

New Griottes of the African Sahel: Intersectionalities and Women's Narrative Authority in Sanou Bernadette Dao's *La Dernière épouse* & Aïcha Fofona's *Mariage on Copie*

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How to cite this paper: Scott, J. H. (2016). New Griottes of the African Sahel: Intersectionalities and Women's Narrative Authority in Sanou Bernadette Dao's *La Dernière épouse* & Aïcha Fofona's *Mariage on Copie*. *Advances in Literary Study*, 4, 54-66. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/als.2016.44010>

Received: September 2, 2016

Accepted: November 27, 2016

Published: November 30, 2016

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Abstract

African women have played a central role in the development of oral literary traditions of countries of the African Sahel historically, yet very few have actually written works and had them published. Among the few who have recently emerged, some have brought new perspectives on historical and contemporary issues as well as innovative techniques in style and narrative structure. Two novels in particular by contemporary women writers from the African Sahel engage issues of women's agency and the power of narrative authority to interrogate the structures of intersectionality that impact women's lives: *La Dernière épouse* (The Last Wife), by Sanou Bernadette Dao of Burkina Faso, and *Mariage on Copie* (Images of Marriage), by Aïcha Fofana of Mali. These works confront the discursive authority of male fictive texts of the post-colonial experience as their female characters seize *la parole* (the word) to remap representations of traditional male/female relationships.

Keywords

Intersectionalities, African Sahelian Women, Respatialization, Patriarchy and Colonialism, African Female Storyteller, Women & Post-Colonialism

1. Introduction

Although women have played a central role historically in the development of oral literary traditions of countries of the African Sahel, there are very few who have actually

written works in French and had them published, particularly in the area of the novel. Those few who have recently emerged have brought new perspectives on historical and contemporary issues as well as innovative techniques in style and narrative structure. While novelistic representations from African women of Sahelian countries are scant, two novels by contemporary women writers of the area engage issues of women's agency and the power of narrative authority to interrogate the structures of intersectionality that impact women's lives. *La Dernière Épouse* (The Last Wife), by Sanou Bernadette Dao of Burkina Faso, and *Mariage on Copie* (Images of Marriage), by Aïcha Fofana of Mali confront the discursive authority of male fictive texts of the post-colonial experience as their female characters seize *la parole* (the word) to remap representations of traditional male/female relationships.

Narrative stylistics from Western story-books, the traditional African raconteurs, the modern video camera and photography are deployed to create a literary respatialization of patriarchy and colonialism allowing the inter-personal relationships and secret longings of women (and men) of their societies to have a forum. The texts indeed bear witness to the influence of the geographical and cultural space itself on shaping their literary creativity. Sanou and Fofana's fictive universes redeploy traditional unmediated male power and privilege as they determine the contours of women's lives and desires. Most noticeable in their works is the role of the storyteller at the "lyrical centre" of the collective consciousness of the characters. This creates in the reader a sense of having direct access to the scene. Such an approach succeeds in masking authorial intrusions and relinquishing voice and narrative license to the griot.

2. Critical Perspectives

A crucial theoretical perspective used here is that of intersectionality. A number of theorists have identified the destructive nature of the intersectionalities of race, gender and patriarchal power on women of color, among them [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#) ("Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics") and [Collins \(1998\)](#) ("It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation"). Their theories examine the ways that gender, race, class, and sexuality create interlocking systems of oppression and collude to create women's inequality. On the theory of intersectionality, critic [Hankivsky \(2014\)](#) notes the following:

Intersectionality promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations (e.g., "race"/ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion). These interactions occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power (e.g., laws, policies, state governments and other political and economic unions, religious institutions, media). Through such processes, interdependent forms of privilege and oppression shaped by colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, ableism and patriarchy are created ([Hankivsky, 2014: p. 101](#)).

She summarizes the complexity of this ideology in observing that in brief, relative to “an intersectionality perspective, inequities are never the result of single, distinct factors. Rather, they are the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences” (Hankivsky, 2014: p. 101). Sanou and Fofana enter the dialogue around this notion, redrawing the contours of the discursive space in their literary creations. Their unique narratological style liberates the silent female voices for this foray into traditional patriarchal space. A theoretical perspective remarking on the respatializing effect of the authors’ narrativity is articulated in Sarah Katherine Foust Vinson’s *Storied Memories: Memory as Resistance in Contemporary Women’s Literature* (Vinson, 2010). In her study, Vinson points out that, being “aware of the limitations imposed by inherited story forms and limited narrative possibilities for women under the traditional patriarchal structure, many feminist literary theorists have claimed that we need new narrative possibilities for women’s stories in order to more fully capture women’s life experiences.” She goes on to underscore the dilemma of finding appropriate “narrative frames available to help story women’s memories” (Vinson, 2010). In finding these frames, she suggests, “it is possible that narratives of women’s experiences, histories, and memories could be constrained or even silenced” (Vinson, 2010).

