

The Female Condition
in the Novels of
Gabonese Writer
Sylvie Ntsame

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By

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Dedicated to the women who have impacted my life most,
my late mother Monica Kyiiripuo, for your love, humility, and dignity
my sisters Zenobia Kyoore, Rev. Sr. Beatrice Kyoore, Lawrencina Kyoore
my wife Martha Kamanda

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INTRODUCTION

Critics have lamented that African women have always been the object of other people's stories. According to Renée Larrier, in her work titled *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean*, whether it was outsiders or insiders, women's perspectives have been rarely presented; their voices seldom privileged (2000, 28). African women have responded to this situation through their fictional creation and their critical works, through which they have been telling their stories in their own ways. This study interrogates several determining factors that fashion the lives of women in African society, as fictionally depicted by Gabonese female novelist Sylvie Ntsame. The factors that dominate the lives of women are especially social and cultural. Using diverse feminist theories, among others, I interrogate how the lives of the female characters are dictated by patriarchal systems in contemporary African society. However, I do not suggest that patriarchy is the only determining factor in the lives of African women.

Ghanaian writer and critic Ama Ata Aidoo characterizes African women as a sort of riddle. That, in her view, is because whether they are formally educated or not, traditional, or modern, they do not fit the accepted Western notion of themselves as mute beasts of burden. Yet they are certainly not as free and as equal as African men would have African women believe. Thus, for Aidoo, feminism is an essential tool for women's struggles everywhere, and that includes African women (1996, 163). Many other African women writers and critics have expressed the same stance as Aidoo. For example, as Blessing Diala-Ogamba has commented on Egyptian writer and activist Nawal El Saadawi, "El Saadawi is geared towards infusing the literary cannon not only with the oppressed women but also with women who try to change the society in a subtle way" (Diala-Ogamba, 2021, 50). Whether or not Ntsame would characterize herself as a feminist, what matters is that in her fictional creation, she is committed to challenging the subservient position that men in her society continue to impose on their female counterparts. I say this, despite her claim in my interview with her that she did not set out specifically to write about women, but rather that in depicting the realities of life, writing led her to paint realities about the female condition (Ntsame, interview with Kyoore, 2022). In the same vein, on the issue of conflict of tradition and modernity which

characterizes the relationship of characters in her novels, Ntsame explained that she develops her characters without a sense of stigmatizing their behaviors, because she wants her characters to resolve conflicts in an amicable manner, as we see by the reconciliatory tone of a novel like *Malédiction*.

This study aims to contribute to an already rich body of scholarship in a field that I would say has grown exponentially over the last twenty years. African women writers emerged later than their male counterparts on the literary scene because they were not offered the same opportunities for formal education as their male peers. Of course, I am referring here to specifically written literature produced in European languages, for African women have always been important producers and bearers of oral literatures of their society. This phenomenon of being late comers in the literary scene, as Christopher Miller puts it lucidly, raises questions concerning the relation of literate culture to patriarchy, the control of literary production, and the process of canon formation outside the boundaries of Western canons (Miller 247). However, I don't think we can still proclaim with accuracy that francophone African women writers are not given attention. That attention might not be at the desirable level, but it has certainly grown. Before you make any conclusions about my statement, consider the following. In countries such as the USA and Canada for instance, francophone African literature, especially women's writing, receives a relative amount of attention in courses taught in French, as well as in scholarship in general. There are colleagues who did not specialize in francophone African literatures and cultures in their graduate work but who, to their great credit, publish articles on the field, and incorporate the works of francophone African women writings into their courses. I am not by this suggesting that scholarship on francophone African women writers is at its apogee and so we should not have any concerns about how much this scholarship should have grown, and in which direction it should go. We have a situation whereby Africa is still relatively marginalized in the curricula of universities in the USA and Canada for example. I am cognizant of this in my assessment that francophone African women writers now receive considerably more attention in teaching and scholarship. Irène Assiba d'Almeida in the introductory chapter of her book on francophone African women writers explains that she uses silence as a metaphor for the title of her book as it recurs frequently in feminist discourse, and because silence represents the historical muting of women in patriarchal societies (1994, 1). She goes on to assert that if women have made significant social advances by challenge and accommodation, by opposition, resistance, and subversion, it is still a reality that there is enforced silence on them (d'Almeida 1994,

1). As Régina Odjola, among others, puts it, “La femme s’est toujours vue racontée par l’homme et non par la femme elle-même dans de nombreuses œuvres littéraires” (161) [Women have always been the subject of narration by men and not by women themselves in many literary works]. The works of contemporary women writers such as Ntsame need to be read against the backdrop of this silence that was imposed on African women. When Odjola laments that “En effet, les seules responsabilités fondamentales qui lui {la femme} ont été assignées restent l’éducation des enfants et les activités ménagères » (161) [Indeed, the only fundamental responsibilities assigned her {the woman} are the education of children and house chores], she makes a genuine commentary. However, I would also say that it is not entirely accurate. Acknowledging the reality of other important social and economic roles that the African woman plays in her society does not diminish this other reality of silence that the patriarchal system imposes on her in varied ways. French feminist Hélène Cixous’s commentary on the status of women vis-à-vis men might sometimes have limited relevance or accuracy in the African context¹. Nonetheless, I see how relevant some of her commentary is to the mission of African women writers such as Ntsame. Cixous tiraded (and I use the word in a positive sense) that “woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing” (Cixous 2010, 27). She believed that until then, writing had been controlled by a libidinal and cultural economy, a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated. Cixous observed that it is out of ignorance that both male and female readers, critics, and writers hesitate to admit or deny outright the possibility or the pertinence of a distinction between feminine and masculine writing. Consequently, she called on “women [to] break out of the snare of silence” (33). Through her fictional creation, Ntsame is breaking out of the silence that African women writers had experienced for a long time. She challenges cultural practices that directly or indirectly encourage the repression of women; and invites us to acknowledge the distinction between feminine and masculine writing. She does this by choosing to represent the female condition in her own way, and within the Fang, and by extension the African, cultural context. In breaking out of what Cixous calls the “snare of silence”, Ntsame does what Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi characterizes as the transformational role of women writers with a cause, which is to act as griotte, as entertainer, teacher, social critic, ideologue, and wise but despised mother (1996, 31). The characterization as “despised mother”, nonetheless, is problematic. All in all, in reading the works of African women writers, we must, as Bâ-Ginette Curry cautions, recognize that patriarchal constructions of gender are done within specific

cultures, and that “it is important to realize the complexity of African women voices in their different cultures” (Curry 2004, 2).

