

GENDER AND CULTURAL NEGOTIATION IN *NINAH'S DOWRY*: EXPLORING A CAMEROONIAN VIEW

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ABSTRACT

The issue of identity is complex in Cameroon. As a nation with diverse cultures, people perform different identities in relation to the power that exist. Moreover, the situation is complicated by the historical colonisation of Cameroon by two different powers with different cultural identities, namely the English and the French. In such a context, where national identity is informed by a background of multicultural institutions, the performance of peoples' identity is challenged by the hegemonies in place. Cameroonian cultural productions have responded to these situations, exposing and challenging the dominant hegemonies in place. Victor Viyuoh's film, *Ninah's Dowry*, is one of these. A work that deals with the trajectory of a woman caught in the web of patriarchy and other dominant practices, Viyuoh's film gives room for a reading beyond this obvious thematic perspective. Using post-structuralist theory and psychoanalysis, I examine the display of domination, oppression and subordination in constructing gender identities in *Ninah's Dowry* (2012). I argue that Ninah's fate, in the work, is determined not only by the symbolic dowry system, which subjugates the woman, but also by the greed that underpins the whole marriage system.

Keywords: Gender; Cultural identity; corporeality; Cameroon cinema

INTRODUCTION

For many women, the problem with certain cultural hegemonic responses to subjugation is that they do not criticise the existing status quo of oppressive power and

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static laws used to bolster subjugation and invoke a mechanism for its perpetuation. It is important to question this, because the construction of a subject by existing oppressive structures functions as the mechanism of cultural hegemony that fuses knowledge and power for the subaltern. According to post-structuralist thinkers like Foucault, the creation of certain autocratic structures in society 'force the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way' (Foucault 1983, 212). To Foucault (ibid.), the individual is trapped within structures that restrain him or her from identifying with the self and obtaining a sense of belonging to a liberal society. From this perspective, permanently constructed structures such as patriarchy, which ascribes to the subjugation of women and rejects her identity as a human, but relate it to the essential/innate formulation of female attributes. This method of categorising a woman, in reality, cannot envisage a solution to subjugation and oppression, since the subject/woman often times is portrayed as an object. Nonetheless, these patriarchal structures are products of a culture and a history that has existed over a long time and that still exist today, with new trends constantly emerging. Thus, judging by the portrayal of a woman's resistance of societal constructions of power in Cameroonian society in the film, *Ninah's Dowry*, Foucault's observation on the constraining of an individual's identity by societal norms may be understood to be a reality in Cameroon. In fact, the film seems to depict a society in which women are already constructed and defined as objects. One interesting aspect that is important to analyse is how the female protagonist, who is constructed as subaltern within the narrative of this film, eventually seeks possibilities in maintaining gender within its binary frame and transforming power relations.

In this article, I examine the concept of gender in relation to Judith Butler's ideas of the performativity of female bodies and ways of exerting power on these bodies and the bodies' own strategy to resist the power exerted upon them. By the performance of power in gender relations, I am not simply referring to the bodily gestures, movements and enactments that constitute behavioural patterns between women and men, nor am I simply concerned with the basic differences that exist between male and female. I am referring here to gender instituted through the embodiment and re-enacting of certain established cultural/social norms, with specific significations which are continuously discontinuous. Butler (1988, 519-520) refers to this as 'a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief'. When the performance of these social norms is applied with repetition in gender identity through time, it creates 'possibilities' for 'gender transformation' in male and female bodies. Butler also theorises the notion that gender identity is performative within socially constructed dominant discourses. According to her (Butler 1988), gender performance is involuntary and operates at different levels within social discourses, and the performance becomes internalised

within dominant patriarchal discourses through processes of socialisation and repetition.

In this article, I explore how a Cameroonian film dramatises the performance of patriarchy and subordination in constructing gender identities. *Ninah's Dowry* can be read as a film that depicts dowry as a catalyst to dramatise power relations and how it is displayed in a patriarchal society. The term 'dowry', in this instance refers to the concept of 'bride price', a practice commonly used in Cameroon and other sub-Saharan countries. It is important to point out that the word symbolically signifies unity for the man and woman and empowerment for the woman in her marital home, but in this film, dowry, ironically, disempowers the woman. However, I am more interested in its cultural implications and how it catalyses the drama of power in the display of gender and power between Ninah and the men in the film. To some extent, I also examine social class stratification, as portrayed in the relationship between Memfi and his boss. My analysis is informed by Foucault's (1994) understanding of power, Sigmund Freud's ideas of projection, which also speak to power (in Baumeister, Dale and Sommer 1998), and Butler's (1988; 1990) ideas of power and the performance of masculinity and femininity as aspects of gender.

