

## “THE AESTHETICS OF PERVERSION: BLACK WOMEN’S QUEST FOR NEW SPACES OF REPRESENTATION”

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### ABSTRACT

Up till recently, African literature has preoccupied itself largely with the burning political issues of the day: colonialism, post-colonialism, nationalism and post-independence political gimmickry. Issues related to sexuality have been enshrouded in too many silences. The situation is compounded by the heritage of the oral tradition: the traditional pre-colonial African societies tented to subject issues related to human sexuality to stern taboo laws. However, African women’s literature, due to the radical militancy that presently rages and pervades all its nooks and cranny, has broken the silence by focusing on inversion as a central thematic concern. The theme of sapphism functions within the context of other numerous taboo themes that are found in present-day African women’s literature passim such as pedophilia, child sexual/commercial exploitation, incestuous rape, sexist necrophilia, among many others. This paper seeks to investigate the emergence of the theme of sapphism in Calixthe Beyala’s fiction, the new avenues afforded by it, and how it has pushed the boundaries of African women’s literature. It reveals that the woman’s treatment of this theme marks her conscious attempt to open up new spaces or ways of representation in African literature in a bid to chart the path toward what may be hazarded as a new literary canon.

Key-Words : Feminism, Sapphism, Literature, Canonicity, Aesthetics.

### INTRODUCTION

From the very early days of its inception up till the present, African literature has maintained too many silences in the area of human sexuality, especially inversion. The niggardly treatment of sexual issues in the literature may be attributed to two factors: firstly, the overriding concerns with the burning political issues of the day such as colonialism, nationalism, post-independence politics and neocolonialism and, secondly, the heritage of the oral tradition which tended to enshroud sexual issues in strong taboo laws. Although studies have shown that inversion existed in traditional African societies<sup>1</sup> albeit mostly in secret societies (inverts who functioned out of the precincts of such secret societies were usually considered freakish and stigmatized), some critics have tended to ascribe the recent occurrence of the theme of homosexuality in African literature to the inroads that white culture is making into African culture. Christ Dunton, for instance, in an article entitled “Wheyting Be Dat? The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature,” contends that the great majority of texts in which the subject occurs “stigmatize homosexual practice as a profoundly ‘un-African’ activity”. Homosexuality, therefore “is almost invariably attributed to the detrimental impact made on Africa by the

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<sup>1</sup> For more, see Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, “Introduction”, in Davis Carole Boyce and Anne Adams, eds., *Moving Beyond Boundaries: Black Women’s Diasporas* (New York:OUP, 1995). See also

West”<sup>2</sup>. It is, however, Important to note that inversion has, for the most part, been strongly spurned by the West as pure perversion, and inverts have often been subjected to much vituperation. The talented and epoch-making British dramatist, Oscar Wilde, was charged with homosexuality, incarcerated and died after much physical and psychological atrophy. The black American poetess Audre Lorde, reveals that “in the forties and fifties... rumors about my lesbianism made me persona non grata”.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the West, too, has traditionally denounced homosexuality as a tangential, unbearable habit. Perhaps Dunton’s conclusion may best be situated within the timeless quarrel into which African intellectuals have often been plunged about what should be African/Afrocentric and not. A most palpable example is feminism: critics, both male and female, have wrangled on and on about the (un-)Africanness of feminism. Since the tradition has been to attribute a purely Western or Eurocentric connotation to the practice of feminism, some African women writers have strongly denied having any association with feminism despite the overt radical-feminist refrain that pervades some of their work. Such denials have obliged Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie to issue the following disclaimer:

*It needs to be stressed that there were indigenous “feminisms” prior to our contact with Europe, just as there were indigenous modes of rebellion and resistance in the mythified African past. Therefore, “feminism” or the fight for women’s rights and women’s interests is not the result of “contamination” by the West or a simple imitation, as divisive opponents like to charge.*

From the same point of view, the Zimbabwean scholar, Marc Eprecht has affirmed that,