As far as literary production is concerned, even though African women came onto the scene later than men because they were offered less opportunities for formal education, the situation has since evolved. As Chantal Magalie Mbazoo Kassa has observed “La position de la femme est passée du stade de passivité sociologique à celui de sujet productrice de discours et d’écriture. La femme devient alors moteur de l’histoire et du texte littéraire » (12) [The position of women has moved from the stage of sociological passivity to that of producer of discourse and writing. Women then become engines of history and literary texts]. Gabonese women writers are testimony to this phenomenon of being producers of history and literary texts.

Like other francophone African women writers, Ntsame fictionalizes the female condition in her four novels, to create an awareness of social norms and traditions which continue to pose serious challenges to the dignity and the identity of the female in African society; and that is what I discuss in this study. One can safely say that francophone African women writers have revolted against the silence that was imposed on them in fictional and critical works by their male counterparts. The quantity and quality of this literature speaks for itself.

When far back in 1986, Kembe Milolo wrote her book on the image of the woman in the novels of female francophone Black African novelists, she made an observation that is worth reflecting on today: “Les romancières... n’ont pu différer la tâche de faire revivre la femme réelle, dans son existence concrète, en exprimant avec justesse les sentiments féminins. Cette volonté va de pair avec le souci de libérer la femme du poids de certaines coutumes, croyances, institutions et rites absurdes, maintenus par le seul esprit de routine ou d’autorité » (4) [The female novelists... could not postpone the task of reviving the real woman in her concrete existence, by expressing women’s feelings with accuracy. This desire goes hand in hand with the desire to free women from the weight of certain absurd customs, beliefs, institutions, and rituals maintained by the mere spirit of routine and authority]. Since the time Milolo made this observation, there have been more scores of francophone African women who have written novels in which they have portrayed the African woman in diverse manners in a bid to free women from these absurd customs and beliefs. In the four novels that I discuss in this study, Ntsame declares that she wants to educate the outsider on the beauty of African culture. At the same time, she portrays the African woman in a manner that questions some entrenched customs and institutions that tend to maintain women in a subjugated position by

endorsing an unequal status for her vis-à-vis her male counterpart. Taken together, what one can conclude from Ntsame's fictional creation is that she is a writer who seeks a realistic equilibrium in how Africans navigate the conflict between tradition and so-called modernity. Before Ntsame, the Senegalese writer Aminata Saw Fall had declared such a position in an interview.

[...] si j'avais à conseiller une femme intellectuelle, je lui indiquerais le juste milieu. Cela veut dire: ne pas s'enfermer dans le carcan du passé, mais aussi ne pas se laisser aveugler par le mirage d'un certain modernisme... Nous avons un fond d'humanisme qu'il serait tout à fait stupide de bafouer, sous prétexte d'entrer dans la modernité... Parce que dès le moment où nous bafouons notre propre passé, c'est notre identité que nous bafouons et nous allons vers une perte (in Milolo 297).

[...if I had to advise an intellectual woman, I would show her the middle ground. This means: do not lock yourself in the shackles of the past, but also do not let yourself be blinded by the mirage of some modernism... We have a body of humanism that it would be completely foolish to flout under the pretext of entering modernity... Because, as soon as we flout our own past, it is our identity that we flout and we are headed for a loss].

African identity is more complex than some outsiders perceive it. Understanding the female condition in that society entails dissecting the complexities of the discourses that shape the perception of the African woman. Through her fictional creation, Ntsame participates in a discourse that invites her readers to dissect the complexity of the condition of the African woman. In discussing the female condition in her novels, I draw attention to the need to question any uncritical use of Western feminist theories in discussions on the African woman's condition. Discussion on this issue is not new, and we should not dismiss earlier works on the subject matter, because they are still very relevant. As Carole Boyce Davies has lucidly observed, there is a need to liberate African peoples from different forms of oppression, coupled with a respect for certain features of traditional African cultures. At the same time, we must be cognizant of the influence of the international women's movement and the recognition that a feminist consciousness is necessary in the examining of the position of women in African societies (Davies 1). What Davies calls a tension in this double allegiance, informs some of my commentary in subsequent chapters of this study. My discussion of the female condition in Ntsame's novels is also informed by the characteristics of a genuine African feminism that Davies

identified in her study. This form of African feminism, she opines, is not antagonistic to African men, but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from generalized oppression of all African peoples. Furthermore, as she explains, African feminist consciousness recognizes certain inequities and limitations that existed in traditional societies and were reinforced by colonialism. So, whilst acknowledging affinities with international feminism, it delineates a specific African feminism inspired by the concrete needs and experience of women in African societies. Davies argues further that African feminism should identify those institutions in African societies which are of value to women; and reject those which are detrimental to the welfare of women, without simply importing Western women's agendas. In this vein, African feminism respects African women's status as mother but questions attitudes that compel motherhood and traditional favoring of sons. Other feminists have similarly cautioned against a tendency by certain Western feminists to impose their worldview on African feminists. For example, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi makes the following observation: "If we review the constant attempt by Western feminists to run African women's lives in conferences without hearing or heeding what we have to say, the other side of our burden becomes clear—Western women are as much of a problem to us as black men, yet it be worthwhile to work or walk with them, at least some of the way" (1996, 107). Likewise, Obioma Nnaemeka has quipped about how "Feminist politics makes the silencing, trivialization, and misrepresentation of African women possible (Nnaemeka 1995, 104). Accordingly, we should heed her advice that "As feminists interrogate other societies and other texts, they must be humble enough to listen to the responses that are whispered into their ears" (Nnaemeka, 106). In a more recent study, Josephine Beoku-Betts and Akosua Adomako Ampofo have expressed a similar stance on the imposition of Western feminist ideas on non-Western societies.

