Woman, but Not Human: Appraisal of Patriarchy, Women Commodification, and Failed Feminism in the African Contemporary Novel *La Tâche de Sang*

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Abstract

This study is based on the premise that patriarchal moulded structures ensure that women remain in perpetual slavery. Using a combination of theories including gender, patriarchy, and feminism, the study examines the types of oppression women face from infancy through adulthood and mostly marriage, as portrayed in Philomène Bassek's La Tâche de Sang (1990), *which I translate as* Stain of Blood – *for thus far the novel has not been translated into English. It is discovered that, due to the patriarchal system that has granted man the power over woman, the latter does not have a voice when it comes to the choice of a marriage partner. Furthermore, once married, her husband's power extended to her body and mind and thus commodified her in the process. The study further exposes the failure of feminism – western feminism to be precise – in an African environment. It concludes that patriarchy is a social evil that has spread across the African continent and that a concerted effort is required from women to join hands and together fight for their liberation.*

Key words: failed feminism, patriarchy, self-effacing identity, women commodification.

Introduction

The interest of this paper is to explore the contemporary nature of male dominance in an African marriage context, leading to female commodification. In addition, the paper attempts to explore the failure of feminism to empower the female subject. In this article, I rely on gender, patriarchy and African feminism as the theoretic devices to analyse the female subalternized body and mind in the contemporary African novel *La Tâche de Sang* [The Stain of Blood] published in 1990 by the Cameroonian female writer Philomène Bassek. I have decided to focus on this novel because it foregrounds a male character while adopting a feminist perspective, which sets it apart from many female-themed novels that abound in African literature.

Synopsis of the Novel

Set in a fictional Cameroonian village in the early 1960s, *La Tâche de Sang* (1990), which I translate as "Stain of Blood" – for thus far the novel has not been translated into English – is the story of Mama Ida, a middle-aged mother of ten children who engages in self-effacing politics of identity through the narrative. In the text, the chief male protagonist, Same Hamack is the beneficiary of the unfairness of patriarchy. This social organization provides males with privileges and power while creating an inferior status for females. Same Hamack has the power to control the mind and body of his wife Mama Ida, leading to her self-effacement and loss of identity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a combination of theoretical approaches including gender, patriarchy, and feminism – Western radical feminism to be precise – and African feminism.

Through the lens of these theories, I will try to investigate the way in which women are commodified within the household, and the failure of feminism – western feminism to be precise – in an African environment.

Gender is a socio-cultural construct of men and women that permeates all levels of society. It is an integral and important determining factor in the organisation of any given society. It is a structure based on socio-cultural production and is sustained by an ideology. According to Dube, "the fact that gender is culturally constructed means that it is neither natural nor is it divine; it has to do with social relationships of women and men, and can be reconstructed and transformed by the society, and since it is culturally constructed it can be socially deconstructed" (2003: 83). Furthermore, how we relate as men and women is always gendered and it is dictated by society. Society places certain expectations on men and women. For example, men in most African cultures are expected to be brave, strong, fearless and authoritarian. They should never express their feelings of pain and fear in public. In other words, traits associated with men are bravery, fearlessness, toughness, physical strength and authoritativeness. Women, on the other hand, are supposed to be gentle, timid, weak, and fearful. They are allowed to express pain and fear openly and whenever they feel like.

Closely related to the above characteristics are the sanctioned roles of men and women. For women, these include being a wife, mother and daughter in a subordinate position within the household. The most important role associated with women is motherhood. It is the responsibility of the female to produce offspring especially sons so that the social order is maintained and the family lineage is continued (Furniss & Gunner 1995: 155). On the other hand, the sanctioned roles of men include being a husband, father, son, seniority and exerting authority over women. The social organization relies on the power and authority of males.

Also included in the theoretical framework is the patriarchal concept, which is concerned with how patriarchy spreads its ideology of male domination. Patriarchy is identified by feminist scholars as one of the social practices that oppress women. This is because it mostly gives more privileges to menfolk than womenfolk, especially in traditional African societies.

How then is patriarchy defined? The word "patriarchy" literally means the rule of the father or the *patriarch*. As Asiyambola (2005) observes, the word "patriarchy" was around before the current resurgent of the women's movement. Originally used to describe the type of "male-dominated family" – the large household of the *patriarch* which included women, junior men, children, slaves and domestic servants all under the rule of this dominant male. Now the term is used more generally "to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (Bhasin 2006: 3). Feminists use the term "patriarchy" mainly to describe the power relationship between men and women. They claim that it is a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political, and economic institutions.

As a social institution, the family is generally a *brewery* for patriarchal practices by socializing the young to accept socially differentiated roles. In agreement with this assertion, Kate Millett (1970) asserts that socialization practices of the young take place only within its confines, which is the family. These socialization practices aim to instil specific personalities into male and female children. As exemplified by Maureen Kambarami (2006), in Shona culture of Zimbabwe, from a tender age, the socialization process differentiates the girl child from the boy child. Males are socialized to view themselves as breadwinners and heads of

households while females are taught to be obedient and submissive housekeepers. Kambarami (ibid.) furthermore observes that, in the family, the male child is preferred to the female child. By virtue of being male, even if he is not the first born, he is automatically granted, by birth, the right to rule females, and considered the head of household who should protect and look after his sisters. The female child is further discriminated against due to the fact that eventually she marries and joins another family while the male child ensures the survival of the family name through bringing additional members into the family. As a result of such attitude, some parents prefer educating boys to girls. The reason for such differentiation and discrimination is due to the fact that society views women as sexual beings and not as human beings (Charvet 1982).

