

Article

**Sexuality and madness: versions and subversions in Calixthe Beyala's *Femme Nue Femme Noire* and Paulina Chiziane's *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia***

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Banished silence and sullen submission have for a long time been synonyms of the condition of African women. In literary spheres however, palpable signs of change have been noted from the time Brown (1981) declared that “women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in this field”.<sup>1</sup> With the popularisation of feminist and post-colonial discourse, African women writers have found their own niche in the literary-critical world. They have nonetheless had to subsume to labels of “women” in feminist criticism and “black” in post-colonial studies.

It is against such a background that Calixthe Beyala (Cameroonian) and Paulina Chiziane (Mozambican) forge their names in African letters. Together with other writers such as Yvonne Vera and Ken Bugul, Beyala and Chiziane are amongst the foremost African female writers to openly broach female sexuality. Beyala's *Femme Nue Femme Noire*<sup>2</sup> (Naked Woman Black Woman) and Chiziane's *Niketche: Uma história de Poligamia*<sup>3</sup> (Niketche: A Tale of Polygamy) problematise female sexuality and create an ontological episteme, through the deployment of literary tropes that use “madness”, which not only destabilises post-colonial patriarchal power hierarchies but also allows the female protagonists to navigate the “nervous condition” that is the lot of women in Africa.

Beyala is reputed for her uncompromising and quasi-pornographic representation of female sexuality. She has radicalised discourse on politics surrounding women's bodies and sexuality and as Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) contends, sexual dissidence foregrounds Beyala's writing:

Beyala subverts and politicises not only “woman” but the woman's body experiences. She achieves this by articulating a sexual politics that need not necessarily define womanhood in relation to motherhood. Identity, subjectivity, and sexuality are intricately linked.<sup>4</sup>

Beyala has more scope to write daringly for two main reasons. To begin with, she is based in France. This spatial distance from her native continent affords her a valuable critical distance. She is removed in ways from from the day-to-day emotional or discouraging influences of compatriots, or those citizens who hold great political power. Secondly, according to Carson (2008) the audacious nature of Beyala's literary texts can be explained by the fact she has indelible media

presence. For Carson, “Beyala’s visibility within the media certainly contributes to her identity as a rebellious writer. She is well known for her outspoken presence in various social groups as well as for the hostile attitudes she sometimes expresses in interviews and speaking engagements”.<sup>5</sup>

Chiziane, though not as provocative as Beyala, has distinguished herself as the first Mozambican woman to publish a novel. She has also made rebellious women the focus of her literary gaze. She refuses to be called a feminist, however, charging that she is merely writing about women’s experiences based on their testimonies and her own. She writes in an African society which, despite years of Portuguese influence, remains somewhat conservative. Chiziane’s female characters are feral and rebellious and Marques (2010) equates them to “feline jaguars”,<sup>6</sup> noting that these female protagonists are engaged in self-introspection so as to unfurl the diverse discourses at play in their subjugation.

Beyala and Chiziane employ vivid and often violent images to challenge the traditional clichés of post-colonial societies within which their female characters struggle to find a place and a voice of their own. They write “near the bone”<sup>7</sup> – a phrase coined by the late Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera (2003) to describe the intricacy and intimacy of writing, a phrase apt for Beyala and Chiziane’s styles, neither of which feel detached from the day-to-day experiences of women on the black continent. According to Vera, the finest writing emanates from the boundaries, in the liminal spaces between male and female, between the real and the imagined. Such liminal spaces render the novels evanescent entities that allow female authors such as Beyala and Chiziane the ability to write (and certainly right) the wrongs of traditionalist and patriarchal post-colonial African societies.

In their novels, Beyala and Chiziane dramatise a subversive female sexuality which puts to question the status quo, prompting in the process an innovative energy borne of the cognisance that women have an important role to play in effecting societal change. In light of Maria Pia Lara’s feminist readings, we set out to examine how through the representation of female sexuality and the literary tropes that use madness, the two writers construct narrative spaces that “create new forms of power, configuring new ways to fight back against past and present injustices”.<sup>8</sup>

We posit that through an “illocutionary force” expounded by Lara, Beyala and Chiziane’s narratives subvert the dominant patriarchal discourse which relegates women to mere passivity in all matters, especially relating to sex and sexuality.