Ninah's Dowry: Narrative Overview

Ninah's Dowry is a poignant story of a woman's femininity objectified by the traditional practice of dowry that entraps her in a marriage defined by violence, brutality and terror. At the age of 20 years, Ninah is a mother of three children, imprisoned in an estranged marriage, with no future. Her father gives her off to Memfi as a wife, as a way of paying his debt. When the father dies, she returns home for his funeral and decides not to go back to Memfi. In the course of her stay, she opens a small restaurant to earn a living. She also restarts a relationship with her childhood boyfriend. But, when Memfi finds out that Ninah is pregnant, he gives her two options: to return to him and maintain her position as his wife in their home or to return the dowry he paid to her father before marrying her, as custom demanded. Not able to pay back the money, Ninah is ruthlessly dragged through the streets to her husband's house. This is a story of a woman in combat with powerful forces against her. Her attempts to resist these forces embody her agency.

As mentioned in the synopsis, the theme of dowry preoccupied the imagination of many African writers in the immediate post-independent period, such as Elechi Amadi, Chinua Achebe and, particularly, Buchi Emecheta, whose novel on the issue of dowry is entitled, *The Bride Price* (1976). Some African filmmakers, such as Johnson-Traore in *Diankhabi* (1969), Daniel Kamwa in *Pousse Pousse* (1975) and Dikongue Pipa in *Muna Moto* (1975), have also addressed the commodification of women through the dowry system. In Cameroon, some ethnic communities like the Bamelikes, Mankon and Beti, highly value the dowry and it plays a significant part

in the marriage between a man and a woman. In an event where a woman is not happy and intends to divorce the husband or to remarry, some cultures expect her to return what was given to her family, either in goods or monetary value. In *Ninah's Dowry*, the woman becomes her husband's property as long as the dowry is in place. Memfi will not allow Ninah to stay at her father's home, unless she repays his dowry. However, it is not the matter of the dowry or returning of the dowry payment which is the thrust of this article. What is at issue here is the display of power and dominance by men in the film through which women's lives are controlled. To use Foucault's (1994) idea of strategy and control of bodies, Memfi becomes an authority over the body of Ninah, as revealed in the following dialogue:

Memfi: you are my wife ...

Ninah: not any more

Memfi: okay ... then pay back my dowry

Ninah: ... I will pay

Memfi: Do it now or you're coming with me.

Memfi literally takes advantage of Ninah's economic vulnerability. He knows Ninah is incapable of repaying him at the moment and he understands he has no real power to challenge her. Confronted with this reality, that as a man he is incapable of convincing his wife to return home, he resorts to threats, namely, demanding immediate payment, without which Ninah is bound to follow him.

The title of the film, *Ninah's Dowry*, captures this patriarchal system that commodifies women and their bodies. Ninah finds herself in a precarious situation, forced to marry a man she does not want, because of an earlier dowry negotiation between Memfi and her father. At the age of 13, Ninah is taken out of school and used as exchange for a debt of 50.000 FCFA (100.00 US dollars) – money which her father borrowed from Memfi and was unable to repay. The film projects this situation to invoke the manifestation of power within particular cultural matrixes through the metaphor of the dowry. In a patriarchal system that objectifies a woman, the power constructed is the power that comes from male dominated ideology. Foucault (1977, 25-26) refers to the ways in which men exercise such power over women as 'the way of power over bodies where power relations have an immediate hold upon [the body], they invest it, mask it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs'.

Class and Power: Conflicting Male Bodies

An interesting element of power discourse in this film plays out in conflicting male bodies between Memfi and his boss. This is important, because this time power is not at the level of patriarchal structures, where women are the victims of oppression; rather, it operates between male bodies, where one male dominates over another.

At the beginning of the film, the camera contrastingly moves from a shabby Memfi sitting in front of his small mud house watching over his boss' cattle. The next sequence cuts to a well-dressed, good looking man (Memfi's boss) speaking rudely to Memfi in the field. The boss ends up not paying Memfi's allowance for the month, because Memfi could not prevent his son from riding his (the boss') horses. The boss symbolises the rich middle class in the society, while Memfi symbolises the poor and marginalised. This relates to Foucault's (1994) argument that power is everywhere and it operates even among people within the same gender group. In the relationship between Memfi and his boss, we see the power that one male body exercises over another male body, because of class differences, which privilege the one over the other. The boss is using his position as employer to suppress the body of Memfi. This manifestation of power at the level of class demasculinises Memfi in the same way Memfi dehumanises Ninah. The irony here is profoundly gendered, with Memfi, who thinks he is a man with authority over Ninah's body, being degraded by his boss, who controls his (Memfi's) economic power.

