

# A Revolt against African Patriarchal System: The Beyalan Version in L'Homme Qui M'Offrait Le Ciel

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## Introduction

The term feminism is attributed to Charles Fourier and was later borrowed by Alexander Dumas who wrote *L'homme-femme* in 1872. Christine de Pisan author of *Cité des Dames* and *l'Epistre auDieud'amours* (1399) was cited by Simone de Beauvoir as the first woman to have written on the relationship of the sexes. Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the most cited in feminism because of her work *Défense des droits de la femme* (1792). Others are John Stuart Mill, Olive Shreiner, Virginia Woolf etc.

'A theory is understood as a set of ideas intended to explain facts and events'. Feminist theory is an outgrowth of the general movement to empower women worldwide. Feminism can be defined as a recognition and critique of male supremacy combined with effects to change it. Another definition says "it's a doctrine or an attitude favourable to the defence and interests of women and the extension of their rights". An organised movement which promotes equality for men and women in political, economic and social spheres. Feminists believe that women are oppressed due to their sex based on the dominant ideology of patriarchy. Patriarchy is the system which oppresses women through its social, economic and political institutions. According to some feminists "femininity is being imposed on women by men" (Solli 2002).

Feminism can take different forms. In the 1970s, women started developing a theory which helped to explain their oppression. By the 1980s, feminists started disagreeing on particular issues linked to feminism. The theory later had different branches with different feminist issues. Today, there are many different definitions about feminism and each depending on a number of factors including beliefs, history and culture.

## Basic principles of feminist theory

The basic principles of the feminist theory are as follows:

1. The relationship between men and women has almost always been unequal and oppressive
2. The extent of inequality and oppressiveness has varied greatly. All known societies have been patriarchal
3. All major social institutions have been characterised by male dominance: economy, political system, family religion.

Feminism no matter their different arguments and divergent groups all come together to fight against patriarchy and male dominance in the society. Mies (1988) in "*The Social Origins of the Sexual Division of labour*" says, whatever the ideological differences between the various feminists groups, they are united in their rebellion against this hierarchical relationship between men and women, which is no longer accepted as biological destiny."

## What is patriarchy?

The word patriarchy is derived from two words, *patria* meaning father and *arché* meaning rule-the rule of the father. It is a system whereby the male dominates the female in the society. The domination varies from control, exploitation to violence. Mahmoud and Mohammed (2008) cite Bourdieu saying:

"this ideology suggests that women are men's property and should be controlled by them"

The African society is and will continue to be patriarchal. The African man is the head of the family. He takes major decisions concerning members of the family without their opinion. This society is structured in such a way that job opportunity are first considered masculine before being considered at the feminine angle. Patriarchy is reinforced in the society by "institutions such as the academy, the church and the family, each of them justifies and reinforces women subordination over the man". (Millett 1977: 35)

## The author and her ideology

Calixthe Beyala is a Cameroonian-born French writer who writes in French. She grew up in Douala with her sister. In 1978, she left Cameroon for France. She is considered a radical feminist as portrayed in her tone and selection of characters in her works. She has published a lot of novels which are widely read. Some of which are: *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulée* 1987, *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* 1988, *Seul le diable le savait* 1990, *le petit prince de Belleville* 1992, *Maman a un amant* 1993 etc. In all her works, the plight of African women has always been a major theme. She breaks the cultural norm of not talking about women sexuality with her vivid description of sexual intercourse and other human parts considered forbidden. She writes to shock her readers with her

narratives packed with slang, sexually graphic vocabulary and sexual violence between men and women. Such scenes demonstrate the way in which relationship in Beyala's fictional world are characterised by abuse and a struggle for power. Her crude and violent language is to convey the brutality of the situation.

Some critics have repeatedly talked about her excessive language and Beyala replies them by saying:

*“Je n'ai pas un discours violent. J'ai un discours inattendu (...) Et ma langue, c'est celle de Douala. Je ne parle pas un français de paris. Je ne vais pas dans les milieu où l'on va exiger que j'emploie l'imparfait du subjonctif Je viens de la rue et je n'ai pas quitté La rue”*

*“My writing is not violent. I have an unexpected way of writing (...) And my language is the language of Douala. I don't speak Parisian French. I don't spend time with people who use the imperfect subjunctive. I come from the streets and I haven't left the streets”*

She has always been at the forefront of women emancipation.

### **Revolt against patriarchy in *l'homme qui m'offrait le ciel***

The novel recounts the late adolescent love between an African writer and a popular television presenter Francois Ackerman. Francois hosts important personalities every Sunday and suffers from the death of his elder brother a year older than himself. Naturally, this love affair comes abruptly to an end as the legitimate wife finds out. It marks the end of the emotional holiday and the return of the husband through a suicide threat from the wife.

