



The Doubly Oppressed: The Portrayal of Female Characters in Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*

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Abstract

This essay explores and analysis the condition of female characters in Mongo Beti's novel, *The Poor Christ of Bomba*(1971). The paper argues that women in the novel's settings are being oppressed and unjustly maltreated by both colonialists, spearheaded by Father Drumont, and by the native African culture. Thus, the concept of "double oppression" is suitable in demonstrating the theme of maltreatment and exploitation of women in the novel, and their roles in the society. The paper exposes the pretence, hypocrisy, insincerity and biasness of the Christian mission in respect to women issues such polygamy, adultery and other sundry issues.

Keywords: Female characters, the doubly oppressed, English literature

Introduction

The treatment and role women the play as portrayed in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*(Beti & Moore, 1971) can be seen from twofold oppression, of the colonialism and native culture, as called by Gutierrez as "intolerable" (xxii). According to him women in Africa, or elsewhere, be it Latin America or Asia, suffers as of the oppressed people as well as part of an oppressed gender in the society. However, Wyrick (1959) hails Fanon's description of the "revolutionary woman, who, having achieved her own liberation, becomes an agent of transformation for society as a whole". In postcolonial theory, women's issues were of great particular concern, because it sees the third world or the colonized woman as a potential victim of oppression by the colonizer and her native traditional culture.

There are lots of empirical evidences depicting the roles of the native people in the exploitation of others especially the women populace in the novel. However, Beti is accused by Susan Gasster of refusing of over-simplifying the factors that are responsible for oppression and poverty in the society, "Beti is adamant that African society was not without flaws, at least as far back as we can see it" (1987:291). On the other hand, Fanon argues that is only a unified front against the colonialists can only free a nation from the external oppressor and can also lead to the establishment of new nations freed from their own internal structure of oppression and exploitation, such as cultural views on gender roles in the society.

In the novel, Beti, seems to project some sort of hope by not only portraying oppression on the part the colonialist but also from the part of the African populace against the female characters. The novelist has in many instances in the novel critiques the behaviour of many African characters, including their complicity in the exploitation of other Africans. Thus, the concept of "double oppression" is very suitable in exploring the roles and treatment of female characters in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, as they both relate to the colonial mission and as they as well relate to the traditional cultural practices of the society.

To begin with, it will be worthwhile to first of all explore the portrayal of women from the view point of the chief narrator of the entire story of the novel, Denis. It is evident that whatever Denis does is in tandem to Father Drumont's opinions on religious matters, therefore, it is expected that Denis' views and thoughts about women will surely have much of his missionary connotation. And, sometimes his thoughts are drawn from his own experiences growing up in the mission school in Bomba. For instance, at the beginning of the story of the novel, Denis criticizes the native tradition which gives the male gender more preference than the female gender. He bears his dismay over his father's remark, who is a catechist, that he would wish his daughter to have a baby outside wedlock: "After all, my father is a catechist, yet I'm certain he'd be the happiest of men if my sister Anne had a baby before marriage, especially a son. That will be one man more in the household. The only thing is, my father might be excommunicated by Father Drumont

over thing like that, especially as he's a catechist" (1971, p. 9). In fact, this act will have tarnish the image of both Denis' father and sister in the Church, but Denis is sure it will please his father. This episode is an indicator to what we are to confront as the story progresses, thus it depicts the value ascribed to the male gender and lack of concern to the female gender.

As a matter of emphasis, Denis again re-echoes his father's view of women: "My father often says women are like children in their desires" (p.15). Meanwhile, Denis' assumes that childishness must be behind the reason many women are chasing Zacharia: "...the girls who chase Zacharia aren't drawn by his tallness or his leather shoes. Perhaps they're only after childish things, a bit of the bread or a pot of jam, knowing that he's a cook" (pp. 14-5). More so, Denis draws our attention to a condescending warning by the priest that women can be dangerous. Thus, it is evident from the beginning that Denis also holds similar views about women as most adult around him, his father and especially the priest.

Similarly, going by Denis dogmatic belief of the mission, he always emphasizes the Father's position on polygamy as sinful, a purely pro-feminine position. For instance, he makes reference to a man's polygamy and refusal of Christian marriage as an "odious situation". However, most the converts do not rigidly hold to the Church's stance on this issue as Denis does. For example, at a village Mombet, Denis notes that most of the converts "...have taken a second wife or even third wife" (p.13). As we have earlier seen in other instances of customary village festivals, converting to Christianity does not mean a total renunciation of traditional beliefs that conflict with the missionary teaching. This proves to be true, especially, as it concerns the traditional gender roles and polygamy.

