

Artikel

African Women 'Becoming White': Performative Whiteness in the Context of West African Literature

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Abstract

Le présent article s'appuie sur le concept d'intersectionnalité et sur les études critiques de la *blancheur/blanchitude* (*Critical Whiteness Studies*). Ces approches théoriques, nées dans le contexte féministe « africain-américain » (intersectionnalité) et des études postcoloniales (*Whiteness Studies*) à la fin des années 1980, sont adaptées au contexte de la littérature dite « francophone ». L'article se concentre, dans un premier temps, sur l'écriture semi-autobiographique de Calixthe Beyala et de Ken Bugul, à la lumière de ces approches novatrices qui rejoignent également en grande partie les positions des études postcoloniales matérialistes (Graham Huggan, Sarah Brouillette). Dans un deuxième temps, l'article cherche à répondre à la question suivante : jusqu'à quel point l'écriture de Beyala et de Bugul est-elle finalement subversive dans sa tentative de remettre en cause les constructions normatives et stéréotypiques sur la *blancheur* et, également, sur la *noirceur*.

African Women ‘Becoming White’:

Performative Whiteness in the Context of West African Literature¹

Kaiju Harinen (Turku, Finland)

Nous sommes arrivés la nuit. Tout était lumière. Enfin l’Europe, l’Occident, le pays des Blancs, le pays des Gaulois, le pays des sapins, de la neige, le pays de mes « ancêtres ».

(BUGUL, *Le baobab fou*)

Introduction

In this article I will discuss representational *whiteness* and gender in the context of francophone African women’s literature. I will focus on the semiautobiographical writings of the Cameroonian author Calixthe Beyala and the Senegalese author Ken Bugul. In their work, *whiteness*² is ‘traveling’ from West Africa to Europe: it is metaphorically incorporated in the personae of a young black girl living in Europe and seeking to ‘become white’. The reconstruction of normative *whiteness* is reflected in white racist and sexist encounters that the protagonists are confronted within Europe. The protagonists of the novels play with reconstructed and representational *whiteness* (imitating the stereotypical white dress, speaking the ‘language of the white’, adapting ‘white feminism’, religion, etc.).³ A ‘scene’ from Ken Bugul’s first novel *Le baobab fou* illustrates one of the protagonist’s ‘methods’ of ‘becoming white’:

Les talons aiguille dans le sable chaud qui m’enveloppait jusqu’aux chevilles, le gras qui dégoulinait de mes cheveux dégrêlés jusqu’à la brûlure, marcher en serrant les fesses. [...] J’apprenais par cœur les chansons occidentales et voulais les vivre telles.⁴

¹ This article is partly based on a paper presentation given at the *Travelling Whiteness: Interchanges in the Study of Whiteness* conference at the University of Turku, Finland, the 18 October 2013.

² The concept of *whiteness* is seen as a discursive construction based on imaginary racialized supremacy of ‘white’ people. The Critical Whiteness Studies, which are used as theoretical background in this article, are criticising and deconstructing this institutionalised and historically constructed supremacy.

³ The naïf desire to ‘become white’ is already illustrated in the citation in the very beginning of this article: The protagonist of Bugul’s trilogy wants to find her ‘ancestors’, the Gauls, because she was told in the colonial school that the Gauls really were the ancestors of the Senegalese.

⁴ BUGUL, *Le baobab fou*, p. 143.

In their performative play, the authors purposely ignore the current notions of fragmented and heterogeneous identity and culture. In my opinion, the game of ‘becoming white’ based on labels is an attempt to demonstrate to what extent the fictional images of both white and black women are very often stereotypical, eroticized and exoticized reconstructions based on patriarchal binary oppositions. My objective is to analyze the Francophone context of *whiteness* through these exoticized and eroticized fictional characters. The analysis in this article is based on Graham Huggan’s notion of strategic exoticism and Judith Butler’s notion of performativity and the concept of intersectionality.

According to Huggan,⁵ strategic exoticism (associated to global leaderships demands) is realized mainly in two different ways: either the postcolonial authors use exotic clichés in order to subvert and criticize them from ‘inside’, or the authors use strategic exoticism in a new context to demonstrate uneven power relationships and to transform the codes of exotic representations. Inspired by Huggan’s research, Sarah Brouillette sums up strategic exoticism as follows:

[...] Huggan identifies a certain ‘strategic exoticism’ that pervades postcolonial writing, as authors attempt to show that they understand the ways in which they are being asked to present the Third World or global South to a presumably apolitical metropolitan audience.⁶

The notion of *whiteness* is relatively unexplored in the ‘French’ research context. And, even if the white racial imaginary has been analyzed and criticized since the late 1980s,⁷ *whiteness* often still represents the norm of humanity. Dyer states that: “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.”⁸ In my opinion, the main focus of Whiteness Studies is indeed on the

⁵ HUGGAN, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, pp. 32-33.

