

ANNE TANYI-TANG AND BOLE BUTAKE: TWO ANGLOPHONE CAMEROONIAN PLAYWRIGHTS WITH CONTRASTING VISIONS OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Anne Tanyi-Tang and Bole Butake are two literary giants whose works have contributed immensely to the development of Anglophone Cameroonian drama. This article examines their plays from a feminist perspective, comparing their creative visions in terms of how they locate women in relation to survival politics and marriage. The article argues that, while Butake's plays project a vision of women that is both sexist and romanticised, Tanyi-Tang's plays offer a more nuanced vision of women as assertive, rebellious and intelligent human beings who stage a successful resistance to patriarchy.

Keywords: Anglophone Cameroonian drama, Anne Tanyi-Tang, Bole Butake, feminism

1. INTRODUCTION

The gender question in Cameroon is a complex one, owing largely to a complex history of triple colonisation, first by the Germans (1884–1916) and then jointly by the British and the French (1916–1961). Colonialism exacerbated the already existing gender inequities in precolonial societies through its restriction of women's access to education. Colonial education privileged men – who were groomed for the political leadership that would come after independence had been granted – while it discriminated against women, to whom education was not only made available at a very late stage but also introduced half-heartedly (Konde 2005). Where education was made available to women, the form

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it took and the system by which it was executed inevitably consigned women to home management as opposed to political leadership. Tara Jabbaar-Gyambrah (2009, 209) makes the following observation about British colonial education in West Africa:

During colonial rule, formal education became a cultural capital that afforded men access to a higher economic status considered valuable in the eyes of the British colonizers. Inevitably, women were excluded from medical studies and were forced to participate in a less valued educational system that focused on home economics, often provided by missionaries.

The educational programmes of the British in Cameroon were therefore a principal medium by which the invisibility of Cameroonian women in public politics was entrenched. As if this kind of domestic education was not disempowering enough, Cameroonian men were strongly opposed to educational reforms designed for women as these were considered a threat to male hegemony (Konde 2005). Thus, both colonial and indigenous patriarchy connived to deny Cameroonian women access to any form of power beyond the domestic space.

Postcolonial Cameroon has not been able to rid itself of patriarchal ideology and its attendant practices of discrimination, domination, exploitation and disempowerment of women. Discriminatory laws and policies in public institutions with regard to marital and property rights continue to perpetuate gender inequity and inequality (Endeley 2001). Political offices in government continue to be held predominantly by men while women enjoy these offices only as a matter of tokenism. On the economic front, women work exceedingly hard to match men in business, yet their efforts are too often sabotaged through male manipulation of the economic space. As Samba notes, 'the more [a woman] attempts to assert herself economically, the stronger the force of oppression impacted on her, and the more forceful the attempt to push her into her traditionally designed role of the silent listener' (2005, 20). Patriarchal ideology extends its operations into the job environment, with women often discriminated against on assumptions of deficiency in physical fitness for the job (Orock 2007). If it is not physical unsuitability, then it is the excuse of culture preservation that is used to restrict women's participation in public politics. Culture, as conceived by patriarchy, requires women to stay at home and tend to family needs, which rotate predominantly on childcare and domesticity. The result has been the maintenance of a political, economic and socio-cultural environment that is both antithetical and resistant to gender equality in Cameroon. Government initiatives to promote equality have remained largely abortive owing to contradictions in legal provisions, the persistence of customs and traditions that oppress women, and the resistance of religions to the transformation of existing gender hierarchies.

In the light of these challenges to the emancipation of Cameroonian women, Anglophone Cameroonian playwrights have used their art both to pose critical questions about gender relations and proffer possible solutions to these challenges. In an attempt to envision a Cameroon marked by gender transformation, these writers have written, published and produced plays which foreground women and the problems

they encounter in both rural and urban spaces. These plays, however, posit differing visions of women and the strategies they employ to combat individual and collective oppression. The plays also reveal the playwrights' subjective ideologies on women's survival strategies and their mechanisms for dealing with marital problems. This article looks at the ways in which the plays of female playwright Anne Tanyi-Tang present a vision of women different from that of male playwright, Bole Butake. The analysis focuses on the playwrights' feminist visions in two specific areas: (1) survival and sex; and (2) marriage and divorce. I argue that, while Butake's vision reinforces patriarchal constructions of women's sexuality and gender roles, Tanyi-Tang's plays subvert these constructions through a vision which reconstructs women as rebellious, assertive and subversive. And yet, neither playwright can escape endorsing motherhood as a defining aspect of Cameroonian women's identities.

