be bearers of the sons of the nation or symbols of a romantic past. While males were the subjects constructing nations, women remained mythical and symbolic figures. Mariama Bâ criticizes the way Africa is represented in nationalist discourses:

The nostalgic songs dedicated to African mothers which express the anxieties of men concerning Mother Africa are no longer enough for us. The black woman in African literature must be given the dimension that her role in the liberation struggles next to men has proven to be hers, the dimension which coincides with her proven contribution to the economic development of our country. (Innes 130)

In this statement, Mariama Bâ refers to Senghor's works, mainly his poem *Femme Noire*. Bâ notes that in the poem women are to be worshipped. In so many nationalist narratives, mothers are symbols of continuity and survival, embodying the land and thus becoming interchangeable with it. Women become the elements of fertility and survival and are "excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit ... women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency" (McClintock 354).

In *Le Baobab Fou* the mother ceases to be connected to survival, fertility, or spirituality. The narrative deconstructs the myth of Africa "which involved a glorification of the African past and nostalgia for the imaginary beauty of African traditional society"

(Irele 49). The abandonment by the mother is also a metaphor for the suffering of not being accepted by Mother Africa where cultural traditions and male privilege contribute to women's pain. In Europe, Ken attempts to cope with the void in her identity through drugs and sex. As Africa, her body becomes a native land that she offers to be colonized, to be settled. The exposition of her sexual colonization unveils the inhumanity that Europe has always attempted to hide behind the discourse of civilization implanted in African continent. As Africa, Ken is consumed by Europe, but she also consumes Europe.

### **Returning to the Baobab**

In *Le Baobab Fou*, as Ken embodies Mother Africa, she becomes an accomplice in her own self-destruction. Her experiences seem to be very personal, but they become clearly collective when her traumatic experiences in Brussels echo the relationship of African nations with Europe. She states that “Depuis [...] l'exposition colonial, l'Afrique pour s'imposer avait commencé à étaler ses fesses et sa peau à travers le monde” (83). As in the story of Sarah Bartman, the *Venus of Hottentot*, she turns into an exoticized element who is being displayed in Europe. Ken has a paradoxical relationship toward the West where she searches for acceptance but gradually learns to despise. A woman who struggles to be a part of Europe and who wants to be accepted by Europeans, Ken remembers her education and every step that has led her to become that construction. She realizes that she was educated to respect Europeans and deny her own culture. Although she is going through an individual personal experience in Brussels, many Africans go through the same process of abhorring their own culture in order to embrace European values. For Cazenave, “Ken Bugul widened the scope of the traditional autobiographical

narrative in order to reach an analytical reflection on her society and the behavior of her generation as well as on Western reactions on Africa” (46).

However, as Ken examines Africa’s dependency on Europe, she also reverses the gaze by examining Europe’s degeneration and degeneracy. Her narrative reveals her frustration and “disillusionment with the discrepancy she discovers between what Europe claims to be and how it is experienced upon her body ... sexually and spiritually” (Watson, 150). In Brussels, she becomes sexually available. While her body is traded, her soul degenerates. She is forced to deal with her internal colonization and needs to deconstruct the image of a perfect Europe that exists only in her mind. Her narrative gives voice to the experiences of many Africans who have gone through French education and assimilationist policies. These policies created in African people’s minds an image of civilized Europe, but once they came to live in Europe, they were confronted with violence and racism. Though many male writers from the African continent have retold their experiences abroad with deep pain, frustration, sadness, and anger, and a few female writers have also done so, Bugul innovates by rewriting her African-European encounter on her body. Through Ken’s lenses, Africa and Europe are unveiled in ways that embarrass the reader who either fetishizes Africa or worships Europe. On her own body, the narrator challenges historical narratives that have appropriated the female body, portraying it as a native land or a source of spirituality.

Ken’s body is neither virgin nor spiritual, as it is deformed and corrupted. By unveiling her experiences, Ken rewrites history, bringing to it a perspective of a neo-colonial woman, someone who learned to despise the self. Ken’s path of destruction ends under the baobab where her story began. Back in Senegal, she seeks to restore her

culture, to reconnect with Mother Africa. Although the baobab is there at the same place, someone tells her: “Ce baobab que tu vois là , il est mort depuis longtemps” (181). By observing Ken’s destruction, the baobab got mad and died. Under the baobab, she says a funeral prayer: “sans paroles, je prononçais l’oraison funèbre de ce baobab témoin et complice du départ de la mère, le premier matin d’une aube sans crépuscule. Longtemps, je restai là devant ce tronc mort, sans pensée” (182). Her funeral prayer is not only to the baobab that is dead but also to herself. After many traumatic experiences, Ken goes mad and experiences a spiritual death. Being dispossessed from her cultural roots, she is just as hollow as an ancient baobab. However, her death under the baobab brings hope for a new beginning where regeneration is possible. As Ken regenerates and is able to write down her story, she provides a rebirth to the whole community. By rewriting the colonial encounter, she avoids the forgetting of history.

### CHAPTER III

#### ARE YOU AN AFRICAN WOMAN?

#### FEMALE DESIRE AND MODERNITY IN AIDOO'S

#### *CHANGES: A LOVE STORY*

I think part of our responsibility or our commitment as writers is to unfold or open for ourselves and our communities what exists, what is wrong ... To state our case in such a way that we would entertain, we would inform and perhaps, if we are lucky to be that good, to inspire others. (Ama Ata Aidoo in Interview with Nedham 130)

It goes back to my politicized imagination on that level. Therefore, I would have to admit that I haven't written a single novel, play or poem that is not political. It is not something that I work very hard at. When I sit down to write, I don't know how it happens. I find my imagination throwing these things at me ... you can't say, "OK, I want to do a love story. Please, politics, stay out." How do I do that? I probably could and maybe one of these days I shall rechallenge myself to do a completely unpolitical love story. (Ama Ata Aidoo in Interview with Tagoe 298)

Like Bugul who portrays her protagonist as an African woman who is neither fertile nor spiritual, Aidoo in *Changes: A Love Story* gives us a female protagonist who refuses to be the "African woman" her husband expects. Esi Sekyi defies social convention as she defies stereotypes of a woman who must bear children to have status in her society or protect her marriage at all costs. As she claims her rights to control her own body, she chooses to have pleasure with a man she chooses, but she suffers the consequences of her stubbornness. In post-independent Ghana, women's lives may be changing but not to the point of accommodating Esi's needs and aspirations. In this novel, Aidoo discusses the ways in which modernity in Ghana affects women's bodies and minds. The novel complicates feminism and women's rights and provides many possibilities for the examination of issues such as sexuality, motherhood, marriage, and

polygamy. Aidoo portrays the lives of three educated women who struggle to digest modernity.

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff in the introduction of the book *Modernity and Its Malcontents* suggest that there is a tendency among Eurocentric scholars to think that colonized societies are reconstructed in the European image; however, colonized populations “struggled in diverse ways and with differing degrees of success, to deploy, deform and defuse imperial institutions” (12). In this sense, modernities in Africa have been marked by the new political and economic structures that affect social life in several ways. In this hybrid environment, the fusion of local and global cannot be understood by applying simplistic polarities such as modern versus traditional or West/Other, but, in many ways, new socio-political organizations are “rerouting, if not reversing the march of modernity” (Comaroff and Comaroff 12).

In the modern urban Accra, Aidoo’s female characters make up different fragments of society’s mosaic. These women struggle to come to terms with the changes happening in Accra, Ghana, especially as they need to understand what happens with their female roles as mothers and daughters in this new environment. For women, circumstances do not change much because of modernity, as Comaroff and Comaroff suggest modernity “seems to have bred a heightened concern with ‘tradition’; ‘culture’” (12). Esi Sekyi suffers the consequences of attempting to resist cultural expectations and live her life the way she wants to. She makes some unexpected decisions for a woman in her condition or living in her cultural context. She breaks up her monogamous marriage, divorces her husband after a marital rape, and decides to marry again, becoming the second wife of a powerful and handsome businessman. Through the narrative, Esi

becomes a feminist, but also a capitalist and an individualist. She becomes frustrated when she realizes that she can no longer communicate with her mother or grandmother or consider the advice of her best friend, Opokuya. Though Esi becomes free to make her own choices, such as investing more time in her career, getting involved in a polygamous relationship, and enjoying sexual pleasure with a man she loves, she also feels impotent when she realizes that her female condition is still a huge barrier and societal conventions keep molding women's lives in so many ways. Esi eventually finds her path again through an understanding that women, like men, should have equal rights to desire. Though the fulfillment of her sexual desire is part of her feminist impulse, she realizes that feminist ideology cannot be simply transplanted from one context to another. It must be reinvented to suit the needs of women who have to come to terms with multiple constraints such as patriarchal imposition, imperialism, and religious beliefs.

### **The Impact of Colonial Education on Esi's Identity**

Like Ken, the narrator of *Le Baobab fou*, Aidoo's protagonist struggles to cope with the sense of displacement resulting from her colonial education. Esi Sekyi is a statistician who works for the government which gives her the right to live in a nice house as part of her job's contract. She is married to Oko and they have one daughter. Oko is the principal of a high school and, although he has a good job, his wife is the one who has a higher income. Though Esi has a good job and is privileged in her society because her family decided to send her to boarding school to get an education, she is frustrated when she thinks about how colonial education has contributed to disconnecting her from her people and her culture. When she visits her village, Esi has the opportunity to overhear a long conversation between her mother and her grandmother and feels that both women appear

to be so close and communicate in a way that is not accessible for those outside their culture. This conversation leads Esi to the understanding that she will never have that close relationship with her mother because they are part of different worlds. Esi cannot speak her native language as fluently as her mother and grandmother, and her education has detached her from her family in ways that make it impossible to recover what she has lost. She realizes that the closeness and friendship between the elder women has to do with their sharing of cultural values and a native language in ways that Esi cannot share since her Westernized education has separated them.

For surely, taking a ten-year-old child away from her mother, and away from her first language – which is surely one of life’s most powerful working tools -- for what would turn out to be forever, then transferring her into a boarding school for two years, to a higher boarding school for seven years, then to an even higher boarding school for three or four years, from where she was only equipped to go and roam in strange and foreign lands with no hope of ever meaningfully re-entering her mother’s world ... all this was too high a price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was in now and the country was in. (114)

By leaving the village to pursue her education, Esi lived in a foreign world for most of her life. As she acquired a European education, Esi not only learned English and forgot her native language Fante, she was also assimilated into a new system of values. As the narrator suggests, Esi lives a dangerous confusion and the reader comes to appreciate the ways in which she has been disconnected from her cultural milieu. By going through different lands the protagonist becomes disconnected from her mother who, like the mother in Bugul’s *Le Baobab Fou*, can also be a metaphor for Africa or Mother Africa. While Esi lives in Ghana, she does not easily accept the values of Mother Africa. Westernization caused a deafness and blindness in Esi that make her feel a deep sense of frustration and displacement.

Esi comes from the Fante ethnic group. To understand the importance of this

ethnic group, it is worth noticing that the Fante and the Ga, ethnic groups who lived in what was the coastal territory of Gold Coast, became allied with the British to fight the Asante, a powerful ethnic group in the north of the territory. The Fante bond was signed in 1844, but unlike the Fante, the Asante resisted British colonization. During the Asante war, 1873-1874, the Asante attempted to banish the British presence. The British destroyed the city of Kumase, and in 1874 the Asante signed a treaty with the colonizers. In 1877, the British establish the Head Office of the Gold Coast colony in the city of Accra.

On March 6, 1957, Ghana gained sovereign independence from the British. Ghana was the first independent nation in Africa. Its first president was Kwame Nkrumah, a revolutionary and one of the leaders of a strong movement called Pan-Africanism. Pan-Africanism is, in the words of Dudley Thompson, "the struggle of the emerging African nations against European colonialism [and it] resonated with the experiences of Black people across the world, who had long been faced with discrimination and violence" (10). The Pan-Africanist proposal was to reunite African people and those of African descent from the diaspora who were separated due to the Atlantic slave trade. Nkrumah was one of the great defenders of Pan-Africanism. Ghana was the nation that symbolised a better future for Africans. At that time the world was looking at Ghana. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o states, "Kwame Nkrumah was the single most important theoretician and spokesman of this decade. His Ghana became the revolutionary Mecca of the entire anti-colonial movement in Africa" (2). Ama Ata Aidoo was also a defender of Pan-Africanism and the movement's ideology influenced her writings.

Pan-Africanism claimed solidarity among peoples of African descent to fight

social injustices. Nkrumah's Pan-African socialism defended a non-violent struggle against colonialism. For him, unity in Africa could be achieved through a class struggle that should be different from European socialism. Economically he proposed the centralization and nationalization of African resources. Nkrumah promoted two Pan-African conferences in Ghana in 1958.<sup>5</sup> Nkrumah emphasized the necessity of educating Ghanaian youth, and English was the medium of instruction. Thus, "English was a course of study from the first year and the sole language of instruction at the earliest stage possible" (Pellow and Shazan 108). Nkrumah's plan of development included the expansion of education that was regarded as a means of "fitting youths for all jobs rather than only white-collar occupations" (Pellow and Shazan 108). Though Nkrumah refused to accept colonial imposition, after independence, the opportunity to learn English became an essential pre-requisite to achieve success in modern Ghana. Of note, women did not have the same opportunities as men regarding education.

Because of her colonial education Esi speaks English. However, she is provided with a comfortable life and a successful professional career, but she has to pay a high price, as speaking English and her job promote disconnection from her cultural roots.

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<sup>5</sup> See Robert Young, *Postcolonialism*. "The Conference of Independent African States" was held in April and the "All-Africa Peoples Conference" in December. The conferences' goal was to establish a unity across African states, support the FLN (Front de libération nationale) in Algeria, repudiate South African's segregation policy, and stress the responsibility of Africans to liberate themselves from colonialism. Young points out that Fanon's FLN criticized Nkrumah's non-violent resistance fight against colonial powers. He adds that by 1974, Pan-Africanism was renamed Revolutionary Pan-Africanism when nationalists from countries like Guinea Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, and others decided to adopt a violent struggle to liberate themselves. Violent struggles were taking place in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde Islands, Mozambique, Namibia, Somalia, South Africa, Spanish Sahara, Zimbabwe, and Palestine. Non-violent resistance was inappropriate, and Pan-Africanism was renamed Revolutionary Pan-Africanism (251).

Many years of boarding school transformed a Fante girl into a woman who has acquired another culture, a culture that her mother and grandmother cannot access. As part of the educated elite in Ghana, Esi has entered a world that is almost inaccessible to her mother and grandmother. As Ashcroft states, "Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which concepts of "truth", "order", and "reality" are established" (7).

When coming to terms with language in African literature, the questions of production and consumption arise. In many African literary works, writers often see European languages as sources of oppression and patriarchal power. They have argued that European languages were imposed by colonialists and that language is culture. Acquiring the colonial language becomes a way to acquire European culture while erasing one's native cultural identity. By being educated and speaking the colonial language, colonized people, like Esi, tend to forget their own languages and become disconnected from their culture. In the case of Esi, she is sad when she is unable to fully comprehend the conversation between her mother and grandmother. She cannot understand the cultural codes that are often part of her native language. As European languages become official and national languages, native languages lose their status, and those who do not accept and learn colonial languages are left outside a whole new structure that requires new skills.

Female writers like Ama Ata Aidoo who started publishing a few years after the independence of Ghana, often connect literacy in colonial languages to African male privilege, as men were the ones who had the most access to colonial education while women were mostly non-literate. The question of the utilization of European languages in

African literature has generated many debates. While some African authors acknowledge the value of writing to an audience outside one's own linguistic group, others disagree, asserting that African literary works written in European languages are not accessible to the majority of African people and are accessible only to a small group of privileged people across the continent. In an interview with Adeola James, Aidoo admits that her people will not be able to read her works.