Irène, Beyala’s protagonist and omniscient narrator, makes it very clear from the very outset of the narrative that she does not conform to what is expected of a woman in the domains of sex and sexuality: “*Dans la violence qu’il assène, il pense mettre à bas ma suprématie sexuelle. Il veut retrouver sa masculinité dérobée : seul le mâle doit déclencher l’acte d’amour*”.<sup>9</sup> Irène reveals here that she is prepared to stand up against the status quo, and that she questions female

passivity in the sexual act. She also interrogates the manner in which the sexual act has to be initiated by men. When considering that the sexual act is an embodiment of the status of women in other facets of social life, it is important to note that Irène adamantly refuses to perpetuate the system that reduces women to nothing but their reproductive capabilities. Irène through her rejection of the status quo shows that “[t]he world can be seen through other eyes, interpreted through other figures, or opened up to different possibilities if the mechanics of sexual reproduction are not given transcendental cultural meaning”.<sup>10</sup>

In *Niketche*, Chiziane also shows how a society and its traditions, through the practice of polygamy and purification rites such as the “kutchinga” (which is performed after the death of one’s husband), often deny women control over their lives and bodies. However, as the narrative progresses, Rami the female protagonist discovers the innate sexual power that is found cocooned within the female body. In Chiziane’s novel, the female body is accorded supernatural agency, even without the use of magic or witchcraft. References are made in *Niketche* to beliefs about female nudity and its manifold power to repel, discourage and protect against enemy forces and even control the forces of nature. The narrator states:

*Nudez de mulher é benção, maldição, protecção. Há muitos relatos de mulheres nuas acompanhando os guerreiros na hora do combate. Dizem que, durante a guerra civil, os comandos ferozes, armados até aos dentes, levavam sempre uma mulher nua com issangas na cintura à frente do pelotão. Ela avançava, destemida, e exibia-se. O inimigo via-a. Acobardava-se, desmoraliza-se, porque ver uma mulher nua antes do grande combate significa derrota e morte. O fim do mundo.*<sup>11</sup>

[A woman’s nudity is a blessing, a curse, protection. There are many reports of naked women accompanying warriors in times of battle. It is said that, during the civil war, ferocious commanders, armed to the teeth, always took a naked woman with *issangas* at the waist in front of the platoon. She advanced boldly and bared herself. The enemy saw her. He became afraid, lost hope, because seeing a naked woman before a big battle means defeat and death. The end of the world].

The objectified naked female body accomplishes two objectives. Firstly, it gives a sense of protection to the troops that wield it. At the same time, this naked female body is used to distract the rivals and instill in them fear in the face of impending battle. As such, the female body, magic in its essence and nature, renders men powerless. The narrator points out at another instance that the female body possesses great power, and that when women deny sex to men, the latter are willing to do anything and everything:

*Tu és feitiço por excelência e não deves procurar mais magia nenhuma. Corpo de mulher é magia. Força. Fraqueza. Salvação. Perdição. O universo inteiro cabe nas curvas de uma mulher.*<sup>12</sup>

[You are magic par excellence and you need not look for any magic whatsoever. The female body is magic. Strength. Weakness. Salvation. Perdition. The entire universe ends in the curves of a woman].

The power of the female body in this instance is presented hyperbolically as being absolute. For both Beyala and Chiziane, the female body has the potential to be positive and negative, constructive and destructive. It is around the curves of a woman's body, as pointed out by the narrator, that the universe gravitates.

In the novels of our two writers, not only is the female body a source of pleasure but it also has the potential of being destructive. This power is exerted upon male characters who find themselves defenceless against the charms of the female body. Beyala's Irène pauses to reflect, at one moment, on the power she wields against feeble men:

*Je suis fascinée par cet amoncellement de chairs, ces corps soudés par le plaisir et ces longs cris trempés comme des ventres de mouettes. Ces scènes enfièvrent mes appétits de pouvoir, décuplent mes fringales érotiques, [...] je croirai entendre gémir une lignée d'hommes soumis à ma volonté.*<sup>13</sup>

[I am fascinated by this heap of flesh, these bodies welded by pleasure and these long cries, soaked like the bellies of seagulls. These scenes stir up in me an appetite for power, multiply my erotic cravings, [...] I think I hear a line of men moaning, subjected to my will].