⁶ BROUILLETTE, *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace*, p. 5.

⁷ Whiteness Studies emerged at the end of the 1980s in the context of postcolonial and feminist studies in the United States. By the beginning of the 21st century Critical Whiteness Studies were widely spread in European universities. See, for instance, FRANKENBERG, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*; DYER, *White*; STOWE, “Uncolored people: The Rise of Whiteness Studies”, pp. 68-77.

⁸ DYER, *White*, p. 1.

deconstruction of these types of normative structures and the analysis of the power relationships that are connected to them.⁹

Whiteness Studies and the Francophone Context

The aspect of *whiteness* in African contexts has been studied by only a few Western academics, even though the colonial history of the continent could suggest otherwise. Actually, there are some colonial era studies of *whiteness*, but few recent ones.¹⁰ One of the reasons for this lack of research in the French context might be simply related to the language barrier:

The research related to “racial” encounters is largely ignored by the major part of the French academics. Unlike in United States or in Great Britain, the “racial” questions are not scientifically studied in social sciences by the French academics. And, the research, made in English, is still not, until recently, well known in France.¹¹

Actually, the difference between French literature and Francophone literature is often (not to say always) related to skin color. And, according to Dominique Combe *whiteness* is also often associated with nationality: “From the Parisian point of view, the ‘white’ writers of Québec, Belgium, Switzerland, or Northern Europe are often assimilated into French literature.”¹² However, the Francophone writers from ‘Black Africa’ are almost always associated with being black and/or African as we can see for example in a book review written by Dominic Thomas:

The work of Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala, popularly known as an “Afro French” or “Afro-Parisian” writer since she assumed residency in France during the 1980s, provides a working model for the exploration of the complex and complicated relationship between the Metropole and its former colonial territories.¹³

⁹ However, a certain awareness of one’s own *whiteness* i. e. his or her privileged position in racial imaginary, can sometimes draw the ‘white’ researcher away from the focus of their topic. This phenomenon is quite typical for modern academic tendencies, and can easily become a distraction, to the detriment of the main research topic. I do not consider that the researcher’s own background and, therefore, her or his subjectivity are meaningless. (See, for instance, Hill, who discusses the ‘trouble’ of being a ‘white’ feminist in HILL, “Introduction”, p. 7).

¹⁰ See, for example, ARNDT, “Boundless Whiteness”; GEHRMANN, “Désir de/du Blanc et écriture autobiographique chez Ken Bugul”, pp. 181-194.

¹¹ BOSA, « Plus blanc que blanc », p. 129. (My translation).

¹² COMBE, *Les littératures francophones. Questions, débats, polémiques*, p. 31. (My translation).

¹³ THOMAS, “Calixthe Beyala”, p. 283.

Thomas is using the quotation marks but this is not always the case, especially in ‘popular’ context. Thus, in any given context, it seems that it does matter if you are ‘black’ or ‘white’.

Whiteness and the Concept of Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality signifies the multiple and collapsing aspects of discrimination. According to Kathy Davis, “‘Intersectionality’ refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power.”¹⁴ As well as Whiteness Studies, the intersectional approach is connected to feminist research, in particular to the so-called Black Feminism.¹⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw Williams was the first researcher to use the intersectional approach in the United States in 1989.¹⁶ In the early intersectional studies, many African American feminists were questioning the hegemony of occidental feminism, focused on the middle-class white American or European heterosexual women.¹⁷ Nowadays, the intersectional approach is used in various research contexts examining different dimensions of social discrimination.¹⁸

In this article, the intersectional social situations are considered as a crossroads of various and simultaneous discriminations that the main characters of my research material¹⁹ are forced to tackle Europe. The intersectional approach is also associated with Judith Butler’s concept of performativity. Butler is questioning the normative binary categories like “men” / “women” that are considered as natural. She states that a certain stable womankind or manhood does not exist. In other words, gender is a patriarchal construction that the “actors” repeat and reproduce in social performances²⁰

¹⁴ DAVIS, “Intersectionality as buzzword.”, p. 68.

¹⁵ See, for instance, HOOKS, “Feminist Theory from Margins to Center”; HILL COLLINS, *Black Sexual Politics*.