Southern feminist scholars have...challenged the privileging of western feminism over other feminisms, viewing this as a replication of colonial hegemony. They express frustration in having to conform to and be excluded from the dictates of shared intellectual space in feminist theoretical works, some of which cannot adequately explain situated differences or complex social arrangements that shape women's experiences and concerns about gender equality in the global South (Beoku-Betts and Ampofo 2021, 4).

These views on African and non-Western feminism in general expressed by Davies, Ogunyemi, Nnaemeka and others are particularly salient and should guide us in the discussion of the female condition in Ntsame's *Malédiction* and *Mon amante, femme de mon père*, respectively. This is so particularly because as an African writer, Ntsame takes a compelling stance vis-à-vis the tension between tradition and modernity, but is also averse to the impact of acculturation on Africans, as well as the distorted and ethnocentric perceptions of Africans by Westerners.

Scholarship on francophone African women writers include among others, studies by Irène Assiba d'Almeida, *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* (1994), Odile Cazenave, *Femmes rebelles: Naissance d'un nouveau roman africain au féminin* (1996), Renée Larrier, *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean* (2000), and Nicki Hitchcott, *Women Writers in Francophone Africa* (2000). Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi's study covers both francophone and anglophone African women writers: *Gender in African women writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (1997). In her study titled *L'écriture du corps féminin dans la littérature de l'Afrique francophone au sud du Sahara*, Nathalie Etoke discusses works of several francophone male and female writers. In Etoke's study, there is diversity in terms of the nationality of the writers but also in the ways in which these writers fictionalize about the female African body. Etoke stated at the time that "Le discours critique sur les représentations du corps dans la littérature de l'Afrique francophone au sud du Sahara en est encore à ses balbutiements" (Etoke, 2010a, 9) [Critical discourse on the representations of the body in the literature of French-speaking Africa south of the Sahara is still in its infancy]. We could not say this today, because African critical works on the female African body has passed this stage. In another study published the same year, on what she calls "la condition du noir" [the condition of Black people], Nathalie Etoke calls on Africans (and their descendants of the Diaspora) to look inside the specificity of their own conditions of life instead of the West for what defines their identity:

Au lieu de nous enformer dans un mimétisme stérile, nous devrions nous pencher sur la spécificité de nos conditions de vie et fournir des réponses adaptées aux tensions inhérentes à notre devenir historique. En appliquant des grilles de lecture élaborées par l'Autre, nous voulons copier sa modernité, manifestation inopérante chez nous. Notre identité est prisonnière du regard occidental. Elle s'en distingue de manière essentialiste ou revendique un universalisme par défaut (Etoke 2010b, 83).

[Instead of confining ourselves to sterile mimicry, we should question ourselves about the specificity of our living conditions and provide appropriate responses to the tensions inherent in our historical evolution. By applying frameworks of interpretation that have been formulated by the Other, we want to copy their modernity, clearly unworkable for us. Our identity is trapped in the Western gaze. It distinguishes itself from it in an essentialist way or claims universalism by default].

Etoke's position aligns with that of Davies who, as we have captured in our commentary above, admonishes African feminists to not simply import Western women's agendas. These are just a few, as well as scores of articles in both French and English that have focused on female writers. Some other works have focused on both male and female francophone African writers. It is my hope that this study will contribute to sharpening interest in a field that already attracts considerable attention on the part of scholars. By focusing on the novels of Sylvie Ntsame, this study draws attention to the important literary production by women writers from Gabon.

Sylvie Ntsame is Gabonese, and she was educated in Gabon and France. She worked as secretary in several ministries of the government of Gabon; and also served as president of the *Union des écrivains gabonais* for a good number of years. Also, she is a member of the Alliance Internationale des Éditeurs indépendants, founder of the Salon International du Livre des Arts de Libreville, and president of the Alliance des Éditeurs de l'Afrique Centrale. Ntsame published her first three novels with the Parisian maison d'édition L'Harmattan: *Malédiction*, *La fille du Komo*, and *Mon amante, femme de mon père*. In 2011, she launched her own publishing house in Libreville (Gabon) called Éditions Ntsame, because she wanted to create better opportunities for Gabonese writers. She has since published a collection of folktales with her own publishing house entitled *Le soir autour du feu: contes*. Ntsame wants her publications to be entirely produced in Gabon. Also, she believes that copyrights should belong to writers and not their publishers. In 2001, she founded an association, "Sourire à l'enfant démunis," to help poor children. An avid reader at an early age, Ntsame wrote a love story while in secondary school, but could not publish it for lack of means. She declared that her aim in writing is to portray how the African woman is the embodiment of values, and the center of what makes an African family function. Nevertheless, as she quips, men make the rules and deprive women of their rights (Mambu 52). Her first novel is about interracial love and relationship. Other Francophone African writers before her touched on the theme of interracial relationships: Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury (*Les couples dominos: Aimer dans la différence*, 1973),

Mariama Bâ (*Un chant écarlate*, 1981), and Ousmane Socé Diop (*Mirages de Paris*, 1937). However, the writer that probably influenced Ntsame the most was her compatriot Angèle Ntyugwétondo Rawiri (Toman 36). Contemporary Gabonese writers continue to be interested in portraying the different facets of Gabonese culture in contact with the demands of modernity (Odounga 161). Like other African writers, Ntsame acknowledges that she navigates between tradition and modernity.

Cheryl Toman observes that “In the United States and Canada where the African Francophone novel has arguably gained more critical attention than in France, the Gabonese novel—not to mention all other genres of literature—has been relatively unknown and there is a dearth of criticism in English” (Toman, 2016, x). It should be noted that Gabonese literature is characterized by a high number of female novelists. Gabon has the distinction of being one of the countries where a woman was the first to publish a novel. As Toman (xv) has observed, Gabonese national literature is mainly driven by women, who today dominate the younger generation of the country’s writers.