However, Father Drumont launches a serious struggle against polygamy, but is without any relevant attempt to protect the rights of women or their well-being. The incident between Drumont with the chief of Timbo, for example, depicts that Drumont, like Le Geun of Essazam in *King Lazarus*, desires to convince the chief to disavow polygamy. The chief converted but when his first wife could not bear children, he decides to take another wife. And he feels this is a personal since he decides not to seek the consent of the priest, and it is vital to note that "...his first wife did not bear him a son. He must have discussed with the Father and been counselled.... But long the inevitable happened; the chief took a second wife, and this was the first time since his baptism that he had taken a decision without consulting the Father" (p.28). Thus, the chief chooses to separate the mission when it comes to the issue of polygamy, so as to distance himself from the Father's hostility and condemnation, or possible sanctions.

Despite all his aversions to this chief's polygamy or any other male convert, the Father is not likely to achieve any significant success in that regard. In the meantime, the chief of Ekokot attempts to convince Drumont to approve his taking of other wives, his reason is that his first wife is a barren. Therefore, he postponed his scheduled conversion to another date. That he will no longer convert till he has enough children and until such a time he no longer desires another woman:

'So when will you be converted?'

The chief thought for some time before replying: 'Oh, Father...Mmm, well, when I've had enough children!'

'Indeed!' the Father exclaimed.

'Certainly, Father; you know what I mean. You know my first wife, eh?'

The one I married in church? Well she's sterile. Yes, Father, she's sterile!

So, you understand me when I say I was forced to take other wives in order to have children. But when I have enough children I shall perhaps let my other wives go. Yes, perhaps...' (p.65).

Father Drumont sees this as another ruse, claiming to dismiss the "extra" wives when they might have had enough children from them. It assumed that Father Drumont will reject the idea of baptism of any polygamous man like the chief when decides to convert. Unfortunately, the response of the mission depicts that he might be ready to accept the chief were Father sure he would stick through to his word of riding of his 'extra' wives. Once small, the imperative for Drumont is based mainly on the abstract concept of polygamy. The resultant effect for the affected women, who would be abandoned and shunned, seems not to be of any concern to the Father.

To further demonstrate the missionary's lack of personal concern to the plight of the women in his manner of dealing with polygamy and consequences, was exhibited when a woman visits him in Ekokot. We all know that Drumont takes clear positions against polygamy on several occasions, particularly if the men involve do not hold the position of chief in the society. And his position is always strict as to completely split families. His demonstration of dogmatic stance against polygamy practically exposes his lacklustre concern for the personal consequences either from the system of polygamy itself or from the rigidity of his own reactions. For instance, when meets a woman who frequently visits her daughter that is married to a polygamous husband, his judgement is simple but rigid, because he insists that the woman "Give up these visits to your daughter!" (p.62). The woman insists that she be allowed by the priest to continue the visits to her daughter: "Father, she's my child, my own child, and I love her.... Punish me in any way you like, Father, but don't forbid me to see my daughter. I would die! Have pity on me..." (p.62). In a response the request, Drumont says that any Christian mother must agree to put an end all relations with her daughter who would be married to a

polygamist. His dogma is clearly portrayed as much more important than the emotional feelings of either the daughter or that of the mother.

It is equally of importance to note the objectifying relation of wives and women to money in analysing and assessing the roles of the female characters under the control of the missionary in Bomba. For example, in Bitie village, men do accept Christian marriages and also sends the wives to the sixa in Bomba. But immediately after sending the wives to the sixa they arrange and take another woman as second wives "...for with all the money they're making from cocoa a second wife is almost inevitable..." (p.40). Thus, men with so much wealth at their disposal they should be expected to take additional wives. The issue of taking a second wife is an indication of a man's success in the society. Denis states that, "at the very altar and in the midst of the service, they are already thinking about their next choice, have already negotiated with the parents and paid part of the bride-price" (p.40). The mission, ironically, derives financial gains when these men marry second wives because their children pay higher dues to the Church before they are baptised than those from non-polygamous homes: "And they do usually send their extra children for baptism, paying a higher fee than the good Christians" (p.40). More so, we see in Ekokot village where the colonial administration is deeply involved in selling of daughters in the name of marriage. For instance, a woman complaint to Drumont about the conflict in the family in which the bride price her daughter is fixed at five thousand francs by family in a guise to 'sell' the daughter for marriage: "A woman appeared before the Father, accused of doing nothing when a young man, who wanted to marry her daughter, was forced to pay out five thousand francs. Five thousand, what a price!" (p.60). However, instead opposing the practice, Drumont only opposes the amount: "You could have spoken to your husband. You could have threatened to report him to the Administrator. Don't you is forbidden for a father to demand five thousand francs for his daughter? Five hundred francs is the your husband can demand of his son-in-law;... And that is the law, made by the administrator..." (p. 61).