Men are engrossed in the pleasures offered by the female body. Irène, upon recognition of the potential power cocooned in her body, harnesses and uses it to her own advantage, for her own emancipation. In addition to countering ideas that have reduced women to nothing other than mothers and wives, Beyala and Chiziane make reference to female strategies of sexual control and manipulation and the use of culture as "a double-edged sword, wielded creatively and resourcefully to enhance women's access to sexual justice".<sup>14</sup>

In *Niketché*, Chiziane makes reference to the power of the vagina, which denies the penis its position of dominance. In direct contrast to traditional notions of female passivity in the sexual act, the vagina is presented as having both power and agency. In this light, the self-assured female characters of Beyala and Chiziane also raise the question of female sexual rights to pleasure, countering the notions of pleasure being the sole entitlement of males. The two writers, through their protagonists, are steadfast in lifting the veil on notions of female sexual pleasure, eroticism, desire and the "celebration of the power of the

vagina” as an important element in the destabilisation of the phallogentric African world-view.

Through their sexualities and their bodies, the assertive and rebellious female characters of Beyala and Chiziane attempt to overturn the way in which reality is constructed and viewed. Irène adamantly states this actuality in such terms:

*Bandes d’hypocrites! Vous cachez vos femmes derrière des voiles pour mieux les assujettir! Espèces de vicelards ! Assassins ! .... Puis je baisse ma culotte, leur montre mes fesses.*

*Ces fesses, dis-je, sont capables de renverser le gouvernement de n’importe quelle République ! Elles me permettent de faire des trouées dans le ciel et de faire tomber la pluie si je le désire ! Elles sont capables de commander au soleil et aux astres ! C’est ça, une vraie femme, vous pigez ? Elles délivrent le monde de grandes calamités !<sup>15</sup>*

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[Gangs of hypocrites! You hide your wives behind veils so that you subjugate them better! Vice-filled lot! Assassins! ....

I then lower my panties, show them my butt.

- This butt, I say, is capable of overthrowing the government of whichever Republic! It allows me to make holes in the sky and to make the rain fall if I so wish! It is capable of ordering the sun and the stars! That’s a real woman, do you understand? Women deliver the world from great calamities!]

Irène alludes above to the manner in which men use different methods such as veiling women and their bodies as a means to better dominate them. She also reveals that even if women are perennially oppressed, their bodies and sexualities are able to undermine even the strongest of governments. The female body is endowed with mystical powers which, as Irène puts it, dictate what course is taken by earthly and cosmic happenings. Irène comprehends the stakes and acknowledges the influence she has over men and she does not hesitate to put to use her sexual prowess to subvert the patriarchal status quo. “Beyala subverts and politicizes not only ‘woman’ but the woman’s body experiences” as Nfah-Abbenyi argues.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Beyala, like Chiziane, enunciates a sexual politics that strays from the traditional episteme that has defined womanhood as being nothing more than motherhood. In the novels of our two writers, there is a subtle blending of female sexuality, identity and subjectivity which should not be restricted to or defined by their sexual roles of procreation.

In a different perspective, critics such as Aggleton (2007)<sup>17</sup> and Johnson (2005)<sup>18</sup> in their analyses of African literature have pointed out that the portrayal of objectified and sexualised female protagonists reinforces phallogentric power structures. Although this may be true to a certain extent, in the literary works of

Beyala and Chiziane, it is the very objectification and sexualisation of female protagonists that leads to the characters' awakenings to the injustices caused by phallogocentric power structures. This objectification and sexualisation of female characters is a necessary evil, so to speak, in their search to find liberation from the constraints imposed by phallogocentrism.