Ntsame belongs to a generation of female African writers whose works have attracted attention from readers and critics alike. As noted above, female Francophone African writers arrived later on the literary scene after their male counterparts, because women were generally afforded fewer opportunities for formal education. However, with access to African publishing houses, they can now publish and be read beyond national boundaries (Dehon 95). Two recent studies focus on female writers from Gabon (Mba-Zué; Toman). Cheryl Toman’s is the first critical work that exposes Gabonese writing to the Anglophone world. In this study, I focus on only Ntsame’s novels, and I also do a closer discussion of these works with a different focus than Toman did in her study. Toman informs us that the 1991 special issue of *Notre Librairie* (Éd. Honorine Ngou) was the first important critical work on Gabonese writers in France (ix). This is the context in which I discuss the female condition in Ntsame’s novels. In the study, I am informed not only by literary critical works, but also by relevant works by anthropologists particularly in my discussion of issues such as kinship and polygamy which are prevailing discourses in the lives of some of the female characters in Ntsame’s novels. The first chapter focuses on the idealization of love in *La Fille de Komo*, whereas the second chapter discusses patriarchal dictatorship in *Malédiction* that poses challenges to a family. The female condition in the latter novel portrays a theme that is dear to Ntsame in her writing: conflict between tradition and modernity. In the third chapter, I discuss the female condition in the novel *Mon amant, femme de mon père*, in the context of the power of patriarchy in polygynous

marriages. Egyptian radical feminist Nawal El Saadawi has lamented in her writing that “the oppression of women...constitutes an integral part of the political, economic, and cultural system, preponderant in most of the world” (1980, i). Some of that oppression stems from the power that patriarchy endows upon men in a polygynous relationship, as we see in Ntsame’s *Mon amante, femme de mon père*. For Saadawi, only radical change can abolish the ascendancy of men over women within the family unit which in her view constitutes the core of patriarchal class relations (1980, i). In the final chapter of the study, I draw on several studies on feminist views on prostitution, to do a close discussion of prostitution and violence in *Femme libérée, battue*. I am particularly interested in interrogating some feminist views that female prostitution gives agency to women who practice it. I also draw on some feminist stance that argues that female prostitution cannot in any way be a source of agency for women, but that it is rather a debasing, dehumanization, of the female body by males who exercise their power over women. In the same chapter, I discuss in detail what seems like some gratuitous violence that characterizes the second part of Ntsame’s novel, and question what purpose it serves in portraying the female condition.

Note

¹ From an African cultural perspective, I am particularly averse to Hélène Cixous’s idea that writing “has been one with the phallogocentric tradition” (*Le rire de la Méduse*). The notion of a phallogocentric system that according to her is the way to see the relationship between men and women reduces gender relationship to the male sexual organ as a metaphor for men’s domination over women. That to me is problematic in the reading of African works.

CHAPTER ONE

LA FILLE DU KOMO AND IDEALIZATION OF INTERRACIAL LOVE

In this first chapter, I will focus on the theme of interracial love and relationships in *La Fille du Komo* (2004), Ntsame's first novel. I see the story in the novel as an idealization of love by a female African writer who depicts a utopian interracial relationship against the backdrop of stereotypes and myths that work to stifle such relationships. *La fille du Komo* is characterized here as an idealization of love because that is how Ntsame challenges stereotypes that prevail across cultures and between genders. She idealizes love by going back to her cultural roots and by calling for understanding between peoples of diverse ethnicities and cultures. *La fille du Komo* is Ntsame's first but also her best-known novel. My study of this novel is also informed and inspired by what Ntsame in her L'Harmattan interview declared to be the theme of her novel. In that interview, Ntsame expressed her feelings about why love should be an important theme for writers, when she said, "Pourquoi l'amour? Parce que j'estime que l'amour est le plus beau sentiment qui puisse exister et puisse rendre quelqu'un gai, serein. Et dans un monde où les gens ne font plus attention à l'amour il est de notre devoir, nous écrivains, de revaloriser l'amour parce que l'amour est au-delà de toutes choses" (Ntsame Interview with L'Harmattan 2010) [Why love? Because I believe that love is the most beautiful feeling that can exist and can make someone happy, serene. And in a world where people no longer pay attention to love, it is our duty, we writers, to revalorize love, because love is beyond everything]. It might sound to us like an exaggeration when Ntsame opines that people don't pay attention to love anymore. Maybe, it is her way of expressing what she observed happening in interracial marriages in France. Through her pronouncement, we see why she chose to create an idealized love relationship in her novel *La Fille du Komo* as a sort of utopian vision of love and race relationships.

In France, the "official racial *invisibility* has complicated discussions on difference" (Thomas 60). The discussion in this chapter draws on various studies on race relations in France, as well as on the

“objectification” of the female body.¹ Ntsame wrote a love story because she believes love is a beautiful and important theme that writers need to explore. She specifically chose to depict an interracial couple because, for her, interracial relationships are about the real world, accepting people, and tolerance. As Mba-Zué puts it, she dreams of a “monde idéal” [ideal world] (244). This explains why the intercultural contacts in *La fille du Komo* are harmonious, unlike in Ntsame’s other novels. The two main characters represent two worlds, two cultures. *La fille du Komo* is about a French man (Georges) and a Gabonese woman (Roberte) who fall in love. Their relationship provokes stereotypes and racism from some of Georges’s relatives. Because in France interracial marriages often end in divorce, Ntsame wanted to create fictional characters whose relationship could make her readers question stereotypes about interracial relationships. After all, there are not more divorces in interracial marriages than there are in other types of marriages in Western cultures.

For Africans living in France, race relations are about postcolonial dynamics. Colonialism created hierarchies in which the colonized subject was relegated to the bottom (Radovic 190). This politics of difference is manifest in the perception of Roberte and other Africans by the family of her lover Georges. Chapman and Frader assert that French social norms include an aversion to discussing race in the way it is done in American society (1). Since the French Revolution, the founding myth emphasizes the unitary, universalist, and inclusive nature of the Republic, creating a mentality of color-blindness that explains how contemporary French society discusses matters of racial and ethnic difference (Chapman and Frader 4).