Vinson explores this idea further with a discussion of Carole Maso’s *The Art Lover*. Vinson observes that in the text, Maso calls “for new narrative and artistic frames to narrate women’s memories and experiences beyond those passed down by a limited, masculine artistic ideal,” [and]... [the] “possibility for narrative frames that embrace multiplicity, ambiguity, and women’s agency” (Vinson, 2010). Vinson notes that Maso looks at how women’s memories can “call for new and varied narrative frames for memory, as they recognize the power of storied narratives not only to report the past but also to change the future...” In asking: “Where have we gotten our small definitions of story? And why?”... [the conclusion is that] conventional realistic narrative is [thus] a prison... of character, of plot, of beginning, middle, and end, of circumstance...” (Vinson, 2010).

3. Feminizing the Sahelian Space

Sanou Bernadette Dao is the second woman of Burkina Faso to publish a novel (the first being Monique Ilboudo’ *Le Mal de Peau*, 1990) and the “première poétesse” (first women poet) of the country. I interviewed Sanou in 1993, during my tenure as Fulbright Professor at the University of Ouagadougou. She was born in Bamako, Mali in 1952 (Ouedraogo, 2012). At age eleven, she returned with her family to Burkina Faso where she received the Bac and later continued her studies at Cheick Anta Diop in Dakar, Ohio University, and La Sorbonne. She is the former Ministre de la Culture and more recently Ministre de l’Intégration Régionale (Ouedraogo, 2012).

Her 1997 novel, *La Dernière Epouse* (The last Wife), is a collection of eight stories: “Un Garçon pour Malick”, “Le fils de l’Abbé Banbaga Jean-Baptiste”, “Hommes tout-puissants”, “L’amant de Josette”, “Rue de l’hôpital”, “Sacree Mère Zizanie”, “Un albinos

pour le trône” and *La dernière épouse*” from which the title is taken. Sanou employs a cryptic traditional griotte as narrator throughout the text; she explores marital relationships and the difficulties these often pose for women; infidelity by both men and women; the viciousness of human beings; and the tragic impact of venereal disease on the victim, his family, and friends. In essence, the narrator is the central apparatus which links all of the stories. In a voice full of humor and irony, she exposes the most secret desires of the characters from the perspective of one who has intimate knowledge of each person. In so doing, Sanou calls into question the societal structures which often silence women & marginalize the importance of their knowledge.

In the critical analysis, “That Long Silence: A Feminist Narratological Study of Shashi Deshpande Maninder Kapoor and Seema Singh” (2012), Rajeshwar Mittapalli gives an elaboration which is particularly applicable to the novel of Sanou Bernadette Dao. Mittapalli assesses the narratological structures employed by post-colonial women writers to expose the veiled voices of women writers and their characters as depicted in Deshpande’s novel. She notes that the work is “overtly conscious concern with the mechanics of women’s writing, and assesses its usefulness as raw material for a feminist narratological application” (Mittapalli, 2012: p. 66). She continues by pointing out that in the narrative, “The real world and the fictional world coalesce, and the voice of the author is indistinguishable from that of the narrator” (Mittapalli, 2012: p. 72). This description of Deshpande’s novel is a salient commentary on Sanou’s technique in *La Dernière Épouse*. Mittapalli’s critique identifies Sanou’s stylistics as well when the former notes the “feminist narratological preoccupation with the context of how a woman writes” in the way that “Deshpande... handles the use of the first person homodiegetic narrator to build a sense of intimacy and empathy with the reader, and also to add the touch of real life authenticity which facilitates the reader’s sense of identification with the situations depicted in the novel” (Mittapalli, 2012: pp. 86-87). The tales of Sanou, I argue employ the “homodiegetic narrator” that Mittapalli identifies. Sanou’s narratives exude a deliberateness of tone which functions to create mood and atmosphere through careful details and vivid descriptions of place, events, and characterization. The effect is one which reveals Sanou’s precise grasp of Burkinabé life and culture, and above all, the effectiveness of traditional orature/storytelling.