*The African cultures ... unquestionably disapproved of open homosexual behaviour. They were, however, prepared to tolerate or turn a blind eye to discreet eccentric or 'accidental' homosexual acts provided the proper compensations and social fictions were maintained. (1998, p.223)*

In much the same line of thought, there is a very real sense in which almost all of the “bolekaja” critics’ hullabaloo, as well as their detractors’, revolve around this itchy issue of what is African and not. It is, however, a matter of course that deviance, even outright perversion, is part and parcel of every human society. To the extent that a spuriously strait-laced Africa continues to find in the West the cause of her anomalies and freaks, she will never possess the full alphabet of the human possibilities.

Without impugning Dunton’s findings (which of course, may be dismissed by some as tinged with heterosexual bias), my “feminocentric” discussion of inversion in Beyala’s fiction is predicated on the hypothesis that sapphism in modern African societies as well as literatures is a pure African reality. That it is incipient but also deeply buttressed and assumes a significant thematic, even aesthetic, dimension in the literature; that it connotes the African women’s urge to open up new ways or spaces of literary representation, and hence launch a newfound canon within the traditional mainstream canon of male African literature. Finally, a study of the theme of sapphism in Calixthe Beyala’s fiction reveals some of the blueprints of a literature of canon formation.

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<sup>2</sup>Culled from Chris Dunton, “Wheyting Be Dat ? The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature” in Richard Bjornson, ed., *Research in African literatures*. 20, 3 (1989) pp.422-448.

<sup>3</sup>Audre Lorde, “My Words Will Be There” in Mari Evans, eds., *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984)

## EVOLUTION OF SAPPHISM IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

As already noted elsewhere, sapphism has always existed in the societies and orature of Africa (and the Diaspora). The only novelty is its evolution from orature to writing and from its traditional consideration as a category of Western abnormality constructed against the category of the normal African heterosexuality to a timid but pervasive acceptance of it as a concrete African reality. Its shift from a state of perversion to that of pervasion is marked by the fact of some African women's assertively reclaiming it for the purposes of inverting their traditional marginal and oppressed/exploited positions. It should equally be noted that many voices among their male counterparts have been recently heard strongly re-affirming same-sex sexuality.<sup>4</sup>

Two major reasons may be advanced for the modern African women writers' urge to develop this theme; the first could be related to the following assertion by Kate Braverman, "...women as writers and characters operate within narrow confines. They inherit a kind of ghetto of the soul. Therefore, they should enlarge the spectrum."<sup>5</sup> Enlarging the spectrum for the African woman writer involves speaking and writing about her daily social, cultural, political, psychological, spiritual and sexual experiences without any external hindrances, be they cultural, linguistic, moral or religious. Secondly, the African woman, unlike her Western counterpart, lives in the triple bastion of sexism, racism and classism. She lives in perpetual fear of being ghettoized through rape and pornographic mistreatment, both of which are rapidly violating the sanctity of the African traditional values. Alice Walker observes that "the more ancient roots of pornography are to be found in the almost always pornographic treatment of black women, who from the moment they entered slavery, even in their own (African) homeland, were subjected to rape as the logical convergence of sex and violence"<sup>6</sup> and Cynthia Bowman adds that when black women are given any forms of vituperative treatment, "the

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<sup>4</sup>See for example Mark Gevisser and Edwin Cameron (eds), *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1994) ; Stephen O. Murray and William Roscoe (Eds), *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Rudi C. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behaviour Outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Rober M. Baum 'Homosexuality in the Traditional Religions of the Americas and Africa', in Arlene Swindler (ed), *Homosexuality and World Religions*(Valley Forge, PA,: Trinity Press, 1995), pp. 1-46; Deborah P. Amory, "'Homosexuality" in Africa: Issues and Debates', *Issues*, XXV, 1 (1997), pp. 5-10; and M. Epprecht, 'Pre-Modern and Early Colonial Sub Saharan Africa', in George E. Haggerty (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality* (New York, Garland Press, Forthcoming 1998)

<sup>5</sup> Kate Braverman, « Interview with Cristina Garcia » in *Time* (Nov. 20, 1989), pp. 18-19.