In *La fille du Komo*, cultural and racial diversity in France is visible in public places such as open markets where food is sold by immigrants from different parts of the world, including countries that were colonized by France. When Roberte comes out of the metro one day, she is struck by the wide variety of the food that is displayed at the market: “Roberte se faufille entre les étals malodorants de poisson: truites, dorades, maquereaux... Aussi continue-t-elle sa visite passant devant bouchers et vendeurs de produits tropicaux” [Roberte meanders between smelly fish stalls: trout, sea bream, mackerel...She continues her visit, passing by butchers and sellers of tropical products] (13). This culinary diversity is a metaphor for racial and ethnic diversity in France: “Les couleurs rouge et jaune du piment, verte et jaune des bananes, verte et violette des aubergines, et des atangas attirent votre regard, et vous incitent à acheter. Noir, Jaune, et Blanc des peuples s’unissent et se tolèrent dans l’alimentation” (13) [The red and yellow colors of chili, green and yellow of bananas, green and violet of eggplants, and of atangas attract your gaze, and entice you to buy. Black, Yellow, and White

peoples unite and tolerate each other through food]. Nonetheless, this racial diversity becomes a source of conflict, as we see through the microcosm of the relationship that develops between the main characters of the novel. Ntsame challenges this tendency for racial differences to become a source of conflict, and she does this by creating an idealized love relationship.

In the novel, a romantic relationship between a French man and a Gabonese woman faces challenges due to their cultural and racial differences. When Roberte cannot accept Georges's marriage proposal without consulting with her parents, George and his parents are bewildered, because they do not appreciate cultural differences. Roberte tries to educate her French lover on African culture: "On n'est jamais seul, tout se partage. C'est cette chaleur, cette solidarité, ce lien familial qui m'empêche de me décider" (43) [One is never alone, everything is shared. It is this warmth, this solidarity, this family bond which prevents me from deciding]. It is revealing that she has to ask for Georges's permission in order to visit her family in Gabon, and also that it is only possible after some passionate lovemaking: "Un soir, après avoir bien fait l'amour, elle profite de la sérénité qui suit pour convaincre Georges de la laisser partir pour quelques semaines de vacances au pays" (71) [One evening, after making love, she takes advantage of the serenity that follows to convince Georges to let her go for a few weeks on holiday to the country]. Roberte is expected to sacrifice her African cultural values, to satisfy Georges's family. However, their relationship will become a source of education for the French family. When Roberte travels home to Gabon, she falls seriously ill, but does not inform Georges. When he can no longer bear her absence and travels to Gabon, Georges's experiences become an intellectual and cultural initiation for him, and eventually for his parents. As Ntsame herself comments in her interview with Kyoore (2022), in visiting Gabon, Georges goes to the source to discover the richness and the enviable quality of Fang, of African culture. He comes to discover Africa in its cultural diversity. Moreover, when Georges's parents travel to Gabon, his mother positively changes her vision of Africans, and of Black people.

As an authorial voice in the novel intimates: "Il n'y a pas de peuple primitif. Chaque peuple se développe par la richesse de sa culture, ce qui ne lui interdit pas de s'ouvrir aux autres" (110) [There are no primitive people. All peoples develop through the richness of their culture, something which does not prevent them from opening up to others]. In interracial marriages, the contact between two cultural systems increases the number of people who have a stake in the relationship. Georges is initially ill-informed about Africa, as we see in his comment to Roberte: "Tu sais, en France, je n'imaginai pas que l'Afrique était aussi riche en enseignements. On ne

nous montre pas le côté positif de la culture africaine: la solidarité, les valeurs morales, l'entente et l'entraide" (104) [You know, in France, I never imagined that Africa was so rich in teachings. We are not shown the positive side of African culture: solidarity, moral values, understanding and mutual assistance]. As Odile Cazenave has noted, "travel is favorable to the discovery of both others and the unknown as well as the discovery of the self" (20). For Roberte, travelling to France and starting a relationship with a French man leads to self-discovery, which calls for a re-examination of her cultural identity. Ntsame's stance on culture recalls in some ways the Negritude discourse of generations past that sought to revalorize African cultures in the face of Western society's superiority complex vis-à-vis other cultures. As a female African writer, Ntsame rejects Western stereotypes about African cultures, and seeks to revalorize the positive values of her culture, even if she is at the same time very critical of those African traditions that disempower women.

This notion of valorizing what is positive in African cultures is reinforced in the interactions between Georges, and Roberte and her relatives, during his visit to Gabon. While in a bar with Roberte and her cousin, Georges learns that a young man called Joël is at the bar to look for women with whom he can have sex. Georges learns that this behavior stems from a customary rite, which calls for a widower to have sex to "purify" himself after the death of his wife. Georges rightly finds it appalling that Gabonese people would perpetuate a rite that encourages the exploitation of women. Having unprotected sex exposes the women (as well as the man) to the danger of transmissible diseases: "Cette histoire bouleversante tourmente Georges à tel point qu'il n'a plus envie de rester dans ce lieu. En voyant ce Joël siroter une boisson tranquillement au bar, Georges s'interroge: 'Combien de Joël y a-t-il, parmi tous ces danseurs?' " (108) [This upsetting story torments Georges to such an extent that he no longer wants to stay in this place. Seeing this Joël sipping a drink quietly at the bar, Georges wonders: 'How many Joëls are there among all these dancers?' "].