Moreover, sexuality in an African context is viewed in the male/female dichotomy and any other form of sexuality that strays from this binary is viewed as taboo. It is for this reason that homosexuality and lesbianism have been marginalised. Nfah-Abbenyi also explains the absence of discourse on marginal sexualities such as lesbianism on the African continent in such a manner:

Most African literary critics are not concerned with lesbian or gay issues because this topic is very sensitive and often controversial, or because they view other issues as more pressing. Or, they fall back on the excuse that homosexuality is shunned or repressed by their culture and thought by many not to exist.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the different reasons given as to why lesbianism and other "deviant" sexualities have been side-lined, it is important to remark that these previously marginalised sexualities have of late gained a greater "voice" through the writings of African writers such as Chiziane and Beyala who deliberately use the appropriation of the sexuality as a strategy of subversion.

It is interesting to note that Beyala dismisses the presence of homoerotic desire in her writings and she categorically states that:

*je pense que ceux qui voient du lesbianisme dans mes écrits sont tout simplement des pervers car la tendresse entre femmes n'implique pas forcément le lesbianisme.*<sup>20</sup>

[I think that those who see lesbianism in my writing are plainly perverts because tenderness between women does not necessarily imply lesbianism].

It does certainly boil down to a question of semantics. Whether it is termed "tenderness between women" or "lesbianism", it is inevitable to read in Beyala's *Femme nue Femme noire* far more than just kindness or affection between women. Beyala describes in fairly graphic terms sexual relations between Irène and Fatou, two women. In *Niketché*, there is also reference to this "tenderness between women" which is presented through the solidarity and friendship between Luisa and Rami, co-wives in a polygamous marriage, drawn to each other in the face of their husband who is unable to sexually satisfy them.

The two novels of Beyala and Chiziane offer a counter-discourse that challenges the dominant discourse on female sexuality in Africa. Lesbianism or erotic "tenderness between women" frees the female characters from the constraints of

patriarchy and heteronormativity which rarely acknowledge female sexual pleasure. We can conclude as did Etoke (2009) that, “[i]ndeed, the hiatus existing between the acknowledgement of female homosexuality (a forbidden sexual practice) and the will to openly live it only shows a theoretical violation of the social code”.<sup>21</sup> Lesbianism or sexual tenderness between women is subversive of heteronormativity in that it represents women obtaining sexual gratification in the absence of the all-penetrating penis, phallic signifier of patriarchy.

It can be noted that Beyala and Chiziane treat the question of sexuality and its role in the subversion of the status quo in two different ways. Where Beyala goes for the technique of shocking her readers to reaction, Chiziane adopts a more subtle stance that requires the reader to closely engage with the text in order to uncover and find the underlying message. Even though the two approaches are different, both writers are able to awaken the readers to the precarious condition of African women. The authors also elaborate the vast possibilities that await women once they understand that men will not liberate them from men but that they themselves have to play an active role in their own emancipation.

We have attempted to show above that female sexuality, especially in Africa, has long been viewed in two lights: firstly as a symbol of gendered oppression and secondly as a symbol of emancipation from gendered repression. The instability and fluidity of female sexuality is far from being a mere signifier of female oppression and resistance to patriarchy as it is equally a site of embedded discourse on contemporary socio-cultural and political topics such as violence and neo-colonialism.

Beyala and Chiziane also employ literary tropes that use madness to accentuate the subversive nature of the discourses of their literary protagonists. For the protagonists of the two writers, the propensity for metaphorical patterns of transgressive thought and comportment leads precariously to near “madness”, in spite of the fact it ultimately safeguards agency and personal harmony amidst a socially challenging milieu. These tropes that employ “madness” present a liminal space through which there is a destabilising and blurring of boundaries between what is and what could be. Irène in Calixthe Beyala’s novel pauses to ponder the importance of this trope of madness in such a manner:

*La folie est la forme supérieure de la sagesse! C’était un don des dieux pour se rapprocher des mortels ! Seuls les fous peuvent trouver les portes du paradis perdu ! Eux seuls t’apprennent ce qu’aucun maître ni oracle ne te dira ! Eux seuls sont dotés de pouvoirs magiques ! Eux seuls sont proches du grand esprit et du mauvais esprit, parce que leur état mental ne leur permet pas de jouir de la grande influence qu’ils auraient eue sur l’univers s’ils avaient été normaux.*<sup>22</sup>

[Madness is most superior form of wisdom. It's a gift from the gods so as to be close to the immortals! Only the mad can find the doors of the lost paradise! They alone can teach you what no teacher or oracle will ever tell! They alone are gifted with magical powers! They alone are close to the Great Spirit and the bad spirit, because their mental state does not allow them to rejoice of the great influence that they would have had on the universe had they been normal].