<sup>6</sup>For this and more, see Alice Walker, *In search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1982), p.287.

experience evokes a long history of disrespect, degradation and inhumane treatment”.<sup>7</sup> It is thus the traumatic experiences of heterosexual abuse both from the white male (even white female) and black male communities that have pushed black women to seek avenues of (sexual) independence, self-sufficiency and, eventually, self-fulfilment. In this connection, Alice Walker, in her usual intrepid style, opines that:

*Since the original crime of “niggers” and lesbians is that they prefer themselves, black women writers and non-writers should say, simply, whenever black lesbians are put down, held up... generally told their lives should not be lived, “We are all lesbians”*( Alice Walker 1982, p. 289)

She later responded to some zealots’ commitment to combat lesbianism in black literature by asserting that, “to say that a black lesbian is writing ‘bullshit’ because she expresses her own perception of existence is as presumptuous as the belief that lesbianism will disappear if black people refuse to ‘encourage’ it.” (Alice Walker 1982, p. 289)

In trying to demonstrate the specificity of the black lesbian, Alice Walker coined the term “womanism”. In the introduction to her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1982), she defines the womanist as a “black feminist or feminist of color”. She is a woman “who loves other women sexually or nonsexually”. She is a woman who appreciates women’s cultures, women’s emotional flexibility and women’s strengths. She also loves individual men sexually and/or nonsexually and “is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female”(Walker, pp.X-XII.). Thus contrary to the Western category of lesbian often conceived of in radical and separatist terms, the womanist is humanist in the general sense of the word, as she fights for the survival and wholeness of the entire community. Her erotic attraction toward other women, as well as her feminist commitments, do not preclude her love of and sexual attraction toward men. This complex, almost problematic, definition works in tandem with Ogundipe-Leslie’s view of the African woman: that is, that she cannot be essentialised. Rather, she should be considered in the complexity of her existential reality: her classes, cultures, races and ethnicities, among other variables (Molara Ogundipe-Leslie 1995, p.9.). Beyond that, Ogundipe-Leslie equally traces present day African women’s investment in the lesbian theme to the precolonial African female practices: says she,

...some of the themes of female bonding, the search for female community and love between women so strong in lesbian literature already received their expression in [past] African societies... where non-sexual female bonding, community support and network exist as defining and basic characteristics<sup>8</sup>

The resurgence of the theme of sapphism in African literature has certainly stretched or squeezed the contours of the African literary tradition and ought to generate at least the same excitement scientists experience on discovering a new solar system in the making. Hence the cutting edge question are : how does the lesbian investiture in modern African literature connote the African woman writer’s quest for new spaces or ways of representation ? How does this quest launch a new-found canon of African female writing ? What are some of the symbolic resonances that well up from this sapphist theme ? These questions may best be answered by analysing the lesbian theme in the works of Calixthe Beyala.

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<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Grant Bowman, « Street Harassment and the Informal Ghettoization of Women » in *Harvard Law Review* (Vol. 206, n°3, 1993), p.534.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.15.

The prolific, self-assertive and rebellious Francophone Cameroonian novelist, Calixthe Beyala, who is presently on her eighth classic novel (all published in about a decade) is probably one of the most vocal African women writers on the issue of sapphism. In her first novel entitled *It is the Sun that Burnt Me* (1987)<sup>9</sup>, the heroine, Ateba, a young fatherless girl, encounters several disastrous heterosexual relationships owing to the fact that the men around her wish to see in her only a prostitute, a sexual object to which they ascribe arbitrary sexist meanings. No sooner has she discovered that heterosexuality is dehumanizing her that she begins to feel a void in her : « I light the torches of my memory and they reveal a void, nothing but a void, »<sup>10</sup> says she. Repeatedly raped and abused by the men of Awu, her village community, Ateba stages a verbal and physical rebellion : « Today, I'm fed up ! Dam nit ! I long to speak... I terribly long to speak of the sad dawn »<sup>11</sup>. The sad dawn here connotes the vituperative treatment to which she and the other women of Awu are subjected daily. The author paints a grim picture of a rape scene in which she is violated by a lecher :