2. THE PLAYWRIGHTS

It is quite interesting to note that Tanyi-Tang and Butake share several commonalities, not just as playwrights but also as Cameroonians. As Cameroonians, they both have a predominantly Anglo-Saxon orientation, owing to their origination from Anglophone regions of Cameroon, with Tanyi-Tang from the South-West region and Butake from the North-West region. Both obtained their undergraduate degrees from the University of Yaounde in Cameroon and proceeded to England to pursue postgraduate studies. After completing their studies overseas, they returned to Cameroon and obtained teaching positions at the same university where they had studied – the University of Yaounde. Both also became involved in the production of theatre performances within and outside the university. At different times in their careers, they have also been involved in Theatre for Development (TfD), using theatre to reach people at grassroots level in different regions of Anglophone Cameroon. Coupling dramatic writing with stage directing, they address the gender question from different vantage points and ideological precincts.

Although not contemporaries, Butake started writing much earlier than Tanyi-Tang both have a considerable volume of plays published and performed. Butake has over 30 years' experience of writing plays, while Tanyi-Tang's career in writing has been, relatively, shorter. Most of Butake's plays were written for performance and published only at a later stage. His first play, *Betrothal without libation*, was written and performed in 1982 but published only in 2005. His second play, *The rape of Michelle*, was also written and performed in 1984 but published only in 1999. Along with *The rape of Michelle*, five other plays were published in the same collection. These were *Lake God* which was first published in 1986, *The survivors*, first published in 1989, *And palm wine will flow*, first published in 1990, *Shoes and four men in arms*, which premiered on stage in 1992, and *Dance of the vampires* which appeared in 1996. This collection of six plays is titled *Lake God and other plays* (1999) and was published with funding from Helvetas Cameroon, a Swiss corporation involved in rural development in Cameroon.

Two other plays which have been published independently are *Zintgraff and the battle of Mankon*, co-written with Gilbert Doho and published in 1993, and *Family saga*, published in 2005.

Emerging as a published writer at the turn of the millennium, Tanyi-Tang has also written and published several plays. She is one of the most prolific Anglophone women writers in contemporary Cameroon. Like Butake, most of her plays were written for performance before they were eventually published. Two of her plays, *Ewa* and *Honey-Gardens*, were written and performed in 1998 but published only in 2000 in a collection containing four plays. The two other plays in the collection are *Arrah* and *My bundle of joy*. This collection, titled *Ewa and other plays* (2000) positioned Tanyi-Tang as a profoundly feminist voice in the Anglophone Cameroonian dramatic space. She continued to carve a niche for herself within this space by publishing more plays. A set of two plays appearing in one collection are *Visiting America* and *Marienuelle* which were first published in 2003 with a second edition published in 2006. In 2004, another duo of plays was published in one collection, *Down the hill* and *Chief Ayito*. The only one of her plays to appear as a single, *Eneta vs Elimo*, was published in 2007.

In most of Tanyi-Tang's plays, the lead characters are women and the vision is woman-centred. Similarly, women occupy a prominent place in Butake's plays, whether it is in terms of the roles they play or the ideologies the writer projects through them. The difference between the two writers, however, is that while Tanyi-Tang's plays espouse a feminist vision within a very specific Cameroonian context, Butake's plays project a masculinist vision where women exist to further men's advancement in different spheres of life. Feminist engagement with Cameroonian literature is crucial in unmasking such underlying sexist practices.

3. FEMINISM IN A CAMEROONIAN CONTEXT

Cameroonian feminism builds on indigenous models of women's negotiation of power through resistance and confrontation. African feminists have argued that feminism in Africa is not a western import; it is an African indigenous practice, though not theorised as such. In proposing her theory of nego-feminism, Nnaemeka (2003) positions it as a feminism built on an indigenous model, drawing on African traditional practices such as masquerade dance as well as on oral narratives such as proverbs. She states the following:

Nego-feminism is structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever-shifting local and global exigencies. The theology of nearness grounded in the indigenous installs feminism in Africa as a performance and an altruistic act. African women do feminism; feminism is what they do for themselves and for others. (Nnaemeka 2003, 378)

Nnaemeka asserts that African women's feminism is embodied in what they do, less so in what they theorise about their actions. Cameroonian women 'do' feminism in their everyday lives as they come into contact with patriarchy and its pervasive influences

in the public and private domains. As noted in the introduction, patriarchal ideology in Cameroon remains resistant to efforts by government and civil society to foster gender equality. Women in Cameroon have, however, sought, to borrow Nnaemeka's words, 'to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts' (2003, 378). A study by Tanyi-Tang among women in the Mundemba subdivision in the South-West region of Cameroon illustrates how women used theatre performances to negotiate with their men and government administrators to 'understand that women have certain strengths and men have theirs [and] these complementary roles should merge for the benefit of the community' (Tanyi-Tang 2001, 35). The welfare of the community is therefore central to Cameroonian women's feminist practice and this has been inscribed into women's consciousness through socialisation and cultural assimilation. Even when women strive for personal emancipation, communal interests stand as a social regulating force conditioning their actions. Cameroonian feminism therefore exhibits a tension between the personal and the communal, and often women are handicapped by this conundrum.