¹⁶ CRENSHAW WILLIAMS, « Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex », pp. 139-167.

¹⁷ In this context, the notion of WASP (*White Anglo-Saxon Protestant*) often comes up, see DORLIN, « Introduction », p. 13.

¹⁸ See, for example, JAUNAIT/CHAUVIN, « Représenter l’intersection », pp. 5-20.

¹⁹ My research material consists of two novels written by Calixthe Beyala: *L’Assèze l’Africaine* and *La petite fille du réverbère* and a trilogy *Le baobab fou*, *Cendres et braises*, *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* written by Ken Bugul.

²⁰ Both performativity and intersectionality can be associated with the strategic exoticism of Graham Huggan who calls this kind of phenomenon, common to all postcolonial literature, exoticist or fetishist spectacle. According to Huggan, “Exoticist spectacle, commodity fetishism and the aesthetics of

(behavior, dress, communication and so on).²¹ Butler also underlines that gender is racialized and this is manifested at the level of body related to sexuality.²² A citation of the Senegalese author Ken Bugul will give us an example of this kind of performative behaviour:

Je [protagoniste semi-autobiographique] jouais un défilé de mode africaine, me changeant tout le temps pendant que les gens mangeaient; de plus, je voulais assurer le service, mettre tout le monde à l'aise, sourire à chacun. Au fur et au mesure l'armoire se vidait de tous les vêtements que j'avais ramenés du pays et que je ne portais jamais. J'avais tout montré jusqu'au petit pagne, si suggestif, qu'on porte sous les vêtements ; je leur en expliquais le sens érotique. Les hommes me happaient du regard, les femmes louchaient sur le petit pagne. Le mythe de l'érotisme du Noir se confirmait.²³

As we can see, the performative character of the 'scene' is underlined and the protagonist is perfectly aware of her erotic and exotic Africanness: she is playing a part in an 'exoticist/ fetishist spectacle' evoked by Huggan²⁴ where the Westerns can observe and admire the exotic and 'authentic' Other in a sexy dress. In other words, the gender is sexualized and radicalized by the young 'black' women only in order to please the Europeans. The space allowed for the protagonist in European context is indeed quite small and the protagonist seems to accept to play the game in this racist and sexist performative play that the autobiographical narrator is ironically describing.

Intersectionality and the Context of Sub-Saharan Literature

Intersectionality can be adapted to the context of Africa where the 'intersectional' situations are quite different from the context of Occident. We should also keep in mind that the so-called African feminism and the literature written by Sub-Saharan women authors are both quite young. Indeed, the fiction written by women has only existed since the 1970's.²⁵ (Of course, not all literature written by women is feminist).

decontextualisation are all at work, in different combinations and to varying degrees, in the production, transmission and consumption of postcolonial literary/cultural texts." (HUGGAN, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, pp. 20, 32).

²¹ BUTLER, *Gender Trouble; Undoing Gender*.

²² BUTLER, *Gender Trouble*, p. 51.

²³ BUGUL, *Le baobab fou*, p. 109.

²⁴ HUGGAN, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, pp. 20, 32.

²⁵ See for example: MOURALIS, « Une parole autre », pp. 21-22.

According to Béatrice Rangina Gallimore,²⁶ feminism in Africa is often understood as radical feminism, which seeks to create parity of the sexes at any price.

Rangina Gallimore states that:

The usual reproach made of feminism is that it's seen as an elitist movement often adapted by a minority group of African intellectual women who live in cities and belong to the upper class. Feminism is hence considered a luxury that the poor women living in economically difficult situations in villages or in shantytowns simply cannot afford. This reproach also contains another subordinated aspect: as feminism is founded and launched by the Western women, it often ignores the specific problems of women coming from the "third world" or Africa in general.²⁷

It is also important to stress that in modern feminism in West-African francophone countries, there is not only one type of feminism but rather heterogenic groups of feminists. Yet, one of the common traits of these groups is that they are opposed to Western feminism (often seen as one "bloc"), which brings African feminists closer to the intersectional approach, as it is also criticizing Western feminism. Actually, many African feminists writers often invent their own terms for their type of feminism. For instance, Calixthe Beyala has created the term *féminitude*, which she associates with Léopold Sédar Senghor's concept of *négritude*.²⁸ Principally, Beyala's concept is an attempt to combine the 'African Womanhood' praised by Senghor and the emancipatory motivations of all women.