Irène presents above “madness” as a positive force, invested with “magical powers”, which imposes a perpetual examination of what is. The subversive quality of madness as a fundamental trope in the works of Beyala and Chiziane makes the novels themselves a locus of interrogation of long held societal boundaries concerning what is defined as normative and correct social and sexual female comportment. In fact, the female protagonists of Beyala and Chiziane are subversive not just of social gender categorisations; they similarly put to question the patriarchal and post-colonialist conceptions of women and womanhood.

Magnabosco<sup>23</sup> states, coincidentally, that within certain psychological circles, women's anxiety or desire for other words, for other interlocutors to voice and enunciate their *self* has been literally considered as “mad” or dismissed as unworthy of attention. For men, who have long structured the discourses or grammars of any particular era, it has been perceived as madness and nothing short of desire to be males, “penis envy”, to borrow the Freudian expression. Beyala and Chiziane make effective use of such “mad” female characters to contest and destabilise the phallogentric “power relations” that characterise contemporary African societies. Irène in *Femme Nue Femme Noire*, concisely describes her quest to strike at the foundations of male-centred discourse:

*Je trifouille dans les entrailles de la terre, stoccade dans les tréfonds des abîmes où l'être se disloque, meurt, ressuscite sans jamais en garder le moindre souvenir. Je veux savoir comment les femmes font pour être enceintes, parce que, chez nous, certains mots n'existent pas.*<sup>24</sup>

[I dig deep in the entrails of the earth, I search in the very depths of the abyss where the being dislocates, dies, comes back to life without retaining the least memory. I want to know how women become pregnant, because, from where I come, some words do not exist].

Irène states that her mission is to plumb the depths of the male-centred society which has formerly dictated the existence of women and not only spoken for them but has also invented a language that they use to define their existence. Irène seeks to invent a language which succinctly conveys the deepest parts of her existence and that of other women as well.

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical postulations are important in their explanation of the connections that exist between language and subject formation. In his *Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*,<sup>25</sup> Lacan analyses the itinerary taken towards the formation and development of the self. He posits a movement from the "Imaginary" (a symbiotic state of being characterised by the use of images and a lack of distinction between self and other) to the "Symbolic" (a stage in which the subject replaces images or objects with words in the subject's attempt to dissociate from the other). Language, according to Lacan, does not mean that the subject is a unified entity. In essence, the self by the very substitution of objects with words is in an eternal state of split. The subject is thus constantly grappling with itself and the other as it attempts to reinforce its structural integrity.

Both Beyala and Chiziane use language as a means of liberating their literary protagonists from the constraints of a male-centered "Imaginary" order. To begin with, both authors do not stick entirely to the English and Portuguese languages when they write. There is an infiltration of native dialects into the main texts forming, in a way, a kaleidoscopic linguistic collage blending the European languages with the native African languages. This intrepid tentative of inventing a new language, through code-mixing and switching, is a form of subversion of the status quo put in place by post-colonial male writers who eloquently master and use the languages of the former colonizers.

Irène goes a step further in the description of her quest in creating a new language:

*Je suis là, en exploratrice, libéré des entraves et des obligations.  
J'erre, sans autre finalité que celle de satisfaire cette quête  
carnassière qui, chaque jour, m'incite à m'approprier des choses  
qu'on ne me donne pas.*<sup>26</sup>

[There I am, an explorer, liberated from hindrances and obligations. I wander, with the sole aim of satisfying this carnivorous quest which, every day, spurs me to claim things that are not given to me].