That feminism is indigenous to Cameroon is borne out by historical evidence. In their feminist engagement, women have emulated historical models of female militancy encoded in the actions of women's traditional organisations such as the Anlu of Kom and the Ta'kembeng of Bamenda. According to several scholars, these women's organisations greatly influenced political events in Cameroon during colonial and postcolonial struggles for power through their use of specific sexualised mechanisms of warfare to challenge what they considered as oppressive regimes (Ritzenthaler 1960; Nkwi 1985; Konde 2005). Lyonga (1993) and Ngwang (2004) have argued that the representation of women in Butake's plays is largely reflective of the political power wielded by these women's organisations. However, I have contended elsewhere that Butake's representation of women needs to be engaged more critically as it tends to promote a masculinist vision in which 'women's power is defined by the sexual and the domestic' (Nkealah 2014a, 6). I therefore acknowledge the centrality of historical events in informing directions of modern feminist discourses but also propose that contemporary writers and activists look beyond history to theorise feminist models that better meet contemporary women's needs of empowerment.

Contemporary Cameroon is beset by a number of challenges which impact directly and indirectly on women's empowerment – politically, economically and socially. These challenges include economic stagnation, underdevelopment in rural areas, poor education, poor transport systems, poor communication systems, violence against women and girls, ineffective legal systems, rural-urban migration, brain drain, as well as cultural and religious practices – including early marriage for girls and female genital mutilation – that continue to subject women to patriarchal control. According to Ondoua, the Minister of Women's Empowerment and Family in Cameroon, 'capacity-building through education and employment is...the best way to provide women and young girls with the best tools for their empowerment' (Ondoua 2013, 10). Still, there are other realities, such as the linguistic divide between Anglophones and Francophones and further ethnic divisions between Southwestern and Northwestern Anglophones –

what Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjoh call ‘ethno-regional cleavages’ (2003, 14) – which impact negatively on women’s access to political and economic opportunities. This suggests that feminist engagement in Cameroon should look at gender in relation to all these other challenges that plague contemporary women. As Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi points out, African feminisms should engage gender in relation to other key factors such as ethnicity, education, religion, geographical location (the rural-urban axis), government inefficiency, race and imperialism which are ‘crucial in distinguishing the insiders from the outsiders’ (1996, 112). Moreover, African feminisms, and particularly the womanist brand, engage with national concerns vis-à-vis international ones (Ogunyemi 1996). This local and global approach, also endorsed by Nnaemeka (2003), allows for an inclusive feminist theory that addresses local imperatives by drawing on indigenous and global models.

The development of Cameroonian feminist discourse through creative writing has been largely dominated by male writers – Butake, Bate Besong, Alobwede d’Epie – whose constructions of women have unrepentantly promulgated an ideology of women’s empowerment through sexual and ritual mechanisms. The work of Tanyi-Tang comes in to redefine the feminist agenda in Cameroonian literature by proposing alternative models of female militancy and activism that challenge, subtly and overtly, patriarchal constructions of women. The next section provides a textual analysis of selected plays by Tanyi-Tang which project visions of women markedly distinct from those of Butake, and in some respects also similar, suggesting a complexity in defining Cameroonian feminism.

4. FEMINIST VISIONS IN THE PLAYS

Writers’ ideological leanings inform their creative visions. Similarly, their creative visions inform discourse formation. Paul Zeleza notes that, through creative works, writers ‘present fuller and finer social imaginaries of African worlds, more textured testaments of African problems and possibilities, values and visions’ (1997, 14). This suggests that a writer’s vision has the potential to create ideologies of power that can either enrich feminist discourses or merely reproduce masculinist ones. Borrowing Lubomir Doležel’s concept of possible worlds in fiction (1998), I locate visions of women as textual possibilities that reconstruct women outside the boundaries set by patriarchy. My arguments focus on (1) the relationship between women’s survival and sex and (2) women’s engagement with marriage and divorce.

