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(Homo)eroticism and Calixthe Beyala

By Sybille Ngo Nyeck

Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala's recent novel, *Femme nue Femmes noire* (*Naked Woman Black Woman*, Albin Michel, 2003), continues the author's prolific career since she first published *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlé* (1987). *Femme nue Femme noire* is Calixthe Beyala's first erotic novel, an audacity that has won her many critics as well as admirers. Fully aware of the fact that in "Africa, eroticism does exist even though it is not named as such" (see [this reference](#)) *Femme nue Femme noire* puts an end to the muteness assigned to women's bodies.

"To understand how women become pregnant, because in our world, some words are nonexistent" is Irene Fofa's primary goal as the main character of this novel. After waiting for 15 years, she finally frees herself from the grip of a mother who is too worried about "the blood that flows between her legs." But Irene's spirit is just as energetic as her menstrual flow. On a morning when the sky seems to be incredibly undisturbed, Irene decides to leave the insular world of her mother for a journey that is to help her name the unnamed sex and to devour it until ecstasy.

On the quay, she makes herself an explorer; a detector of "things that are not given [to me] . . . domains inaccessible to ordinary miracles." In the midst of men's voices and children's cries, Irene detects the object of her dreams: a bag "laying between the legs of a woman." Unfortunately for Irene, what she has happily discovered is not a man.

In her escape, angry men denounce Irene using the masculine "*Au voleur! Au voleur!*" (Oh robber! Oh robber!). Irene is actually accused of stealing the dead baby's body: a crime that could send her to jail for the rest of her life, or, indeed, to the mortuary.

The society believes that Irene's behavior puts her in the ranks of the "burning-women" killers or the robbers of men's bags (*bursa*), and by extension their paternity/virility. Irene is one of these "women-husbands" whose sexual desires kindle men's fears, and, worse, their inquisitorial zeal. Her crime of "outrage against paternity" makes her eligible to join the sorority of witches who challenge the "circles of fire" until she vanishes into exile.

She takes refuge in a Negro-Muslim neighborhood "unknown to her" where women "speak to one another with warm words" despite the violence and inequalities exhibited in the surrounding "social comedy." Once in this marshy little town, Irene pretends to be a wealthy heiress as a mantle in the face of poverty. But "innocence as good manners is nothing but deceit." She fornicates with the "unknown" while "pretending to move forward in the furnace of this sleepy town" she hates.

Irene is not fond of ruins. The lifeless colors of the city leave her breathless, similar to her lack of emotions for the men in her life. In sum, Irene "understands [the posturing of different characters] . . . but disapproves" of their hypocrisy; showing difference by her indifference. "Here, the ugliness, sublimated by human intelligence, explodes under the sky of a cataclysmic disorder."

In her exile, Irene forgets the hierarchical settings of sexual roles. She is lost in her frolics with Ousmane under a mango tree. Then with Fatou (Ousmane's wife) both women tune in to their respective secret frequencies "as long distance radio stations intercept hazardously by thick nights" until they extract from their bodies "the last juices of inhibition." But it is difficult for two women, even in the closet, to really be alone. Neither the bedrooms nor the newspapers are willing to hide them for long or to protect them from the sex police. There are too many unforeseen obstacles; too many injunctions to "change direction" or to be strangled by the terrifying shadows of the police.

Although many men, both fictional and real, appear in Irene's erotic, empiric universe, only Fatou feeds her with love. Both women discuss childbearing, but maternity is not the only focus of their lives. Sexuality in *Femme nue Femme noire* is jauntily unproductive and magisterially creative. As an example, the levirate [the law by which a

man marries his brother's widow] imprisons grandmothers as bedfellows for younger males but even in an "artificial situation" like this, the "withered old women" reinvent their relationships in pro-creative and re-creative dimensions.

Calixthe Beyala's female characters are far from being egg-laying chickens. Libidinous women, they form a web of mixed desires. Fatou offers to Irene a "roof"; an intimate but open space for both sexual and political activism; denunciation and reconciliation. They create a space to navigate men's fancies and speculations, each one featuring his portion of indifference.