4. The Abbey’s Son

On the subject of narration in Sahelian literature, Joseph Paré of the University of Ouagadougou notes that: “Les écrivains {Sahelian} essaient de recréer dans l’espace de l’écrit la vivacité des échanges inter-individuels. De la sorte, les écrivains tentent d’échapper aux limites...” (Paré, 1998: p. 94) (Translation: Sahelian writers try to recreate on the terrain of writing the vivacity of exchanges between individuals). This attempt to “recreate the vivacity” of oral exchange is evident throughout the eight stories of Sanou’s novel, two of which I want to explore here. This intimate pose of the narrator who has direct access to the consciousness of the characters and who also addresses the reader as a familiar accomplice is clearly evident in “le Fils de L’Abbé Ban-

baga Jean-Baptiste” (The Son of the Abbey Jean-Baptiste) and “La Dernière Épouse” (The Last Wife). “Le fils de L’Abbé Banbaga Jean-Baptiste” is set in the fictional village of Bolidougou, a thinly-disguised reference to Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. It is the tale of a young priest of a prominent local family who falls in love with a lovely young university student, also of a prominent family of the village. The priest subsequently renounces his vows in order to marry her.

The narrator begins in a tone which assumes our familiarity with the community and this particular story: “Oui, l’abbé Banbaga Jean-Baptiste avait un fils; sa femme venait en effet d’accoucher cette nuit d’un beau garçon” (Sanou, 2001: p. 16) (Translation: Yes, The Abbey Banbaga Jean-Baptiste just had a son. His wife just delivered tonight a handsome boy). The tone constructs the reader into the role of a sort of accomplice who listens, not only while the tale is being told, but who is equally invited to be an unexpected witness to the events. There is the matter-of-fact assertion that a priest has had a son, and as the tale unfolds, we learn that the beautiful Saraman Bertine—“sa femme” (his wife) referred to in the narrative—carefully orchestrates the situation that precipitates the young priest’s seduction of her. Yet, there is a very decided avoidance of moralizing by the narrator. In fact, her intent seems to be to make fun of this man’s doomed attempt to adhere to an imported ideology that is in conflict with the traditional expectations of his family and community and which runs contrary to his natural human impulses. Through this humorous tale, Sanou takes aim at patriarchal religion, one of the forces of intersectionality which colludes to keep women oppressed in Burkina Faso and other African countries. Other African novelists, men and women, have critiqued the influence Christian missionaries and the Christian church has exerted on the African family and its traditions (Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emetcha and Wole Soyinka to name a few). Sanou’s countryman, Malidoma Patrice Somé, wrote of his forceable removal from his family among the Dagara people by Catholic Priest and his subsequent physical and sexual as they tried to turn him into a priest.

The article “[Role of Missionaries in Colonization of Africans](#)” (2012), suggests the following about the role and impact of Christianity and Christian missionaries in Africa:

The message preached by Missionaries encouraged Africans to rebel against everything that formed the foundation of African family and society. The article goes on to note that “an analysis of some of the missionaries [shows that they]... forsook the teachings of the Holy Bible the sacred text of Christianity in favor of government trinkets. It is a fact that some of these missionaries assisted their governments in the subjugation of Africans... Missionaries came with the attitude that all things European were superior to all things African... It was their mission to do anything necessary to convert Africans who were viewed as uncivilized and barbaric. Missionaries often failed to distinguish between Christian principles and those of the colonialists. They misused biblical passages to further the causes of their colonial friends ([“Role of Missionaries in Colonization of Africans”, 2012](#)).

The narrator recounts the latent agency of African women with the story of Sara-

man's seduction of the Abbey, one night as she prepares a meal for the priest and takes it to him. With a humor that pays deference to the wit and precision of the traditional word-smiths of Burkina Faso, the narrator describes the situation:

L'Abbé Banbaga Jean-Baptiste oublia bien vite le repas avalé à la hâte Le boubou de Saraman, son sourire, ses gestes gracieux, tout son corps enfin tourmentaient le jeune prêtre. La conversation devenait pénible. L'Abbé se taisait longuement puis, revenant à la réalité, éclatait d'un rire nerveux, croisant et décroisant les jambes, mal à l'aise. Saraman ne lui facilitait pas la tâche non plus. Pourquoi ne partait-elle pas? L'abbé avait fini de manger depuis un moment déjà mais Saraman n'avait pas l'air pressée de s'en aller (Sanou, 2001: p. 21)!