She tries to liberate herself but the man grips her more strongly obliging her to stretch herself in the bed. He fidgets her, she slaps him, he sets upon her briefs, she bites him... He flings himself again on her, plunging on her knees with such a violence that she is obliged to throw her thighs wide open, he penetrates her. The pain is so sharp that she moans, but he does not listen<sup>12</sup>

Far from being suggestive of pornography or obscenity as some non-feminist critics might think, the above passage represents Beyala's attempt to assail the African male's animalistic urge to subject the female to sexual violence.

Ateba's response to the male-authored sexual, psychological and moral violence raging around her is to wrest her sexual allegiance from men and to direct it toward women. Her new-found erotic allegiance is initially expressed in a lettered plea addressed to women. She writes :

Woman you fill my desire for love. To you alone I can say certain things. I will not be myself anymore, but merge with you, for I say these things better to you than to myself... You have taught me passion, the joy of living. Without you, I will be the shadow of life that regrets to live. I have often reproached you for your love of men... Woman I love you<sup>13</sup>.

The forgoing monologue is indicative of Ateba's desire for a complete sapphist, spiritual, moral and psychological (com)union with women. She asserts that mutual and self-sufficient solidarity among women would bring more help than any they can expect from God. Hence she writes letters to God questioning his identity, His inability to come to the rescue of the black woman fettered triply by the bogeys of sexism, racism and *classism*. Convinced of God's inexistence or incompetence, she decides to write only to women, both real and unreal : « She

<sup>9</sup> Originally published as *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulée* (Paris : Stock, 1987) and translated by Heinemann as *The Sun Hath Looked Down on Me* (1996) (Except otherwise stated, all translations in this paper are mine)

<sup>10</sup> « j'allume les torches de ma mémoire. Elles éclairent le vide, rien que le vide » (p.20).

<sup>11</sup> « Aujourd'hui j'en ai marre ! Ras le bol ! J'ai envie de parler de cette aube triste » (p.30).

<sup>12</sup> « Elle tente de se libérer, mais il l'agrippe plus fort, l'oblige à s'allonger sur le lit. Il s'ebat sur elle, elle le frappe, il s'attaque à son slip, elle le mord...Il se rue de nouveau sur elle, fonce sur ses genoux avec une telle violence qu'elle écarte les cuisses, il la pénètre. La douleur est fulgurante, elle gemit, il n'entend pas » (pp. 132-133).

<sup>13</sup> « Femme. Tu combles mon besoin d'amour. A toi seule, je peux dire certaines choses, n'être plus moi, me fondre en toi, car je te les dis mieux à toi qu'à moi-même... Tu m'as appris la passion, la joie de vivre. Sans toi je serais l'ombre d'une vie qui s'excuse de vivre. Quelquefois, je t'ai reproché ton désir de l'homme... Femme je t'aime » (p.40)

wrote to Jane, to Paulina, to Carolyne, to Nicholine, to Mole, to Kambiwa, to Akkono, to Chantal... To all those women who people her imagination and steal her nights »<sup>14</sup>. Later, she inscribes her amorous yearning for women in the form of a rule repeated thrice : « I MUST REDISCOVER WOMEN » in order to « ANNIHILATE CHAOS »<sup>15</sup>. By representing the words in capital letters, she emphasizes her point that African women can only weather the storms of daily vituperative assaults of their male counterparts by constructing a powerful camaraderie, a union whose walls would be unassailable.