Reiterating the unfairness of patriarchy, Irène D'Almeida (1994) states that this social organization provides males with privileges and power while creating an inferior status for female (1). Similarly, commenting on the ideology of patriarchy in Nigeria, Izugbara (2004) apprises that male socialization practices in many Nigerian cultures aim largely to train them to be domineering, ruthless, and in control, and to see themselves as naturally superior to women. On the other hand, female socialization often aims at making girls and women submissive, easy ruled or controlled, and to see themselves as naturally inferior to men. These socialization practices inscribe superiority into maleness and masculinity, and inferiority into femaleness and femininity. I can therefore argue that, this cultural socialization locates men and women in specific places in sexuality and endorses the belief that the natural order of things is for men to control women in a number of ways.

This study also draws its theoretical underpinnings from feminism and African feminism. The subject of feminism has received extensive treatment. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive survey of these debates, but I will focus on those that are pertinent to my discussion. What is feminism? *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* views feminism as "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men and the struggle to achieve this aim" (2010: 575). In the same breath, Mhindu (2014) states that "feminism is a political position committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism" (46). Karik-Namiji (2016) quotes Adebayo as saying that "feminism brings to mind the idea of challenging male hegemony" (13). It is therefore right to say that feminism entails the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of sexual equality. In other words, the main thrust of feminism lies in its striving to fight for women's rights and against oppression.

As mentioned earlier, this paper also adopts African feminism as its theoretical framework. In the paper, African feminism is distinguished from its precursors that dominated the scene before 1960, after which varieties of modern feminism continue to flourish. This discourse does not countenance the complexities and the intricacies of conceptualizing or taxonomizing Africa. Africa, in this context, will refer to the geographical space rather than the metaphorical or historiographical polemics. In the African context, feminism "is not calling for a reversal of gender roles, and it is not a call for a particular sexual orientation; neither is it in opposition to men and African culture" (Ogundipe-Leslie 2007: 545-547).

African feminism recognizes the existence of other forms of feminism such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, cultural feminism and Islamic feminism. African feminism, according to Ogundipe-Leslie (2007), is "a kind of red flag to the bull of African men" (548). African feminism, therefore, calls for the overhauling and amelioration of the conditions of women in which women will be economically, politically and socially

empowered to enable them to be involved in the societal transformation without compromising their motherhood and recognizing their biological and reproductive rights. (ibid.: 549). Although this view is also shared by other forms of feminism, African feminism lays more emphasis on the complementary roles of both genders in enhancing societal growth and development in addition to the welfare of women.

Mekgwe (2008: 167) defines African feminism, while acknowledging the complexities that surround the linguistic and socio-cultural realities of African women, as:

> A discourse that takes care to delineate those concerns peculiar to the African situation. It also questions features of traditional African values without denigrating them, understanding that these might be viewed differently to the different classes of women.

That is the concern of Olomojobi (2013) when he says that African feminism is concerned with African nuances without disparaging them in view of the various socio-economic classes and socio-cultural backgrounds that define the identities of the African women. He says that:

> African feminism rests on the notion that women in Africa are socially constructed by different cultural components. [. . .] The theory attempts to shift away from misleading notions of equating western values with non-western societies. The point to bear in mind is that African women have different identities and primordial attachment to region and cultural determinants than women from western societies.
>
> (Cited in Ajidahun 2020: 44)

One of the main objectives of African feminism, according to Arndt (2002: 32), is to dismantle the current atmosphere of domination and then transform the concept of gender roles in African societies in order to improve the conditions of African women.

In his conceptualization of African feminism, Badeji shows that womanness is the centre of African feminism. In addition, he describes the relationship between power and femininity as mutual. He also captures other features of African feminism thus:

> African feminism embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It is always poised and cantered in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical. African femininity complements African masculinity, and defends both with the ferocity of the lioness while simultaneously seeking male defence of both as critical, demonstrable, and mutually obligatory.
>
> (Cited in Ajidahun 2020: 45)

African feminism critically interrogates gender discrimination from the African perspective with a view to elevating the roles of African women who are seen traditionally as the carriers of societal encumbrances and whose roles must be made complementary to the roles of the men. It is only in this context that African women can be liberated from the socio-cultural, patriarchal and phallocentric shackles that have tied them down for so long. Without this liberation the entire African continent will remain in bondage. This theory is apposite for this paper because it condemns and opposes all forms of gender discrimination and prejudices experienced by African women. It also recognizes the biological and motherly roles of women which do not inhibit them from participating in societal transformation as men do.

It should be mentioned that, although there are various feminist approaches like African feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism that provide different explanations for the roots of gender inequality, they all present patriarchy as the source of women's oppression. Thus, the aim of feminism is to challenge the privileged position of men and demand for the equal distribution of power between men and women in all spheres including political, economic and social.