But here we are, writing in a language that is not even accessible to our people and one does worry about that, you know. For instance, writing in English makes it possible for me or any African writer to communicate with other people throughout the continent who share that colonial language ... one is aware of the language issue as a big issue, it is better for a writer to write in English, than not to write at all. (James 9)

As a native speaker of Fante, an Akan language, Aidoo acknowledges that English might not be the most appropriate medium for her to write her African novels, but she feels that she is left with no other option, mainly because of the question of audience. If she decided to write in Fante, certainly she would not have audiences outside of the Fante in Ghana. Even other Ghanaians would not be able to read her work. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o was one of the first African authors to maintain that African writers should cease to write in English. He decided to start publishing in Gikuyu, his native language. Ngugi did not keep writing in Gikuyu for very long; however, his political decision brought him serious consequences regarding his audience as his works became inaccessible to those who could not read his native language. His works had to be translated into English which involved additional costs. Most of his audience was in Europe and in the United States, Ngugi had trouble publishing, translating, and distributing his books in Gikuyu. A few years later, he started writing in English again, but many literary critics and African writers have seen his initial decision to stop writing in English as a political act that

makes us reflect on the role of languages in African literature, the question of audience, and the literary market.

Ngugi's decision was based on the understanding that language is one of the main features of imperial oppression. Through the acquisition of the imperial language, the colonized people were forced to deny their own culture, which was generally seen as savage or evil in comparison with the standard of civilization brought by the colonial system. Fanon also remarks in *Black Skin, White Masks* that "to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to group the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture to support the weight of a civilization" (17). Though writers understand that writing in European languages might mean oppression, a denial of culture, and the erasure of indigenous languages, they also understand that this tool is able to give them the opportunity to tell their experiences to a broad audience. According to Ashcroft, this literature is written out of a tension between "abrogation" and "appropriation." He defines "abrogation as a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or "correct" usage and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning" (38). Appropriation is the use of the colonizer's language as a medium for the colonized to reflect and to tell the colonized of their own cultural experience. This ambivalence regarding the use of imperialist languages permeates the works of African writers.

Writing in the language of the former colonizer becomes an ambiguous tool that gives the writer the possibility of a larger audience inside and outside the continent, but also serves as a medium to exclude those who do not have access to formal education. And, as was stated earlier, women are often the ones who are not given the opportunity to receive

education. According to Lloyd Brown, African literature has an imbalance between the number of male and female writers, suggesting that “until recently, women did not enjoy comparable educational opportunities [...] fewer acquired literacy, let alone the university education, that have traditionally been prerequisites for the writing of African literature in European languages” (4). Though this situation has been changing in most African nations, and more women have appeared on the literary scene, the imbalance Brown suggests still exists. The major writers are men, and men are also the most influential African scholars and literary critics.

Colonialism and traditional values privileged men to attend the colonial schools. Women had fewer opportunities for professional careers because most of them could not master the official language. This situation contributed to women’s economic dependence on men. Aidoo’s novel examines the impact of education on women, specifically those women who get Westernized education and become part of the new elite.

In spite of acknowledging colonial education as an element of exclusion that perpetuates the power of a determined group, Aidoo believes that women writers can use this instrument as a tool to reconstruct their stories. For Aidoo, it is the language used first by colonizers and soon after by nationalists that needs to be deconstructed and used creatively in order to locate women's issues in post-colonial Ghanaian society. Women often express their anguish at having to use a language that carries a history of oppression. However, this language must become an instrument of opposition and must question colonial and patriarchal structures. For women, this same language must be used as a source of creativity, an instrument to give visibility to their experiences. For educated women like Esi, language and education become more paradoxical as they

provide women with an opportunity to have professional careers, economic independence, and to hold positions in which they may question colonial and patriarchal systems. Paradoxically, for women like Aidoo's protagonist, education in the European system means disconnection from their culture but also the possibility of challenging abusive traditional systems.

In *Changes*, Esi coins the term "marital rape" to refer to her husband's abuse. When Oko forces a sexual relationship on her, Esi describes it with a term inexistent in her native language to conceptualize male abuse. She struggles to communicate with Oko who complains about her career, her lack of time for her family, and, mainly, her refusal to bear more children. Her husband does not accept having only one child, but he does not find arguments to convince Esi to have another baby. Esi does not see any necessity of giving explanations regarding her decision to have only one child, but the situation leaves Oko with a feeling of frustration and lack of masculinity. During one of their discussions about having other children and the future of their relationship, Oko grabs Esi, pulls her body to their bed, and forces a sexual relationship on her:

Oko flung the bed cloth away from him, sat up, pulled her down, and moved on her. Esi started to protest. But he went on doing what he had determined to do all morning. He squeezed her breast repeatedly, thrust his tongue into her mouth, forced her unwilling legs apart, entered her, plunging in and out of her, thrashing to the left, to the right, pounding and just pounding away. Then it was all over. (9)

After the episode that came to be known by both Oko and Esi as "that morning," Esi realizes that what happened between them was really a marital rape. In her office after the rape, Esi feels dirty, frustrated, and impotent, and she makes up her mind that marital rape is a good cause for a divorce. By trying to name what happened to her that morning, Esi puts herself in a sociologist's position and tries to analyze her society, mainly male

behavior. She attempts to imagine herself giving a conference for African men and women and questions how an audience would respond to her about the concept of marital rape. Certainly, they would not understand; there would be no word in her language to explain it.

“And, dear lady colleague, how would you describe “marital rape” in Akan?”  
“Igbo? ... Yoruba?”  
“Wolof? ... or Temne?”  
“Kikuyu? Or Ki-Swahili?”  
“Chi-Shona?”  
“Zulu? or Xhosa?” (11)

Esi concludes that the term marital rape cannot be translated into any African language, since in her culture, and that of many other Africans, sex is something that a husband has the right to claim from his wife any time. An experience that cannot be expressed in any African language should not be considered of any relevance for that context. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi claims that though there is not a specific term in any Akan language for marital rape, by referring to the episode as “that morning,” both Esi and Oko agree that something unusual happened between them. Oko’s violence against Esi is real, and, though without naming it in her native language, “her experience is inferred, is named in codes that are available in a heteroglossia that is culturally specific, culturally translatable to both Esi and Oko” (292). Nfah-Abbenyi, who is from Cameroon, explains that though in her language, Beba, there is not any specific word for rape, there is an expression that means “a girl/woman has been spoilt. Thus people who share the same culture will understand that a woman was raped” (291). For Esi the term is not translatable, meaning that the experience is not part of her culture and she feels guilty for importing a foreign language concept—importing Western culture—into Africa. Thus, education provided Esi with a language and another culture, but she cannot understand

whether or not she should use those tools to claim women's rights. If the term does not exist in any African language, does it mean that women should accept abusive sexual relationships?

### **“But What Is an African Woman?”**

When Esi does not accept the husband's abusive relationship and rethinks her identity, Oko starts seeing her as a betrayer of her culture. He asks himself: “But, what is an African woman?” (8). In his mind, being an African woman has to do with nurturing the family and attempting to please the husband by all means. He cannot understand how Esi can despise him, a faithful, devoted, monogamous husband. In a context where most men are involved with polygamous relationships and have many concubines, Oko seemed to be a prize.

For Oko, colonial education contributed to transforming women's roles in a way that challenges his masculinity, as he affirms, “I am not behaving like a man” (8). Thus, Oko attempts to define Esi's identity by encapsulating her in the category of “African woman.” In urban Ghana, the category Oko has in mind gets troubled, as he cannot recognize its characteristics in his wife. Esi is an African woman living in a village, but she is an educated woman, a professional, and an independent woman who lives in Accra. While Esi seems to accept the contradiction that maintains her identity, Oko remains connected to the fantasy of a stable, united, and indissoluble identity. He becomes paranoid imagining other African men in their community laughing behind his back. “My friends are laughing at me, he said. They think I'm not behaving like a man” (8).

As Esi begins to redefine her femininity by telling Oko that she will not comply with his rules, her husband's masculinity gets even shakier. He acts to reinforce his

masculinity through aggression and violence. As he asks whether or not Esi is really an African woman, he is also trying to make sure that he is an African man. Oko is a desperate man who wants to maintain his status through the control of his educated wife whom he sees “as an adjunct to his ego, a crutch to bolster his image in the eyes of his co-workers and himself” (Odamtten 163). The only way he finds to let her know that he is still a man is through the rape. The rape becomes a symbolic instrument of power to Oko, as well as of humiliation to Esi. Her husband uses his phallus as a weapon not only to reinforce his masculinity, but also to restore the African femininity Esi seems to have lost in a world where the patriarchal rules assert “what a woman wants is to be desired by her husband and defined exclusively in relation to that desire” (Olaussen 6).

By being considered an empty vessel, an object of her husband’s sexual desire, Esi’s own sexual desires cannot be taken into consideration. Esi is expected to follow the patriarchal rules and be fulfilled simply by arousing male desire. In this sense, the absence of female desire is expected during sexual intercourse, as Catherine MacKinnon suggests: “If what is sexual about a woman is what the male point of view requires for excitement, for arousal and satisfaction, have male requirements so usurped its terms as to have become them?” (118). However, when Esi gets the divorce, alleging that she was raped, she claims her role as a participant in sexual intercourse and her right to fulfill her own desires, thus resisting objectification. In her husband’s logic, being a woman means satisfying his needs. As Luce Irigaray states, patriarchy expects women to feel pleasure through their roles of satisfying men, hence women who want to have sexual pleasure do not know how to perform female roles in a patriarchal society:

How can this object of transaction claim a right to pleasure without removing her/itself from established commerce? With respect to other merchandise in the

marketplace, how could this commodity maintain a relationship other than one of aggressive jealousy? How could material substance enjoy her/itself without provoking the consumer's anxiety over the disappearance of his nurturing ground? How could that exchange – which can in no way be defined in terms “proper” to woman's desire – appear as anything but a pure mirage, mere foolishness, all too readily obscured by a more sensible discourse and by a system of more tangible values? (32)

Irigaray explains that if a woman is considered property and an object, she has no possibility to demand anything, thus sexual pleasure and desire are considered unimportant. When Esi claims her right to refuse her husband's desire, she destabilizes him, erasing his identity or forcing him to rethink his positionality. In order to deconstruct her identity and reestablish her desire, Esi must confront society and reevaluate herself. Her friends tell her that feeling so desirable to the point that a man feels out of control and commits an act like that could incite jealousy in other women, as is the case with her best friend Opokuya. Opokuya confesses that she is jealous of Esi because Oko seems to be a perfect loving husband, thus the concept of marital rape loses meaning in a context where women struggle to be desirable or consumable.

The situation becomes further complicated when Esi's social context is considered, i.e. the Accra urban setting. By deciding to get a divorce, Esi's accusation of “marital rape” appears to be a result of her Westernized education. The years of European education gave Esi a new language, another form to conceptualize and understand the world. She imagines how her ideas would be received by a large audience of intellectuals. She is entrapped, and she cannot find a way to denounce male abuse without claiming women's rights. Does fighting for women's rights mean being a feminist? Is a feminist somebody who will hurt or destroy African culture? Is she a betrayer of her nation and a Westernized African? In her culture, is denouncing women's suffering a sin? Aidoo's

*Changes* ask many questions and creates room to expose women's experiences and interrogate the lives of those who are not able to disentangle the personal and the political. Esi's private issue turns into broader questions of whether denouncing male abuse means importing a foreign feminist ideology, and if women are therefore denying their "African" identity.

It appears that Aidoo is suggesting that in order to be liberated and fulfilled as a woman, Esi must renounce her African identity because of the inherent sexism of many traditional African societies. Or if she "wishes to cherish and affirm her 'Africanness' she must renounce her claims to feminine independence and self-determination. Either way, she stands to lose; either way she finds herself diminished" (Umeh 175). By disregarding an identity that is linked to unconditional obedience to patriarchal rules, Esi becomes a traitor to her culture. Considering that the postcolonial struggle is deeply concerned with restoring cultural values and identity, there is no room for a discourse that could deconstruct the fallacy of an integral identity. Nationalist discourses created a mythical "African woman" who is always ready to sacrifice herself for the sons of her nations. Female writers would argue that in the works of male writers, "African women were virtually silent observers who simply fulfilled their destiny without questioning it or the structures that sanctioned the roles they were made to assume" (Nfah-Abbenyi 5). Women's identities were connected to their role as mothers, quasi-spiritual beings who would take care of national heroes. Desire or sexual pleasure was not to be part of the life of this mythical spiritual entity who assumed the role of the mother.

Rejecting the "African woman" or the Mother Africa identity imposed by nationalist discourses gives Esi a new label: feminist. She is accused of being a feminist,

someone in charge of transplanting a Western ideology to independent Ghana. In her imaginary conference, a large audience of intellectuals in Ghana would attempt to offend her, just by saying “‘yes, we told you, didn’t we? What is burying us now are all these imported feminist ideas’”(8).

Like Aidoo’s protagonist, many Third World feminists are also criticized with having importing a Western ideology that brings into Third World nations the perspective of White middle-class women from developed countries. Uma Narayan argues that Third World feminisms have nothing to do with importing ideas regarding gender from the developed world and transplanting them into other cultural contexts. Hence Third World feminism “is not a mindless mimicking of ‘Western agendas’ in one clear and simple sense – that, for instance, Indian feminism is clearly a response to issues specifically confronting Indian women” (13). As Narayan states, women in Third World countries do not simply reproduce western feminism, but they realize the necessity to forge a new ideology. Aidoo’s novel, in many ways, reveals the problems encountered by women like Esi and how these women attempt to cope with these issues. In this sense, Esi is not mimicking Western feminism, but she is claiming women’s rights in her cultural context.

Esi’s feminism goes farther when she enters a polygamous relationship to have more freedom and sexual pleasure. After her divorce, Esi falls in love with Ali, a very charming and handsome married man. In this new relationship, she has a perfect space to express her sexual desires and the freedom to focus on her career. The polygamous relationship becomes the perfect site for Esi to combine all her aspirations; she has her house to herself and receives a man on days when she is willing to have a nice chat and a

good night of love-making. Every time Ali comes to her house after his long absences, Esi is fulfilled sexually in a way she never felt before.

Esi was somewhat cramped because the couch was rather narrow. But then she also thought that she would rather not be comfortable if it would mean having to give up all those different kinds and levels of sensations she was enjoying without shame. She wanted to scream and scream. (85)

The quality of sex that Esi has with Ali gives her security to accept Ali's proposal of marriage, becoming his second wife. Though Esi will be involved in a polygamous relationship, she is not the victimized wife who does not have the husband at home at all times. On the contrary, at the beginning she feels fulfilled with this kind of agreement. She finally has a perfect relationship in which she can be herself without having to deal with a man who interferes in her life. Ali is the perfect match for an independent woman with an established career. In her relationship with Ali, she attempts to combine "gender equality with sexual desire" (McWilliams 348).

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie affirms that though some women defend the polygamous system by arguing that in traditional cultures a woman can benefit from polygamy, as she will have co-wives to help with the household work, she firmly believes that there is no justification to maintain polygamy in postcolonial Africa, especially in the cities. She considers the system oppressive while suggesting that those women who accept it might be contributing to their own victimization. The theme has generated several controversies where some writers position themselves in favor of polygamy, while others firmly deny the possibility of accepting it.<sup>6</sup> In the introduction of *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, Davies outlined the main fundamentals of African feminism and

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<sup>6</sup> For detailed discussions about the theme of polygamy in African Literature, see Carole Boyce Davies in *Ngambika* and Irene Assiba D'Almeida in *Francophone Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*.

recognized polygamy as part of a feminist agenda that seeks women's empowerment. She remarks,

[African feminism] sees utility in the positive aspects of extended family and polygamy with respect to childcare and the sharing of the household responsibilities, traditions which are compatible with modern working women's lives [. . .] but which were distorted by colonialism and continue to be distorted in the urban environment. (9)

In many novels the theme has been overwhelmingly discussed, not focusing on the positive aspects of polygamy, but, instead, mainly focusing on women's suffering when they are forced to accept the institution of polygamy. For instance, in Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre*, the protagonist Rama writes a letter to her friend Aissatou to tell her that her husband Modu is dead. In her letter, Rama also recounts her trajectory with a cruel husband who chose her daughter's schoolmate as his second wife. In Mariama Bâ's novel, the protagonist is victimized by an institution that seems to have lost its significance in urban Dakar. Modu, a powerful man, chooses a teenager to be his second wife and ends up abandoning his family. On the other hand, Binetou, his second wife, accepts the marriage as a viable way to get a stable economic life.