The novel equally depicts sapphism through body contact, massage and mother/daughter bond. Hence Ateba recounts her exciting, albeit short-lived, encounters with her mother, Betty, a former prostitute, now dead. She recounts how her mother used to come back from her nocturnal quest for clients both physically and psychologically broken. Ateba would then set about washing, scraping and massaging her mother's old skin – the one possessed, used and abused by men – and finding the new which to her looked like a new-born baby's. The act symbolises her annihilation of the traces of men's nefarious touches on her mother's body. When Ateba, following the massage, inserts her body and spirit into the mother's new-found skin, a powerful woman-identified investiture engenders both women's psychological liberation. Instances of merger of identities abound in the novel : Ateba/Betty, Ateba/Narrator (a disembodied spirit that narrates much of the story), Ateba/Grandmother, Ateba/Irene and Ateba/Beyala.

Finally, sapphism symbolically takes the form of story-telling and folklore. Ateba relates how her grandmother used to initiate her into a matrifocal<sup>16</sup> vision of the world through story-telling :

Grandma told her stories about stars, rain, and wind. Ateba...reached her limits, surpassed them, transcended them and, finally, overcome by sleep, she let her head fall on Grandma's breast, which smelt like dried herring, and closed her eyes<sup>17</sup>.

The child's grandmother thus exploits the material of her oral tradition to effect a profound spiritual ritual. She thus mesmerises and transforms her granddaughter's tender mind. Her grandmother's story about stars end up effecting a physical, spiritual and even a linguistic transformation in her as she astounds her village community with her astronomical language which sounds completely incomprehensible to them. Eventually, these stars open up a vision of the female ancestry to her. Indeed, they simply become the African ancestral mothers whose sparkling and splashing lights are tears of sadness. These tears, according to a legend she tells a crowd of unrecptive mourners gathered in her bosom friend, Irene's house in the wake of her death after a botched abortion, were shed by African women who originally lived as stars long before the mysterious arrival of men on earth. The men were so miserable that women, high in the sky, were heart-stricken to see them suffering, so they descended to the earth to comfort them. But the men turned out to be treacherous as they imprisoned the women surrounding them with an iron thread. The women cried and supplicated for seven days and nights in vain. Their tears formed the seas, rivers, brooks and lakes. As Richard Bjornson has commented on

<sup>14</sup> « Elle a écrit aux Jeanne, aux Pauline, aux Carole, aux Nicole, aux Molé, aux Kambiwa, aux Akkono, aux Chantal... A toute ces femmes qui peuplent son imaginaire et lui volent ses nuits » (p.34).

<sup>15</sup> « RETROUVER LA FEMME ET ANEANTIR LE CHAOS » (p.88).

<sup>16</sup> For more on the concept of « Matrifocal » or « Matrifocality », Gay Wilentz, *Binding Cultures : Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> « Grandma racontait les étoiles, la pluie, le vent, Ateba...atteignait ses limites, les dépassait, les transcendait et, enfin, brisée de sommeil, elle laissait sa tête couler sur ses seins qui sentaient le hareng séché, et fermait les yeux » (pp.37-38).

this legend, « Ateba's point is that the consciousness of women originated in a state of harmony and must be liberated from its present bondage to fulfil its joyful destiny »<sup>18</sup>. This is particularly true seeing that the joyful destiny, as it were, is a womanist/humanist vision whose *modus operandi* is the survival and wholeness of society.