Textual Analysis

As a stated earlier in the study, Kate Millett (1970) observed that patriarchal socialization practices of the young girl take place only within its confines, which is the family. In *La Tâche de Sang* (1990), we encounter Mama Ida meticulously carrying out the exigencies of her patriarchal traditional education as mother and wife, a battered and subalternized wife to be precise; all under the tutelage of her mother. Mama Ida is gradually being socialized into a submissive adult woman. This is not surprising, for her mother Veronica had been subordinated to her father and she wants to pass on the same education to her daughter. As the narrator reveals, Mama Ida even had to abandon school in order to release her old mother from certain domestic chores:

> L'irrégularité de Mama Ida commença à se faire sentir à l'école et le temps nécessaire pour étudier ses leçons vint à lui manquer. Veronica avait de plus en plus besoin de de l'aide de sa fille à la maison et aux champs, d'autant plus que de nouvelles maternités l'accablait [. . .] Mama Ida finit par sacrifier l'école. Elle déchargea sa mère de certains travaux en savourant le plaisir d'acquérir le bagage technique et artistique nécessaire à un exercice appréciable de son futur rôle d'épouse.
>
> (Bassek 1990: 11-12)

> [Mama Ida's irregularity began to make itself felt at school, and the time needed to study her lessons was missed. Veronica increasingly needed help from her daughter at home and in the fields, especially as new maternity overwhelmed her [. . .] Mama Ida ends up sacrificing the school. She relieved her mother of certain works, enjoying the pleasure of acquiring the technical and artistic baggage necessary for an appreciable exercise of her future role as a wife.]

As evidenced above, Mama Ida is being socialized into a submissive adult woman. She happily or perhaps ignorantly acquires this education for her future role as a wife and mother. Though this is the only glimpse the narrator gives us of Mama Ida being socialized into the submissive adult woman, it is sufficient to prepare us for this description of the married Mama Ida that we encounter later in the novel:

> Levée très tôt le matin, elle n'aspirait qu'à faire ses devoirs harassants de femme. On lui avait appris dès l'enfance qu'une situation de ménage qui ne marche pas comme il faut a essentiellement pour responsable la maîtresse de la maison. Aussi passait-elle le plus clair de son temps à trimer pour sauver l'honneur.
>
> (Bassek 1990: 71)

> [Up early in the morning, she aspired only to do her harrowing duties as a woman. She had been taught from childhood that a household situation that does not work properly is essentially responsible for the mistress of the House. So she spent most of her time trimming to save honour.]

This description of Mama Ida's personality through the prism of domestic responsibilities and her submissive relationship to her husband is sustained throughout the novel:

> Mama Ida incarnait la bonne épouse. Tous les hommes la citaient en exemple lorsqu' ils n'avaient pas eu la chance de se marier à une femme de son genre : forte, travailleuse, docile et soumise. Elle bavardait peu et haussait rarement le ton devant son mari.
>
> (Bassek 1990: 71)

> [Mama Ida played the Good Wife. All the men mentioned her as an example when they had not chance to marry a woman of her kind: strong, hardworking, docile and submissive. She chatted little and rarely raised her voice in front of her husband.]

Before proceeding, let us briefly look at the institution of marriage. In her article *Femininity, Sexuality and Culture: Patriarchy and Female Subordination in Zimbabwe*, Kambarami (2006) observes that marriage in Africa is sacred and a married woman is treated with respect; in fact the desired destination of most women is marriage. This brings us to the difference of marriage concept and practices between the African and Western society. European marriage is very different from the African concept of marriage. For the Europeans, marriage is an exclusive relationship between husband and wife. But in Africa, marriage is not simply the affair of the individual couple but of the community. As Chondoka (1988) contends, marriage in Africa is a wider relationship that embraces the families of both the husband and the wife. In America and Europe, marriage is defined as a union of man and woman by a ceremony in law. Parents and indeed families have very little role to play. Before marriage can take place, a man does not need to consult elders for their opinion. Upon their mutual consent, a man and a woman will first cohabit, and later on get married. Conversely, in the African traditional society, prospective husbands are made to learn and know about the prerequisites for marriage before being allowed to marry. For example, as practiced by the Lunda people of Zambia, a prospective husband, paid back–cloth as one of the marriage payments to the girl's family. Chondoka (1988) further observes that these marriage payments reflect a number of things about the prospective husband. First, it meant that the man had reached an acceptable level of maturity in the community for him to take part in the activity of making various items. Second, it meant that he had satisfactorily acquired certain skills to enable him make these items for his future family. Thus, he was only allowed to marry after the community convincingly proved that he had mastered certain skills that would help him and his family successfully. In this way, marriage payments reflected the man's ability to take care of his future family.

Traditionally, as John Mbaku (2005) points out in *Culture and Customs of Cameroon*, many Cameroonian communities have practiced arranged marriage, in which the daughter is married to a man chosen by her parents. But in recent years such marriages have become less common, particularly in urban areas among families where parents are educated. In arranged marriage, the choice is primarily based on the quality of the potential husband's family as well as personal traits exhibited by the man. Moreover, most parents wish their children to marry someone from their own ethnic group (Mbaku 2005: 143-44). In Mama Ida's case, after she drops out of school in order to release her old mother from certain domestic chores, her father and uncle choose Same Hanack, an older and polygamous man, because they know

his family and he inspires trust and a sense of responsibility. In their opinion, Same is "un homme d'âge mûr, simple, généreux et étroitement lié aux affaires de l'église; originaire de Mbakassi, à une trentaine de kilomètres de Song-Mbônji" (*TS* 12) [a simple, mature, and generous man who is deeply involved in church matters; he hails from Mbakassi, thirty kilometres away from Song-Mbônji]. Mama Ida's input is not sought nor is her opinion considered. She cannot even refuse to marry Same who is polygamous and old enough to be her father, as doing so would be contemptuous of tradition. The lack of choice is one illustration of how hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy affect women. This kind of marriage that deprives a woman of her right to choose a partner of her choice is a way of commodifying her.