Unlike Davies, Mariama Bâ's novel does not acknowledge any positive aspects of polygamy and, while Davies defends that women in Africa should search for a new definition of polygamy that fits in postcolonial African societies, Bâ says that every form of polygamy in an urban environment runs the risk of being distorted. Like Davies, Esi believes at first that polygamy can be reinvented and adjusted to her modern life.

The literary critic Irene Assiba D'Almeida disagrees with Davies. For her, those in the academic world tend to idealize polygamy, showing a positive side that does not often coincide with the lives of actual women who are generally forced to endure this

situation. Her position coincides with Mariama Bâ's letter in which Rama demonstrates a profound bitterness regarding Modu's decision. Rama feels abandoned with her children and needs to come to terms with this humiliating situation. The letter is to make public Modu's abuses as well as denouncing women's positions in polygamous marriages. In the essay "Marriage, Tradition and Woman's Pursuit of Happiness," Edris Makward affirms that Mariama Bâ did not believe in happiness within polygamous relationships.

Makward states:

Mariama Bâ was convinced that happiness— and not just women's happiness but men's as well, a whole society's happiness—must be based on monogamous marriage. And in the modern context, for her, monogamous marriage meant a close association between two equals, and sharing of pains, hopes, disappointments and successes. The foundational stone of this happiness is without doubt in the couple, a concept, an ideal that is clearly new in Africa. (273)

Thus for Bâ, polygamy is one of the main causes of women's suffering in her society.

Through her letter, she reveals not only the writer's pains, but the suffering of many other women who have to cope with the same situation. The letter serves as an opportunity to reflect upon her attitudes. However, in her letter, besides narrating her own life with Modu, Rama also brings into her narrative other women who have to cope with polygamy or adultery.

In the beginning of her relationship with Ali, Esi idealizes polygamous marriage, thinking that it will be the best way for her to fulfill her sexual desires without the constraints of having a man living with her. Esi wants to marry Ali and live out her sexual freedom, thus she does not consider her best friend's advice about the need to meet Fusena, the first wife, and have Fusena acquiesce to the marriage. Opokuya asks Esi if she has already met Ali's first wife, affirming that it is ideal according to tradition. Esi pretends to agree: "I will ask Ali to let his wife meet me before we go to see my people,

Esi said a little defiantly, a little fearfully” (97). Although Esi promises her friend that she will attempt to follow traditional practices regarding polygamy, she never really puts pressure on Ali to know his first wife. Nfah-Abenyi states that Esi “conceives the marriage in very individualistic ways” (295). In this sense, her decision is individualistic rather than feminist because Esi is not concerned about the perspective of other women around her. Esi accepts the marriage as a means to get her sexual self-determination, but she does not consider social, historical, and cultural contexts. Her decision does not consider other women, only herself.

Furthermore, Esi has not taken into consideration her mother’s and grandmother’s advice about the status of second wives in a polygamous marriage. Esi does not listen to them because she is certain that this is the ideal relationship for a woman in her position. She starts to think carefully about all the advice she didn’t listen to when she realizes that Ali has a home, and as a husband and a father, he has duties in his home. In addition, he has to perform rituals with his children, especially during the holidays when he has to stay home, give gifts to his children, and have dinner with them. At these moments, Esi stays alone in her house, taking pills to sleep, and tries to cope with the consequences of her choices. Only during nights of loneliness in her bedroom can Esi remember her mother’s and grandmother’s advice.

Lying alone in bed with her eyes hard and wide-open in the dark, she remembers some of the advice her mother and her grandmother had given her. They told her to be careful and that being one of any number of wives has its rules. If she obeyed the rules, a woman like her should be all right. If she broke the rules, then her new marriage would be like a fire that had been lighted inside her. They recited some of the rules to her. They made her aware of some pitfalls. Above all, they said, there were two things she had to bear in mind at all times. One was never to forget that she was number two, and the other was never to show jealousy. (116)

After the honeymoon period is over, Esi finds herself entrapped in her marriage. Ali starts to set the rules, stops calling or coming to the house, and substitutes his presence with tons of gifts at her doorstep. Esi starts to feel like the other woman in an adulterous relationship. Her marriage is a distortion of the institution of polygamy in which there are no rules to be followed by the husband. In polygamous marriages, the husband should give equal attention to all the wives, but Ali simply disappears for days, weeks, or even months. As Ali makes Esi a territory, his property, he decides what to do with her. Ali is living a polygamous life that is very convenient for him. He secures his male privileges, but does not show any responsibility toward his wives.

Esi tries to talk to Ali about polygamy and what this institution means in the modern urban African context. Ali defends polygamy as a part of his identity. He points out that the practice has always existed in Africa and the repudiation of this is nothing more than the acceptance of the standard imposed by the colonizers. In Ali's discourse, his maintenance of polygamy is a way to defy Western colonization and the interference of Western values in Africa. As African Muslims, men from his culture have always chosen to marry more than one wife and this should not be a cause for shame.

“To the people who created the concepts, these are all crimes. Like homicide, rape and arson. Why have we got so used to describing our cultural dynamics with the condemnatory tone of our masters' voices? We have got marriage in Africa, Esi. In Muslim Africa. In non-Muslim Africa. And in our marriages a man has a choice – to have one or more wives.” He paused dramatically, and then ended with a flourish: “As long as he can look after them properly.” (90)

Ali Kondey's position regarding polygamy reveals the view of many African intellectuals in the post-independence era, in which they advocate for an adherence to traditional institutions as a form of reinforcing their African identity. Though men like Ali embrace many other aspects of Westernization by staying in expensive hotels, attending schools in

Europe and in the United States, or simply spending lots of money on luxury items, they defend some African practices such as polygamy, claiming that these practices are part and parcel of their African identity.

By defending identity politics, men make women scapegoats of culture. For example, the practice of genital mutilation was widely advocated by the revolutionary movement Mau Mau as a form of resistance to the impositions of the Catholic Church (Levin 209). In nationalist discourses, African women's bodies are appropriated not only through the myth of Mother Africa, or as Belle Femme or Femme Noire, referenced in the famous poem written by Senghor, Senegal's first Head of State, but they have also been used as symbols of cultural revival. During the nationalist revolutionary struggles in Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, asserted that if the Kikuyu were proud of their traditions, men should not marry non-circumcised women. After his election, his first act as Head of State was to restore female circumcision in the country. Also in Kenya in the 1950s, the Mau Mau embraced female circumcision as a traditional value and part of a dismantled culture that had to be restored (Levin 209-210).

Worthy of note is that in these nationalist discourses, African women's bodies become the nation's property. By objectifying women's bodies, these discourses efface female agency, taking away women's rights to control their bodies and their sexuality. The assumption that women's bodies should be part of men's wealth is profoundly ingrained in African patriarchy, from popular discourses to intellectual ones, from those who celebrate their nation's unification to those ones who preach ethnic divisions. When women voice their concerns and take control of their bodies, they often renounce certain African institutions because their acceptance of these institutions erases subjectivity

while reinforcing patriarchal privilege. As they renounce parts of their culture, they also renounce parts of their identity.

Ali applies a colonial and patriarchal discourse to persuade Esi to wear his ring. When discussing polygamy with Ali within her social context, Esi tries to convince Ali that it is not traditional to give a ring to the second wife. Ali convinces her that the tradition to which she is referring is recent, because in Egypt husbands used to give rings to second and third wives. In the end Ali says that a ring is a symbol that tells the world that Esi has become “occupied territory” (91). Esi realizes that she has become Ali’s territory or a piece of land. Employing the language of the colonizers, Ali lets Esi know that from the date of their marriage, she turns into his property. Though Esi understands that Ali’s power comes from a patriarchal society that benefits him and that he takes advantage of it, Esi accepts the deal, wears the ring, and becomes one more piece in Ali’s game. As he will not spend a lot of time with her or be with her like a husband, he will occupy his land with cars, jewels, art pieces, and other luxury items. With his money, he will be able to maintain his “territory” while he is away taking care of his business. In the meantime, Esi struggles with this new situation and resists victimization, recalling that her mother and grandmother had advised that polygamy could be oppressive for women and that second and third wives lose status and act like concubines.

### **Fusena’s Invisibility: The Other Side of Polygamy**

For Fusena, Ali’s first wife, Esi is a concubine, not a second wife. Ali is being an adulterous husband rather than a polygamous one. In a polygamous relationship, the first wife needs to give permission to the husband to have a second wife. However, Ali decided to marry Esi without communicating with his first wife. Ali is abusing a system

in order to fulfill his desires. As Ali claims to be an African man, he is also saying that culture gives him a license to find other wives when he wants. When Fusena learns about the marriage, she knows that it is not according to her religion's rules. Following her Muslim code of conduct, she stops talking with her husband and decides to consult the elders. After a long conversation, the elders accept Ali's desire to have a second wife.

Fusena and Ali's relationship has been described as a strong friendship that gradually turns to a love story. Fusena's love story is similar to other stories that compose a scenario of urban Accra. Fusena desires a higher education. She would love to go to a college and have another degree, thus becoming a very educated woman, but she chooses to marry Ali, accompanies him to Europe, raises her children, and forgets herself. When they go back to Ghana, Ali opens a small business for his wife. Fusena is there most of the time, taking care of the business to the point of being recognized as one of best traders in the city. But Fusena always carries the secret fear that one day Ali will get a woman with a college degree to be her co-wife, humiliating her.

In the beginning of the novel, Fusena lives for her family, going back and forth to her business, organizing her home, and taking her children to school. After Ali's involvement with Esi, Fusena becomes frustrated and bitter, and tries to convince her husband that his relationship with Esi cannot be considered a marriage, that he is committing adultery. When Ali makes up his mind to marry Esi, Fusena goes to the village to ask the elders for advice and help because what Ali is doing is against their religion, and his marriage should not be permitted. Though the elders listen to Fusena, they decide to help Ali marry his second wife.

Though her voice and presence become invisible, Fusena's pain becomes increasingly visible as her voice starts to disappear. Fusena does not speak many complete sentences or enter into any of the discussions, instead she uses short sentences and monosyllabic answers. When Ali comes home to give her the news about his second wife, she asks, "She has a university degree?" (98). That question is all she can ask before rushing to seek help from the elders. From this passage on, Fusena is silent. She stops speaking, and her silence leads the reader to understand that her pain is unimportant in a society that moves in so many contradictory directions, while, for some women, the female condition remains intact.

As Ali decides to marry his second wife, fulfilling his desires and following his own rules on marriage and polygamy, Fusena becomes empty of sexual desire. As a consequence of this emptiness, her body and beauty become invisible. She appears unattractive and no longer inspires any sexuality or sensuality. Fusena's body gained importance as a commodity, a property, and existed to give birth to Ali's children. Interestingly, Fusena finds freedom and fulfillment in her car. One of the few passages that show Fusena as a woman capable of pleasure is when she gets in her own car. "Before starting her car, which was a small two-door vehicle she had come to love unreasonably and fiercely, she removed her veil completely and put it together with the handbag on the passenger seat next her. The car screeched into life" (99).

The car frees Fusena from religious and societal constraints, and alone, inside her car, she feels pleasure. It is also symbolic that the car gives "life" back to her, a life she finds in the confinement and solitude of a vehicle that gives her freedom to move. Both Esi's friend Opokuya and Rama, in Mariama Bâ's novel, had to fight to have a car and

ultimately each received one from a friend; Fusena, on the other hand, has the means to consume, to purchase her own car. For Fusena, her car emerges as a symbol of freedom and pleasure.

Fusena is not portrayed as a woman capable of having sexual desire. Only in one passage in the novel does Fusena have sexual relations with Ali. The encounter appears to be part of a ritual, an obligation, not for pleasure. When Fusena's love story overlaps with Esi's romance with Ali, the novel heads toward simplification and polarization. Fusena and Esi happen to be part of the incoherence in urban Accra where certain values are retained and others distorted or transformed to benefit patriarchy. On one side, Fusena represents tradition and religion and accepts a polygamous relationship that is distorted and unfair. Though she is a successful businesswoman, she does not divorce Ali or attempt to find happiness in other relationships. Esi, on the other hand, who declares herself a feminist, chooses a polygamous marriage in order to have more freedom and sexual satisfaction, but also is victimized. Esi's feminism grows dangerous and contradictory when she does not recognize the importance of sisterhood. Acting in her own self interest, Esi ignores Fusena's pain which she seems not to consider a feminist concern.

Silently, Fusena and Esi compete for Ali, but what is implicit is how both women play a part in his life—Esi is for sex and Fusena is a housewife. Fusena is entrapped in the stereotype of a self-sacrificing mother and housewife who lives for the family. Esi is the stereotyped individualist who attempts to fulfill her sexual needs through a polygamous marriage that ignores socio-historical traditions. Either way Ali has the power to decide how he manages a polygamous relationship that provides him with the

assertion of his “African” identity. Esi is disempowered and while both women are competing for Ali, he gets a third woman, a new secretary who appears at the end of the novel.

### **Asexual Opokuya?**

After Ali finds a new lover, his absences become longer and Esi gets lonely, frustrated and sex starved; she needs to fulfill her physical needs. In one of these moments, Kubi, Opokuya’s husband comes to the house and unveils all the desire he has kept in secret for so long. When Oko reveals that he wants to have sex with Esi, she lets him know that she is ready.

No words came. Kubi took hold of her hand maybe to lead her into the room and get her to sit down. He found himself holding her close. Then, as though he had taken a quick decision just in that minute, turned to face her and hold her closer and hard. She did not feel like offering resistance. He began to kiss her face, her neck and all over. Then they were moving towards the couch and Esi could feel Kubi’s manhood rising. (163)

Esi interrupts Oko when she thinks about Opokuya. She thinks about sisterhood, and everything Opokuya means to her. Though Esi desires Kubi at that moment, she refrains because of friendship. Though Esi wants to fulfill her physical desires and have sex with Kubi, she reconsiders her sexual desire and understands her grandmother’s advice. She thinks about finding a way to adjust her feminist impulse to her cultural context. She needs to continue to fulfill her sexual desires, but also find a way to understand that though modernity has brought many transformations to her society, in many ways being female is still an impediment to her freedom. With this new context, she needs to learn how to come to terms with the economic discrepancies, political contradictions, and many social changes in her country.

Opokuya and Kubi have four children. The narrator says that Opokuya is “definitely fat, moved like lightning, and laughed through the days of the year” (14). She works hard as a nurse, has to take care of her family, wakes up at 5 am every day, and struggles with her husband to have an opportunity to drive the family’s car. She is an educated privileged woman, and, though she has a successful career, she does not have the economic means to buy her own car. For her, the notion of freedom comes with the idea of having her own car that will provide freedom of movement. Opokuya is also concerned about body politics in her society. She gets concerned with the imposition of Western standards on female bodies, mainly regarding weight and fertility. Although she is aware of health problems that can result from obesity, she is convinced that there is an external attempt to get all women to be the same shape or to make African women copies of Western ones.

Opokuya had thought quite hard about the politics of population and fat. She had concluded that the way population, especially, was being handled in relation to Africans left her frightened. It seemed to her that any time someone else showed a keen interest in your not making children, then for sure, he is not just interested in good health, your prosperity, and the good health and prosperity of your children. (15)

For Opokuya, female body control through contraception, fertility programs, and weight control are connected to the same processes of Western influence in Africa. Women have been scapegoats used for the implementation of Western politics to reshape the continent. Opokuya concludes that this is part of imperialist politics that goes beyond a mere preoccupation with health. Opokuya’s question is not only about desiring slim bodies like European women, but about the demise of African culture and African standards of beauty. The new concepts regarding female beauty and women's bodies frustrate her. In most African cultures being overweight was never reproachable, but often brought

women a higher status in society, as weight was seen as a signal of prosperity. Opokuya argues that the main perception in the developed world about overweight women is that they are part of a mass of uneducated women who are not able to take care of their bodies and thus enter a cycle of self-destruction. In many ways, Opokuya's society imported this notion about women's bodies, thus leading women to try to attain a corporal ideal imposed by the West. Now many African women are worried about their weight, and society's perception of beauty has started to change.