In her second novel, *You Shall Be Called Tanga*<sup>19</sup>, the same lesbian theme is at the central focus. The novel centres on an African woman, Tanga and a white woman, Anna-Claude, both inmates of a filthy prison compound of Iningue, a modern African shanty-town. Both women, like Ateba, have experienced ruinous sexual relationships. Tanga's woes, for instance, begin when her own father makes love to his mistress in her mother's bed and under her watchful eyes. Secondly, her own turn comes when the very father seduces her and takes her to bed, that is, her mother's bed. The next humiliation comes when her mother decides to « initiate her by forcefully subjecting her to a clitoridectomy and later « selling » her to prostitution. Finally, her long-time dream of a happy marriage fails as Hassan, her boyfriend, fails to see her as anything but a custome, that is, a prostitute. Anna-Claude's experiences are no less devastating : having been reduced to a social pariah by the racist/capitalist/sexist French society due to her Jewish origins, she fantasizes about a happy love affair with an imaginary African lover whom she names Ousmane. She then sets out for Africa with hopes of finding Ousmane and living a happy life in a racially free Iningue society. But she is confronted by another, totally different, reality from her dreams : a sexist, male-dominated, corrupt and poverty-stricken society ridden with hopelessness and depression. The curtain descends on her dreadful drama when she and Tanga are incarcerated for an unmentioned crime. To weather despair and suffering both women decide to tell each other stories of their traumatic experiences, and the sapphist union between the two women is effected through story-telling and ritualistic body contacts.

By confiding her woes to Anna-Claude, Tanga is able to effect the merger of both women's identities. Roen Tollefson notes that « Tanga's story fills Anna-Claude until by the end of the novel both women's identities have become blended »<sup>20</sup>. And Richard Bjornson corroborates that « the merging of the two women's identities in the face of death, despair and decay symbolises the possibility of achieving the ideal love they have formerly associated with the illusory images of Ousmane and Hassan »<sup>21</sup>.

Initially, though, Tanga, is revolted by the Western values that Anna-Claude represents. Although the latter's journey to Africa, coupled with her Jewish origins, have had a purgative effect, she must cast off the slough of racism and capitalism before she can now engage in a lesbian relationship with Tanga. Thus Tanga says:

Now get into me. My secret will be illuminated in you. But before that, the White woman in you must die. Give me your hand and henceforth you shall be me. You shall have seventeen seasons, you shall be black and you shall be called Tanga<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Bjornson, *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity : Cameroon Writing and the National Experience* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Originally Published as-tu t'appelleras Tanga (Paris : Stock, 1988) and translated by Heinemann as *Your Name Shall be Tanga* (1996)

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Roen Tollefson, « Theorizing the African Mother : Mothers and Mothering in Two Novels by Calixthe Beyala » (Masters Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1993), p.30.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Bjornson, p.419 (see note 34).

<sup>22</sup> « Alors entre en moi. Mon secret s'illuminera. Mais auparavant, il faut que la Blanche en toi meure. Donne-moi la main, désormais, tu sera moi. Tu auras dix-sept saisons. Tu sera noire, tu t'appelleras Tanga » (p.18).

And later, she emphasizes : « Give me your hand and my story will get into your veins. You will see how a child is born already old in my country, since in him exists no sign of spring. Give me your hand and you will be me »<sup>23</sup>. In blending her identity with Anna-Claude's, the dying Tanga ensures that her death will not mark an end to the struggle to rupture the patriarchal system. The real encounter which effects both a sexual, physical, psychological and spiritual merger of their identities takes place in the following incident:

- « You are right, woman. One must not run away from the dream.
- Yes, one must live the dream. This evening, you will be Ousmane, my dream.
- I will render you fertile.
- I will offer myself to you.
- I will give you children that will generate other peoples.
- Love me ».

Their bodies meet. Anna-Claude is crying. Tanga tells her not to cry. She tells her that they will get rid of their despair and that theirs will be the most maternal of loves...

« Don't forget woman, you must know the rest of my life in order to continue it ». Tears disappear and Anna-Claude calms down... and once more, words come out of the but reborn woman and enter into her body resuscitating a vanished childhood<sup>24</sup>.