The cinematic projection in this sequence is fundamental in establishing power relations between male bodies (Memfi and his boss). The scene opens with a sequence-shot, showing an overview of them in conversation with cattle in the background. The two men face each other, with Memfi's head bent to the ground, indicating the boss' dominance over him. The framing puts Memfi in a weaker position compared to his boss. The boss' position of dominance is further strengthened through dialogue by his forceful utterances that subject Memfi to a one-word answer throughout the semblance of a conversation:

Boss: Have I not been kind to you?

Memfi: yes, massa.

Boss: Have I not been generous?

Memfi: yes, massa.

Boss: Have I not provided you with a beautiful house?

Memfi: yes, massa.

Boss: And consistent pay?

Memfi: yes, massa.

Boss: Are you not farming a fertile piece of land?

Memfi: yes, massa.

Boss: In fact, are you not living pretty much like royalty?

Memfi: yes, massa.

Boss: Am I asking too much when I ask you to obey my little tiny rules?

Memfi: yes, massa.

Boss: Yes!

Memfi: Er, no, massa.

Boss: Am I?

Memfi: No.

Boss: Is it also asking you too much to keep your little runts in check? In fact, is your family too much for you to manage?

Memfi: No, sir.

Boss: ... Then tell me what should be your punishment.

Ninah: Oh no!

Boss: You should be fired!

Memfi: Em ... massa!

Boss: It is, however, you I hired not your family. I'm a very merciful man.

Memfi: yes, massa.

Boss: However ... because you cannot keep that knucklehead son of yours from riding my horse ... you'll have no food money for this month.

Memfi: Massa!

Boss: Do you have anything to add?

Memfi: No, sir!

Boss: Good.

Memfi: Sir ...

Boss: What?!

Memfi: We don't have a penny, no food ...

Boss: Good ... that should help make my point sink down into all of your little numskulls!

Ninah: Nick ... Nick ... Run. Nick. go!

This particular sequence is significant, because Memfi and the boss are sutured to the audience through direct camera address. While the boss assumes power over the camera, Memfi's projection of ego submerges to an Oedipal complex, with his masculinity being threatened as the image establishes a rational of displaced power between masculine bodies. Thus, the way of power, from Memfi to the boss, is ill-directional, but the way of power from the boss is mono-directional. As such, Memfi must find a way to regain his masculine pride and this he does by attacking Ninah and the children.

Although this power of male bodies over other male bodies seems to emerge from class stratification, it might also be possible to think that the ways of power in the film directed towards Memfi seem to play with his response to the ways the power is manifested on his masculine body. Memfi's behaviour towards weaker bodies could be linked to his state of 'self-being'. His current position as a herdsman does not provide opportunities of 'becoming' a man with full authority, equal to 'other' men. As such, it would be plausible to view his desires based on a binary opposition between displacement and compensation. His identity is constructed both in the representations between the haves in his community and the have-nots, as he attempts to reclaim the 'power' that he does not have. In essence, he does not have power, because he cannot take care of his wife and children without working for his boss. Moreover, Memfi's misdirected anger at his wife and children is because they are present when he is demasculinised by his boss. As such, his relationship with the boss is based on an imbalanced power relationship that complicates his self-perception. He is therefore obsessed with the desire to perform his masculinity, which can only be achieved through the violence that he directs at his wife. Thus,

by performing masculinity, he is simply projecting his own impotence on weaker objects, which happen to be his wife and children.

Power and Gender: Of Masculinity, Femininity and Resistance

Having demonstrated how men become dominated by superior men, it would be significant to explore masculinity as a way of performing power over female bodies and how the female bodies respond to male hegemony. Memfi, who has been emasculated by the boss, is now trying to regain his masculinity by projecting anger on Ninah. The sequence in the film where Ninah is busy cooking, on a three-stone fireside, symbolically portrays Ninah's resilience towards the domineering body of Memfi. The camera pans and zooms into her in the kitchen, exploring her body from the toes on the ground to her head as she complains of the lack of salt and palm oil. The zoom focuses on the empty bottle of palm oil as Ninah throws it on the ground. The shot cuts to Memfi, who scolds and blames Ninah as the cause of his poverty, as the following dialogue between him and Ninah illustrates:

Ninah: We're out of palm oil ... even salt ... just my luck ...