The days when being fat was a sign of prosperity and contentment are long over. You and I know that these days the only fat people in the world are poor uneducated women in the so-called Third World and unhappy sex-starved women in the more affluent societies who are supposed to eat for consolation. (37)

As Africa changes and as the continent gets so many faces of modernity, women's bodies start to become reshaped, standards of beauty reorganized, and male perception of beauty reoriented. In the short story "Everything Counts," part of Aidoo's collection entitled *No Sweetness Here*, the protagonist Sissie realizes almost every single Black woman is wearing a wig in urban Accra and that they are gradually despising their own beauty. In this short story, Aidoo discusses the presence of Western ideology in a post-independent Ghana and its impact on African women. The story starts with the female character, Sissie, a university lecturer in economics in London, talking to some of her male friends whom she also calls her comrades. Sissie is a Pan-Africanist, a socialist, and an activist in her country's struggle for independence. In London she is discussing with her comrades how the economic and material problems in Ghana are the ultimate way to liberate people of Ghana from neo-colonial exploitation. However, some of her friends are more concerned with aspects regarding cultural imperialism, for example, the use of wigs by African women that for them is a way of trying to look like White women. They

are convinced that the wigs are another form of imitating White women and acknowledging their superiority over African women. The protagonist tries at first to argue that there are more important themes to worry about in Africa than wigs but finally just states her opinion: "After a time, she gave up arguing with them, her brothers. She just stated clearly that the wig was an easy way out as far as she was concerned. She could not afford to waste that much time on her hair. The wig was, after all, only a hat. A turban" (*No Sweetness Here* 3).

Sissie as a lecturer in economics believes that there are more serious problems to be dealt with in Africa than the question of "wigs." African intellectuals must be more worried about African politics, and in particular, neo-colonialism as the new form of African exploitation. She is convinced that they must concentrate on more important issues regarding Africa's future. Nevertheless, as the story goes on, Sissie returns to Africa and realizes that her comrades were right. Problems like the wigs should also be taken into account because almost every single Black woman was wearing a wig, and they were gradually being transformed into Whites. She does not recognize her own people and she sees them as clowns, using some kind of weird masks, because they are also using those whitening creams: "Suddenly, it seemed as if all girls and women she knew and remembered as having smooth black skins had turned light-skinned. Not uniformly. Lord, people looked as though a terrible plague was sweeping through the land" (4).

In this story Aidoo presents an African woman who is oppressed twice, once by the settler and again by African patriarchy. The African male imposes on her the White

woman's standard of beauty because he dreams of and desires the White woman, the colonizer's woman. Thus, the European woman's beauty is seen as the new standard of beauty, and the Black woman imitates this standard and despises her black complexion. On the other hand the settler also imposes on the Black woman a standard of bestial sexuality, a woman who is in contradiction to the White woman in terms of sexual license.

Aidoo's aim through her protagonist's reflection on the African woman's situation is to promote a removal of the White mask imposed on the native woman. Her protagonist realizes that this kind of revolution also will count toward a truly independent African people. The story ends with a beauty contest, and the protagonist is anxious to know who will be the most beautiful African woman. To her surprise the winner is a mulatto. Through her protagonist's experience of returning to Africa and her realization that her people are being transformed into Whites, Aidoo takes responsibility for awakening her people and especially African women to the dangers of political and cultural domination. She intends to make her people deconstruct those values that were inculcated through the process of colonization. In "Everything Counts" Aidoo criticizes both the African people and the Western colonists. As Linda Strong-Leek points out,

Aidoo's critique of traditional western standards of beauty and their acceptance by a part of African society attacks the institution upon which ideology is defined-the Western patriarchy- but now in the hands of the formerly colonized, because colonization is much more than a stark exploitation of the body: it achieves its ultimate success in the destruction of the human soul that results as a matter of the psychological destruction of those it seeks to enslave. Aidoo is both informing the West and criticizing those in Africa who have accepted this practice of attempting to conform to European standards of beauty. (149)

As Strong-Leek emphasizes, Aidoo discusses how colonization changed the perception of beauty in Africa in ways that led women to risk their own lives to fit into the new society.

This attempt to fit into a modern society leads women to bleach their skins or starve to death. Though the changes in the standards of beauty regarding African women affect Opokuya's life, she is a conscious woman who analyses how modernity in Africa has contributed to women's suffering.

Opokuya examines how overweight women happen to be perceived as “sex-starved,” unattractive, or frustrated. Often in public perception, their lack of sensuality is prominent, as their obese bodies deter them from sexual pleasure, thus leading them to compensate for this lack of sex with food. With food seen as a substitute for sex, overweight women become empty vessels who should not be allowed to desire. Nevertheless, Opokuya rejects some changes happening in urban Accra, mainly those changes affecting her body and the constant attempts to control it, shaping it in order to attain modernity's demands that often lead women to destroy themselves through anorexia, bulimia, and paranoia.

Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju explains that in Nigeria, women's beauty has always been located in plump and round female bodies, mainly in the jutting backside. She points out that this “autonomous aesthetic code of body image was part of African culture, while also indicating indeed what we call ‘beauty’ has always been culturally codified” (41).

Opokuya really gets frustrated with the reversal of the values thinking that in her traditional culture, it was the skinny woman who had problems concerning beauty. In her cultural context, “... a young woman who is too tall, too thin and has flat belly and flat behind has a slim chance of bearing children. (41).

The idea that skinny is beautiful and attractive becomes oppressive to women who live in cultures where gaining some weight was not previously considered to be harmful or a motive for disrespect. Instead, more status is gained, as weight relates to power and beauty. However, in societies where being sterile is one of the main causes of women's

suffering, fertility is highly favored. Opokuya cannot cope with the contradiction of an African urban context where motherhood is still highly valued but overweight women get depreciated. The postcolonial setting has often found ways of distorting traditional values, replacing them with new ones; the new values often make women's lives harder.

Aidoo's narrative turns contradictory as Opokuya, who is overweight, a professional woman, married, and a mother is portrayed as asexual. Opokuya's sexual desire is explicit in the narrative. She pretends not to understand that her husband is sexually attracted to Esi, and she silently expects her friend to be faithful to their years-long friendship. Her lack of sex is set in opposition to Esi's freedom to pursue sexual fulfillment. Interesting too is that Esi is thin and elegant:

Esi was a tall woman ... She was quite thin, which gave her an elegance that was recognized by all except members of her own family. When she was young and growing up in the big compound with her cousins and other members of the extended family, she had to be extremely careful about starting a quarrel with anyone. Because no one lost the chance to call her beanpole, bamboo, pestle or any such name which in their language described tall, thin and uncurved. (6)

Esi not only is liberated and has quality sex many times with Ali, she is the only woman who is able to have sex in the novel. There is no place in the narrative for Opokuya's sexuality; her main desire is to own her own car. While Esi is fulfilled by sex, Opokuya's fulfillment happens on the material level via consumerism. No scene of love between Opokuya and Kubi, her husband, is referenced in any passage of the text. Her main interaction with her husband happens through their fights over the car. At some level, it appears that the narrative reiterates the notion that an overweight woman might not be able to have sexual pleasure. The narrative entraps Opokuya in her own body, focusing on her emptiness. As a sex-starved woman, Opokuya focuses not only on food but also on consumerism. The car fills the void left by the lack of love, sex, and pleasure.

Beauty is not part of Opokuya's description. The attention she receives is regarding her weight. Opokuya's speech blames the imposition of Western ideals of beauty on African women's bodies and the drive to achieve external beauty standards. At the same time, her speech reinforces the idea that Opokuya might be an incomplete woman. The narrative gets cruel when Kubi attempts to have sex with Esi. While Esi embodies Western beauty and modernity, Opokuya is connected to an Africa that no longer exists, and she embodies the anti-urban or anti-modern, thus her discourse against the West is dispersed in an environment where she does not fit. Her displacement is why Opokuya cannot understand Esi's priorities regarding desire and sexual pleasure. In an environment that rejects her body and her political discourse Opokuya is displaced. The narrative that is sometimes generous to Esi also victimizes Opokuya, erasing sex from the construction of her subjectivity. The text removes this possibility from Opokuya's life as if she does not deserve this right.

While Esi earns a decent wage, lives in a nice house, and gets a brand new car as one of Ali's gifts, Opokuya quarrels with her husband about a car that she never has the opportunity to drive. As Opokuya's sexual desire vanishes from the narrative, the absence gives space to another desire. Her freedom is based on her right to drive a car, to buy a car, and be free from the constraints of begging her husband for a turn in his car—a car provided by the government. In Opokuya's life, sexual pleasure appears as a secondary preoccupation, a luxury for a woman who needs to get up at five in the morning every day to go to work. Getting sexual pleasure is implicitly not among the aspirations of a woman who does not have money to buy her own car to get to work or to take her children to school. Esi's construction of subjectivity happens at the level of her freedom

to divorce and have quality sex in a polygamous marriage; while, Opokuya's independence is connected to material desires that are fulfilled not by sex but with an old car that Esi decides to give her as a gift.

The same freedom that Esi feels by having sex with Ali in her own house without the presence of her daughter Ogyanowa, Opokuya feels inside her car driving anywhere without explaining every turn she takes to her husband. Other African women novelists have identified the car as a tool or symbol for women's freedom. In Mariama Ba's *Une Si Long Lettre*, when the husband abandons his family, he takes the car. Rama stays home with her children, struggling to get public transportation to move around the city with her children. Rama, a privileged woman, who never had the opportunity to drive her own car, realizes that a car would provide her with a degree of freedom. Like Opokuya, the car comes as a gift from her best friend Aissatou, who divorces her husband, leaves Senegal, and gets a job in the Embassy in Washington, DC. Aissatou has the opportunity to give her friend a gift that will change her life. Both Opokuya and Rama do not have sexual pleasure as part of their lives; their subjectivities are constructed through the freedom they enjoy in their vehicles.

At the end of the narrative, Opokuya drives freely, laughs in her car, and enjoys pleasure for the first time. She feels free in the driveway, and the orgasm that the text has taken from her, she is able to get with the car. The narrative is entrapped, as it is implicit that as an overweight woman, Opokuya does not have the right to have sexual pleasure. She should accept her husband's infidelity because she is not able to elicit desire sexually or be desirable. In Aidoo's narrative, a conscious, professional woman becomes asexual. The narrative does not explicitly state the lack of sex as a void in her life, but for

somebody in Opokuya's situation, this lack would seem to be normal. As Aidoo's narrative inscribes sex as part of the female identity by letting Esi make her choices, paradoxically, when the narrative takes sex away from Opokuya's life, it reiterates Esi's concerns with sexual desire as a preoccupation of a Westernized African woman. The narrative questions how modernity can affect Esi and Opokuya in such different ways and to what extent Esi's education really matters to Africa when coming to terms with modern discourses.

### **Bittersweet Polygamy**

Polygamy has been bitter for Fusena and bittersweet for Esi; by the end of the novel, both women understand the practice is not advantageous for women. The narrative cruelly vilifies Esi as it implicitly reiterates that for the feminist Esi sex and freedom become so important that she cannot perceive what happens around her even while she becomes lost and displaced in a cultural setting that does not appear to be her own. She misunderstands polygamy and its rules and attempts to take advantage of the system, but in doing so she contributes to another woman's victimization and her own unhappiness. Esi thinks that she can take advantage of polygamy because of her economic status and education, but in the end, she understands that she is part and parcel of a society that changes while men still have greater privileges. Esi realizes polygamy is a patriarchal structure that reinforces male privilege and women cannot benefit from it.

Aidoo's novel complicates feminism and women's rights, providing many possibilities for the examination of women's issues in urban Accra that are also relevant in many other cities across Ghana and the continent. The narrative renders an ambiguous perspective regarding women's choices in this context. At times, through Esi's life, the

novel advocates women's freedom to desire and make choices regarding marriage and sexuality but, in the end, Esi remains unhappy and victimized. At other times, through Fusena's and Opokuya's lives, the narrative polarizes women's experiences. Fusena and Esi represent different fragments of an urban postcolonial society, and they represent opposite and even antagonistic perspectives. In this disturbing context, Fusena becomes the portrayal of inertia, frustration, and tradition, while Esi emerges an individualist and capitalist, a product of the underdeveloped capitalist society of African urban centers. While Opokuya's desire and pleasure are centered on consumerism, Esi gradually becomes a subject able to make her own choices. Fusena, however, remains depersonalized and objectified by both Ali and Esi. Fusena's womanhood diverges so much from Esi's that Esi's feminist ideal loses meaning, and her political consciousness and struggle for freedom are displaced in urban Accra.

## CHAPTER IV

### RETHINKING SEXUALITY AND WOMANHOOD IN CHIZIANE'S *NIKETCHE*

Have I ever desired? (Niketche 20)<sup>7</sup>

For me writing is a way of being in the world. I need my space, so I write. First, I write to exist, I write for me. I exist in the world and my existence is repeated in other people. (Chiziane)<sup>8</sup>

Paulina Chiziane published *Niketche: Uma Historia de Poligamia (A Story of Polygamy)* in 2002, eight years after Mozambique's democratic elections. She is the first Mozambican female novelist and one of Africa's most prominent writers. Born in southern Mozambique in the province of Gaza, Chiziane was six years old when her family moved to the capital city of Lourenco Marques. Though she grew up in a Protestant family, Chiziane attended a Catholic mission school where she learned Portuguese. Besides Chope, her native language learned from her parents and community, she also learned Tonga while living in the colonial capital. She pursued higher education at University Eduardo Mondlane and became a political activist for the socialist party Fremilo, an experience that certainly had a great impact on her literary work.<sup>9</sup> Besides *Niketche* (2002), Chiziane also published five other novels: *Balada de Amor ao Vento [Love Songs in the Wind]* in 1990, *Ventos do Apocalipse [Winds of Apocalypse]* in 1993, *O Setimo Juramento [The Seventh Oath]* in 2000, and *O Alegre canto da Perdiz [The Joyous Song of Partridge]* in 2008.

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<sup>7</sup> All translations of *Niketche* are mine.

<sup>8</sup> See Passagens Literarias [www.passagensliterarias.blogspot.com/2008/01/entrevista-Paulina-Chiziane](http://www.passagensliterarias.blogspot.com/2008/01/entrevista-Paulina-Chiziane). Access April 25 2013.

<sup>9</sup> See Hilary Owen, *Mother Africa, Father Marx*.

Chiziane's *Niketche: A Story of Polygamy* unveils how colonial and nationalist policies have shaped Mozambican female sexuality. The novel not only addresses the ways that women challenge the fallacy of the nationalist project and its impact on women's lives, but it reveals how women's desire disturbs the social order. Female desire becomes a catalyst to destabilize patriarchal power, while the celebration of women's sexuality turns into an instrument for subjectivity construction. Chiziane's narrative reinvents cultural traditions, creating a space for women to decide which aspects of traditional practices they want to retain. In coming to terms with continuity and change in postcolonial Mozambique, *Niketche* re-imagines the national by restoring women's voices.

In *Niketche*, Rami, the narrator, a southern Mozambican woman, married to Tony, a powerful *assimilado* man, profits from the status of *assimilada* and the wealth of her husband. She speaks Portuguese well, has a European education, and is respected in her community, but she feels impotent and disempowered. She views herself as a fat, ugly woman, and is neglected by a husband who decides to be polygamous after 20 years of marriage and five children. Rami investigates her husband's love affairs and discovers that he has four other wives and many children. Each woman comes from a different region of Mozambique. Julieta is from Inhambane, while Luisa, Saly, and Maua come from the north. After a lot of fights, Rami realizes that her co-wives are poor women who need food and shelter and that Tony exploits them sexually. The wives do not have other alternatives for survival and accept humiliation from a cruel husband. Rami forms a bond of sisterhood with her co-wives, and helps them become financially independent from Tony while the co-wives help Rami discover desire and sexual pleasure.