(Translation: The Abbey, Banbaga Jean-Baptiste forgot the food hastily gulped down, Saraman's boubou, her smile her gracious gestures, her whole body even tormented the young priest. The conversation became painful. The Abbey said nothing for a long time; then coming back to reality, he burst out in a nervous laugh crossing and uncrossing his legs, completely ill at ease. Saraman did nothing to make things easier for him either. Why didn't she leave? The Abbey had finished eating a long time ago, but Saraman didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave.)

The description continues with careful attention to the details of their behavior drawing out the conspiratorial complicity between audience and storyteller already established as the reader peeks in on the scene:

Ah, the perfume! Banbaga Jean-Baptiste was re-submerged again in her fragrance. "Okay, I'm ready. We can leave." She says, standing In front of him as the light bathed over her body. The Abbey stood up abruptly in front of Saraman, Saraman, her smile made him dizzy, Saraman's neck, Saraman's body. Banbaga Jean-Baptiste didn't remember at what moment he grabbed the young woman nor what went on before he found himself on the floor with her (Sanou, 2001: p. 22).

The narrator tells us that sometime after, Saraman returns to school in France and Banbaga Jean-Baptiste returns to his apostolic mission with even more zeal than before. However, the Monsigneur, Mon. Leroulé has heard rumors; the young priest is called in and ultimately sent to Rome, "pour réfléchir, selon les villageois, puis en France où ironie du sort, le hasard, sinon le destin, voulut qu'il retrouvât Saraman!" (Translation: to think things over, according to the villagers, then to France where irony of a sort, the unexpected, if not destiny willed that he would again find Saraman). This familiarity of the narrator with the details of the situation serves to depict, not only the psychological and emotional states of the main characters of the fictional space but also the collective consciousness of the villagers and the church establishment in the village.

The setting, as well as the story itself, concerns the lives of people like those one might find in Burkina Faso or another Sahelian country. As we see in the works of other African women writers like *Bâ* (1981) of Senegal and *Emecheta* (1979) and *Nwapa* (1966) of Nigeria, Sanou maintains the integrity of the people about whom she writes. The tales are not controlled by the masculine voice, the omnipresence of colonialism or

political tyranny, but rather the realities of life for average people, women and men, that one might see on the streets Ougadougou or the villages of her country, and it is through the wit & facility of the narrator that Sanou renders a powerful analysis of women's agency.

5. The Last Wife

The second story, "La Dernière Épouse" (The Last Wife), depicts an on-going concern of Sanou and other African women writers about polygamy and its sometimes devastating effects on women. Sanou however, presents an innovative and imaginative treatment of the topic. Set in the city rather than the countryside, it is the tale of Kélénman, a wealthy man who acquires and abandons wives as an art collector might collect or cast aside paintings, without a thought of the impact on the object itself:

Kélénman avait huit enfants et presque autant d'épouses déclarées et mariées à la face du ciel et de la loi (Sanou, 2001: p. 111)! He had hardly "finie avec une épouse en effet, qu'il s'en allait par monts et par vaux à la conquête d'une autre! La première devenait brusquement 'fade' et la vie auprès d'elle tout aussi morose et sans intérêt." Elle "ne le comprenait plus," ses façons "lui échappaient." Il fallait qu'il "change de décor..." (Sanou, 2001: p. 111).

Translation: Kélénman had eight children and about as many wives as heaven and the law allowed. He had hardly finished with one wife before He took off over hill and dale in quest of another. The first having briskly faded and life around her was morbid and uninteresting. She didn't understand him, his needs and desires completely escaped her understanding. He had to "change the scenery".

This all ends, the narrator tells us, when he takes the sixth wife, Moussoba, who determines to put an end to Kélénman's behavior. Like an eavesdropper, the reader follows the griotte's foray into the inner-most workings of Moussoba's mind. She takes very bold actions not usually expected of an African wife. First of all, she tells her husband that he will not travel without her. This is said under the pretext that he needs her company when traveling to areas that he does not know well. This all surprises him, at first, that a woman would dare to think that she can tell him what to do. However, she counters his protest by providing him with an orderly who, according to her, must be with him at all times because she is concerned about a possible traffic accident or other injury to him. These individuals, of course, are her spies who inform her of anything suspicious that her husband does. Such contests of will are not usually portrayed in depictions of African women in predominately male discourse. The griotte informs us also that Kélénman worked not far from his wife Moussoba's office so that it was very difficult for him to do anything without her knowing about it. She also begins to invite his friends to come over freely and drink tea with him. In this way, he will have no excuse to leave the compound. Here, the storyteller lets us in on the secret infidelities of women as Moussoba herself begins to pay particular attention to one of these friends, Kader, by openly demonstrating her interest in him.