At this juncture, let us look at what commodification is and how the concept can apply to women and Mama Ida in particular. According to wikipedia, commodification means the transformation of goods or services (or things that may not normally be regarded as goods or services) into a commodity, or assigning economic value to something that traditionally would not be viewed in economic terms. Lindorfer (2007: 126) notes that, in African societies, children were the glory of man and his property, and moreover woman was seen as a valuable commodity owned by her male family members and later by her husband and his family. In general, daughters were required to make their parents' lives easier. Moreover, as Lindorfer (2007) further observes, in some communities, women are viewed as income-generating mechanisms, even at a young age. Thus, whilst a girl is still in her father's home, she is viewed as an investment and when she marries she becomes an asset to her husband and his family.

As a result of the emphasis placed on material considerations, women are limited in the choices that they are able to make because they do not have the opportunity to marry the men they love; this applies to Mama Ida in *La Tâche de Sang*. In this novel, Mama Ida's parents decide to marry off their daughter without consulting her or listening to her opinion. They believe that Same Hanack is the right man for their daughter, despite being old and having other women. Because of his wealth, and having come from a known ethnic group, they think he can take care of her, and they will benefit in return. Quoting Mankaasi (2008), it can be observed that, like Binetou's mother in Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981), Mama Ida's parents are eager to have her married to Same not for her happiness but for the opposite reason, despite the age difference between him and their daughter. Motivated by self-interest, Mama Ida's parents want to elevate themselves from their poverty-stricken life because this elevation will make them respected in society.

The South African writer Ngcobo (1991: 194) reinforces this point when she states that an African girl child is born to fulfil a specific role, for she is trained to be a suitable wife from a very early age. This was done in order to make sure that the girl child would become a "valuable" commodity, as is evident in *La Tâche de Sang*, the bride's family would be able to gain materially from marriage to a prosperous man.

The above argument shows that a young woman whose destiny is determined by a man and older people stands no chance of refusing what has been planned. It further illustrates the extent to which Mama Ida is denied the chance to enjoy her youth. If she had stayed in school amongst her peers, she might have developed a more critical, questioning mind, and perhaps acquired the ability to speak for herself, but she is denied this. Mama Ida's fate is illustrative of the way in which the girl child is at a disadvantage because she is brought up to be married, hence it becomes difficult for her to pursue her goals in life and develop her own capacity for independent self-expression. Furthermore, by marrying off

young Mama Ida to the old and rich man, Same Hanack, her parents contribute to the oppression of the girl child. By forcefully marrying her off to old Same, Mama Ida ceases to live her own life, and she dies inside as she watches her other friends enjoy their youth, as we shall see later.

As we have seen, Mama Ida has her future decided for her and she has no say in the matter. Marina Deegan (1994) comments further on the boundaries that surround women such as Mama Ida: "[C]onfined by their low position in society, their social and economic powerlessness, and most importantly by the restricting definitions of womanliness, women are forced to repress all their natural ambitions and inclinations" (43). This description of a woman satisfies the proponents of polygamy and patriarchy. According to the dictates of African tradition, a woman is a good wife if she observes the status quo by, for example, not challenging her husband and looking after the children. This leaves women in a situation in which they are not able to support themselves because their primary role in life is that of a wife and mother, to the exclusion of all else. They become the property of men, thus making them commodities that men can treat in any way they choose. As we have seen, this state of affairs can encourage selfish, irresponsible behaviour on the part of men.

Commenting on arranged marriage in Zimbabwe, Kambarami (2006) apprises that arranged marriages are familiar within Shona traditions and elsewhere in Zimbabwe. These can be based on religion such as the Apostolic Sect where young girls are married off to older members of the Sect based on prophetic revelations. In some cases, parents marry off their daughters to affluent members of the community in exchange for money or grain to plant. In extreme case, Kambarami (2006) notes, some parents marry off their daughters to their debtors when they fail to repay their debts. In all these cases, consent is not sought from the young women concerned, but they are forced to comply with cultural tradition. This is exactly what happens to the young Mama Ida. After dropping out of school, her father and uncle marry her to an old and polygamous man simply because they know him and that he is affluent enough. This is reminiscent of the young Binetou, in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, who was reluctant to marry Modou, a man so much older than herself, but her mother who wanted to escape from poverty encouraged her to abandon her education in order to give the mother access to a higher socio-economic status quickly via marriage to Modou.

Undoubtedly, this patriarchal practice of arranged marriage reinforces male supremacy while depriving Mama Ida of the power to choose and to control her body. The involvement of family in the marriage process is consistent with the African belief that marriage is an alliance between families rather than between individuals, as is the case in the Western world. It is also true that arranged marriages often happen for valid reasons and can be construed as a way of protecting young people from making bad choices. For example, in Ghana, as reported by Baffour Takyi (2003), it is the duty of the parents of each party to ensure that their potential in-laws do not come from a family with any known serious disease (including lunacy and leprosy), are not known criminals or witches, do not engage in quarrelling, and are hardworking and respectful. The involvement of family also serves to insure that the future couples are compatible in values, expectations, and lifestyle. In the same breath, Chondoka (1988) apprises that the practice of parents choosing marriage partner for their sons was very common in the traditional pre-literate society in Zambia. Parents or close relatives of the man were the ones who went in the neighbouring villages (or their own village) looking for a girl from a good family for him to marry. The man or the girl was, by tradition, not allowed to reject the partner his or her parents had chosen for him or her. One reason for such a choice was to ascertain that their daughter and son marry someone who

belongs to their ethnic group in order to avoid intermarriage with people with whom they have had tribal feuds in the past.