Friendships with women from different parts of the country help Rami realize that she does not know anything about her African cultural heritage and practices. She feels humiliated because, as a woman from the south, she was prevented from what she calls “African sexual education” or the participation in women’s initiation rites. In southern Mozambique, where the Portuguese established colonial missions, a stronger connection with Europe exists than in the rest of the country. This colonization delinked southerners from African traditions. Due to the Portuguese influence, the region is considered the icon of “progress” in relation to the rest of the country and exhibits more socio-economic development. After the war for independence, it was in the city of Maputo, in the south, that the Marxist Party Liberation Front of Mozambique (Frelimo) established its government in 1975. In facing her circumstances and situation, Rami concludes that everything is her fault and that she is losing her husband because she is not a good wife. She is an educated woman from the south who never participated in initiation rites or received advice from her mother and grandmothers; however, throughout the novel she engages in a journey to reconcile with her sexuality. For Rami, the lack of sex in her life is a result of colonization that determined her identity as an African woman and was generated by the African elite who learned how to mimic White Portuguese colonizers.

### ***Niketche: A Dance of Freedom***

Niketche is a *Macua* dance, a sensual dance performed by women during initiation rites when girls inform the community that they are ready to perform women’s roles. The ritual is a way to let the community know that girls are mature and ready to initiate an adult life:

Niketche. A danca do sol e da lua, danca do vento e da chuva, danca da criaçao. Uma danca que mexe, que aquece. Que imobiliza o corpo e faz a alma voar. As

raparigas aparecem de tangas e micangas. Movem o corpo com arte saudando o despertar de todas as primaveras. Ao primeiro toque tambor, cada um sorri, celebrando o misterio da vida ao sabor do Niketche. (160)

Niketche is a dance of the sun and the moon. It is a dance of the wind and of the rain; a dance of creation. It is a dance which moves and heats the body. It immobilizes the body and makes the soul fly. The girls show up wearing thongs and *missangas*. They shake their bodies with art to greet the awakening of Spring. At the first beat of the drum, each girl smiles to celebrate life with the flavor of Niketche. (160)

Chiziane's narrative attributes new meanings to dance, to performance, and to female initiation rites as the narrator dances Niketche in pursuit of her freedom. For Rami, the initiation rites help women form a bond of solidarity and create a space where younger women can learn from mothers and grandmothers. As dance is interwoven into African cultures, Niketche functions as a reminder to the reader of the many cultural traditions that have been considered the antithesis of modernity in Mozambique. To construe a modern nation, nationalists in Mozambique attempted to abolish cultural practices they considered backwards and atavist. While emphasizing changes that contribute to modernizing the country, nationalists did not consider the importance of the continuity of cultural practices.

As the Niketche is a symbol of African culture, Chiziane's novel also becomes a symbol that establishes connection between the fictional narrative and the extra-narrative world and provides the reader with an interpretation of the changes in women's condition in Mozambique. In the novel, Rami, the protagonist, reflects on female roles in the urban postcolonial Mozambique where colonizers first and then the nationalists, the socialist party Frelimo, banished traditional practices claiming that they were immoral, indecent, and oppressive to women. Paulina Chiziane fictively recreates the initiation rites as a way of liberating women's bodies, exploring women's desires and sexual pleasures as the

novel's leitmotif and as a means to rethink the inclusion of a women's agenda in Mozambican socio-economic and political affairs.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist attempts to learn from the northern culture in order to liberate herself. Her co-wives gather with Rami to teach her the northern culture and the ways northern women find sexual pleasure. To comprehend the importance of initiation rites in Chiziane's *Niketche*, it is worth considering Victor Turner's theories about symbolism and rituals. Turner assumes that the African groups he observed were able to interpret their own rituals; the anthropologist was not the holder of the other's knowledge. By examining the Ndembu's rituals, Turner affirmed that "to penetrate in the inner structure of ideas contained in this ritual, we have to understand how the Ndembu themselves interpret its symbols" (14). Turner criticizes the anthropologists who assume that societies, under their analysis, do not really comprehend deeply the internal meaning of their own ceremonies. In what he calls "exegesis of symbols," Turner explains that the inference of the investigator comes from the data provided by actors themselves. In his anthropological work, actors are empowered as they have the opportunity to contribute their knowledge to the interpretation of the ceremonies. In this sense, the power of the anthropologist is minimized as it depends on the contribution of those who perform the rituals. In this conversation, anthropologist and informant come together in order to construe knowledge.

At one level, *Niketche*'s protagonist, Rami, is, in many ways, building her knowledge about her African traditions through her interactions with her co-wives. As an educated southern woman, Rami feels like a person deprived of her own culture, a woman without roots. At another level, Chiziane draws on African symbolism to narrate

a story that becomes a symbol through which women in Mozambique or in Africa are able to understand how history has shaped female bodies. In this sense, the move to decolonization becomes collective rather than individual. As Turner affirms, "...it is not surprising that much of the imagery found in the writing of modern African novelists and in the rhetoric of politicians is drawn from ritual symbolism – from which it derives its power to move and channel emotion" (1105). Chiziane's protagonist channels her emotions toward understanding her body—her sexuality—while coming to terms with the interference of colonialism and nationalism in her private life. Her main concern is with her lack of sexual education because as an educated southern woman, she was deprived of traditions that would have provided her knowledge about her body.

The novel's symbolism and structure get inspiration from African rituals. Chiziane's protagonist experiences a major transformation that is reminiscent of the phases of the rites of passage described by Arnold Van Gennep. In *The Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep affirms that rites of passage have three major phases: separation, margin, and aggregation. During the first phase, the separation, the person delinks from the previous situation or position. In the second phase, the liminal period, the individual is in a transition state where he/she is not linked to the previous status, but has not been incorporated into a new status. The final phase is the aggregation when the individual is incorporated into a new group and receives a new status.<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that the rites reinforce social norms for this new status. As Turner suggests, "the person is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions" (95). However, Rami does

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<sup>10</sup> See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, and Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*.

not reinforce social norms, she challenges them, questioning women's position in her society and reinventing the rites. Most importantly, she takes advantage of the transition phase, the liminal space when she is not linked to the past, but has not gained a new status. In this space, she tries to promote social change through the consolidation of a female community which capitalizes on practices that are often oppressive to women. Victor Turner suggests that "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt, and between the two positions ... their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions" (95). In liminal space, individuals who go through the rites learn from elders in order to be prepared for their new status. At this stage, Rami joins her co-wives to learn from them, forming a community, what Turner calls "communitas" which implies a "social relationship form" or "a communion of equal individuals" (96). In this community Rami learns about her body and sexuality and is empowered to gradually disconnect from her husband while forming a strong bond with her co-wives. Although Rami is a privileged woman from the south, she forms a community with women from different ethnic groups to reinvent traditional practices while empowering herself and her co-wives.

### **Learning How to Dance**

In the beginning of the story when Rami discovers Tony's extra-conjugal relationships, she feels frustrated and deeply hurt. Through her interaction with her image in the looking glass, her transformation can be clearly seen. When she enters her room and faces her looking glass, she is not able to recognize the woman reflected in it. The image reflected in the mirror appears to be from another dimension. Rami cannot

reconcile with the image, which might be an unrecognizable fragment of the self. While Rami feels like a walking dead being, the woman in the mirror smiles, feels alive, and dances.

Paro de chorar e volto ao espelho. Os olhos que se reflectem brilham como diamantes. E o rosto de uma mulher feliz. Os labios que se refletem transmitem uma mensagem de felicidade, nao, nao podem ser os meus, eu nao sorrio, eu choro. Meu Deus, o meu espelho foi invadido por uma intrusa, que ri da minha desgraça. Sera que uma intrusa esta dentro de mim? Esfrego os olhos, acho que enlouqueci. Penso em fugir daquela imagem ... Aquela imagem e uma fonte de luz e eu sou um fosso de tristeza. Sou gorda, pesada, e ela magra e bem cuidada. (17)

I stop crying and go back to the mirror. The eyes reflected in the mirror are sparkling like diamonds. It is the face of a happy woman. The lips that are reflected convey a message of happiness, no, they cannot be mine, I do not smile, I cry. My God, my mirror was invaded by an intruder, who laughs at my misfortune. Perhaps the intruder is inside me? I rub my eyes, I think I lost it. I think about running away from that image ... That image is a source of light but I am a pit of sadness. I'm fat, heavy, and she is thin and well cared for.

The image reflected in the mirror is a happy woman; a woman not suffering discrimination or neglect because of her body or age. Rami believes that she deserves to suffer because she is middle-aged and overweight; a woman like her cannot experience pleasure. What she sees in the mirror is a desirable woman, younger, smiling with a face full of life. As Rami's life appears to be dismantled, the image in the looking glass is disconnected from suffering or death. When Rami affirms that the image is her own body seen from another perspective— “Esta imagem sou eu, sim, numa outra dimensao” [“The image is myself is another dimension”] (18)—she accepts death as the only possible way to free her mind and body from oppression. These realizations and thoughts paralyze Rami who becomes unable to respond and starts to degenerate. Death and degeneration were also present in Aidoo's *Changes* when the protagonist Esi realized that Ali had a wife and children, that she was secondary in his life. Like Rami, Esi felt paralyzed:

The ancients claim that they know something about the freshly dead and that especially those who perish violently are often compelled by certain forces to visit familiar people and places. When they do, they observe what goes on, but without interest. They cannot be moved because all emotions have to do with living tissues: sensitive skin, muscle and bones, rushing blood and beating hearts. And since spirits are humans who have been mercifully spared of such baggage, they cannot rejoice, they cannot hurt ... So like a spirit newly released from the body, Esi sat and remembered all the other times in the past that Ali announced he had to leave her – after a short or a long stay – and how intensely she had hurt each time then. (*Changes* 150)

Abandonment led both Esi and Rami to depression and degeneration. Esi, locked in her room, takes pills to cope with the suffering; while Rami, in front of her looking glass, sees life outside her body. The image in the mirror seems to stand apart from the sad woman in the bedroom, but Rami never finds ways to reconnect with the self. Unlike Rami, the self in the mirror appears to be free of constraints; the woman on the other side can make choices regarding her own life. For Irene Marques, the self in the mirror is Rami's most genuine self

... the mirror is the object that permits Rami to look at herself in a reflective and more profound manner, thus taking her beyond the superficial persona reflected and allowing her to uncover (or at least envisage) her deeper, genuine self: that self untouched by the various social agents that are responsible for her oppression and suppression as a fully entitled human being. (135)

The woman in the mirror interacts with Rami, gives advice, exhorts her and, in many ways, guides Rami toward her subjectivity. As Rami accepts the image in the mirror as her lost self, she finds the power to make a difference in the lives of those women who have materially less than she does, are more marginalized in society and who thus have fewer opportunities. Rami finds strength and decides to meet each one of her co-wives. She discovers that they are all poor uneducated women who accept Tony's tyranny because they do not have food or shelter. Tony did not marry any of these women, but maintains them as his mistresses. These women never participate in his life,

do not know any of his friends, or have any rights. They are maintained far from the eyes of society. Rami unites forces with her co-wives to overcome suffering and oppression.

*Niketche* is not about victimization or women's ever-lasting suffering from a cruel husband. It is about regeneration and construction of subjectivity. In his book *Golden Cage: Regeneration in Lusophone African Literature and Culture*, Niyi Afolabi states that though the term regeneration might not be a novelty in literature, when taking an African perspective, regeneration is strictly connected to degeneration, as (re)birth is inseparable from death. The image in the looking glass challenges death, while refusing to let Rami drown in depression, solitude, and a lack of desire. Because of this, Rami begins to regenerate. While sexuality in Rami's life seems impossible because of her condition, her inner self challenges those assumptions by leading her to rethink Mozambican or African culture. She also thinks about her European education in which she learned all about Portuguese manners, while gradually forgetting her culture. When the woman in the mirror starts to dance, the image makes Rami recollect her cultural memory. The image appears as something lost in Rami's identity. She gets mad when the image starts to dance and asks:

- Por que dancas, tu, espelho meu?  
- Celebro o amor e a vida. Danco sobre a vida e sobre a morte. Danco sobre a tristeza e a solidao. Piso para o fundo da terra todos os males que me torturam ... A dança e uma prece. Na dança celebro a vida enquanto aguardo a morte. Dançar ... Dançar na festa do meu aniversário. Dançar sobre a coragem do inimigo. Dançar no funeral do ente querido. Dançar a volta da fogueira na véspera do grande combate. Dançar e orar. (18)

[Why do you dance, my mirror?

- To celebrate love and life. Dance is about life and death. Dance is about sadness and loneliness. I send to the bottom of the earth all the evils that tortured me ... A dance is a prayer. By dancing I celebrate life while awaiting death. Dance ... Dance to celebrate my birthday. Dance over the courage of the enemy.

Dance at the funeral of the loved one. Dance around the bonfire on the eve of the great battle. Dance is to pray.]

The self in the mirror reminds Rami of her African culture and the symbolism implied in performance and dance. Through memory, she reconstructs what is meaningful in her culture in order to reconcile with the self in the mirror. The image dances to educate Rami about her own culture, African rituals, and the importance of continuity in a modern environment where changes become overwhelming. As the image forces Rami to remember the social function of dancing and performing in African cultures, Chiziane's narrative regenerates cultural tradition through storytelling. While Frelimo has struggled to unify the nation through effacing cultural practices, Chiziane's narrative finds multiple strategies to reinsert culture in the national imagination. Rami, who feels undesirable and depressed—a woman locked in a room—receives lessons about the healing function of dancing.

Stephanie Urdang, in her book, *And Still They Dance*, comments on the multiple meanings of dancing for Mozambicans:

Dance is a vibrant expression of Mozambican zest of life. Mozambicans danced even as they suffered brutality under the Portuguese colonialists; they danced even as they struggled to win their war of liberation; they danced in victory when this war was won; they danced even as they fought a second war with their racist neighbor Rhodesia; but once more they danced in victory and with hope when this war came to an end with Zimbabwean independence in 1980. (45)

Urdang remarks on the ways in which dance and performing are important parts of Mozambican culture. People not only dance to celebrate, they also dance to fight and to heal. In *Niketche*, Rami is disconnected from her culture and initially she is unable to understand why the image on the mirror dances. While the self in the mirror tells her that dance can heal her, Rami remembers how Christianity has taught her about the healing

powers of prayer. She learned to pray, but she forgot how to dance. The image in the mirror challenges Rami by reminding her that in many African cultures dancing is praying.

*Nikethe* reasserts that for women like Rami, restoring the symbolism of performance serves to resist discourses that position women as voiceless and disempowered. Rami's co-wives teach her how to dance and how to be healed within their culture. Rami builds a strong bond with the women who are dispossessed and depend on Tony financially. Tony manipulates his wealth and power to abuse polygamy, refusing to respect the traditions and rules that are intended to govern the system. In addition, he declares himself a Christian, further complicating his relationship to culture. Rami does not intend to fight polygamy; however, she struggles to combat its distortion and insists that if Tony is going to take many wives, he must respect tradition, recognize each woman, pay the dowry, assist with all the children. For the wives, Tony needs to be genuinely polygamous; he has to respect the conventions of the system.