Conflict between the characters constitutes an allegorical questioning of the masculine power that represses the rights of African women. Joël objectifies women by taking advantage of a customary rite to satisfy his sexual desires—a behavior that is sanctioned by the patriarchal system. The personal freedom of African women is often stifled, as they encounter the conflict between tradition and modernity. In the novel, women in Libreville have the liberty to go out as they wish, like their male counterparts. However, the objectification of women by men such as Joël reflects the reality of women's place in the society. This is made even more poignant in the experience of women who are "inherited" like objects by the

brother of their diseased husband: “Marie-Louise lui raconte les péripéties qu’elle vit depuis la mort de son mari, mais plus encore depuis que le petit-frère de son défunt mari a hérité d’elle et est devenu son époux” (145) [Marie-Louise tells her about the adventures she has been experiencing since her husband’s death, but more so since her late husband’s junior brother inherited her and became her husband]. What is even worse: “[C]et homme qui percevait pourtant la pension de son défunt frère, ne se souciait pas de la leur réserver [...] Marie-Louise ne travaille pas. De plus, elle est locataire” (146) [This man who received his late brother’s pension, did not care to save it for them...Marie-Louise does not work. Moreover, she is a tenant]. Ntsame is calling for a rejection of African traditions that trample on the rights of women and stifle progress in the society. Marie-Louise is financially and emotionally disempowered by the action of her late husband’s brother. In the introductory chapter, I alluded to Carol Boyce Davies’ characterization of what African feminism should be. She called for the need for feminist consciousness in the examination of the position of women, and this consciousness challenges inequalities and limitations that existed in traditional societies. Feminist consciousness rejects all institutions that are detrimental to the welfare of African women. Wife inheritance as we see happen to Marie-Louise in Ntsame’s novel, is an antiquated institution that dehumanized and objectified women and should not be allowed to persist in contemporary African society. The idea that the woman should not have the choice to not marry her deceased husband’s brother nullifies any argument about maintaining sustenance for her children within the late husband’s family. The idea of a widower having the right to “purify” himself by sleeping with women is equally abhorrent and falls within the institutions that are detrimental to women, because the practice objectifies them.

Because many interracial marriages end in divorce, Ntsame creates an idyllic relationship between Georges and Roberte, to demonstrate that such interracial and intercultural relationships can work. As I have intimated earlier, there are not more divorces in interracial marriages than there are in other types of marriages in Western cultures. Nonetheless, what Ntsame herself says in her interview with L’Harmattan about interracial marriages is very instructive in how we interpret the relationship between her fictional characters in *La Fille du Komo*.

Dans *La Fille du Komo*, il y a ce désir de faire connaître le Gabon, la culture gabonaise et les difficultés que l’on rencontre quand on vit en France lorsqu’il y a une relation mixte, parce que quand je commence à écrire, j’étais en France en 1991 à 1994 il y avait beaucoup de problèmes sur le mariage mixte. Parce

que certains mariages étaient blancs. Il y avait donc beaucoup de divorces après l'obtention du titre de séjour. Et moi, j'ai voulu ressortir ce sentiment qui puisse être sain entre [deux personnes], Georges qui aime Roberte qui est une Gabonaise. Ça me permettait donc de faire connaître la culture gabonaise et surtout de mettre un point parce que vous savez chez nous même quand on a cinquante ans et on a toujours l'âge de se marier, on se réfère toujours aux parents" (Ntsame L'Harmattan interview, 2010).

[In *La Fille du Komo*, there is this desire to educate people on Gabon. Gabonese culture and the difficulties that one encounters when one lives in France when there is a mixed relationship. Because when I start writing, I was in France from 1991 to 1994. There were a lot of problems with mixed marriages. Because some marriages were fake. So, there were a lot of divorces after obtaining the residence permit. And me, I wanted to highlight this feeling which could be healthy between [two people], Georges who loves Roberte who is a Gabonese. It therefore gave me an opportunity to educate on Gabonese culture, and above all to make a point. Because you know, where we come from, even when one is fifty years old and one is still within the age of marriage, one still consults one's parents].

In her interview with me in 2022, Ntsame reiterated her point about how fake marriages in France created a negative image in the minds of people concerning mixed race marriages. What she said was that, "Le roman [*La Fille du Komo*] peint une vision des années 1990 avec de grands problèmes raciaux en France. Pendant cette période, la recrudescence des mariages blancs ont fait douter de la réalité que deux personnes de couleur de peau différente pouvaient tomber véritablement amoureuses" (interview with Kyoore 2022) [The novel {*La Fille du Komo*} paints a picture of the 1990s with serious racial problems in France. During this period, the resurgence of sham marriages cast doubt on the reality that two people of different skin color could truly fall in love]. The problem of mistrust in these types of interracial relationships persists in French society today; and is even more acute because of contemporary opinions on immigration in that society that are shaped by strong political ideologies.

In the novel, when Georges travels to Gabon to find out why he has not heard from his lover after she travelled to her country, he discovers that she had fallen seriously ill. Treatment in a hospital with Western medicine did not help her. Therefore, the family took her to a rural village so that they could consult a traditional healer. As part of her treatment, the traditional healer requires that she undergo a spiritual healing ritual.

Georges, who has traveled to the village, is present when the healer makes his recommendation for Roberte's treatment. Georges asks that the healer also allow him to undergo the ritual. Roberte does not like the idea because Georges is not the one that is ill, and because a ritual is a dangerous venture into the "other world." Roberte does not want her lover to take such a risk. The healer explains to Georges why he should not have this experience, yet he gives in because of Georges's insistence. Among African communities, rituals are such a fundamental aspect of traditional healing that Roberte's status as a female is not an impediment in the healing process that the healer undertakes. Roberte's healing ritual is symbolically an initiation into the spiritual world from which she has been alienated thanks to Western education and modernity. In the Gabonese novel, initiation is presented as the quest for integrity and completeness. It seeks the entire human being, and is the guarantor of the person's unity. It is reconciliation with oneself, with others, with ancestors, and with God (Nguema Ondo 17). Roberte might not be going through some stipulated traditional initiation, but Ntsame presents the relationship of the lovers as symbolically such a spiritual experience.

Though Georges's decision to undertake the healing ritual with the sick lover who is undergoing treatment by a healer is his ultimate manifestation of love for Roberte, from the reader's perspective there is a lack of verisimilitude in the way the story evolves. It is unrealistic that an African traditional healer would allow a foreigner to undergo a healing ritual just to show his solidarity with a lover. Roberte's healing process brings two cultures into dialogue, into symbiosis, because the author wants to demonstrate through this allegory what African culture can offer to the West. In the process, it is a rejection of the colonialist gaze that thrived on myths and ethnocentrism vis-à-vis African cultures, embracing modernity with its quest for openness, and mutual respect for cultures. It cements the love between two people of different cultures and validates a world where dichotomies should only be a learning tool for bringing different worlds together. This fictional utopian world is altruistic, in the sense that despite the Manichean relationship between the West and Africa, the novel illustrates how African culture is welcoming and open to transcultural dialogue with the West.