Calixthe Beyala through this novel shows the different problems encountered by women under a patriarchal society whereby almost every part of life is dominated and controlled by men. She starts by putting up a revolt against such system. Through the character of the protagonist Andela, she shows her stance of not allowing any man to control or dominate her life without putting up a fight. This is shown in the following lines.

*“Je vais enfoncer mes ongles dans le bras de chacun de ces hommes, me disais-je. Je vais les griffer jusqu'au sang et les interpeller: sans les minorité, messieurs, votre société est incomplète” P13*

*“ I am going to sink my nails into the arms of each of this men, i told myself. I will scratch them until they bleed and challenge them : without the minorities, sirs, your society is incomplete”*

She reaffirms the fact that nature made us and designated us males and females in order to complement each other. But society decided to make us masculine and feminine in order to show the inferiority of the latter to the former.

As an activist fighting against such traditional gender roles, Andela shows her difference from other women who will allow themselves dominated and controlled. She shows that like an amazon, she can be rational, strong, protective and decisive. This can be seen in the following statement made by her.

*“J'appartenais à une génération de femmes qui avaient un métier. J'étais capable d'élever seule mes enfants, de discuter dans l'assemblée des hommes, d'y revendiquer une place et de l'obtenir. J'étais heureuse, du moins le croyais-je, de marcher seule dans le soir jusqu'à l'heure où la lune s'effiloche. J'avais l'âme à l'envers et c'était tout aussi bien.”P12*

*“I belong to the generation of women who had a job. I was capable of bringing*

*up my children alone ,to discuss in the  
of men assembly, to demand for a  
place and obtain it. I was happy, so  
thought i, to walk alone in the evening  
at the time when the moon frays. I had  
a twisted soul and it was all good''*

Andela stands her ground against any form of domination and patriarchal system whereby women had their place in the kitchen and the home. She shows how unafraid and courageous she is; j'avais l'âme à l'envers". She defies traditional gender roles of women being considered as weak, emotional and submissive.

Beyala through the character of Rosa, Andela's maid brings out an example of women who have allowed themselves to be controlled by men and have rejected emancipation. She continues to believe that without a man in her life, she cannot be a better person.

*"Elle écumait les rues de Paris  
à la recherche d'un mari à défaut  
de grand amour. Elle distribuait son  
téléphone dans les métros. Elle parcourait  
les agences matrimoniales. Elle se laissait  
invités à danser, a boire un verre, même  
offert pas un qui porte un pantalon qui  
lui tombe mal sur le fesses" P19*

*" She skims the streets of Paris in  
search of a perfect husband. She distributed  
her telephone number in the train. She visited  
matrimonial agencies. She allowed herself to  
be invited to dance, to have a drink, even if it  
is offered by a poorly dressed man''.*

Beyala discourages such women because they tend to encourage the patriarchal system which people like Andela are trying to bring down. Women like Rosa will only make men see women as emotionally weak and incapable of surviving without a man beside them.

Furthermore, Beyala points out the importance of women in society. Women who have nurtured men and yet forgotten and not remembered by history. This is highlighted in the citation between Andela and François.

*"Je l'écoutais en songeant à sa mère,  
à nous femmes, dont les livres d'histoires  
taisent les sacrifices. C'est elle qui les  
avait élevés. C'est elle et elle seule  
qui avait réussi à les transformer en  
hommes. Eternelle injustice, cette histoire  
écrite au masculin. Jusqu'à quand se perpétuera  
le silence des femmes? me demandais-je". Pg32*

*" I listened while thinking of his mother,  
at us women, that the history books forget  
our sacrifices. It is she that brought  
them up alone and succeeded in  
transforming them into men. Until when  
will women be in silence? I asked myself."*

This citation insists that without the presence of women in the world, it would be an incomplete place and uncomfortable for men.

In addition, Beyala uses François' wife to show that some women can be bread winners while their men just sit back and enjoy the glory. François was greatly in debt and it was the wife that was taking care of the family.

*"...François était autant charge de dettes  
que l'arche de Noé des créatures de Dieu.  
Ses mains étaient aussi vides que celles  
d'un paysan de Bangladesh". P153*

*" François was full of debt like the ark of*

*Noah with creatures of God. His hands were  
as empty as the hands of a peasant in Bangladesh*

Using this comparison and biblical allusion, Beyala shows the level of indebtedness in which François is in. Such a popular broadcaster who is so in debt can less be imagined by his fans. And moreso, to be catered for by his wife. It all proves that women too can play the roles which society and institutions have termed patriarchal.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, with the analysis shown above through the words and actions of the characters in the novel, it becomes very clear that the African patriarchal system should be discouraged and destabilised as women have been seen to be able to carry out responsibilities as their male counterpart. Gender should not be what should be used as criteria in social, political and economic life of any society. Andela proves that she can work and cater for her family as a single parent. François' wife too caters for the family as the husband is in debts. Beyala has always been an activist in all her writing and this has been shown in the analysis above of characterisation in her novel *l'homme qui m'offrait le ciel*.

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