Through poetic writing, Calixthe Beyala undresses the mechanical sexuality of false modesty and the status quo and transforms it into political eroticism. Beyala's *engagé* eroticism is a collective movement of submissions and withdrawals, revolts and coups, in which orgies rebel against the monopoly and other forms of privatization and abject domestication. Women's bodies are invested with innate rights.

When Irene couples with Eva (Hayatou's wife) in a homosexual union, it is formed to resist the destructive forces that "suck" the vital energies that empower creativity. Be it global or local, eroticism for the sake of egoistic pleasure is immoral. In a mystical embrace, Irene and Eva cross and uncross the knots of abstinence until new visions are born in their nude bodies; a "heavenly music [that only they can] understand . . . a woman . . . the elixir against death." For Irene and Eva, "the sun has not yet set." There is enough light for the seeds of freedom to bloom when resignation and resistance kiss each other.

However, it is important to notice that *Femme nue Femme noire* is not about sexual identities. Sexuality here "is not an idea to debate, a law to parley, a scarecrow to agitate, an insanity to protest against or simulate on TV screens." According to one character, sex is not where to find a "sense of orientation." Sexuality is liberated of any orientation and expectation. It is naked and terrifically creative. However, this metamorphosis is not yet beneficial to women nor to their fetuses, which are merely viewed as commodities. Eva becomes pregnant but never delivers her baby.

Far from prescribing, Beyala describes what is simply mimed in the heart of her native equatorial forest. By deconstructing the categories, she also deconstructs the agents and their fields of action. The characters are never static: "Ousmane holds a chicken that he sodomized as if it was a woman."

The black woman in the image of Africa is a naked woman; the pre-colonial woman of ever-present dreams. A woman's desires, however, are still censored on the "Black Continent." Africa is a house where no one "supports the cries of pleasures of women."

At 16, when Irene decides to return to her mother, she is fully aware of the dangers ahead. She wants to "remain mistress of her skin" because of the threat of being sold on the "matrimonial" markets where women are viewed as '*congélés*' (**). These purchased marriages are problematic, as many don't last and women are "recycled" on the market. Irene's return home exhibits her willingness to break the vicious circle of denial of the vice in this formal and informal industry.

These traditional and modern markets are growing, thanks in part to the World Bank's development-related "restrictions" that negatively affect the representations of women's bodies. This is especially true in Africa where war is becoming the biggest employer of all. How are we going to break the powerful "norm" of national and global dictatorships that successfully manage to tax the impoverished? With whom are we going to "blow up his buttons, his zippers, his belts, all that is dear to man and gives him a complex of superiority" but not security? Considering the cultural, economic, political nudities and the growth of insecurity, Irene Fofó suggests a therapy of a "shared pleasure." She and her same-sex partners create a new way of relating to the socio-cultural, the economic, the political, and the religious.

This is a noble dream, but a difficult one to fulfill for a black woman who knows that her destiny "is decided there, in the hands of men who carry iron's bars." Irene succeeds in her adventurous life to undress some men but disarms none. Battered and abandoned at a corner of a route, her clothes are torn up by her aggressors, as was the

robe of Christ. She is left naked with only her skin as a garment and her congealed blood as its color. "Help! Please help me!" cries Irene's mother, who wants her daughter to come back to life. Please, if you hear her crying, help save Irene from dying. We have so much to learn from her.

Notes:

* The book reviewed here is not yet translated into English. All of the translations in the following article are my own.

** '*Congélé*' is a Cameroonian slang word to designate second-hand merchandise imported from Europe. The '*congelé*' (frozen) is a commodity that loses its sensibility. The '*congelé*' verbalizes the anti-social and anti-(real and sustainable) development processes and actions that keep the global South economically dependent on the North. The '*congelé*' (cold) occupies a lot of space and melts under the fire (sun) of Africa without leaving a souvenir. So, indeed, are women melting under patriarchy. This is because they are "recycled" and treated in commercial and sexist ways.

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