In other words, pegging of five hundred francs by the administrator is far lower than the five thousand francs discussed here, the limitation by the colonialist is also an implicit approval of the system itself. Similarly, one can argue that the Church also endorsed the system through the responses of Drumont to the woman. For instance, when he tells the woman to be ashamed of herself, for selling her daughter for such amount, hence he resorts to scolding her: "How could you agree to sell your daughter at such a rate? ...Five thousand francs! Aren't you ashamed? A Christian selling her daughter for five thousand francs!" (p.60). Thus, this incident depicts the Church and the administration's approval of the practice because further action is taken to forestall the act.

To further buttress the depiction of double oppression of women, in the novel, as discussed by Gutierrez, we see the struggle for control of women between their husbands and Father Drumont. For instance, Drumont's visits, according to Denis, to women have been generating hostile protests from their husbands: "We'd been there about twenty minutes when we heard a strong male voice thundering....From the veranda of his house,...the man called the catechist and shouted: 'Tell your boss'..., 'that I won't have any man, white man or priest though he be, spending so long in my wife's quarters. Do you get it? I won't tolerate...'" (p.18). The narrator comprehends the severity of the husbands' threat as shown in the way they treat their wives. His assessment may be right, but he is ignorant of the control the mission asserts on the women especially those in the mission school, the sixa. At the sixa, the women are subjected to forced labour and rigid daily schedules which indicates a sort of control that be said to be severe than the one Denis observed on the on the part of the native husbands.

Generally, the most practical trace of portrayal of the oppression and the maltreatment of women in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* is in the sixa, the mission school run by the Catholic Mission in Bomba. It is in this part of the colonial church that one confronts glaring abuse and maltreatment of the colonized women, with both the Colonial Church and the native men clearly culpable to the crime. Malone (1971) as quoted in Tracy Scott Parkinson (2003), strongly condemned the acts in the sixa and described it as: "...a veritable gang sex abuse all women of the sixa." The sixa is housing about sixty (60) young women who are under total control of Rapheal, the mission's appointed administrator. During interrogation of some the young women in the sixa, we have heard that they have no choice than to do the directives of the administrator: "But she hadn't really any choice, for if she refused Rapheal would send her back to the heavy work...She had gradually come to understand that everyone in the sixa had to dance to Raphael's tune if they were to avoid suffering..." (p.173). At beginning of the story of the novel, we learnt that Father Drumont is unaware of the way and manner the sixa, for which he is totally responsible, is being run by Rapheal. Again, he condones more oppression and abuse of women as he even becomes aware of the atrocities and abuse in the sixa by Raphael. The interrogation that aims to expose the abuse and exploitation of the young women in the sixa, turns out to another show of more oppression, exploitation, abuse, coercion and injustice, as the young women were forced to answer questions through threats and whippings. Here, Marguerite summarizes the whole situation "...through her sobs" when bluntly and courageously responded to Father Drumont during the interrogation:

' Fada, you're torturing me unjustly. You must know what goes on here, what's always gone on right here in the mission. You must know that every girl in the sixa sleeps with someone here or someone from outside. Why are you torturing me like this? Why are prosecuting me? Anyone can tell you these things if you ask them;...I'm no more guilty than anyone else... When I

came to the sixa, things were already just the same as they are now. You can't blame for bringing bad morals here. You're unjust...' (p.183).

To be candid, the Father shows his feelings against the forced labour development projects by colonial administration in the Cameroon, but contrarily in the sixa similar forced labour and coercion of the young women enrolled there take place, and is evident that Drumont cannot claim to be ignorant. For instance, Drumont deployed the young women when building the mission itself, especially whenever men were scarce:

All the bricks and tiles were made by the sixa girls. Every week he called up some of the village Christians to help. But despite that there still wasn't enough manpower. So He put a girl from the sixa to work wherever a man was missing, and proved to our people that girls can do jobs that no one had ever dreamt of, like sawing wood into planks (p.16).

Although, Denis views this act as a deliberate attempt by Drumont to show to the local people that women when given the chance can do so many things that had never been thought possible. But in my opinion, they do so in context of forced labour for the mission, not willingly. For instance, the young women were never given any further chance to demonstrate their abilities but only during labour. It is also worth noting that Drumont also approved the extension of the requirement of stay in the sixa from three months to four months in order to maintain a labour force (p.16). In order to further encourage the act he created a song to encourage to work and to make believe that the work is a demonstration of their character:

Work with a will,
Then strive harder still.
And never give up,
But work till you drop (p.14).

From the foregoing, it is evident that the sixa works for the material interest of the colonial mission, coercing and forcing young women to work under the pretext of spiritual and moral guidance and development.

Finally, through the exploration of the characters these women, we assess the mission in Bomba as not a means of liberating or empowering the women of Cameroon. Thus, all the women discussed in this essay, have directly or otherwise been doubly oppressed. The novelist in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, powerfully these women characters as representation of exploitation, maltreatment and oppression by both the European colonial Church, being represented by the Bomba mission, its missionary and M. Vidal, and by the African male, represented by Zacharia and Raphael.

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