4.1. Sex and survival

Debates about women’s use of sex and their bodies as instruments for survival are varied within feminist discourse. On the one hand, there are scholars who view women’s use of sex to their own advantage as subversive, because it dismantles notions of sexual inequality as women re-appropriate sexual power. Speaking with reference to the

South African context of apartheid, where sexual power was the most readily available instrument for women's economic survival, Steyn (1998, 49), quoting Holmes, asserts that women engaging in sex work 'acted with ingenuity in the face of intolerable conditions and...despite rigorous attempts at social control fought to create a culture of survival.' Women's survival under difficult conditions, social or economic, is therefore linked to sex and the body as primary locales of female power. On the other side of the debate are scholars who argue that prostitution further deepens sexual inequality because it places men (the buyers of sex) in a position of power while women (the sellers of sex) remain in a subordinate position, depending on men for their survival. According to Tamale (2011, 148), these scholars 'find sex work fundamentally objectionable because, for them, it involves women's subordination.' The question then remains whether women's use of sex for survival subverts patriarchal dominance and control or reinforces them. Survival in this context is understood as the state of ensuring the continuity of one's life and improvement of one's welfare in the face of hardship, which could be concrete or abstract, physical or psychological. Two plays by Butake and Tanyi-Tang provide insights into women's survival strategies and their link to sex, thereby extending the debate on women's sexual power.

Butake's play, *The survivors*, endorses women's use of sex as a means of survival. The protagonist, Mboysi, is a woman alone in a land wrecked by natural disaster and the only survivors are her, two men and two children. In a verbal conspiracy, the two men pressure Mboysi to use her body to obtain food provisions from a military aid officer. They see Mboysi as their only saviour, because, as they tell her, 'you're a woman with great charms' and 'a woman will soften the hardest heart' (Butake 1999, 63). Mboysi is here constructed as a commodity to be traded for food provisions. She is labelled 'prostitute' because she is a woman, despite her elite status as an educated schoolteacher. Reduced to a sexual object, Mboysi yields to the demands of Ngujoh and Old One and seduces Officer who, in turn, rewards her with packets of biscuits, tins of sardines, bottles of water and a new set of clothes. The change of clothing is particularly significant because it denotes Mboysi's change of status from mere woman to mistress, which is synonymous with whore. Significantly, it reconfirms the prostitute as even more inferior than other women within the chain of gender hierarchy since patriarchy conceives all women to be whores and all women to be doubly inferior to men. Moreover, as Tamale points out, 'commercialising male access to female bodies... institutionalises women's sexual subordination and commodification' (2011, 148).

Oblivious to these sentiments, the two men and the children celebrate Mboysi's perceived victory over Officer with cries of praise:

Old One: Woman bring survival to children.

Mboysi: Man sell woman for food and water.

Ngujoh: Woman break Officer. Woman save man.

Old One: Woman bring survival to children. (Butake 1999, 66–67)

In these lines, Mboysi is elevated to the position of a saviour, a redeemer in a time of crisis, this despite her own awareness of the commodification of her body. Significantly, the vision in this play conflates woman's heroism with whoredom. Butake replicates a male literary tradition canonised by writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka and Mongo Beti in whose writing women are doubly gendered – by the vision of the texts and by the vision of the writers. Stratton argues that Ngugi, for example, constructs Wanja in *Petals of Blood* from a masculinist ideological viewpoint: '... in his creation of his "vision"', Ngugi conflates in one body [Wanja's] the figures of Africa as mother and whore' (Stratton 1994, 49). In a similar way, Butake constructs Mboysi as both mother to the children and whore to the men and Officer. Sex and the body are manoeuvred around the patriarchal chessboard and men emerge as the inevitable winners because the power of purchase and consumption lies in their hands.

Women's use of sex for survival is seemingly justified in this context because the perpetuation of the community is more important than feelings of personal degradation. Mboysi's act of prostitution is not for self but for the survival of the community, because, as Old One says, 'these children must survive to tell the story' (Butake 1999, 64). Effectively, the vision in this play is that community needs take precedence over women's individual interests, and if women must use their bodies to promote community interests then female prostitution is justified. I, however, contend that where a writer's vision limits itself to women's prostitution as the ultimate mechanism for ensuring the survival of the community, then the writer's imagination requires rehabilitation.

Women's use of sex for survival is an approach that Tanyi-Tang challenges in her play *Marienuelle* by depicting female characters who stage a resistance against male sexual exploitation. Marienuelle lives in England as an immigrant without permanent residence status. This means that she cannot get permanent employment or advance her career after the completion of her studies in Law and Financial Management, and she may even be forced to return to Cameroon. She worries about her status and suffers daily from the trauma of being 'a poor, coloured, foreign girl' (Tanyi-Tang 2006, 61). Although she is employed part-time in Agit's firm, she cannot afford two thousand pounds to pay someone to marry her and give her permanent residence, because all her income goes to paying for 'tuition, the bills, travelling expenses and rent' (Tanyi-Tang 2006, 59). Immigrant life is not only expensive but also uncertain and it is this uncertainty that causes severe emotional and psychological hardship for Marienuelle.