For Irène, creating and espousing a new linguistic order proper to herself allows her to claim that which has remained beyond her reach due to the inadequacy of the language imposed by patriarchy. Similar sentiments are echoed in *Niketché* when the protagonist Rami wonders whether women have a right to "the word", concluding as she has been socialised to think that a woman's word/voice is only useful for singing lullabies to children. She repeats Irène's desire to give voice to the suppressed rage of all the years of silence in the "Imaginary" order of patriarchy:

*Sou um rio. Os rios contornam todos os obstáculos. Quero libertar a  
raiva de todos os anos de silêncio. Quero explodir com o vento e trazer  
de volta o fogo para o meu leito, hoje quero existir.*<sup>27</sup>

[I am a river. Rivers wind around all obstacles. I want to release the rage of all the years of silence. I want to explode with the wind and bring the fire back to my bed again, today I want to exist.]

By using her own language, Rama wishes to explode with the wind and be able to redefine her existence in her own terms. It is through this newly created language that she (re)appropriates what has long been refused her. By appropriating language, Irène puts herself in a powerful position of giving voice to and naming not just herself but her existence as well.

It is almost a given that violence (linguistic, textual and otherwise) is an unavoidable eventuality in this quest by women to invent a new epistemic language for themselves. Chevrier (1998), commenting on Beyala, highlights that :

*[L]’œuvre de Beyala constitue un point de rupture avec ses devancières. Chez elle, la libération du corps féminin va de pair avec l’affranchissement du texte, ce qui signifie à la fois subversion de codes littéraires habituels et élaboration d’un nouveau discours romanesque.*<sup>28</sup>

[Beyala’s work constitutes a point of rupture with her predecessors. For her, the liberation of the feminine body goes in tandem with the setting free of the text, which at once signifies subversion of usual literary codes and the elaboration of a new fictional discourse].

Indeed, the liberation of the female characters from the gendered yoke begins with an adamant refusal to submit to the normative use of a language that women have been compelled to espouse and use over the centuries. Asaah (2006) points out in this respect that:

*L’aberrance langagière à souhait se déploie dans la perspective de contester les tabous sexuels et discursifs statufiés par les lois du Père.*<sup>29</sup>

[linguistic defiance is deployed in the perspective of contesting sexual and discursive taboos transfixed by the laws of the Father].

This manner in which the protagonists of Beyala and Chiziane linguistically defy the castrating law of the father, which Lacan also terms the “phallic order”, expresses the imperative need to interrogate the patriarchal constitution of social relations of and between sexes.

Linguistic defiance is thus the initial step in the search by the female protagonists for an identity of their own, an identity that they themselves name. We can conclude as did Perichon (2006), that the use of the “mad” female protagonists:

*veut briser le miroir dans lequel les écrivains et les hommes ont voulu enfermer la femme, la mouler dans une image de paraître, sans lui laisser voir son propre visage”*.<sup>30</sup>

[wants to break the mirror in which writers and men wanted to enclose women, mould her into a set image, without letting her see her own face].

The tropes that employ madness thus afford the female literary characters, as well the authors themselves, a mask behind which they can criticize their societies and compel their readers to look at the prevailing reality from a different perspective. Beyala and Chiziane shock their readers and oblige them to pause and attempt to (re)view the prevailing reality (or realities) in a way they have never done in the past. It is the incisiveness of the voice of the forceful protagonists which moves the readers from their comfort zones. A reader, once moved from his/her familiar zone of comfort, is in a better position to be open to redefining his/her reality and the world about him/her.

How, one may ask, do the female protagonists considered “mad” by their societies configure themselves into these male-centred social and power structures? For women, who have had a certain position and place that has been prescribed for them, a form of behaviour that deviates in any way from the norm is deemed a direct challenge to the status quo. As Orlando (2003) laments, what should women do when they are “pushed to the edge, marginalised in the outside realms of what is considered ‘normal’ by their respective societies”!<sup>31</sup>

Madness is an extended metaphor of the disruption emanating from the polarised and often politicised existence that present-day Africans have to endure. Female Africans face an even greater challenge, because they also have to deal with questions of gender and patriarchy. The truths of the feminine condition must be discoursed not only to demystify them but more importantly to cast new light on the struggles, trials and tribulations that women have faced over the years in a male-dominated and -centred world.