Memfi: Stop complaining! I told you to hold off on the cooking. God! If not for poverty, what would tie a man to a woman like you?

In this sequence, the framing of Memfi emphasises his appearance as that of someone with an abusive and domineering personality. His image is portrayed in an up close-up shot, which projects his authoritative attitude towards Ninah. Memfi claims power as the man and head of the house, who provides for his family. He assumes his patriarchal position as a man and enacts dominance over Ninah in his role as a husband. This is what Freud calls 'projection'. To him, weak objects project on other weaker objects. Memfi is a weak object because the way in which his boss asserts his power has made him so. For Memfi, to perform his masculinity, he must look for another weak object on whom to project. These projections of misplaced power describe the ways Memfi vents his power on the weaker bodies of his wife and children, because he cannot fight the power that is exerted on him by his boss. The film shows Memfi confronting and challenging every agency set by Ninah to dismantle him. He mistreats Ninah at the least opportunity, without paying attention either to the gaze of his children or that of the public. He beats her up when she protects their son from being punished for riding his boss' horses and beats her in front of the children when she insists on paying a visit to her sick father without his approval. The latter happens when a friend of Memfi's, Fuh, pays a visit to inform him that Ninah's father is unwell. Upon hearing this, Ninah decides to go home despite Memfi's refusal. After several failed attempts, she finally leaves to see her father without informing Memfi. At this point, we see the projection of the female body resisting power from the male body. Ninah's weak body cannot respond in the

same way to Memfi. So she looks for symbolic ways of performing power, as her own way of fighting back. While at her father's house, she revitalises a relationship with her old boyfriend. It could be said here that Memfi feels threatened by Ninah, whose resistance strategy portrays the power that her female body possesses as she symbolically responds to him in a subtle way. Thus, one way of performing power against masculinity is by using another masculinity. To Ninah, meeting with her boyfriend is her own way of demasculinising Memfi, because it deflates his ego. This is her dimension of power and form of resisting oppressive powers.

In the same vein, Ninah's empowered body rejects her father on his dying bed when she confronts him about selling her off to Memfi. When we look at Ninah's father on the bed, he still does not show remorse for what he did. He had actually enslaved his daughter by giving her into marriage to a man who cared nothing for her. Greed made him offer Ninah for money, which he used to roof his house. As a father, he is able to use his power and give her away to Memfi like an object. At this level, we see the cultural constructs of power when it comes to questions of dowry. Ninah does not have a voice or the power to protest, because patriarchy is an extremely powerful institution. The power it exerts over her body makes her to become subservient and submissive. This is why she accepts the marriage to Memfi. Looking at her father now, lying on his bed, sick and weak, Ninah is able to speak out, challenging his masculine power. This is the only time she can fight back, when the father is lying paralysed and helpless as the sickness that has demasculinised him and he no longer has power over her. Ninah seizes the opportunity to tell him that he still wants to enslave her 'even in his death'. Ironically, this masculine body still has power, because the father's funeral service consumed all the money that the family has, since the father did not request that a lavish funeral should not be organised for him, even though he was aware of the limitations of the family's resources. Because of the cultural power that the masculine body holds, it enables it to still enslave the living.

The death of Ninah's father introduces another character, Robert (Ninah's younger brother), who establishes his masculine authority through conflict with Ninah. When Ninah's father dies, she prefers a quiet burial without 'chickens being slaughtered', as custom requires, in order that the money could be used for other purposes. But her younger brother insists that their father must be buried in a particular manner, according to tradition, despite the family's poverty, as exemplified in the following dialogue:

Ninah: Where did you get the money to pay for his big feast?

Robert: It's a funeral.

Ninah: He left this family penniless ... yet ... chickens fly left and right at his death.

Robert: What would you have us do?

Ninah: How about a quiet burial? No fanfare. How about keeping that money for something else? How about using it on people who are alive?

Robert: Sis, if I didn't know you, I would think you lost your mind. This is a funeral.