In this interracial love between Roberte the Gabonese and George the French man, there is a spiritual and social dimension that speaks to the status of women in the society. Cheryl Toman in her study on women writers of Gabon, draws our attention to how the recital of the *Mvet* represents the philosophy and conscience of the Fang people, and is considered a uniting force of the diaspora. Although there are female

characters in the *Mvett*, women have been denied access to it by being prohibited from being initiated into the art form, and like all non-initiates, male and female, they are not allowed to interpret or perform it (Toman, 2016, 80). In *La Fille du Komo*, the narrator tells us that “Lors du retrait du deuil d’une femme, il n’y a pas de conteur de Mvett. Les contes du Mvett sont l’apanage exclusif des hommes” (140) [When the mourning period of a woman comes to an end, there is no Mvett storyteller. The tales of the Mvett are the exclusive prerogative of men]. As Toman observes, Ntsame uses the narrative as an opportunity to highlight how women are excluded from a sophisticated, celebrated traditional epic. She believes that “for an art that has traditionally excluded women, it is both ironic and bold that Ntsame, as a female author, has chosen to retell elements of the *mvett*, and furthermore, she does it most often through the eyes of her female protagonist, Roberte” (Toman, 2016, 80). I agree with Toman that when George is given the name Engouang Ondo, a name taken directly from the *mvett* epic poem, Ntsame shows the significance of George’s journey to win the heart of Roberte.

The idyllic relationship between the lovers—Roberte and George—is nonetheless undermined by racism. While the definition of racism might be a straightforward one for most people, it is helpful to consider how Tzvetan Todorov defines it: “Le mot ‘racisme’, dans son acception courante, désigne deux domaines très différents de la réalité: il s’agit d’une part d’un *comportement*, fait le plus souvent de haine et de mépris à l’égard de personnes ayant des caractéristiques physiques bien définies, et différentes des nôtres; et d’autre part d’une *idéologie*, d’une doctrine concernant les races humaines” (113) [The word ‘racism’, in its current sense, refers to two very different areas of reality: it is, on the one hand, a form of behavior, most often involving hatred and contempt for people with well-defined physical characteristics, and different from ours; and on the other hand an ideology, a doctrine concerning human races]. In the novel, the racist attitude toward Roberte is derived from the two. Despite Georges’s love for Roberte, for some of his family members, what matters is Roberte’s origins (a Gabonese, an African), and her race (a black woman). As mentioned earlier, according to Chapman and Frader, there is a reticence in France to call racism what it is. It is preferable to discuss it in veiled terms, to call it a question of cultural difference and integration. Also, there is a prevailing myth that racism in France “functions in a vacuum, within a race-less society, where certain groups are unable to assimilate or embrace French cultural norms” (Tshimanga et al. 6). Some groups are considered more capable of assimilation. Northern Europeans would assimilate most readily in France, followed in decreasing order by southern Europeans, Slavic

peoples, and lastly non-Europeans (Chapman and Frader 6). If, as David Beriss observes about comments made by his informants in his field work, for metropolitan French people “there are no generic black people. There are only members of specific cultures” (126), why is Roberte an object of stereotyping not just because she is an African but because she is a black woman?

When Roberte travels to Gabon, Georges begins to lose his mind and can barely function. Among his friends who come to give him moral support is Pierre. Pierre’s perception of what is happening to Georges stems from entrenched racism. Pierre cannot see Roberte as an individual who happens to be the lover of a Frenchman. All he sees in her is a black African woman. One consequence of the frequency of *mariages blancs* in France, especially in the 1990s, was the high level of divorce, as Ntsame herself observed in an interview that I have already referenced. The phenomenon reinforced French stereotypes that black Africans and others married their French lovers only to get their legal papers. However, as Jennifer Cole demonstrated in her study on the social transformation of Malagasy women who marry French men to emigrate to France, it is erroneous to think that it is a one-way affair in which foreigners take advantage of the French system. According to Cole, a small number of Malagasy women marry French men to be able to travel and work in France and to help their families financially. French men, meanwhile, exploit the economic vulnerability of Malagasy women, who often discover when they arrive in France, that the men they marry have not fared well on the local marriage market due to their employment, their age, or their looks (Cole, “Working” 280). In the novel, the best advice that Pierre can give his friend Georges, whose Gabonese lover has travelled home, is.

Je sais que c’est difficile à avaler, il y a quand même quelque chose qui m’intrigue... Vous vous souvenez que, durant son séjour, malgré l’amour que Georges avait affiché à son égard, elle n’a jamais accepté sa demande en mariage. Moi, je commençais à douter de ses sentiments. Était-elle amoureuse ou voulait-elle seulement d’un homme stable pendant son séjour en France? Vous connaissez les femmes noires, elles sont toutes pareilles, ergote Pierre, avec dédain (77).

[I know it’s hard to swallow, there is something that intrigues me...You will recall that during her stay, despite the love Georges had shown her, she has never accepted his marriage proposal. I was beginning to doubt about her feelings. Was she in love or did she only want a stable man during her stay in

France? You know black women, they are all the same, Pierre quips with disdain].

Pierre's prejudice blinds him from understanding African culture, which requires that before Roberte can accept a marriage proposal, she should consult with her family, even if the choice to marry is her prerogative. Moreover, Pierre talks about "les femmes noires" in generic terms. A black woman is thus perceived only in biological terms, much like Europeans, in their encounters with Africans, saw them as an undifferentiated mass. Pierre has reified the black woman, precluding any possible dialogue between cultures. At first, Georges's father (Séraphin Tonnelier) also had misgivings about his son dating Roberte: "Il s'est inquiété lorsque son fils a décidé de vivre avec une Noire. Julien, le neveu de Séraphin a vécu auparavant avec une fille de couleur et leur histoire d'amour a été un calvaire. La famille a gardé un très mauvais souvenir de cette idylle. La différence de peau et de culture a posé un problème. Mais il n'a pas osé le signifier à Georges" (15) [He became concerned when his son decided to live with a Black girl. Julien, Seraphin's nephew, has lived with a girl of color before and their love affair has been an ordeal. The family has a very bad memory of this romance. The difference in skin and culture was a problem. But he did not dare to tell Georges]. Skin color designates the black African as an "Other": "Of all the characteristics Africans possessed, their skin color seems to have elicited the most enduring tropes" (Gondola 152). Unlike other members of his family, Séraphin evolves as a character and sheds his stereotypes about blacks. However, the racism of Georges's mother toward Roberte is telling. If Rose-Marie Tonnelier shows any positive feelings toward Roberte, they are hypocritical. Her only goal is to protect the happiness of her son. Roberte is just a black African woman whose beauty and gentle personality is temporarily desirable for her son. When Roberte travels to Gabon, Rose-Marie advises her son to forget about this black African woman, whom she considers to be unfaithful and untrustworthy, simply because she did not accept her son's marriage proposal.