The sacred and ritualistic aspect of the above lesbian scene symbolises the profundity of their new-found sisterly camaraderie. Hence, although Tanga dies at the end of the novel, her spirit lives in Anna-Claude and keeps the flame of the struggle against sexism alive. Rangira Gallimore considers the scene from a purely platonic viewpoint and dismisses the erotic dimension of their body contacts : « The love that links Tanga to Anna-Claude does not seem to lead to a sexual exchange despite the appearances. The physical contacts, the affection and tenderness between the two women instead show what Adrienne Riche calls « a lesbian continuum »<sup>25</sup>. It is quite right to read the encounter between the two women as woman-identified reciprocity but also quite erroneous to dismiss the erotic aspect, for Anna-Claude says Tanga will be Ousmane « this evening, » that is, the lesbian lover will replace the

<sup>23</sup>« Donne-moi ta main et mon histoire naîtra dans tes veines. Tu verras comment dans mon pays, l'enfant naît vieux, puisqu'il ne peut porter en lui le bouquet du printemps. Donne-moi la main, tu sera moi » (p.18).

<sup>24</sup> « Tu as raison, femme. Il ne faut pas s'éloigner du rêve.

-Oui, il faut vivre le rêve.

-Ce soir, tu seras Ousmane, mon rêve.

-Je te donnerai la fertilité.

Je m'offrirai à toi.

-Je te ferai des gosses pour perpétuer d'autres humanités.

-Aimez-moi ».

Leurs corps s'enlacent. Anna-Claude pleure. Tanga lui dit de ne pas pleurer...Elle lui dit qu'elles froteront leur désespoir et que d'elles jaillira le plus maternel des amours...

« Ne l'oublie pas femme, tu dois connaître la suite de ma vie pour la perpétuer ». Les sanglots s'éloignent. Anna-Claude se calme... Et de nouveau, les mots se sont succédé du corps de la mort naissante à son corps à elle, ressuscitant l'enfance évanouie » (pp.71-73).

<sup>25</sup> Rangira Béatrice Gallimore, *L'œuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala : Le renouveau de l'écriture féminine en Afrique francophone sub-saharienne* (Paris : Harmattan, 1997). ( *The Fictional Works of Calixthe Beyala : The Rebirth of Feminine Writing in Francophone Africa South of the Sahara*). (L'amour qui unit Tanga et Anna-Claude ne nous paraît donc pas véhiculé d'un échange sexuel malgré les apparences. Les contacts physiques, l'affection et la tendresse entre les deux femmes illustrent par contre ce qu'Adrienne Rich appelle « a lesbian continuum », (p.132).



heterosexual one. Again Tanga proposes to render her « fertile » and « give » her children. All these facts are proof positive of an erotic lesbian encounter. The two women are prototypical womanists in Alice Walker's sense of the word : that is, they love each other sexually and fight for the survival and wholeness of entire peoples.

The most outstanding novelty about Beyala's treatment of the theme of sapphism is her tendency to problematize it by effecting an extraordinary conflation of sexual, religious, moral, cultural and even political issues. In the following scene in which Ateba expresses a lesbian desire for her friend, Irène, the spiritual, sexual, moral, psychological and political are tactfully, even provocatively, merged together :

*She wants to kiss her mouth despite its fatigue-sunken corners. She wants to give her a deep and queenly kiss which she will wrap up in her crown...She reaches out a hand, she wants to place it on Irène's knee, she trembles, her body tells her she is sinning. And she waits, her body trembling, trying to crush this thing that is devouring her from within. A woman and a woman. It has never been written of, nor has it ever been spoken about. No preparation. She is sinning and nothing, nobody, can explain why she is sinning. Everyone bables on this subject (The Sun,p.138)<sup>26</sup>*

The foregoing text marks a radical turning point in Beyala's expression of sexual essence. The erotic connections which Ateba tries to make with Irène but which remain futile due to « their association with 'sin' oblige her to question those cultures, religions, laws or policies that posit woman-to-woman erotic connection as 'sinning'. By questioning what this 'sin' is, a restriction reserved for women in patriarchical cultures, Ateba is, to paraphrase Lorde, making those connections between the spiritual (physical and emotional), the political and the erotic (physical and sensual) »<sup>27</sup>. Women's sexually and the repression of lesbian contacts becomes much more than a sexual issue : it is also a religious, moral, cultural and political concern to be reckoned with. The uniqueness of Beyala's themes is thus that she problematizes every aspect of black women's existence.