Robert, who now represents the head of the family, stands to protect his masculine dignity by using the little money they have to organise a lavish funeral service. His masculine prerogatives are threatened psychologically by what the community will say if he does not act the usual way a man would act to bury his father. Obviously, as the younger sibling, he is expected to submit to Ninah's request as the firstborn, but he defiantly goes ahead to organise a lavish ceremony; thereby undermining Ninah's authority and, by implication, overlooks her views in family decision-making. In another encounter, Robert challenges Ninah's decision to remain in her father's house after the burial ceremony by asking her whether 'a woman, a married woman ever claims rights in her father's house? You have run away from your home'. Ninah responds in a loud voice that '... my blood and my future roofed this house. I would like to see you come and kick me out' (The 'blood' and 'future' referred to here, symbolise her education as well as the money paid as her dowry). She challenges her brother that no one will make her leave, because she is in her father's house. The visual framings in this sequence between Ninah and Robert are portrayed in different clips. First the camera positions them in the centre of a medium shot with a background of the house. As the conflict intensifies, Ninah and her sibling are in a close up, shot-reverse-shot, privileging the brother as he takes more viewing position than Ninah. This position is in line with the politics of power in gender, as the shots give more physical representation to Robert than Ninah. This particular shot is important in speaking gender politics, as Ninah and her brother are presented to the viewer through direct camera address. By choosing this framing, Viyuoh simply confirms the power that comes with authority and the subtle ways the female body responds to power.

Another symbolic illustration of male power over the female body is based on explicit binary oppositions of the villain and the victim. Memfi is the villain and Ninah the victim of his villainous acts. This binary opposition of evil and good is meant to influence the audience to take a particular stance and identify with the victim. Memfi, the villainous husband, is portrayed as unkempt, rude and demented. Ninah, on the other hand, is beautiful, dignified and motherly, though through regular brutality and violence, she loses her comportment, especially when she begins to resist. Her identity alters at this point, from the previously feminine to a more masculine identity. To elicit sympathy for the violated woman, Viyuoh deploys exaggerations and repetitions of both acts of violence and acts of attempted escape and resistance, as Ninah escapes into the forest, climbs a tree and jumps into a mud-covered pit at night to hide. These exaggerated acts of violence, escape and resistance is Ninah's own way of reclaiming power. Foucault explains this as the body's own way of responding to power and the symbolic disengagement. Ninah's symbolic ways of disengaging build up as she goes up the roof and hides. She finally jumps on a horse, which in this kind of set-up is a masculine activity. She rides the horse, gets to the village square and exposes the impotence of the men, because they

could not help her out of fear of Memfi. The following dialogue between Ninah and a man in the community captures the way of power as disengagement succinctly:

1st Man: Ninah

Ninah: Don't touch me.

1st Man: But you need help

Ninah: Help? Where were you when I was dragged through this square: How come no one said anything? What kind of people are you? Am I not human? Am I not one of you? Get out of my way... you wicket cowardly people!

Ninah's words convey a woman's response to masculinity by exposing its weaknesses. Nevertheless, Ninah ends up deploying another avenue of power, which implicates Memfi. She puts the foetus from her miscarriage in his traditional bag. She informs the men that Memfi is in a cult and that the proof is found in his traditional bag. 'Let's see what you would do about that bastard. He killed my unborn child ... telling me it belongs to him. He is going to sacrifice it for money. That is against one of your own laws!' The community finds the foetus in his bag and jungle justice is applied on him. This is what Foucault (1980) refers to as the symbolic acts of popular justice in terms of responding to the dramatisation of power in masculinity and femininity. Because Ninah cannot physically fight Memfi, she uses what Foucault describes as strategies of a weak body applying its own internal mechanisms to fight back. So the weaker object, according to Freud, will then become a trickster, and that is what Ninah gets transformed into.

In the film, the individual desire for freedom is established through the quest to break through specific codes of cultural coherence imposed by the society. Ninah's feminine body transforms into a masculine body as she performs male attributes. Towards the end of the film, her body transforms into a shabby woman. She has the opportunity to change into a clean dress and look womanish when she meets her children after escaping from the neighbours' house at night, but she does not. Rather, she allows her dressing to translate as the transformed personality of someone who does not care what society thinks of her. In resisting, she is responding to power in a transformed way through 'stylized repetition of acts', Butler (1988, 519 -524) an imitation of dominant conventions of gender which Butler espouses when she states that 'the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that's been going on before one arrived on the scene' (ibid). Without such acts, the audience will not be able to identify the constructions of such genders.

CONCLUSION

The female body is explicitly shown in *Ninah's Dowry* as capable of resisting the system of patriarchy, which seeks to disempower it. Viyuoh correlates Foucault's thoughts in portraying gender identities as indicators of the power of bodies over bodies, particularly in power relations between the dominant male and the

dominated male [class and power] and power relations between the oppressive male and the subjected female [gender and power]. The film is an initiative to start up a debate about dominant patriarchal systems as the struggles, though portrayed through fiction, are real and address current gender issues. The film participates in an interventionist project, exposing gendered violence and projecting women's multi-layered resistance to it.

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