Having examined the ways in which Mama Ida is perceived as a mere commodity by her parents when they married her off, the next form of oppression within the marriage, leading to failure of feminism, will be discussed. From the outset, the marriage of Same Hanack and Mama Ida is based on a non-egalitarian relationship. Same believes in the power patriarchy has granted him as a man, and he uses it to subdue his wife, either by persuasion or by physical force. In one instance, he invites his brothers to his house to share a snake he killed earlier in the day, without informing Mama Ida of the visit. It should be mentioned here that in Bassa society of Cameroon, and indeed in most African communities, one of the major ways to cement social relationships and express the high value placed on human company is through the sharing of food. Moreover, the gourmet dish of viper steaks is served to honour guests, especially male relatives.

While waiting for the snake to cook, Mama Ida serves fish, which angers her husband. As Mama Ida tries to justify her action, Same Hanack, who feels that his masculine authority is being challenged, reminds his wife: "Ici, c'est moi qui commande et j'ai le droit de corriger qui je veux, quand je veux" (*TS* 39) [Here, I am the one who gives orders, and I have the right to beat whomever and whenever I like]. A brutal beating ensues. This violence, as Green (1999) observes, is "one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position" (2). Violence instils fear, which in turn makes women subservient to men.

Mama Ida is not totally oblivious of her disadvantaged location in the scheme of things. She knows that it is wrong for Same Hanack to beat her the way he does, but she rationalizes and justifies his action: "mais qu'y puis-je? N'est-il pas plus fort que moi? N'en-est-il pas le droit?" (*TS* 90) [But what can I do about it? Is he not stronger than I am? Doesn't he has the right?]. As far as she is concerned, Same has the right to beat her. She believes that by virtue of being male, Same is entitled to power and privilege, including the privilege of abusing her.

If Mama Ida is the character through whom the theme of patriarchal education is developed, her husband Same presents the sub-theme identified by the narrator as "conjugal hierarchy" in which Mama Ida would be perfectly controlled. Same's only concern throughout the narrative is the maintenance of this hierarchy which makes man the unchallenged supreme head in an unequal conjugal relationship:

> La responsabilité de chef de famille qui incombait à Same et qu'il assumait non sans privilège et abus lui pesait parfois [. . .] Que pouvait lui apporter son épouse? N'était-il pas à lui de lui apprendre? Comme beaucoup d'hommes de sa génération, Same pensait que les femmes étaient toutes comme ça, qu'elles ne savaient pas grand-chose, et que lorsque même elles faisaient exceptionnellement montre d'une certaine intelligence, il fallait leur faire croire le contraire en exploitant leur savoir. Le maintien de la hiérarchie conjugale était à ce point.
>
> (Bassek 1990: 47)

> [The responsibility of the head of the family that fell to Same and that he assumed not without privilege and abuse weighed on him at times [. . .] What could his wife bring him? Wasn't it up to him to teach her? Like many men of his generation, Same thought that women were all like that, that they did not know much, and that when even they

were exceptionally intelligent, they had to be made to believe otherwise by exploiting their knowledge. The maintenance of the conjugal hierarchy was at this point.]

Same's reasoning, reminiscent of Okonkwo's attitude to women in *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1959), often makes him resort to violence to maintain his cherished conjugal hierarchy. Justifying the brutal beating of his wife after Mama Ida dared to contradict him; Same argues that: "même hors d'elle, une femme doit pouvoir taire ses instincts et éviter de s'emporter en présence de son mari" (*TS* 40) [a woman should learn to keep her emotions to herself and avoid losing her temper in the presence of her husband]. Same assumes that a woman cannot do, think, or say anything important, and that man's power, bestowed by patriarchy and expressed in his role as head of the family, has to be used to keep women in check because otherwise they will abuse their freedom. Consequently, he expects his wife to be submissive and remain silent whenever he talks to her. After all, he sees himself as the supreme head of the household, and if his wife fails to comply, she must pay for her insubordination.

Perhaps an appropriate question to ask at this juncture is why men have recourse to physical force, especially in their relationships with women. In his anthropological study on male dominance entitled *Why Men Rule*, Steven Goldberg (1993) articulates the reasons for such violence on the part of men: he observes that men tend to use physical aggression as the means to an end; they resort to physical violence in the pursuit of dominance. Same epitomizes this behaviour. In his relationship with Mama Ida, he often resorts to physical and verbal abuse in order not only to subdue his wife, but also to maintain his masculine identity in front of his friends and for himself.

To have total control over his young bride and to satisfy his sexual desires, Same decides to isolate her from any external contact, thereby bringing her totally under his control. He forbids Mama Ida to go to her own village or to visit her family, claiming that because he paid a bride-wealth, he now owns her: "Mets-toi dans la tête que j'ai payé la dot et que tu n'as plus rien à voir là-bas" (*TS* 44) [Get it into your head that I paid bride-wealth for you and that you don't have anything to do there any more]. Implicit in this comment is the notion of entitlement that only men enjoy. Here the writer underscores the tradition of bride-wealth, which, according to Eustace Palmer (1982), degrades women to the status of goods and chattel, while allowing husbands to dominate their wives and thus ensuring a system of perpetual subjugation of women. I however take issue with Palmer's assessment of the bride-wealth, which I believe plays an important role in African customary and civil law marriages. Unfortunately, this practice has often been misconstrued by some Westerners and by some westernized Africans as the mere purchase of a wife.