Of importance too is the fact that the instability of the narrative voices of the “mad” female protagonists renders the literary texts unstable and fluid. It is from this fluidity that the texts derive their vitality, because the texts:

transgress the limits within which they are constructed, breaking free of the constraints imposed by their own realist form. Composed of contradictions, the text is no longer restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading. Instead, it becomes *plural*, open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning.<sup>32</sup>

In such a way, the madness of the literary characters is transferred to the madness of the texts, calling upon the reader to adopt a stance of madness as well. This circle of madness therefore engages the reader and requires of him/her to be more than just a passive consumer of narrative. The reader is thus an important and integral collaborator in the story-telling process.

At first glance, the strategies of madness and *carnivalesque* language put into place by Beyala and Chiziane to subvert male paradigms can be said to be a simple mimicking of the strategies used by male African writers questioning Eurocentrism. It would certainly seem rather frustrating and self-defeating for women, in their bid to liberate themselves from male centred discourses and ontologies, to use the very same strategies used by the very people from whom they seek to liberate themselves. This Carson (2008) refers to as a “guilty repetition”<sup>33</sup> of male strategies.

However, a close reading of the texts of the two female writers shows that they both appropriate these strategies formerly used by male writers during the colonial and neo-colonial period. As the Ivorian writer Véronique Tadjo (1986) remarks,

*Je ne comprends pas ces hommes qui veulent déchirer. ... Il faut leur dire d'arrêter. Les tenir à bout de bras et leur réapprendre l'alphabet.*<sup>34</sup>

[I don't understand these men who want to tear apart ... It is time to keep [men] at arm's length and to teach them a new alphabet].

For Tadjo, it not just a question of re-using male strategies, but also of making men learn a “new alphabet” from the strategies they themselves used so effectively against Eurocentrism. Beyala and Chiziane differ from their male counterparts in that they use these strategies to fight not only patriarchy but also other power matrices such as Eurocentrism. So when their male counterparts fight and write for the rights of Africans, Beyala and Chiziane write and fight firstly for women and then for Africans.

There is no greater irony than the fact that women are able to appropriate male discourses and strategies to subvert and liberate themselves from male domination. We note, for instance, in keeping with Fanon's view in his seminal text *Wretched of the earth* that decolonisation could only take place through violent means. Beyala and Chiziane both show that women can liberate themselves from male domination by no means other than the violent. Their violence is not, however, destructive in that it is sturdily committed to the creation of an egalitarian society, in which mankind in general and women in particular are able to define and fully live their lives.

We have attempted in this essay to show that sexuality and the tropes that use madness are deployed by Calixthe Beyala and Paulina Chiziane to portray, in

their novels, the suffering of female characters in their quest to be heard and recognized. In addition to using sexuality and madness, the female characters have had to create a language that clearly translates the trials and tribulations that they undergo at the hands of post-colonial patriarchy. Such a treatment of the female condition through the lens of subversive sexuality is an important site for the contestation of a principally male-centred ontology which devalues women and banishes them to an existence of silence and submission.

Even though Beyala and Chiziane adopt different literary and stylistic approaches which serve to put into question the male-centered world-view, their deployment of sexuality and madness mark a radical break from the norm, which requires a re-imaging of women in society and the role(s) that they hold and play in it. The female characters presented by Beyala and Chiziane become progressively determined and self-reliant, emerging from stereotypical presentation as dependent victims and challenging mind-sets and behaviours socially attributed to them.

In conclusion, as we have attempted to show, the deployment of sexuality and the tropes that use madness in the novels of Beyala and Chiziane go beyond the simple challenging of patriarchal and societal restrictions on the existence of women. Such engagements with sexuality and the trope of madness are “consecrated to an entirely holy work, cleansing, repairing, beautifying as we go, the page of the world’s history that lies before us now”.<sup>35</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> L. Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa*. Westport: Greenwood Press. 1981, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> C. Beyala, *Femme Nue, Femme Noire*. Paris: Editions Albin Michel. 2003.

<sup>3</sup> P. Chiziane, *Niketche: Uma História de Poligamia*. Lisbon: Caminho. 2002.

<sup>4</sup> J. M. Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997. p.76.