"S'il te plaît, oublie cette femme, qui de plus, est Noire. Nous savons tous ce que ces Noirs viennent chercher en Europe. Ton cousin a eu le même problème que toi. Je pensais que cela t'aurait servi de leçon." Jamais, Georges n'aurait imaginé que sa mère nourrissait de telles idées à l'endroit de Roberte. Sa mère a-t-elle laissé échapper un mot qui ait pu trahir son rejet de la Noire qu'il aime? (79)

["Please forget this woman, who moreover is Black. We all know what these Blacks come to Europe for. Your cousin had

the same problem as you. I thought that would have taught you a lesson". Georges never imagined that his mother had such ideas about Roberte. Did his mother let slip a word that might have betrayed her rejection of the Black woman he loves?]

Georges's mother's perception of black people is essentialist. She reacts to Georges's sister (Rébecca) who advises Georges to not listen to their mother's stereotypical attitude: "Ne vous leurrez pas, elle ne reviendra plus. Qui sait, elle est peut-être mariée en ce moment à un Africain comme elle" (79). [Don't be deceived, she won't return. Who knows, maybe she is currently married to an African like her]. When she claims that everyone knows what black people come to do in France, she is echoing a stereotype about immigrants. As Frederick Cooper noted, immigration laws of 1974 and the increase in anti-African and anti-Maghrebian xenophobia in the 1980s and 1990s led to a political discourse that emphasized France's republican values (115). This French relationship with immigrants is a form of dystopia, as displayed in the racism of Georges's mother. Cole observes that since they were targets of stereotypes, Malagasy women found it necessary to explain the moral legitimacy of their status to their kin and to the families of their French husbands ("The *téléphone*" 533). Similarly, Georges's mother questions the moral legitimacy of the relationship between her son and Roberte. As Sander Gilman reminds us in her important study on difference, pathology, sexuality, and race, in nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, in the minds of Europeans, Black females did not merely represent the sexualized female, they also represented the female as a source of corruption and disease. The innate fear of the Other, Gilman explains, was what drove the stigmata of difference (107). Rose-Marie Tonnelier is obsessed by the "Other" in Roberte. Metaphorically, she sees in Roberte a source of corruption and disease that pose a danger to her son and to French society. As Nathalie Etoke has observed in one of her works, racial identity is a social, cultural, and political invention rooted in relationships of domination. She further observes that "The degradation, marginalization, and criminalization of Black people guarantees the stability and permanence of the structures of domination (Etoke 2021, 231). Rose-Marie Tonnelier represents this obsession in France to marginalize and criminalize Black people in order to guarantee racist structures that maintain Otherness.

While Rose-Marie knows that her son had love affairs with several women—"Hélène, Chantal, et toutes les autres" (57) [Hélène, Chantal, and all the rest]—her racist, voyeuristic perception reduces Roberte to an eroticized, exoticized Other. Edward Said called Orientalism the distorted way peoples and cultures of the Orient are represented in the West through

literary and other discourses. In this phenomenon, the fascination for people and objects that come from another culture lead to myths and stereotypes. Georges's shock at discovering that her mother harbors racist stereotypes about blacks counters the voyeurism that the mother embodies. Georges engenders what French society needs to oppose the reification of black people. As Michele Lamont put it, the "French don't perceive their society as racist [...] Those who refer to skin color, racial differences, or biological explanations, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen, are severely criticized for it by the media, intellectuals, and politicians" (149). Denial of racism in French society is not something peculiar to that society. However, the idea of color-blindness is a myth that disguises the reality of challenges in racial relations in France.

If Ntsame sought to portray what is positive about interracial love in France, she also tended to idealize and romanticize that love in the context of race relations in that society. It is Roberte's beauty that is the catalyst for the relationship that Georges forges with her. It happens through an accidental encounter in a store. Georges accidentally hits Roberte with his shopping cart as Roberte, who is an employee, is doing her work. This apparently innocuous encounter will lead to a passionate relationship. The romantic relationship between Georges and Roberte develops at an unrealistic pace. His relationship with her is overshadowed by his obsession for her beautiful black body. As Cazenave observed, it is perilous to reduce a woman's identity to a sexual representation (125). At their first encounter, Georges is utterly captivated by Roberte's beauty.

La jeune fille se redresse, se retourne gracieusement. Georges, frappé par ce visage angélique qui porte si bien de si beaux yeux noisette, reste muet. Elle s'excuse aussitôt et s'éloigne. Eberlué et sans s'excuser, Georges regarde partir cette jeune femme pulpeuse, d'un mètre soixante-six environ, un visage ovale, un nez droit aux narines légèrement ouvertes, des lèvres voluptueuses et sensuelles qui s'ouvrent sur des dents blanches comme du lait. Georges court après cette fille sortie d'un rêve et la rattrape de justesse au moment où elle entre dans l'arrière du magasin. (16-17)

[The girl stands up, turns around gracefully. Georges, struck by this angelic face that has so beautiful hazel eyes, is mute. She immediately apologizes and walks away. Stunned and unapologetic, Georges watches this pulpy young woman leave, about one meter sixty-six, an oval face, a nose with slightly open nostrils, voluptuous and sensual lips that open on white teeth like milk. Georges runs after this girl who has come out of a