Calixthe Beyala, Ken Bugul and the Desire to 'Become White'

The narration in the semi-autobiographical novels written by Beyala and Bugul is based on different binary oppositions such as communitarianism/loneliness, traditional femininity/ emancipated femininity, emotionality/reason and dominated/dominating. I demonstrate these here in order to analyze the categorical way both Beyala and Bugul set 'white' and 'black' in opposition to each other. The former opposition (communitarianism, traditional femininity, emotionality, dominated) refers to the African, 'black' context and the latter (loneliness, emancipated femininity, reason, dominating) to the European, 'white' context. The oppositions are intentionally stereotypical and the authors are also ignoring the present-day notions of intersectional identity and culture in

²⁶ GALLIMORE RANGINA, « Ecriture féministe ? », p. 81.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 84. (My translation).

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 85-88. MATATEYOU, « Calixthe Beyala », pp. 611-612.

order to criticize the very existence of these kinds of normative constructions. In other words, the binary oppositions function as ‘foundations’ for the strategic exoticism both in Beyala’s and Bugul’s autobiographical texts to demonstrate the false idea of a stable and schematic ‘black’ or ‘white’ identity or culture.

The binary opposition between communitarianism/loneliness is illustrated in the citation that follows:

Oh, comme les chambres étaient chaudes, vivantes, rassurantes, humaines en Afrique ! Tout le monde est là. Les souffles réguliers des petits neveux, le sommeil plein de rêves et de bonheurs d’enfants. La sœur est là, la mère est là, les animaux domestiques ne sont pas loin. C’est magnifique quand tout dort ensemble. [Europe] Et voilà que j’allais dormir toute seule dans une petite chambre, sur un petit lit, avec le petit Christ au-dessus de ma tête.²⁹

Ken Bugul’s quoted opposition is based both on the stereotyped clichés about Africans living closely together in a perfect harmony and on the contrary stereotype about Western individualism i.e. loneliness also related here to ‘white’ man’s religion, Christianity. Christian religion can also be understood as a reference to the colonial era when the Christianization of the Africans was used as one of the ‘methods’ to justify the oppressive colonization of the ‘savages’.³⁰

As to the opposition between traditional femininity and emancipated femininity, it can be observed in the next citation:

Là-bas [Afrique], dans le village, les femmes se donnaient des conseils, se confessaient, vivaient ensemble. Pourquoi ici [Europe] on cherche à bouleverser la nature ? Insatisfaites, elles revendiquent. Que revendiquent-elles ?³¹

So, does the author mean that the demands of emancipated ‘white’ women are considered as unnatural? The question of both femininity and feminism is quite contradictory in Beyala’s and Bugul’s semiautobiographical novels. In addition, both authors seem to admire the more liberal Western women’s space, but, at the same time, they criticize the stereotyped individualism and the lack of solidarity between ‘white’ women. The idealized sisterhood associated with the traditional way of living among Africans is glorified in Bugul’s as well as in Beyala’s novels even though Beyala’s

²⁹ BUGUL, *Le baobab fou*, pp. 41-42.

³⁰ See, for example, MANGEON, *La pensée noire et l’Occident*.

³¹ BUGUL, *Le baobab fou*, p. 100.

protagonist in *Assèze l'Africaine* holds herself responsible for her sister's suicide and Bugul describes the 'carnal' rivalry between wives in polygamous marriage.

The last opposition is the opposition between emotionality and reason and dominated/dominating:

C'est le Dieu des Blancs qui a inventé ça [qui a inventé la mobylette], dit le Nègre. Dieu seul peut te montrer comment fonctionne cet engin, mon frère. Et c'est le Dieu, c'est le Dieu des Blancs.³²

Once again, this time in Beyala's fiction, there is an intersection between the religion of 'whites', rationality and domination. In the same extract of text (not cited here), the narrator makes fun of the stereotyped Africans who easily lose their temper and don't manage to drive the moped, the symbol of 'white man's' technological superiority i.e. dominant status in the context of Africa.

At some point, the exoticized and eroticized 'blackness' comes into confrontation with the 'superficial' and normative *whiteness*:

Je dansais devant une foule en mal d'exotisme, avec des masques gentils ou inquiétants. J'épuisais les contes de Grand-mère et d'Ahmadou Koumba. Je décorais de précipices rouge tropical des contes de Grimm et de Perrault. Je faisais le singe, le poirier, la diseuse de bonne aventure. Les Blancs se marraient parce qu'ils croyaient goûter au gâteau sucré des mystères africains. Je les embobinais dans un flot de snobisme et de références cambroussardes.³³

This example of text also demonstrates Huggan's 'exoticist/fetishist spectacle'³⁴ in which the exotic becomes a burlesque show where the shameless behavior of not only the 'white' people but also that of the 'black' performer is mocked. In other words, I do not think that the performer manages perfectly to put herself above the 'white' people with this subversive act. Even though she is mocking the 'whites' and their shallow and selfish exotic and erotic desires, the Beyala and Bugul writings are simply responding to the demands of a global readership. In a way, at least as to the 'scenes' where the protagonists actually prostitute themselves, it is a sad demonstration of a certain kind of fetishist prostitution in order to please the Western 'client'.