Rami recognizes that Tony is not a polygamist husband, rather he takes advantage of a system to appropriate as many women as possible. Rami criticizes the ways that Tony distorts the system:

Que sistema agradavel e a poligamia!Para o homem casar de novo, a esposa anterior tem que consentir e ajudar a escolher. Que pena o Tony ter agido sozinho e informalmente, sem seguir as normas, senao eu teria so consentido em casamentos com mulheres mais feias e desastrosas que eu. Poligamia nao e substituir mulher nenhuma, e ter mai s uma. Nao e esperar que uma envelheca para troca-la por outra. Nao e esperar que uma reproduza riqueza para depois passar para a outra. Poligamia nao depende da riqueza ou da pobreza. E um sistema, um programa. E uma so familia com varias mulheres e um homem, uma unidade, potanto. No caso do Tony sao varias familias dipersas com um so homem. Nao e poligamia coisa nenhuma, mas uma imitacao grotesca de um sistema que mal domina. (96)

[What a nice system polygamy is! In order to remarry a man has to consult his first wife who needs to consent to another marriage and help him to find a new wife. It is too bad that Tony acted alone and informally, without following the norms. I would have consented to marriages with women uglier and disastrous women. Polygamy is not replacing a woman. It is not expected that one wife gets older for the man to find another one. It is not expected that one wife helps the husband to build wealth and then he goes to another one. Polygamy is not dependent on wealth or poverty. It is a system, a program. And a family with so many women and one man is a unit. In the case of Tony, several families dispersed with one man only. It is not Polygamy. It is nothing but a grotesque imitation of a system.]

Rami's criticism is not about polygamy but about the ways that her husband practices polygamy. By calling Tony's system a grotesque imitation of polygamy, Rami accuses her husband of unfairness.

Clear that it is not polygamy but rather the breaking of polygamy's rules that is the issue, Rami unites all the wives and children, and introduces them to friends, family, and important members of the community such as the priest and Tony's co-workers during a celebration of Tony's birthday. All the family and important people are present in Rami's house, and she introduces the four wives, telling everybody that Tony is not the Christian he pretends to be. He is an African man, a guardian of African traditions, and a polygamist. Rami's husband is confronted with the contradictions in his own identity. While Tony cannot accept fragmentation of the self, Rami reimagines a nation that is far from the unified country proposed by nationalist discourse. She imagines instead a nation that respects Mozambican cultural diversity; however, "the postcolonial nation as Chiziane envisages it here is literally mapped onto the female body, not as a fusion but as difference, highlighting their different ethnic groups and difference" (Owen 206). In the novel, the claim for a cultural plurality occurs in many ways, from the restoration of

women's dances and rites, to the inclusion of African languages and oral tradition in the written text.

Tony's connection with women from different parts of Mozambique is significant to Rami, and she sarcastically calls him a national man, comparing him to the national unity.

... os homens gostam de variar, concluimos. Mas nos ja somos uma variacao, em linguas, em habitos, em culturas. Somos uma mostra de norte a sul, o pais inteiro nas maos de um homem. Em material de amor o Tony simboliza unidade nacional. (161)

[Men like to diversify. But we are already a diversification in languages, in habits, in culture. We are a show from north to south, the whole country in the hands of a man. In terms of love, Tony symbolizes national unity.]

Rami utilizes humor to compare Tony's relationship with the project of national unity proposed by Frelimo.

Chiziane's narrative deconstructs discourses of cultural integration central to Marxist national discourse. Frelimo's main project was to eliminate differences in order to pursue its national cohesion. However, it had to eliminate all forms of tribalism and any cultural aspect that could oppress people. Frelimo spoke out against traditional practices such as polygamy and lobolo (dowry) that held women back, putting them in a position of subordination.<sup>11</sup> Unlike nationalists like Ali in Aidoo's *Changes* who defended polygamy as part of his African culture, Frelimo argued that "just because a custom is African does not mean that it unquestionably enhances African life, and therefore fails to oppress" (Urdang 202). To address women's issues, Frelimo supported OMM (Organization of Mozambican Women) that functioned as an arm of the party. OMM backed many campaigns to end polygamy and lobolo in Mozambique. Despite

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<sup>11</sup> See Stephanie Urdang, *And Still They Dance*.

Frelimo's and OMM's intentions to end women's oppression, some groups of women criticized the government, claiming that even though women participated in the revolution, they were excluded from the party leadership—high-ranking members of the party were all male. For most dissidents, Frelimo assimilated all differences within the country under the umbrella of a class struggle.

Like Frelimo's nationalism, Tony's masculinity suppresses cultural difference. Because of his privileged situation, he is able to connect to each region of the country without running the risk of fragmentation—maintaining an apparent unity. He becomes the perfect symbol of the nation, a southern assimilated African man, educated and wealthy, who is able to forge an integration of diverse ethnic communities through appropriation. Nevertheless, Tony's identity is somewhat disturbing, because while his African identity gives him license to be polygamous, his Christianity identity thwarts it, imposing monogamy on him. If the nation becomes an imagined community that pretends to assemble groups with different interests and needs, Tony's African identity also becomes counterfeit in a postcolonial context where he is seen as an adulterous, rather than a polygamous, man. In many ways, Tony is forced to cope with his ambiguous identity that embodies multiple cultures—Mozambican/African and Portuguese. Tony's privileged position enables his fragmentation. As an assimilated Christian African man, he is supposed to assume or flatten cultural difference, but his African culture marks difference and opposition to the European norm. Tony assumes a paradoxical role. While his identity has an irreconcilable aspect, he is also seen as an icon for national unification and simultaneously this very project is destabilized by his African identity.

While Rami's husband attempts to secure his African privilege of having five wives or as many as he is able to support, he does not realize that his powerful situation is also a result of colonial history. Through his connection to the colonialists, he can blend into the spheres of power and acquire wealth and privilege. While the colonial enterprise tries to banish some traditional practices that safeguard male privilege, it also generates disparate economic conditions, calcifying gender inequities. As Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie affirms:

Women in labor process became the "proletariat" of the proletariats, becoming more subordinated in the new socioeconomic schemes, and often losing their old meaningful roles within the older production processes. Women became more marginalized in the production process as the "cash crop" became the "main crop" leading to new economic arrangements between men and women and new attitudes of male superiority. These economic changes in Africa following the intrusion of the West were inextricably linked to political changes in society. (108)

Colonialism interfered in African women's lives, disrupting their roles in traditional societies and maintaining sexist tendencies. The colonizers' choice to allow only males to attend colonial schools further complicated women's situations. A number of measures contributed to define women's condition in postcolonial societies. When women become poorer and marginalized, they are forced to accept new rules. Tony's wives had to accept demands from their husband who had access to national wealth. Though colonialism contributed to the women's situations, decisions by African leadership that excluded women from power and International Money Fund structural adjustment in Mozambique also contributed to define the position of women in the country.

Tony tries to have exclusive rights to five women's bodies and takes advantage of their subaltern condition. Chiziane's novel clearly undermines Tony's masculinity and

power, but also reinvents Rami's role as the first wife. Rami refuses the authority and power traditionally delegated to the first wife. Instead, she creates a chain of solidarity, helping women achieve their economic independence. Rami struggles to understand why these women accepted the conditions imposed by Tony, a tyrannical man who beats and deceives the women who nevertheless serve him. Rami understands that Tony's other wives are trying to escape their destinies of poverty and humiliation and that Tony provides them with some security, supplying them with food and shelter. In understanding the other women's situations, Rami is able to create a bond of female solidarity. Rami uses the solidarity among the women to create the means to overcome patriarchal power and women's subjugation.

As a first wife, Rami has access to Tony's wealth and uses this money to help the other women advance economically. By utilizing a kind of micro-credit, Rami lends money to the other wives to start their own businesses, and this opportunity really makes a difference in the lives of the women. With her assistance, they have tools to negotiate their relationship with Tony. As they gain economic independence, they become empowered and are no longer forced to accept Tony's rules.

Rami understands that despite the class gap between them, as women, she and the other wives face very similar situations. Rami compares Tony's wives' destinies with the destiny of Mother Africa, exploited by colonialists and African nationalists. She uses an analogy of a suffering mother or an exploited and raped African woman to illustrate the destiny of the continent.

Ha dias conheci uma mulher do interior da zambezia. Tem cinco filhos ja crescidos. O primeiro. Um mulato esbelto, e dos portugueses que a violaram durante a Guerra colonial. O Segundo, um preto, elegante e forte como um guerreiro, e fruto da outra violacao dos guerrilheiros de libertacao da mesma

Guerra colonial. O terceiro, outro mulato, mimosas como um gato, e dos commandos rodesianos brancos, que arrasaram esta terra para aniquilar as bases dos guerrilheiros do Zimbabwe. O quarto e dos rebeldes que fizeram a Guerra civil no interior do país. A primeira e a segunda vez foi violada, mas a Terceira e a quarta entregou-se de livre vontade, porque se sentia especializada em violação sexual. O quinto e de um homem com quem se deitou por amor pela primeira vez. (277)

[I met a woman from the interior of Zambezia. She has five grown children. The first son is a slim mulatto from the Portuguese who raped her during the colonial war. The second, a black, sleek and strong as a warrior, the fruit of another violation, from the guerrilla war of liberation. The third is another mulatto, dainty as a cat, from the rude Rhodesian who destroyed this land to fight the Zimbabwean guerilla bases. The fourth is a son of the rebels who waged civil war in the interior of the country. The first and second time she was violated, but the third and fourth she surrendered willingly, because she was a specialist in sexual violation. The fifth was the child of a man with whom she had loving sex for the first time.]

Rami uses the comparison between Africa and women, a trope employed by colonialists and African male nationalists. For Rami, as Mother Africa, women are relegated to spheres of abstraction where their voices tend not to be heard. In Rami's analysis, Africa is as exploited, abused, and humiliated as African women themselves.

Chiziane's novel tells a sort of Mozambican *herstory*, as if the country were a woman with five children. The first son is a mulatto, a consequence of Portuguese invasion and rape, the second one is an elegant Black, the consequence of another rape. For Rami, the authors of the second violation are the Africans themselves, the revolutionaries who under the Marxist flag continued the job of the colonizers. In this sense, she accuses Frelimo of continuing many of the Portuguese policies. The woman embodies Africa. She tells Rami that she was raped several times and delivered five children, but only the fifth child was the fruit of love. This child is certainly representative of democracy, when people have the chance to choose their leader. The raped woman is Africa, in general, and Mozambique, in particular, and depicts the

destiny of many African women. The rape also illustrates the situation of many African women for whom the question of desire and sexual pleasure remain taboo, while men have power to control women's bodies. The woman is Rami herself who embodies Africa. Since she never had pleasure within her marriage, she felt raped. Like Ken who embodies Africa and goes through humiliating and painful experiences in Brussels, Rami rewrites the destiny of the continent on her own skin, through the story of her own life. Throughout the story, Rami experiences humiliation and a lack of desire and sexual pleasure within a marriage to a cruel husband, but she struggles for her liberation.

### **Reinventing Polygamy**

Rami learns that her husband has extra-conjugal relationships with four other women. By describing each of these women, Rami deals with the women's positions in different ethnic groups and regions of Mozambique, thus emphasizing the differences between women from the north and from the south. Saly, one of her co-wives accuses colonial education of depriving Rami of the initiation rites, what she calls female sexual education. Through the rites women have the opportunity to learn from each other, to bond with mothers and foremothers. Just as Esi, Aidoo's protagonist, was frustrated at being unable to connect to her mother and grandmother, Rami also gets frustrated at being unable to establish a bond with elder women from her family. In Esi's case colonial education contributed to detaching her from her community, her culture, the world of her mother and grandmother. In Rami's case colonial education deprived her of her culture and the bond between women. Ceremonies and rituals are one way to make connections with elder women. Saly examines how Portuguese colonization deprived southern Mozambique of cultural traditions:

Nao tens culpa – comenta a Saly. – Voces do sul deixaram-se colonizar por essa gente da Europa e os seus padres que combatiam as nossas praticas. Mas que valor tem esse beijo comparado ao que temos dentro de nos? (180)

[It is not your fault - Saly said. – People from the South permitted the settlement of European people and their priests who fought our practices. But what value does this kiss have when we compare it to what we have inside us?]

By acknowledging that Rami did not have contact with her cultural traditions, Saly does not blame Rami, she attacks colonization and the way that Catholic missionaries spread prejudicial notions about African cultural practices. As a woman from the south, Rami experienced assimilation in ways that the population from the north did not. Saly remarks that Portuguese missions established in southern Mozambique imposed Christianity while effacing the culture of the groups in the region. Most importantly, Rami does not blame the colonizers, she says that people from the south allowed the Portuguese to stay.

Hilary Owen writes about contemporary Mozambique noting “The south, more influenced by colonialism, missionary culture, and Marxism, has long enjoyed political and economic predominance in national life” (206). Assimilation with the Portuguese in the south was more prominent; colonial education was instrumental in this process. Christianity prohibited the nakedness involved in girls’ rites that the missionaries considered sinful. In addition, girls were forced to assimilate European women’s manners. Rami complains about this education that was much more prevalent in the southern half of the country, acknowledging that northern women are more powerful in their societies. Though Rami lived in Maputo and had more economic power and a higher status in contemporary Mozambique, she suggests that northern women traditionally have more authority in their societies. They did not depend solely on their husbands and had more options within the structure of their societies. One contributing factor is that

southern groups were patrilineal, while northern ones were matrilineal as Kathleen

Sheldon points out:

Northern Mozambican societies demonstrated a range of structures and ideas about women, from Makua and Makonde matrilineality, to the Yao traders, to Swahili who were part of a larger coastal society in East Africa. Women's options were somewhat broader than in Southern patrilineal societies, though they continued to have the primary responsibility for food cultivation and preparation and for child care. Local gender expectations in the north reinforced these obligations while simultaneously recognizing the potential for women to have more in the society through their position in matrilineage. (17)

Women in matrilineal societies have more power than those in patrilineal societies, but the matrilineal system is still patriarchal. In patrilineal systems, children are part of the father's ancestral group and the husband's mother and sisters play an important role in children's education while wives are powerless. In matrilineal systems, children are seen as part of the mother's kin and the mother's brother plays a crucial role in the lives of his sister's children. Though northern women have some power in their communities, colonialism also affected their lives, creating more poverty in part due to the southern migration of their male counterparts in search of jobs. Because of the economic disparities between north and south, Rami's husband has the power to acquire as many northern women as he wishes and does so as if they were cheap properties. Though they are within the same country, the history of colonialism contradictorily brought them together while setting them apart. The women are all Mozambican, but as an assimilated woman Rami feels different from the other four women as she has some socio-economic status, but little knowledge of her African culture. While her co-wives are more connected with their cultural roots, Rami is a hybrid who has received colonial education. Her frustration with the construction of her identity makes her feel incomplete—an incomplete woman. Portuguese assimilationist policy shaped the self of a woman who

feels between two alien worlds. Her identity is suspended and unstable in a context where neither her African culture nor her Portuguese education appears to be sufficient to make her feel complete.

Portugal started their colonial enterprise from the south which generated rivalries between north and south that persisted after independence. Portuguese colonizers exerted force to bring together different groups who lived in the south, claiming the region as a part of the Portuguese Empire. Southern people abandoned many of their traditions, as they assimilated Portuguese culture. An important aspect of the Portuguese colonization was the miscegenation through which mulattos got more opportunity and respect in the society. Along with the imposition of a new language, a new culture gradually turned the south into a reconstituted land where Portuguese ruled and mulattos had privilege. This history of hostility between the south and north marked the Portuguese colonization. While the Portuguese and mulattos had influence in the south beginning in the sixteenth century, the north of Mozambique remained unknown to the Portuguese until the 1890s.

The southern region is comprised of the provinces of Maputo, Gaza, and Inhambane; in the northern region the provinces are Cabo Delgado, Niassa, Nampula, and Zambezia. In the central region are the provinces of Manica, Sofola, and Tete. In the south, the ethnic groups are patrilineal, and, in the north they are matrilineal. In the central region, the ethnic groups are both matrilineal and patrilineal. The Makua, a northern ethnic group, is the largest group in the country. Makua, Makonde, Lomwe, Yao, and Swahili are also localized in the north.