Survival in this case requires Marienuelle to engage in deceit, and Agit comes to her aid by finding someone and paying him the two thousand pounds to marry Marienuelle. Entering into contractual marriage for the sake of securing permanent residence is a tough decision that many immigrants like Marienuelle have to make. And being forced to share a house with a contracted husband in an attempt to make the marriage look real puts a woman in a sexually vulnerable position.

Marienuelle deals with sexual vulnerability by steering clear of Smith, her contracted husband. Although trapped in a makeshift marriage with a man who demands

sex in return for marrying her, Marienuelle is determined to not give in to Smith's advances. She tells her friend Roza: 'If I do, I will live in trauma all my life. In short, my entire life will be miserable' (Tanyi-Tang 2006, 80). This is a complicated situation because, legally, Smith is entitled to conjugal rights. The terms of their agreement, however, were that 'this deal does not include passionate feelings' (Tanyi-Tang 2006, 63). By abrogating the terms of the agreement, Smith cunningly seeks to subject Marienuelle to his masculine control, and, if Marienuelle persists in rejecting him, she risks losing the prospect of getting permanent residence. The play, however, does not present an easy solution by positing sex as the ultimate. Marienuelle's refusal to trade her body for papers encodes a feminist ideology of women's control over their bodies and the uses to which these bodies are subjected. In the end, Marienuelle chooses to leave Smith and regain her freedom at the expense of losing everything she desired. Her decision and action subvert patriarchal notions of the female body as a commodity that can easily be acquired with offers of cash or packages of sentimental rhetoric, such as Smith's when he tells Marienuelle: 'I love you. I am honest' (Tanyi-Tang 2006, 79).

The setting of Marienuelle is far removed from the traditional village setting of *The survivors* where women's prostitution is perceived as a simple exchange of their bodies for material comforts and where the result is simply gender and sexual degradation of women. For a play set in the diaspora, there is the added dimension of the racial degradation of black women. Smith's friend, White, is a racist who considers Marienuelle special because 'intelligent, beautiful coloured girls are rare' (Tanyi-Tang 2006, 66). Like White, the characters Grasbelle and Davidson can read Marienuelle's vulnerability as a black woman desperate for legal security in a European country and therefore feel they are equally entitled to the 'black booty.' Smith himself is an old white man who has lived alone for a long time and is now thrilled to have a woman living with him. But because Marienuelle is black, he turns her into his domestic worker by making her do his cleaning and cooking, which was not part of their agreement. Marienuelle laments to Roza:

Marienuelle: What is the essence of living in this flat? Smith is dirty. He snores and believes that I am his property. He must be joking. My illiterate mother was not my father's property.

Roza: Whose property are you then? Listen very carefully. For now you are his property. You have to make sacrifices. You should have known.

Marienuelle: I am cooking his meals. He should be grateful. Cooking for him was not included in the deal. (Tanyi-Tang 2006, 72)

Marienuelle decries Smith's combined racism and sexism which constitutes her as his property. Unlike the female characters in Chika Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters' Streets*, whose bodies become the properties of men in Brussels, thereby encoding their dehumanisation as prostitutes (Eze 2014), Marienuelle demonstrates a feminist assertion of her right to be treated as a dignified human being. She emulates the model set by her mother who never allowed herself to be her father's property. This is the kind

of indigenous feminism that the play engenders. Central to it is decisive action, because ‘to be or think feminist is to act feminist’ (Nnaemeka 1998, 5) and to act feminist for Marienuelle is to reject sex as a medium of survival.

Marienuelle’s decision and action of leaving Smith embodies feminist assertion at multiple levels. Yielding to Smith’s sexual demands will mean that Marienuelle tolerates his racist view of black women, conforms to his racial expectations of her, and desires the supposed racial superiority of a white man. Such a compromise will exacerbate not only the gender and sexual inequality prevalent in England but, more importantly for the character, the racial inequality as well. Thus, for African women in the diaspora, the question of using sex for survival is a more complex one, as racism compounds sexism and the insider/outsider trajectory exacerbates white patriarchal domination.

Marienuelle projects a feminist vision different from that in *The survivors* in that it privileges the survival of the self over the survival of the community. Marienuelle desires a relationship with Agit, despite knowing that he is married and despite Mrs Agit’s kindness towards her. She sees Agit as her gateway to upward social mobility and a semi-autonomous life, especially since Agit has already intimated that he wants her to run his firm in France. She dreams about a future between them, which to her means a lifestyle of affluence and a life of security. The following soliloquy reveals her ambitions:

Marienuelle: Damn everything. Why did Agit choose an old man? Perhaps he wants me for himself (*Smiles contentedly*). I love him. He is understanding, caring, young, rich and extremely handsome. I love his mellifluous voice, it’s richness, it’s melody [sic]. The rhythm of his masculine soft and sweet voice sounds like the voice of a counselling angel. It makes me tremble. It makes my heart vibrates [sic] with joy... (*Rebukes herself*) Stop it. Mrs Agit is very kind to me, although her occasional silence makes me feel very uncomfortable. Falling in love with Agit will mean doing her a favour. Yes, I will remain faithful to Agit. In this way, HIV & AIDS will weep... But I have to wait until I head the firm in Paris. (Tanyi-Tang 2006, 81)

For her own interest, Marienuelle disregards the impact her relationship with Agit may have on his marriage. She justifies it as a mechanism to keep him – and thus Mrs Agit – safe from HIV infection. It seems that, within this context, the pursuit of relationships with married men is a liberal feminist act by which women seek sexual intimacy with men but remain semi-autonomous as they sidestep the obligations of marriage. In Marienuelle’s case, such a relationship will enable her to secure her own survival in a foreign land. It is about her survival first, and everything else takes second place. Such stories of migrant women’s survival strategies compel us to put aside our moralistic compass and, as Eze points out, ‘to understand feminism as taking interest in the dignity of individual women, rather than adopting an ideology that seeks to deliver a group’ (2014, 98). Group survival seems to stand in the way of individual survival in this case.

However, in this pursuit of self-interest, it is important to question how the ‘other’ woman’s interests are protected. For Marienuelle, a relationship with Agit is a protection

of Mrs Agit against sexually transmitted diseases by forestalling any proclivities Agit may have towards philandering. Within a feminist context, therefore, privileging the survival of the self is not necessarily oppositional to protecting the interests of a community of women, as long as there is some understanding between the women involved and the ultimate goal is the re-appropriation of power for women. This is a similar idea to that reflected in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), both of which engender new visions for undermining patriarchal hegemony and restructuring the family institution. It can, therefore, be argued that Marienuelle espouses a womanist ideology because, in Ogunyemi's words, she 'moves creatively beyond the self to that concern for the needs of others characteristic of adult womanists' (1985, 72). In the context of survival, there is a blurring of lines between personal interests and collective interests such that, in the pursuit of individual survival, women – deliberately or inadvertently – also defend the survival of the group.

In contrast to Butake's play, Tanyi-Tang's play proposes alternative models of marriage and marriage-like relationships by which women secure their economic survival without necessarily trading their bodies for it. The playwrights' further engagement with marriage is explored in the next section.

4.2. Marriage and divorce

Nnaemeka's nego-feminism and Ogunyemi's womanism both advocate the complementarity of women and men and the equal involvement of both genders in building egalitarian societies. Within this framework, married women have an opportunity to re-orientate the attitudes of their husbands towards respect for women and recognition of their strengths. Single women, by contrast, remain marginal to processes of change because, by their singleness – whether deliberate or circumstantial – they are stigmatised.

In Butake's play, *The rape of Michelle*, married women are pitted against single ones, with singleness associated with irresponsible behaviour, prostitution and deceit. Single women are the catalysts of men's social downfall because they seduce and destroy men or plot against them. Rufina is the exact replica of Potiphar's wife in the Christian Bible, not only because she desires sex from Mikindong and is rejected, but also because she becomes vindictive and connives with the police commissioner to get Mikindong arrested for the alleged rape of her teenage daughter, Michelle. Her portrayal engenders ideologies of single women as 'agents of moral corruption, as sources of moral contamination in society' (Stratton 1994, 53). Because the play is set in the city of Yaounde, Rufina also becomes the embodiment of the moral decline that threatens to envelop the nation as a whole. Butake's criminalisation of women's sexuality in *The rape of Michelle* is similar to Ferdinand Oyono's in *Houseboy*. Mikindong, like Toundi, is seemingly innocent and suffers severe grief because of the scheming of women, who like Potiphar's wife, cannot keep their sexuality under control. It is a dominant tradition

in Cameroonian men's writing for women to be depicted as destructive social forces whose actions destabilise the world of men and, by implication, the balance of the universe. Within this context, the exorcising of women's sexuality is justified so that a phallocratic order can be maintained.

In contrast to Rufina, Akwen, Mikindong's wife, is depicted as the model woman – dutiful in fulfilling her domestic obligations as a wife and faithful to her husband, despite accusations of rape hovering over him. She is determined to get Mikindong out of jail because she cannot stand the 'loneliness and the embarrassment' his arrest has caused her (Butake 1999, 181). More importantly, as she says, 'I can't lose a husband only after six months of marriage' (Butake 1999, 182). For Akwen, the pressure to keep her husband and thereby sustain her marriage takes precedence over the need to protect a young girl from sexual abuse. In the words of Beatrice in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, 'a husband crowns a woman's life' (2009, 75). But Akwen, like Beatrice, ignores the reality that the same husband oppresses a woman, because a crown is after all also a source of affliction to the wearer. Thus, Akwen chooses to protect her marriage against all odds, even if it means publicly denouncing Rufina and Michelle as prostitutes. This juxtaposition of unmarried 'promiscuous' women with married 'decent' ones, what Stratton calls 'the good women (virgin–wife–mother)/whore dichotomy' (1994, 53), serves to inscribe elements of negation, marginalisation, exclusion and otherness as intrinsic signifiers of single women's social identities.