A certain contradiction between the desire to 'become white' and feelings of disgust towards all the 'white' people who are only using the protagonist to experience

³² BEYALA, *Assèze l'Africaine*, p. 32.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

³⁴ HUGGAN, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 20.

exciting exotic and erotic emotions is also associated with the performative behavior of the protagonist:

Et parfois l'envie de m'abandonner comme les femmes du village, cette grâce que j'appréciais et rejetais à la fois. [...] De plus en plus le fossé se creusait, désespérément. L'Afrique me rappelait à elle par ses élans, ses instants de poésie et ses rites. Mais je tenais bon le lien avec les valeurs apportées par la colonisation.³⁵

The disgust towards the 'white' is also related to the melancholic 'prostitution'. At the same time, Africa is 're-born' and 're-appreciated' by the protagonist and all the negative aspects of the whole continent are suddenly wiped away.

Finally, towards the end of this performative play, the binary oppositions actually seem to change places:

Nous ne voulions plus subir l'exil intérieur qui nous mettait à l'écart de la race humaine. Nous voulions devenir des anges, prêts à nous envoler sans le savoir. L'influence blanche. Le complexe blanc. L'anticomplexe blanc. Des enculables en puissance. On croyait que l'âme pouvait se blanchir.

Frantz Fanon already discussed about the thematic of 'black' complexity and the feeling of inferiority towards the 'white' in the 1950's.³⁶ Nevertheless, it seems that the same type of complexity of 'black' identity is still incorporated into the contemporary semiautobiographical writings of Beyala and Bugul. In other words, the racial imaginary and the intersectional oppression are still facing the same types of problems and challenges as 60 years ago. The 'parameters' of discrimination might have slightly changed but, in the end, the Western countries and, indirectly, the postcolonial literary studies, are still confronted with the 'basic' racism treating 'blacks' as inferior to 'whites' and the 'blacks' defending themselves the best they can. For example, the current debate about whether or not today's France is racist or not seems quite naïve, since it obviously is, and, I would say, always has been.³⁷

³⁵ BUGUL, *Le baobab fou*, p. 143.

³⁶ FANON, *Peau noir, masques blancs*.

³⁷ See, for instance, the debate related to racist insults against the French minister for justice Christiane Taubira: SOETEMOND, *La parole raciste s'est-elle libérée en France?*

Conclusion

In some way, both Beyala and Bugul respond to the global marketplace's needs and expectations of postcolonial literature: both authors tell seductive stories of Otherness in an exotic and erotic environment where the White can observe the Other in a secure European context.³⁸ In other words, both authors are using strategic exoticism in order to subvert the binary and essentialist assumptions of gender, racial identity and Africanness. The question is, whether or not the readers understand the subverting intentions of the authors or if they are only reinforcing the stereotypes. Huggan states that strategic exoticism is probably not a perfect or all-inclusive way to subvert the prejudiced and/or sexist postcolonial interpretations of postcolonial literature. Huggan³⁹ argues that:

Strategic exoticism' is an option, [...] but [...] it's not necessarily a way out of the dilemma. Indeed, the self-conscious use of exoticist techniques and modalities of cultural representation might be considered less as a response to the phenomenon of the postcolonial exotic than as a further symptom of it. [...] The postcolonial exotic is, to some extent, a pathology of cultural representation under late capitalism – a result of the spiralling commodification of cultural difference, and of responses to it, that is characteristic to the (post)modern, market-driven, societies in which many of us currently live.

Despite the fact that this kind of strategic exoticism might not work in the desired manner, I still believe that the game of 'becoming white' based on labels is a subversive attempt to demonstrate to which degree the performative images of both 'white' and 'black' women are stereotypical, eroticized and exoticized reconstructions based on patriarchal binary oppositions. Thus, it is difficult to determine who is playing the part of the 'victim': the 'white' or the 'black'. Probably both.

³⁸ See, for instance, BROUILLETTE, *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace*; CAZENAIVE, *Afrique sur Seine*.

³⁹ HUGGAN, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, pp. 32-33.

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