In the past, as mentioned earlier, bride-wealth was offered to the bride's parents by the groom's family as a kind of contract that sanctioned a union – not only between two individuals as is the case in the West – but also, and particularly, as an alliance between two extended families. Furthermore, bride-wealth served as compensation to the woman's family for her labour. The bride-wealth was also intended to acknowledge the wife's family for giving away their daughter; in addition, it "placed the marriage on firm ground if questions later arose about the position of children within their father's lineage, their rights to inheritance, and the rights to property on the part of the husband or wife if the marriage ended in divorce" (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 136). In other words, bride-wealth was a means of recognizing and legitimizing marriage in the eyes of the public. However, in recent years, due to the emergence of a monetary economy, the bride-wealth has become more and more

commercialized; for instance, the more educated the woman, the higher the cost of bride-wealth. As a result, a man who pays an inflated bride-wealth may have the impression that he has "purchased" his wife (Green 1999: 37). These are the kinds of beliefs that make Same think Mama Ida is his property and should, therefore, submit to his will.

At this point, one may wonder why Mama Ida cannot leave her abusive and disrespectful husband. There are a number of theories that attempt to explain why women live with abuse. In a study on Ghanaian women, Ofei-Aboagye (1994) reveals that many women remain in abusive relationships due to economic dependency. In another study on Zimbabwean women, Taylor and Stewart (1991) reports that women stay with abusive men because they enjoy being dominated by men and believe that a happy family depends on women respecting men's authority. While I agree with Ofei-Aboagye (1994) that some women stay in abusive relationships because of economic dependency, I dispute Taylor and Steward's theory; I do not think that women stay with abusive partners because they enjoy being dominated by men. Very often women put up with abusive men because of cultural beliefs. Women have been brought up to believe that being a wife and a mother is the only good thing and that divorce is wrong. As a result, they often feel that their family needs to stay together.

In Mama Ida's case, it is the combination of social and economic factors that deter her from leaving her abusive husband. Mama Ida has been socialized to believe that marriage and family are the ultimate things a woman should vie for; she has learned to "veiller sur son mari et ses enfants au point de s'oublier" (*TS* 12) [look after her husband and children to the point of forgetting herself]. She cannot leave for the sake of keeping her family together: "ses fils et se filles étaient sa raison d'être. Aussi consentait-elle à tous les sacrifices pour pouvoir demeurer auprès d'eux et les élever droitement" (*TS* 45) [Her sons and daughters were her reason for being. She therefore agreed to make every sacrifice so that she could stay close to them and raise them rightly]. Another reason is that Mama Ida is unable to sustain herself; she entirely depends on Same for economic support. We need to keep in mind that Mama Ida's willingness to conform to patriarchy does not necessarily mean she ignores her alternatives. I would argue that it is a result of fear of being rejected by Same, by society, and of being thrown into a world where she has no means to survive.

In most African societies, the main purpose of marriage is to have children and continue the bloodline. In addition, having many children addresses the fear that not all children may turn out to be successful and the hope that at least one out of many will. Furthermore, it is believed that the more children one has, the greater one's chances of living comfortably later in life because then, the roles will be reversed and the children will be able to take care of their parents. In Zambia, among the Lunda, for example, there is a common proverb that illustrates this traditional belief which is upheld by men and women alike: "*elekaku mwana, kumbidi niyena akakweleki*" [carry a child on your back today so s/he can carry you in your old age as well].

One model of masculinity stresses the ability to procreate, "something that every man must do in order to be respected as man" (Fuller 2001: 96). In other words, having many children not only enhances a man's self-confidence and social prestige, but it is also an indication of manliness. In this connection, Same desires to have as many children as he can in spite of his wife's advanced age and poor health. Furthermore, despite his unsound financial position, Same believes that being able to father many children is vital to his male identity. This corroborates the claim by Connell (2005) that masculinity is socially constructed because society expects one to behave like a man and not otherwise.

This raises the question of how men view other men in this novel. They constantly scrutinize one another, watching and ranking other men before granting them acceptance within the realm of manhood. If his friend Oman's remark is anything to go by, Same has proved his manhood: "Mes félicitations [. . .] Dieu est avec toi. [Ma femme] Johanna a eu beaucoup de problèmes [. . .] Je n'en ai que sept, moi" (*TS* 70) [Congratulations, God is with you. (My wife) Johanna had many problems [. . .] I only have seven (children)]. Oman's statement underscores the importance he and Same attach to having many children, even when a man is not financially capable of sustaining a large family.

Same attempts to control not only his wife's mind but her womb as well, the womb which Gayatri Spivak (1987) maintains is "a workshop," a place that can be managed and controlled in terms of use value and surplus value. Hence, when he realizes that Mama Ida's concern over giving birth at the age of 55 may cause her to re-evaluate her pregnancy, Same is quick to allude to biblical characters in the same situation, hoping that the analogy will convince his wife to carry her pregnancy to term. He exploits Mama Ida's profound Christian faith when he says:

> Je connais des femmes qui ont fait quatorze, quinze enfants sans peine. As-tu véritablement eu des problèmes depuis que tu en fais toi? [. . .] Ida, l'enfant est et reste le signe de la bénédiction divine, il est la seule vraie richesse du monde.
>
> (Bassek 1990: 65)

> [I know women who have given birth to fourteen, fifteen children without difficulty. Have you really had any problem with childbearing? [. . .] Ida, a child is and will always be a divine blessing; it is the only real fortune in the world].