Butake's play glorifies marriage while suppressing the ways in which marriage operates as a patriarchal institution to keep women bound to men, irrespective of the men's morally questionable character and behaviour – the same morality by which women's behaviour is judged. This glorification of marriage is further enforced in the play, *Betrothal without libation*, where Elissa marries Fointam despite his parents' opposition to the marriage on the basis of ethnic differences. The play presents a utopian vision of marriage, as Elissa and Fointam end up enjoying marital bliss with their four children – three boys and one girl. Even at a metaphoric level, where the marriage of Elissa and Fointam symbolises national reconciliation between different ethnic groups in Cameroon, the play's vision is utopian because, as Christopher Odhiambo argues, it proffers simplistic resolutions to complex problems and reveals 'Butake's desire for an ideal Cameroon nation that seems to reside more in the realm of the imagination' (2009, 161).

In *Betrothal*, marriage is celebrated as the ultimate source of women's happiness and motherhood as the crown of that happiness. Yet, the same institution functions principally to regulate women's behaviour and thereby keep women's sexuality under patriarchal control. The play projects the notion that women who behave 'properly' are those who get 'good' husbands, since Fointam marries Elissa and not any of her friends because she meets his expectations. Hence, he tells her, referring to her friends: 'Tell them to behave like you and they will soon find husbands too' (Butake 2005, 64). That women can live happy and fulfilling lives without husbands is not much of an option

in Butake's dramatic imagination. They are bound to be 'loose' and 'wayward' like Rufina in *The rape of Michelle*. Such a vision restricts women's social identities to conformity with social codes of morality – a particular form of morality that sustains gender hierarchy.

In contrast to *Betrothal* and *The rape of Michelle*, Tanyi-Tang's plays, which are more contemporary, project a vision in which women readily embrace divorce and singleness as viable alternatives to marital and spousal abuse. This highlights not just the introduction of a feminist discourse into Anglophone Cameroonian drama but also the difference between women's self-representation and men's representation of women. In Tanyi-Tang's play *Arrah*, the protagonist, Arrah, leaves her husband and takes her children away to start a new life as a single parent family, in much the same way that Aissatou does in Mariama Bâ's *So long a letter*. Both characters recognise that marriage entraps them into relationships founded on masculine domination and privilege, where their husbands get what they want – Ettah, a home without the influence of Arrah's parents and Mawdo Bâ, a second wife – while they have to simply accept their husbands' actions, as unfair as they are. These actions are underpinned by a patriarchal ideology of entitlement which the women find unjust. Arrah and Aissatou, therefore, end their marriage to Ettah and Mawdo Bâ, respectively, and choose single parenthood as a form of assertive feminism.

Significantly, Arrah's parting note to Ettah bears the initials A.A. which stand for Arrah Abunaw. Arrah's resorting to the use of her maiden name, Abunaw, instead of her marital name, Ettah, symbolises feminist rebellion against the institution of marriage which not only dislocates women's identities through name change but also reconstructs women as the properties of their husbands. Arrah's separation introduces a new element to feminist discourse, where Nnaemeka's concept of negotiation with patriarchy becomes inadequate: in Arrah's new family, there will be no negotiation with patriarchal heads. In fact, Arrah's leaving without telling Ettah, after several attempts at dialogue with him had failed, suggests that negotiating with or negotiating around patriarchy is a futile project. Entering a space of no-negotiation accords women regenerative potentials. Embedded in Arrah's last sentence 'The children will be fine' (Tanyi-Tang 2000, 98) is a bold articulation of a new principle of family headship where women's authority is supreme.

In *Visiting America*, a play that vacillates between a Cameroonian setting and a diasporic setting, the protagonist, Coco, embraces motherhood but evades marriage. Like Marienuelle's planned relationship with Agit, Coco enters into a relationship with a married man, which allows her to enjoy emotional and sexual intimacy and at the same time maintain her independence. Coco bears triplets by Yomi – two boys and one girl – whom she raises in her fictional city of Ednuoay while Yomi, who lives in fictional Ajuba with his family, visits occasionally to see his children.¹ This arrangement illuminates possibilities of women succeeding in raising families with the support of men to whom they are not necessarily married. Constructing motherhood as independent of marriage subverts patriarchal expectations of women. In addition, Coco's rebellion against

motherhood within the confines of marriage provokes a re-assessment of society's moral prescriptions for women. As I have argued elsewhere, it dismantles 'binaries of morality – right/wrong, good/bad, virgin/whore' and suggests instead 'intersections where right and wrong blend' (Nkealah 2014b, 132). To this I add intersections where 'good women' evade definition and marriage resists essentialisation.