<sup>5</sup> E. C. P. Carson, *Charming Fictions and Guilty Repetitions: Authorship Other(-)wise by Calixthe Beyala and Carol Shields*. New York: Proquest Publishing, 2008. p.4.

<sup>6</sup> I. Marques, “Confused ‘Slaves’ of Many Traditions: The Search for the Freedom Dance in Chiziane’s *Niketche: A Tale of Polygamy*,” in *Research in African Literatures* 41(2) 2010, pp. 33-159, p.135.

<sup>7</sup> Y. Vera, “Writing Near the Bone,” *Women writing Africa: The Southern Region*. M. Daymond, (ed). New York: Feminist Press. 2003, p.70.

<sup>8</sup> M. P. Lara, *Moral Textures: Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 1998, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Beyala, *Femme Nue Femme Noire*, p.21. Translation: In the violence that he bludgeons, he thinks he subdues my sexual supremacy. He wants to regain his stolen masculinity: the male alone must initiate the act of love.

<sup>10</sup> L. R. Schehr, *The Shock of Men: Homosexual Hermeneutics in French Writing*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, p.viii.

<sup>11</sup> Chiziane, *Niketche*, p.148.

<sup>12</sup> Chiziane, *Niketche*, p.44.

<sup>13</sup> Beyala, *Femme Nue Femme Noire*, pp.137-138.

<sup>14</sup> S. Tamale, *African Sexualities: A Reader*. Nairobi: Fahamu/Pambazuka. 2011, p.606.

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- <sup>15</sup> Beyala, *Femme Nue Femme Noire*, p.66
- <sup>16</sup> Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*, p76.
- <sup>17</sup> P. Aggleton, *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*. London: Taylor & Francis. 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> A.G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unravelling Our Patriarchal Legacy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2005.
- <sup>19</sup> Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African women's writing: identity, sexuality and difference*, p.30.
- <sup>20</sup> B. Gallimore-Rangira, *L'œuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala*. Paris: L'Harmattan. 1997.
- <sup>21</sup> N. Etoke, "Mariama Barry, Ken Bugul, Calixthe Beyala, and the Politics of Female Homoeroticism in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Literature," in *Research in African Literatures* 40(2) 2009, pp.173-189.
- <sup>22</sup> Beyala, *Femme Nue Femme Noire*, p.24.
- <sup>23</sup> M. M. Magnabosco, "Testemunhos Narrativos Femininos na América Latina: Uma Articulação Interdisciplinar," *Belo Horizonte*, 3(1)1999, pp. 51-58.
- <sup>24</sup> Beyala, *Femme Nue Femme Noire*, p.11.
- <sup>25</sup> J. Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1968.
- <sup>26</sup> Beyala, *Femme Nue Femme Noire*, p.14.
- <sup>27</sup> Chiziane, *Niketche*, p.14.
- <sup>28</sup> J. Chevrier, *Littératures d'Afrique Noire de Langue Française*. Paris : Nathan-Université. 1998, p.64.
- <sup>29</sup> A. H. Asaah, "Entre Senghor et Beyala: Une Affaire de Controverse, de Divergente et de Résonance," in *Francofonía* 15(1) 2006, pp.33-51.
- <sup>30</sup> A. Perichon, "Calixthe Beyala ou Quand le Verbe Entre en Scène," 12 February 2006. Web. <<http://www.grioo.com/pinfo5746.html>> Accessed 12 November 2011.
- <sup>31</sup> V. Orlando, *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls: Seeking Subjecthood through Madness in Francophone Women's Writing of Africa and the Caribbean*. New York: Lexington Books. 2003, p.10.
- <sup>32</sup> C. Belsey, *Critical Practice*. London: Routledge. 1994, p.104.
- <sup>33</sup> Carson, *Charming Fictions and Guilty Repetitions: Authorship Other(-)wise by Calixthe Beyala and Carol Shields*, p.3.
- <sup>34</sup> V. Tadjó, *À vol d'Oiseau*. Paris : Éditions Nathan, 1986. p. 54.
- <sup>35</sup> H. Chukwuma, *Accents in the Nigerian Novel*. Port Harcourt: Pearl Publishers. 2002.