The above passage reveals that Same is a selfish carnivore who considers Mama Ida as a mere object of possession, a body for sexual gratification, and a children-baking machine. His attitude is typical of bourgeois life style or capitalist modes of production that view women as property, tools for production or labour.

To continue with religious analogies, Same reminds his wife of the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah:

> Rappelle–toi qu'Abraham était âgé de cent ans et Sara de quatre-vingt-dix lorsqu'elle devint enceinte. Grâce à Dieu l'Eternel. Et leur fils, Isaac, grandit et devint riche.
>
> (Bassek 1990: 65)

> [Remember that Abraham was a hundred years old and his wife Sara was ninety when she became pregnant. Praise to the everlasting God. And their son Isaac grew up and became rich].

Upon hearing such "paroles angéliques" (*TS* 65) [angelic words], Mama Ida becomes so persuaded that she cannot do anything but agree with her husband. Here is an example of the exploitation of religion by men for their personal interests. According to biblical teaching, God gave Abraham a child in his old age because he had none; but in Same's case, he already has ten children and the multiple childbirths have compromised his wife's health. Like her husband Same, Mama Ida is also happy that she is pregnant with her eleventh child. Not once does she consider the implication of her pregnancy for her fragile health; after all, Same "owns" the pregnancy. By rejoicing over her eleventh pregnancy without considering its

effects on her health, Mama fails to "question obligatory motherhood" (Davies and Graves 1986: 8), which is one tenet of African feminism.

As expected, Same is excited about the prospects of being a father again. He therefore decides to send Mama Ida to the city for pre-natal care. In the city, she is to put up with their eldest child Patricia, an educated, thoroughly westernized woman married to a successful lawyer Mandinka. Patricia's "revolutionary" ideas, her belief in her independence and individuality even within the marital context, set a stage for an inevitable confrontation between mother and daughter. For, as might be expected, Mama Ida attempts to foist the code of patriarchal education – which she inherited from her own mother Veronica – on her daughter's domestic space.

Events soon begin to justify Mama Ida's anxiety over Patricia's behaviour. The "unimaginable" liberty Patricia takes frequently with her husband induces a feeling of guilt in her mother who begins to wonder if somehow she failed in her duty to effectively transfer – as her own mother Veronica did – the code of patriarchal education to her daughter during her formative years:

> Pourtant, il y avait longtemps de cela, sitôt que le corps de sa fille eut commencé à prendre des formes provocantes, à se faire femme, Mama Ida prit soin de la mettre en garde contre certaines idées. Elle lui enseigna la tradition dans le domaine qui la concernait le plus, à savoir son avenir d'épouse–mère. Elle lui répéta qu'une fille ne pouvait trouver le bonheur que dans le mariage. Que pour être une femme respectable et respectée, il fallait aimer son homme, lui faire de bons plats, deviner ses intentions et surtout, avec l'aide du bon Dieu, lui faire des enfants, beaucoup d'enfants.
>
> (Bassek 1990: 83)

> [However, a long time ago, as soon as her daughter's body began to take provocative forms, to become a woman, Mama Ida took care to warn her against certain ideas. She taught her the tradition in the field that most concerned her, namely her future as a mother–wife. She repeated to her that a girl can find happiness only in marriage. That in order to be a respectable and respected woman, one had to love her man, make him good dishes, guess his intentions, and most importantly, with the help of God, make him children, many children.]

As a graduate and agent of patriarchal school, Mama Ida wonders where she could have gone wrong in educating her daughter Patricia. She remembers having imparted in her daughter the necessary knowledge and skills a woman needs as wife and mother such as respect and care for the husband, and ultimately giving him more children.

The feminist critic Odile Cazenave (2000) observes that, like in other African women's novels that examine the mother-daughter relationship, there is in *La Tâche de Sang* a fundamental questioning of the mirror–image trope of the mother, as well as textual move to deconstruct the age-long axiom: like mother, like daughter. This explains the irreconcilable differences between Mama Ida and Patricia, who would have none of her mother's blind adherence to the tenets of patriarchal education. Patricia, joining a radical women's movement, rebels against the codes of patriarchal teaching to which her mother adheres. Patricia and her friends, mostly married and all very westernized, come together in a movement described in terms reminiscent of radical feminist formations in Europe and North America. Mama Ida is, of course, horrified by the idea that her daughter belongs to such a group, but Patricia insists that their intentions are noble: "nous réfléchissons sur les

conditions d'existence des femmes dans la famille comme dans la société et nous étudions la manière de les transformer" (*TS* 89) [we reflect on women's conditions in the family as well as society at large, and try to find a way to transform them].

The news that her mother is carrying her eleventh pregnancy and has actually come to the city for pre-natal care infuriates Patricia, who insists that a woman's life cannot be reduced to marriage and procreation. But Mama Ida's commitment to Same is very strong. As a woman used to putting herself last, Mama Ida can only reiterate her husband's wishes: "mon mari adore les enfants" (*TS* 130) [my husband adores children]. Mama Ida's statement baffles Patricia's friend Modi, who quickly responds: "Tu parles comme si tu n'existais pas" (*TS* 130) [You are talking as if you did not exist]. Mama Ida's response should not come as a surprise; after all, she has indisputably internalized her social role so much that she is willing to please her husband while suffering silently. Everything Mama Ida does is to please and appease Same, she is not at all concerned about herself. She has internalized the traditional values of her upbringing. As an adolescent, she learned that women's value was in marriage and that as a woman, she should be a passive breeder under the jurisdiction of her husband.