Of all the critics that have had to examine the theme of sapphism in Calixthe Beyala's fictional works, none is as informed and insightful as Juliana Makuchi Afah-Abbenyi. While commenting on the afore-cited scene in which Ateba engages in a botched lesbian encounter with her friend, Irène, she affirms that « this is what I see as the erotic and (un)spoken moment for/of lesbianism in *Soleil*, an issue, among others, that has been highly controversial with some readers and critics »<sup>28</sup>. However, no sooner has she invoked this controversy than she, paradoxically, stumbles into the same trap : after citing such lesbian encounters in Beyala's works, and stating affirmatively that « Non-heterosexual and women-centred existence is strongly reclaimed and reaffirmed in Beyala's works... Calixthe Beyala portrays a specific sensuousness and eroticization of that woman-centred existence » (92), Afah-Abbenyi hurries on to state again that « the women in Beyala's work do not... reject heterosexuality, nor do

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<sup>26</sup> Elle veut cette bouche malgré la fatigue qui en affaisse les coins, elle veut lui donner un baiser profond, un baiser de reine qu'elle enfermera dans sa couronne...Elle avance une main, elle veut la poser sur le genou d'Irène, elle tremble, son corps lui dit qu'elle pêche, tout son être lui dit qu'elle pêche. Et elle reste le corps tremblant, essayant d'écraser cette chose intérieur qui la dévore. La femme avec la femme. Nul ne l'a écrit ; nul ne l'a dit. Aucune prévision. Elle pêche et rien ni personne n'explique pourquoi elle pêche. Tout le monde baragouine à ce sujet.

<sup>27</sup> Juliana Makuchi Afah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African women's Writing : Identity, Sexuality and Difference*. Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press ; 1997, p.94.

<sup>28</sup> Afah-Abbenyi, p.93.

they necessarily turn to lesbianism » (92). Many of such contradictory assertions abound in some feminist critics' attempts to analyse Beyala's works. Since Calixthe Beyala, as Jea-Marie Volet has suggested, « is developing into one of the post provocative women writers of her generation » (Quoted in Afah-Abbenyi, p 93), apologetic feminists are doing her a terrible disservice by attempting to moderate her themes and styles which, to all intents and purposes, are audacious, overtly innovative and quite fearless of taboo. Such (un)conscious (mis)readings of her works constitute (1) a denial of the militancy that is presently raging in African women's literature, (2) a minimization of the new canon that is operating within present-day black women's literature and (3) a denial of Beyala's work as well as other modern African Women writers' hard-earned right and latitude to write about what they please and, according to Alice Walker, « to denigrate that right reveals an antipathy to [black women] so vast that all recorded history cannot, apparently, limit it »<sup>29</sup>

Conclusively, the investigations carried out in this paper clearly show that the theme of sapphism is not only alive and well in modern African literature but is also as radical as its Western counterpart. Its trajectory in Calixthe Beyala's fiction, though, is unique, complex, even problematic and is marked by a conflation of spiritual, social, psychological, moral and even political values. Sapphism in African women's literature has pushed the boundaries of the literature by upholding the image of female sexual relationships that rupture the conventionally accepted moral positions of their cultural communities. The theme functions within a radical new-found tradition of African women's literature, one that owes its essence to the relentless quest for novelty but subverting orthodoxy and challenging the established order through the bid to dramatize the ordeals of wronged African womanhood. Finally the theme reveals African women's urge to develop new spaces or ways of representation thus adumbrating the making of a new literary canon.

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<sup>29</sup> Alice Walker, « *Breaking Charms and Encouraging Life in In Search of our Mother's Gardens p.189*).

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