However, the play also reiterates the notion that motherhood is inescapable for African women. In two other plays, *My bundle of joy* and *Honey-Gardens* (2000), Tanyi-Tang presents women who are obsessed with the desire to have children. Rich (cited in Nnaemeka 1997, 5) makes a distinction between 'motherhood as an institution and motherhood as experience.' African women have to negotiate motherhood within these parameters, though they are not often conscious of this distinction. Tanyi-Tang's vision of women is similar to Butake's in that in both *Betrothal* and *Visiting America*, children crown a woman's happiness. In a melodramatic address to God, Coco expresses thanks for her children and states: 'Gossips are free to make insinuations. You have crowned my happiness' (Tanyi-Tang 2006, 52). Thus, for Tanyi-Tang, as it is for Butake, the possibility of women sidestepping motherhood – whether in resistance to patriarchy or out of personal aversion to its glorification – is still a distant dream. And the possibility of motherhood to be socially valuable without the production of sons is an even more distant dream.

5. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of the drama of Tanyi-Tang and Butake from a feminist perspective has highlighted the writers' distinct visions of women in their struggle for survival as gendered subjects. Tanyi-Tang's vision in *Marienuelle* is that of women using their intelligence to secure their economic survival. This vision stands in contrast to that of Butake in *The survivors* where women's principal instrument of survival is the sexual body – the body that can be traded for any number of benefits for the self and the community. Confining women's power to sexual power, or what Mumbi Machera calls 'bedroom power' (2004, 167), is problematic, not only because it enshrines a vision that is masculinist in conception, but also because it encodes a phallocratic order of male sexual dominance and female sexual compliance. In the end, Mboysi – the saviour of the survivors – is killed by Officer in a gun tussle, and power reverts to a military regime headed by ruthless soldiers. What hope is there for women in this testosterone-loaded space?

Marriage features as a central institution for social cohesion in the plays of both writers. However, whereas marriage is romanticised in Butake's *Betrothal without libation* and unmarried women are condemned to whoredom in *The rape of Michelle*, Tanyi-Tang presents a more complex picture of marriage, particularly in terms of how marriage feeds fuel into the patriarchal wagon such that husbands act in ways that prioritise their own interests as heads, even if these are self-centred, and simply ignore

the impact of their actions on their wives. What Arrah had envisaged as a happy marriage turns out to be a fiasco because Ettah does not want her parents in his house. In the end, Ettah's emotional, verbal and psychological abuse pushes Arrah to exit the marriage. Separation and divorce emerge as viable options for women experiencing spousal abuse. To quit an abusive marriage is to re-establish one's right to dignity. And as Ifeoma says in *Purple hibiscus*, 'sometimes life begins when marriage ends' (Adichie 2009, 75). Coco, in *Visiting America*, rejects marriage altogether, but embraces motherhood as a mechanism for generating human capital – children who will grow up to look after her economic investments. Motherhood then becomes an institution for keeping the wheels of capitalism running. For Butake, however, performing motherhood while sidestepping wifehood, as in Rufina's case, constitutes sexual transgression, which in this case configures her as a prostitute. It is a myopic vision when only women are imagined as social pests while men are celebrated as moral icons.

In the plays of the two playwrights, feminist consciousness does not mean the negation of marriage itself or the criminalisation of motherhood. At the other extreme, neither is it the glorification of marriage and motherhood. Feminism in a Cameroonian context means women's assertiveness and the taking of ownership of their lives. It means that women should be the principal drivers of their own processes of emancipation and empowerment, while soliciting the partnership of men where such partnerships will produce mutually beneficial outcomes. It also means the reclaiming of the self and the prioritisation of women's needs, since men will not do so for women. Tanyi-Tang's plays expand Nnaemeka's model of nego-feminism by positing a third possibility: no negotiation with patriarchy. Her plays inscribe imaginative possibilities of women rising above their obstacles to regain their sense of dignity. They go beyond mere didacticism to postulate more nuanced conceptualisations of women's survival and social relationships. Ultimately, they engender a feminist politics that dislodges sexual power and reconfigures women's power within the realm of economics and intellectualism.

NOTE

1. Although Tanyi-Tang uses fictional names for cities in this play, it is easy to deduce that Ednuoay stands for Yaounde (it is simply a reverse spelling), while Ajuba stands for Abuja, the political capital of Nigeria.

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