Patricia does not agree with Mama Ida's world view. Having realized that her mother is incapable of making an independent decision concerning the pregnancy, she conspires with Modi, one of her feminist friends and a medical doctor, to perform a drug-induced abortion without Mama Ida's knowledge and consent, without consulting Same, without even discussing the matter with their own husbands, with whom they both have successful marriages. To show her friendship and solidarity, Modi reassures Patricia: "Ne t'alarme pas, Patricia, ton drame et ton combat sont les miens" (*TS* 131) [Don't worry, Patricia, your tragedy and your struggle are mine]. This is an indication of women's solidarity. Mama Ida consequently loses the pregnancy that gave her a sense of her own value. The narrator informs us that administering such drugs secretly to pregnant women who, in her view, are only carrying their pregnancies at great risk to their own health just to make their husbands happy, is Modi's stock in trade. She rationalizes her action as a contribution to the necessary feminist struggle. It follows therefore that Patricia and Modi assume that they know, while Mama Ida and others non-westernized women do not know – that is do not know what is good for themselves. By acting for her mother and terminating her pregnancy surreptitiously, Patricia denies her the right to make her own decision, the right to choice, the very right she and her "feminist" friends set out to defend.

One might think that Patricia's decision to terminate her mother's pregnancy is a victory because she is able to take responsibility and help her mother, whose health has considerably deteriorated as a result of a series of unplanned pregnancies. But, in fact, the abortion does not liberate Mama Ida, since by failing to consult her, by exercising control over her body without her consent, Patricia and Modi – like Same – rob her of the right to exercise agency on her own behalf. They act upon her, treating her as an object whose voice and choices are less important than theirs. The abortion is then a typical colonial move. The educated, Westernized younger women feel justified in what they do because they have agreed that it is in the best interest of the ignorant native woman, who clearly cannot be trusted to do what is good for her. And because Mama Ida has been so thoroughly conditioned by the patriarchal system she lives in to bow to male authority, Patricia and Modi are right in thinking this. But it is a hollow victory, achieved at great cost in terms of trust and family relationships.

At this point, one may wonder why Patricia and her friends were not successful in their attempt to foist a workable feminist ideology on a subalternized female subject like

Mama Ida. For an understanding of why radical feminism fails in Bassek's novel, let us turn to Uha Menon's (2000: 77-78) analysis of the failure of feminism (Euro-American feminism to be precise) in India:

> I suggest that feminists working in India find themselves out of touch with ordinary Hindu women because they offer very little in terms of message and meaning that resonates with the lived experience of these women. I submit that feminism is so particular a product of Western social and intellectual history, its moral order constructed so explicitly in terms of equality, individual rights, and personal choice, that it appears quite alien to Hindu women who live within another, equally elaborated moral order that cherishes self-control, self-refinement, and duty to the family.

This quote apprises that Euro-American feminists working in India among Hindu women fail in their mission simply because the message they offer could not resonate with the lived experiences, history, and culture of the local people. Their message was incompatible with Hindu women and therefore alien.

One only has to substitute Africa for India and African women for Hindu women in this passage to arrive at the situation in *La Tâche de Sang*. A group of Westernized African women come together to impose their Western influences in an African context, without serious consideration of how their newly acquired Western feminist consciousness could be adapted to appeal to African women. I agree with Adesani (2002: 107) that, in *La Tâche de Sang*, as elsewhere in contemporary Africa, the daughters of imperialism ascribe to the role of liberating "daughters of goddess" only to end up alienating them. The failure of Patricia and her friends also raises the crucial issue of who has the right to speak for or on behalf of the other.

Conclusion

The novel analysed in this study cast much light on situations familiar to various women in diverse parts of Africa, depicting the ways in which they are oppressed in their households as a result of gender and patriarchy, and describing the extent to which feminism has failed to empower them.

From her young age, Mama Ida was groomed for marriage. As a result, her parents decide to marry her off without consulting her or listening to her opinion. They believe that Same Hanack is the right man for their daughter, despite being old and having other women. They also believe that, because of his wealth, he can take care of her, and they will eventually benefit in return, thus making her a simple commodity. Unfortunately, this marriage turns into hell for Mama Ida as she is abused physically and emotionally. Voiceless and powerless, Mama Ida has to comply with her husband's demands, including that of procreation despite her frail health.

As a way of expanding power and control over Mama Ida, her husband (Same Hanack) isolates her from all external contacts, claiming that, since he paid bride price he now owns her. To him, Mama Ida is simply a commodity he purchased with his own money. However, having been socialised to believe that marriage and family are the ultimate things a woman should vie for, Mama Ida cannot leave her abusive husband. It should be added that her enlightened feminist daughter, Patricia, also cannot help to liberate Mama Ida who is willing to conform to patriarchy without questioning it.

Considering all the oppressions that Mama Ida has put up with, there is a need for women to join hands together and struggle against patriarchal power and authority, not only within the family structures and society, but in all sphere of their life, in order to liberate themselves. Since suffering is a common denominator that they share together, women need to unite so that they can stop it. As D'Almeida (1986) rightly points out, "a greater solidarity among women is needed to alleviate the agony women go through in marital and social situation" (162). However, as Mutunda (2007) observes, this solidarity cannot flourish without a good understanding on the part of women themselves that, in a patriarchal society, all women are second class citizens.

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