Contact with the Portuguese provided people of the south with a European culture and language. During the Portuguese colonization, Black Mozambicans fell into one of

two categories created by the colonial system: *chibalo* or *assimilado*. *Chibalo* were part of a system that utilized forced labor to produce resources to be used in industries in Portugal. Laborers had to cultivate raw material such as sisal, cotton, and rice. To avoid the *chibalo*, Mozambicans pursued the status of *assimilado* through learning the Portuguese language and culture to become a sort of honorary Portuguese, gaining citizenship and enhanced economic opportunities. The official status of *assimilado* used to provide Mozambicans with the opportunity to have permanent housing in the city, a right strictly based on racial discrimination. The majority of the Black population did not have a choice other than living in shanty towns, while only Whites, mixed races, Asians, and *assimilados* had permission to build permanent housing in the cities. *Assimilados* also got opportunities to serve in some employment positions that were otherwise reserved for Whites. A small percentage of the population could attain the *assimilado* status, and, for women, it was even more complicated. Women were encouraged to secure a marriage with an *assimilado*, since acquiring this legal status by their own efforts was even more difficult than for a man.<sup>12</sup>

Though *Niketche* is set in the 1990s, after the civil war and the democratic elections, the protagonist Rami struggles to come to terms with the legacy of colonization. She criticizes the socialist government for not revoking many of the Portuguese policies. Frelimo not only maintained the Portuguese language, it also banished many cultural traditions that Christian missionaries considered evil and backwards. By restoring her sexuality Rami decolonizes her culture and chooses which traditions she will retain and which ones she will eradicate from her life. When Rami

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<sup>12</sup> See Kathleen Sheldon and Joseph Hanlon.

claims that she wants to learn the *Niketché*, she regards the dance not as an immoral act but as a dance of freedom. While her defense of these rituals might seem contradictory to many feminists in Africa and around the world, it is significant to consider the symbolism and the purposes of these ceremonies in order to comprehend what Rami is choosing.

In her study of the Bemba ethnic group in Zambia, Audrey Richards examined girls' initiation rites, providing some insights into these rituals' purposes. She explains that within the rites there may be an effort to change some circumstances and maintain others:

The nature of ritual, as I hope to show, demands that there should be multiple explanations for most of the forms of symbolic behavior which compose it. But since rites are, to my mind, invariably an effort to "do" – to change the undesirable, or to maintain the desirable, I believe that there is always some purpose, however general behind a ceremony which the performers can, and will express (113).

Though rituals often reinforce social norms, Richards states that ceremonies are also the expression of a group's effort to interfere in aspects of its social life. For her, the rites contribute to change some aspects of society while maintaining others.

As Richards observes in her study, in *Niketché*, Rami and her co-wives perform together in an urbanized Mozambique not only to "change the undesirable" but also to "maintain the desirable." The women get together to challenge patriarchy and to promote changes in women's lives, but also to maintain some aspects of their culture. In this sense, the initiation rites performed by Rami become an instrument of women's agency. Women in the novel create a symbolic space to come to terms with the reconstruction of their subjectivity.

While Rami and her co-wives unveil their sexual desires, Chiziane makes them public through the literary narrative. Sexuality, sexual desire, and pleasure are important

and perhaps crucial to women's lives; however, they are turned into a parody to express other desires about women's inclusion as decision-makers in the public spheres of the nation. As women come to terms with their positions in society, they create a bond to fight against injustices and change their status. When they come together to rethink their relationship with Tony, they realize that for their husband they are only cheap commodities. By acknowledging Tony's power over them, the women fight to free themselves. Though Rami struggles to have sexual desire and pleasure, she also struggles for empowerment in her society. Richard states that another purpose of women's ceremonies concerns prestige. Women who engage in these rituals bring a sort of prestige to their families.

Expressed purposes may also include secondary as well as primary motives. For instance people may say that their object in doing such and such acts is to give their daughter in marriage but they may also recognize that the ceremony itself gives them prestige, binds their relatives to return them economic services, or raises their credit in community. (114)

The ceremony becomes a site of power, and those who do not take part might be seen as outcasts or in other ways excluded from society.

Women in the novel are trying to restore their prestige that was lost during the years Mozambique was dominated and ruled by Portugal. The narrative deals with how women are deprived of power and prestige in postcolonial societies. While polygamy or girls' initiation rites seemed to be abolished to protect women's rights, patriarchal privilege is still ingrained in the society. Rami realizes that only through an alliance among women is it possible to challenge patriarchy. Recreating her initiation rites affords Rami a space to be among women. Rami may be searching for a symbolic compensation

for women in restoring the rites. Richards points out that rituals also function to heal daily life's repressions and act to compensate the group.

Anthropologists interested in social structure – and they have been in the majority of recent years – have started to explain forms of ritual which seemed surprising or quite at variance with the social values of the tribe, as ritual expressions of hostilities which have to be repressed in daily life, or as symbolic compensation for the unpleasant roles which society may assign to an individual or group. (118)

With the recreation of the rites, Rami attempts not only to compensate herself, but also to compensate the group of women who have to cope with the loss of tradition. Through the defense of the rites, Rami brings to light a broader discussion about women's freedom and choices. Women should be the ones to come together as a collective and decide what traditional practices to retain and what ones to abandon. As an educated woman who received colonial education and who speaks Portuguese, Rami attempts to restore her culture while coming to terms with her hybrid self.

### **Challenging Colonial Education and Portuguese Language**

In *Niketche*, female characters re-imagine a nation that surpasses Portuguese colonization and the myth of monoglossia imposed by Portugal and ratified by Frelimo. While each woman comes from a different part of the country, speaks a different language, and has different cultural traditions, they come together to envision a nation that is able to include ethnic diversity. In this alternative nation, women learn from each other's cultural traditions, forging a national space that accepts difference. However, Rami and her co-wives search for a sixth wife for Tony when they realize that he is taking too much of their time. They attempt to take advantage of polygamy to have more freedom to be with each other, thus reversing a relationship that was once oppressive to

them. In their search, they find a young girl from the north who speaks Portuguese with a regional accent.

-Tony, explica a Saly, conhecemos as tuas aspiracoes de abraçar o país inteiro em casamento, por isso fomos buscar esta nortenha do lado oeste. Ela fala português com acento *nhanja*, mas vamos corrigi-la no devido tempo. (322)

[Tony - explains Saly - We know your aspirations to embrace the entire country through marriage, so we sought out this northwestern woman. She speaks Portuguese with a *nhanja* accent, but we will fix it in due time.]

By speaking Portuguese with a *nhanja* accent, the girl from the northwest might not be a proper wife for a man of Tony's stature—a powerful man—however, Rami promises to fix the girl's accent and make her a proper woman for Tony.

Chiziane's novel questions the validity of the Portuguese language as a unifying tool in bringing the nation together. As the majority of women were excluded from the colonial system of education, Chiziane's narrative disrupts the exclusionary language not only by introducing northerners who speak Portuguese, but also ones who are not accepted because of their accent as is the case with the northern girl.

After the country's independence, many Mozambicans could not speak Portuguese because they were not able to attend schools and learn the colonial language. Only a tiny fraction of the population could speak, read, or write the European language. In 1979, only 15% of the population was literate in Portuguese, some, included in this 15% attended school for less than two years (Devonish 36). With that in mind, it is clear that deciding national political matters or producing national literature in European languages might be useful to only a tiny fraction of the population. Devonish affirms that choosing an international language as the national or the official language of the country only serves the interests of the national elite who will acquire more power to control the

wealth and dominate the population. The majority of the population who cannot speak the national language is virtually excluded from political debates and decisions that directly affect their lives. Of this small fraction who are literate in European languages, the majority are African men, as women were almost entirely excluded from colonial educational systems.

After the independence of Mozambique in 1975, the socialist party Frelimo decided to maintain Portuguese as the national official language. Like many other nationalist leaders across Africa, Frelimo opted not to choose one of the local languages to be the national language since the decision could instigate ethnic disputes. Some groups could argue that one ethnic group was being privileged to the detriment of others. Frelimo also considered that keeping Portuguese as an official language could connect Mozambique to other parts of the world, such as Brazil and other Lusophone colonies in Africa. Though Portuguese became the official language, only a few Mozambicans could learn the colonial language because the majority of the population did not have access to education. Kathleen Sheldon points out that in the census of 1970, “93 percent of Mozambican women and 86 percent of Mozambican men were considered illiterate in Portuguese. Only 6 percent of women and 12 percent of men had completed a primary education” (105).

The issue of language in Mozambique is similar to that in other African countries, as has already emerged in previous chapters. Women do not get the same opportunities as men for education and access to the status of *assimiladas*. A few women like Rami have these opportunities, but most women become outsiders and foreigners in their own nation. Women get pushed aside in political and administrative matters, being unable to

make decisions to change women's conditions in the nation. As women were unable to speak Portuguese, they were not allowed to participate fully in the construction of the nation. "Language, in both spoken and written versions, gave men in general an advantage denied to women, and allowed men to feel attached to the idea of Mozambique as a nation" (Sheldon 30).

Chiziane's narrative appropriates the Portuguese language to construct a national allegory where women get included and are empowered. As her narrative rewrites women's history, Chiziane incorporates devices of orature, bringing the storyteller to the center of her narrative. The novel is filled with oral stories that help the characters come to terms with history, society, and culture. These stories, always told by elder women such as grandmothers, mothers, and aunts, interrupt the written text by filling the gaps of silence left by those who cannot speak or write the colonial language. In the novel, oral stories resist modernity, providing women with culture and knowledge from oral traditions.

In one of these passages, Rami and her co-wives set up a conference among the elders to let them know that Tony is abusing polygamy. However, one of Tony's aunts takes advantage of the situation to tell the women the story of a princess named Vuyazi. She explains that Vuyazi never obeyed her husband and her father. She never behaved like a woman, thus when her parents or husband hit her, she hit back. She talked back to them, letting men around her know how she felt. When she served food to her husband, the princess never gave him the best parts of the meat, but instead ate whatever she wanted. One day, her husband became upset because Vuyazi would not stop breastfeeding her daughter when the girl turned one year old. Vuyazi thought that, in

order to get strong, girls should have the same rights as boys to be breastfed. Vuyazi's father became upset with his daughter's stubbornness and asked a dragon to send her to the moon. Vuyazi was stamped in the full moon to show that she was banned from the earth for being a rebel. The storyteller also explains that women menstruate every month to remember the consequences of Vuyazi's rebellion.

The story of Vuyazi assumes symbolic significance within the novel. Tony's aunt, a woman in the village who certainly cannot speak Portuguese, tells the wives the story of Vuyazi in order to prevent a rebellion against her son. Thus, Chiziane's text reinserts culture and oral tradition into the literature, but also subverts the oral story that has the intention of reinforcing social norms. It is implied that women should obey their fathers and parents or they will be in trouble like princess Vuyazi. At the end of the novel, however, Rami frees Vuyazi from her lunar prison. As Rami extends Vuyazi her freedom, she reverses the oral story saying that women who challenge patriarchal society and disobey their husbands and fathers should not be imprisoned. As Rami walks toward her own freedom, she shows other women how to do the same.

In another passage, Rami's mother tells stories about a rebel woman who was murdered by her husband when he discovered she had eaten the stomach of the chicken that was reserved for him. When the husband arrives home and discovers that the wife has eaten the best parts of the chicken, he gets furious and kills her. The woman is punished for defying patriarchy. She ought not to have eaten the chicken's stomach that was reserved for the man who felt powerful by having such a privilege. To subvert the story, Rami and her co-wives decide that they should go to the grocery store and buy kilos of chicken stomachs for Tony. Tony feels disrespected because he craves a single

stomach from a special chicken which would signal privilege and respect not a tableful of chicken stomachs. The women challenge the story and make fun of Tony. These stories told by Tony's aunt and Rami's mother are multilayered texts that serve many functions. The stories serve to reinforce societal rules and teach women to follow the rules as well as to show how those who defy patriarchal rules are severely punished. While the elder women attempt to insure that women are not going to rebel against men and that society will function as it should, Rami subverts the text and frees women from these rules thus forcing men to change. Through rebellion against these norms, women are able to rethink feminine roles in this patriarchal society. The text also gives voice to village women who cannot speak the European language. When Tony's aunt tells the story, the narrator is silent, giving a place to the elder women. The narrator exchanges her place with several other women who fill the text with multiple voices. Through oral tradition, Chiziane's narrative alerts the reader to the importance of memory in the reconstruction of the community's history, as voices of those who cannot speak Portuguese are included as a counterpoint to history. In this sense, memory plays a pivotal role in maintaining history. In this process, elder women's tales play a crucial role, functioning as constructions of self-representation and identity.

By bringing oral stories into her written text, Chiziane positions the elders as the resources of the village, the pillars, and the center of a fragmented world where things have started to change. As sites of memory, the elders establish the balance the village needs to anticipate the future. Thus, counterbalancing the promise of a future where capitalism and modernity dominate the scene, the idea of preserving the past becomes a way to understand and negotiate the future, not romanticize the past. Chiziane's narrative

informs the reader that depriving a nation of these stories means provoking amnesia. To avoid amnesia, Chiziane reinstates memory and oral tradition as pillars for maintaining the knowledge that Mozambican modernity had gradually set aside.

Chiziane finds ways to remedy the ruptures caused by European language, providing for the inclusion of non-Portuguese speaking women from diverse parts of the country and of elder women who had been excluded from the making of the nation. Though Chiziane writes in Portuguese, the inclusion of these other voices gives the reader a feeling that they are reading a work in translation. Chiziane fulfills the goal of translating as many female voices as possible, writing a text that has the flavor of orature. Most importantly, Chiziane highlights voices from different ethnic groups in different parts of country, so that in her narrative the privileged south learns from the north and by effacing rivalries the novel re-imagines the nation.

### **Rami Inscribes Culture on Her Body**

Rami employs her own body to map the story of Mozambique. A mother of five children who suddenly realizes that desire was never part of her conjugal life, Rami concludes that her children are the result of rape and abuse. Though Rami is the first wife, married in the Catholic church and with more status than the other wives who were little more than concubines until Tony was forced to recognize them as legitimate wives, she feels that her life is not so different from the other women's. She became objectified in her relationship with Tony just as they were. For Rami, the construction of her subjectivity happens when she is able to make choices regarding her body and her life.

Having desire and experiencing sexual pleasure are crucial in building her identity. When women are repressed because their sexuality is seen as unnatural, their

sexuality becomes fantasized. Sex is the medium through which Rami reasserts her agency. To compensate for the discrepancies in the female condition in the actual society, Chiziane's narrative assumes the symbolic role of deconstructing male privileges. The idea of a complete sexual liberation however defies both patriarchy and colonialism. Through humor and parody, Rami reconstructs initiation rites in Modern Maputo through some classes in sex:

Participei em muitas aulas, quinze no total. Fui ate as aulas mais secretas, sobre aqueles de que nao se pode falar. Enquanto noutras partes de Africa se faz a famosa excisao feminina, aqui os genitais se alongam. Nesses lugares o prazer e reprimido, aqui e estimulado. A minha professor diz que a preparacao para o amor nao tem idade e eu acredito. (46)

[I participated in many classes, fifteen in total. I went to some secret lessons about things that we cannot speak about. While other parts of Africa became famous for female excision, here genitals are elongated. In those places pleasure is repressed, here, it is encouraged. My teacher says that the preparation for love has no age and I agree with this.]

These classes in sex not only help Rami know her body and build her confidence, but also provide her with a community of women who accompany Rami into womanhood. Through her classes, Rami reinvents the rites. Her teacher and her co-wives have come together to give Rami what colonization and education had taken from her. Through these classes, Rami moves through the phases of rites: separation, transition, and aggregation.

During the separation phase, as a forty-year-old woman, she behaves like a girl in a village and begins initiation under very new conditions. The cultural void in Rami's life makes her feel like an outcast in this group of women or a foreigner in her own country or a child among women. Rami seeks to learn about pleasure and the female body in her classes. She is also helped by her co-wives who play an important role in the recreation of the symbolism of the African ritual. As Rami becomes the young girl ready to be

initiated, the co-wives and the sex teacher play the roles of elder women who initiate her into womanhood. Kathleen Sheldon points out that during the rites, women from the Makua ethnic group used to have lessons on the manipulation of their genitals in order to stimulate sexual pleasure.

The initiation of young people through a series of rites was a central event in their lives [...] Descriptions of the ceremonies included the role of older women in teaching adult subjects to the young girls, many of whom would be married soon after the ceremony. There were no evidence of genital cutting among the Makua. They had a custom of manipulating the labia so that, in contrast to genital cutting, women's genitals were enlarged through a procedure that most likely involved sexual pleasure. (13)

Through the rites, Rami searches for self-discovery and empowerment, learning to navigate sexual desire and pleasure. Rami senses that her northern co-wives have more power, as they learned about female sexuality from their mothers and grandmothers. Coming from matrilineal groups, women in the north exercise more power in society than those in the patrilineal south. In the south, women also must deal with the Western conception of being feminine which contributed to making their lives even harder.

In her classes, Rami also learns about the elongation of women's genitals, a part of the northern women's rituals. The classes encourage her to touch her genitals, looking for the elongation that is known as a source of pleasure, but she finds only frustration when she touches her genitals, as she finds nothing there:

Vou a casa de banho e passo a mao por baixo de mim mesma. Nem escamas. Nem lulas. Nem tentaculos de polvo. Apenas uma concha quebrada onde o vento passa sem canto nem eco. Uma concha insipida, com sabor de agua que nem mata a sede. Por aqui passaram cinco cabeças, tres filhos e duas filhas com que me afirmo na historia do mundo, mas para o povo do norte ainda sou crianca, nunca fiz uma viagem para dentro de mim mesma. (184)

[I'm going to the bathroom and I pass underneath myself. No scales, nor any squid. No tentacles of an octopus. I have only a broken shell where the wind passes without singing or echoing. It is an insipid shell with water flavor that does

not quench thirst. Here, five heads have passed, three sons and two daughters, with them I affirm myself in the history of the world, but for the northern people, I am still a child who never discovered myself.]

Rami discovers that some of her co-wives elongate their genitals to maximize sexual pleasure. When these women talk about their traditional practices to have more sexual pleasure, Rami senses a void within herself. Through Rami's journey the reader is informed about women's experiences in this society. Rami feels trapped by systems that deprive her of an important part of the self as she shares knowledge with the reader revealing the ways she is constructing her subjectivity. As Rami goes through her initiations, she learns northern women's culture and forms a bond with other women who give her advice about female desire and pleasure. As a regular practice in the villages, experienced women offer advice on sexual life and pleasure to girls who are ready to initiate their own sexual lives. Women coming from specific caste groups are designated to give the girls lessons about women's sexuality. Their roles are social obligations handed down through several generations via training and personal coaching (176). According to Arnfred, the ceremonies allowed women to have a gendered space for themselves.

The rituals always also provide adult women with the opportunity to get together under circumstances that permit a very different behavior: disrespectful, non-subservient. I came to see the initiation rites as the ritual celebration of a shared female gender identity. A focal point of the rites is the confirmation of the sexual maturity of the girls. Having passed the rituals they should be familiar with their own potential for sexual care and pleasure. This sexual confidence seems to be an important base for the strength of these women. (9)

Arnfred states the importance of women getting together to learn from elder women as well as the need to acquire knowledge about pleasure and sexual care. Though Rami's journey begins with her concern about not being able to feel sexual pleasure or desire and

wanting to be desired by Tony, her defense of the rites goes beyond her initial concerns as she experiences that the rites have other purposes. The sisterhood among the wives shows how women access power when they help each other in order to overcome difficulties in a society where males are privileged. In the end, even more than sexual pleasure, Rami discovers that a relationship among women is easier in the village.

Chiziane's narrative does not defend all cultural traditions; it also exposes how some traditions can be cruel to women. The text denounces traditions that tend to humiliate or sacrifice women, as is the case of the levirate marriage or *kutchinga*. During one of Tony's escapades to Paris with another woman, his family thinks he is dead and Rami executes all the rituals of widow. One of these practices establishes that women should go through the *kutchinga* ritual. In this ritual, the husband's eldest brother must have sexual relations with the widow eight days after the death of her husband. In the novel, Rami complains about the rituals she has to go through, such as cutting her hair, being locked in a room and so on, but the protagonist comments that the best part will be the *kutchinga* and she will do everything possible to have sexual pleasure. During the funeral, Rami knows already that Tony is not dead, but all she wants is for her husband to not return before the *kutchinga*. The *kutchinga* is supposed to be a tyrannical act against the widow, but in this instance, it is ironically reversed and becomes a moment of sexual pleasure:

Olho para o Levy com olhos gulosos. Ele sera o meu purificador sexual, a decisao ja foi tomada ele acatou-a com prazer. Dentro de pouco tempo estarei nos seus bracos, na cerimonia de kutchinga. Serei viuva apenas por oito dias. Sou um pouco mais velha que ele, mas sinto que vai amar-me e muito, pois apesar desta idade e deste peso tenho muita docura e muito charme. Daqui a oito dias vou-me despir. Dançar nicketche so para ele. (220)

[I look at Levy with hungry eyes. He will be my sexual cleanser, the decision has already been taken and he obeyed with pleasure. Soon I'll be in his arms during the *kutchinga* ceremony. I will be a widow only for eight days. I'm a little older than him, but I feel he will love me so much because despite my weight and my age, I have a lot of sweetness and charm. In eight days I will undress myself. I will dance the *niketche* only for him.]

Rami reinvents the *kutchinga* by affirming that she will make sure to enjoy the moment with the brother-in-law. The *kutchinga* ritual is a way to exorcize the dead, giving the partner freedom to reinitiate her sexual life. The *kutchinga* is a cleansing ritual in which the widow disconnects from the deceased husband. According to Richards, through the *kutchinga* the widow inaugurates a new life, thus the ritual is part of the purification:

If one partner dies, the other must sleep with some social equivalent of the dead – a brother or uterine nephew or a maternal grandson in the case of a dead man, or a sister or granddaughter in the case of a dead woman. This is to “take the death off” the living partner. A member of the dead man or woman’s matrilineage has to fetch back his or her spirit from the living spouse and makes him or her free to marry. (34)

Rami subverts the *kutchinga* and takes advantage of the moment to have sexual pleasure. By deconstructing the function of the ritual, Rami empowers herself and becomes subject.

The ritual would not be complete without the dance practiced by women during the ceremony, and Rami affirms that she will dance *Niketche* to Levi, her brother-in-law, during the *kutchinga*. In an affirmation of her newly found sense of self, Rami—despite her age and her weight—says she will dance the *Niketche* and Levi will desire her, while she has sexual pleasure. Through her dance, Rami achieves her liberation in terms of sexuality and empowerment, including her voice on issues concerning the continuity and change of African traditions in a society where male privilege is secured by any and all means.

In *Niketche*, Rami's co-wives carry the load of being with the cruel and adulterous Tony because they do not have a shelter. When they received help from Rami to be financially self-sufficient, they started to free themselves from Tony. Each of them established other kinds of relationships with other men. The only one who stayed with Tony was Rami, the legitimate wife according to Christianity. But even Rami was not the same, she was pregnant with a baby that was fruit of the *kutchinga*, the fruit of sexual pleasure. The new Rami is a different woman, an "impure" woman. The baby represents sexual freedom for Rami, while Tony experiences Rami's pregnancy as another humiliation. Both Rami and Tony are faced with negotiating their ambivalent selves in this process of redefining their identities in a postcolonial environment.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION:

#### HEALING THEMSELVES, SOOTHING US

Many African writers have examined the impact of colonialism on colonized peoples, but in Bugul's *Le Baobab Fou*, the protagonist writes the colonial encounter on her skin. The protagonist Ken is a neo-colonial woman who has suffered a violent process of acculturation, and the narrative vividly depicts how colonialism has affected her mind and influenced her desires. By exposing her body and sexuality, Ken attempts to fulfill her racial desire for Whiteness. Similarly, in the novels by Aidoo and Chiziane, the protagonists Esi and Rami also expose their desires as a way of revealing and interrogating the condition of women in their nations.

Bugul, Aidoo, and Chiziane all utilize female desire to question colonialism and nationalist rhetoric and to shed light on the inconsistencies of modernity in Africa. To counter colonial and nationalist tales in which women's bodies become objectified, these three authors present female characters who reconstruct their subjectivity through the unveiling of female desire and sexual pleasure. In these narratives it is noteworthy that sexual desire is not always a form of liberation; it often contributes to women's pain and suffering, and sometimes even leads to women's further subjugation. However, it is through revealing their pain that the female protagonists in these works struggle to decolonize their sexuality while at the same time trying to make sense of their socio-economic and political positions within their societies. Interestingly, Ken, Esi, and Rami are not celebrating their sexual freedom, but rather, by uncovering their bodies, they are challenging their colonial education and their lack of knowledge of their African

traditions. As they reveal their sexuality, they not only expose their female condition within the neocolonial context, but also defy patriarchy in ways that threaten the prevailing social order and inscribe a vision of future nations that would include female voices.

In *Le Baobab Fou*, Ken's portrayal of her traumatic experiences in Europe lead readers to interrogate the relationship between Africa and Europe and to view the colonial encounter from a new perspective. In an interview, Bugul says that writing the story contributed to her own healing:

Quand j'ai écrit mon autobiographie, j'avais ce vécu hors de moi, et d'avoir ma propre vie en face de moi à travers l'écriture m'a permis de mieux assumer ce vécu. Peut-être parce que c'était sorti, dévoilé. (Bourget and D'Almeida 353)

It is true that, as Bugul confesses, this autobiographical novel is the author's moment of looking in the mirror where she is able to confront and deal with her pains and struggles in Europe, but her text also provides her readers with a broader perspective on colonial history and its narratives as well. *Le Baobab Fou* becomes a collective document that bears witness to Africa's subjugation and the status of the continent after colonization. Furthermore, the impoverishment of European civilization described in Bugul's text shows the fallacy of the "civilizing mission." Even as Ken unveils her own degradation, she also unmask both Europe and Africa. In different ways, the narrative provides not only an individual healing, but also a collective moment of catharsis where both Africa and Europe are forced to look in the mirror and stand face to face with history. Ken's experiences in Europe show that she is not the beneficiary of an enlightened project of civilization but is instead the product of a cruel and violent process that has taught her to loathe herself and her African culture. Displaced in Brussels, Ken is all too ready to

deliver sexual favors to please Europeans, although she discovers later that pleasing Europeans is an impossible task.

While Bugul's *Le Baobab Fou* exposes female desire in order to examine the colonial past through the lenses of an alienated neo-colonial woman, Aidoo's *Changes* utilizes female desire to examine the condition of women in urban Accra in the late 1980s. Like Bugul, Aidoo places female desires at the center of her narrative in a story that examines how modernity affects the female condition. Her novel not only unveils Esi's body but also deals with the consequences a woman faces when deciding to liberate herself in a society that is struggling to be modern while still practicing some cultural traditions. As Esi realizes that most traditional practices benefit men, she attempts to profit from polygamy in order to have more time for herself and more quality sex.

In such a cultural context, even though Esi's sexual freedom gives her much joy and pleasure, her journey toward liberation is filled with pain. Modernity brings new meaning to cultural values, interfering in the ways women perceive the world and themselves. In her attempt to be modern and feminist, Esi embraces capitalism and becomes highly individualistic. Unable to perceive how the changes in her own behavior are affecting other women around her, Esi becomes selfish and cruel, a "devourer of people, someone who commits emotional violence" (Wilson-Tagoe 296). By making Esi an antagonist, Aidoo questions the possibility of being a successful, modern woman who pursues her sexual freedom in a context where concepts of modernity and capitalism are unstable. The price of Esi's freedom is suffering and pain as she gradually turns into an impure and improper woman, displaced in her own culture. A victim of modernity, she is

entrapped in a narrative that discloses her as a product of Western education and of her version of feminism that does not quite fit in her cultural context.

Feminisms in Africa and the question of female characters declaring themselves as feminists are recurrent issues in the three works examined here. In their works, Aidoo, Bugul, and Chiziane are in many ways all struggling with concepts of feminism, frequently considered to be an imported Western ideology and thus another form of colonization. While in Aidoo's narrative Esi gets displaced in her community because of her feminist ideals, Chiziane's text brings together the voices of women from different backgrounds. However, in attempting to incorporate these voices, the narrative runs the risk of being dismissed as a feminist utopia. Chiziane's protagonist forms a bond of solidarity with her co-wives to help them overcome poverty but the fact is that women from different social classes in very hierarchical societies, as most African societies are, have few possibilities for overcoming the constraints imposed by societal divisions. It is this utopian feminism that Aidoo and Bugul attempt to avoid in their own works. In Bugul's text, though Ken finds love, sexual desire, and tranquility among women in Brussels, she knows that questions of race and class complicate any easy feminist solution to the challenges she faces as an African woman in Europe.

Chiziane's narrative exposes female bodies in order to question economic and socio-political affairs in Mozambique and to think about the female situation in a nation where women became poorer and more disempowered after independence. Through the allegory of sexual pleasure and desire, Chiziane's text portrays the lives of women who fight for the inclusion of their voices in nation-building. By exposing her body and demanding the right to have what she calls "African sexual education," Rami is able to

question policies that attempted to exclude women from the building of the nation. In affirming her sexuality, she exposes the inconsistencies of Frelimo nationalist rhetoric and the violence of Portuguese colonization.

*Niketche's* protagonist understands the lack of desire and sexual pleasure in her life as part of the construction of the self imposed upon a modern, educated Mozambican woman. In the end of the novel, Rami embodies Vuyazi, a princess from African mythology, who is locked in the moon because of her disobedience and defiance. The image of Vuyazi in the moon and the image of the woman in the mirror both represent the self that threatens the prevailing social order. Thus, freeing Vuyazi becomes a powerful symbol in the narrative, as female characters struggle to free themselves from societal constraints, social norms, and rules that regulate their bodies. As female characters decolonize their bodies, Chiziane's narrative gives a new perspective on history not only by rewriting it from women's points of view but by using women's bodies to show how colonial history and post-independence policies have contributed to women's poverty. Through their narratives, Bugul, Chiziane, and Aidoo provide their readers with tools to re-imagine neo-colonial women beyond the stereotypes disseminated by colonialist and nationalist discourses. Though the question of reception is still an issue in countries where a high percentage of the population is not proficient in European languages, these women writers attempt to make a political impact in their societies through their literature. Their audience is, however, for the most part, outside of Africa, and so they may find it difficult to have any direct influence on the lives of poor women in their countries. This situation is a source of frustration for those who are generally constrained to write in European languages since this is often the only way to

get their works published. In African women's literatures, language is a space of tension and controversy, and, although these writers find European languages a site of patriarchal and colonial power, they also appropriate these languages in an attempt to profit from the exposure that they offer. After all, it is the European language that gives Esi power to conceptualize her husband's sexual abuse.

Even as the colonizer's language may be an impediment for these writers in any attempt to reach the majority of the population in their countries, it also gives them the possibility of having an impact on readers worldwide. Writers thus give to the global community means to deconstruct stereotypes about these authors' countries and about Africa in general. Through their literary works, Bugul, Aidoo, and Chiziane are fabricating new myths. Perhaps this is why Aidoo apologizes to the literary critic in the preface of her novel. She reminds the "western critic" that the literary work will not give the critic what she or he is looking for. Like the Cameroonian Werewere Liking in *Elle sera de Jaspe et de Corail*, Aidoo seems to be telling us that the critic is a voyeur who searches for a specific portrayal of Africa and its people, and the writer must and will refuse to please this critic. As Bugul, Chiziane, and Aidoo write, they attempt to heal themselves and to offer their stories to receptive readers. These authors inscribe new myths and visions of women's roles in neo-colonial African societies, and they beckon us into a community that becomes educated, informed, challenged, healed, and soothed by their stories.

## APPENDIX

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