All of this completely unnerves Kélénman who doesn't want to display his irritation by her behavior, and to make it worse, soon she became pregnant and people couldn't say whose baby it was. The unusual agency of the fictive wife enrages the husband so much so that his friends and everybody else begin to avoid him: "La cour de copains fondit comme beurre au soleil!" (Sanou, 2001: p. 121) (Translation: His courtyard full of buddies melted like butter in the sun). It is clearly a tale about a turn of the tables. Moussoba gives him—as we would say—"tit for tat." His behavior becomes so bizarre that people begin to call him a fool and finally he is locked up for his own protection. Always with a sly humor, the griotte explains that, "it was necessary to call in four sturdy fellows to wrestle him down to the ground and tie him up like a common criminal. They later took him and locked him up in a dark, cold cell where Kélénman spent the rest of the day yelling and rolling around on the ground" (translation: Sanou, 2001: p. 121). Sanou's transgressions of the spatialization of intersectionality with this character are maintained throughout the story. The narrative persona reasserts herself at the end of the story reminding the reader of the fictional terrain onto which she has enticed us:

"Combien de temps Kélénman vécut-il là comme un homme totalement fini, un être ridicule et qui faisait la risée de tout le village? L'histoire ne le dit pas..." (Sanou, 2001: p. 121) (Translation: How long Kélénman lived there like a man completely destroyed, a creature ridiculed, the laughing stock of the village? We are not told).

At the end, Moussoba, herself, ultimately winds up alone, a sort of femme fatale, because no man wants to run the risk of marrying her.

In effect, all of the stories treat the social realities and daily experiences at various levels of Burkinabé society, issues, as Sanou suggests, that most people don't bother to stop and question. A title like "Sacree Mère Zizanie" (Sacred Mother Zizane) is eloquent, but it is the story of four friends whom Zizanie opposes to the point where she provokes them to almost kill each other. "Un albinos pour le trône" (An Albino for the Throne) depicts African society and its politicians who think they must make human sacrifices in order to win at the ballot box and in essence go out many times and commit heinous crimes against the people. On this point, Sanou notes the following:

Les écrivains doivent dire et toujours dire. Dire dans notre langage, À nous, qui est différent du discours officiel. Celui-là est courant et Connu, il faut au besoin prendre son contrepied. On a parlé de vigile, Moi, j'y vois plutôt une sorte d'alerte constante des consciences; alerte au sujet de tout ce qui doit faire tiquer et que les gens ne Remarquent pas (Dao, 1990: p. 83).

Translation: Writers must speak and tell all. Speak that is in a language specific to us and which is different from the official discourse. That language is current and well-known. It's necessary to take a counter position. We speak of vigil. In my case, I see right away a kind of constant alertness, an awareness about everything, especially in regards to that about which the people remain silent.

With *La Dernière Epouse* (The Last Wife) Sanou Bernadette Dao has demonstrated “une sorte d’alerte”, (a kind of warning); she has, unquestionably, created a presentation that is refreshing, clear, fluid, & celebratory of Burkinabé women’s lives & narrative tradition, and in so doing, she offers an authoritative commentary on the socio-cultural topography of her society and the multi = dimensional aspect of women’s and in so doing provides a definitive contribution to the evolving canon of African women’s literature.

6. The Camera as Storyteller

Aïcha Fofana, the second Sahelian novelist of this discussion, is the daughter of the former Minister of Health of Mali. She was born in Bamako in 1957 and died in 2003. Fofana attended high school at the Lycée Notre-Dame du Niger and later studied languages at the Sorbonne, the University of Mannheim, and Oxford University. She was not only a novelist but also a playwright, poet, journalist, and translator of German and English (D’Almedia, 2003: p. 271). With her first novel, *Mariage on Copie* (Images of Marriage, 1994), Fofana expands the meager ranks of Malian women writers of literature in French. Like Sanou, Fofana’s text turns on innovative narratological stylistics, in Fofana’s case drawing on the mechanics and techniques of cinema and photography. Divided into five chapters, the storyline of the narrative employs a dialogic of perspectives between the filmic “eye of the camera, the oral raconteur of the griottic narrator, and the stream of consciousness of the four women protagonists whose intimate stories unfold. The text asserts then probes the relationship of image to narrative. It represents Fofana’s dialogue with the discourses of photography, cinema, and writing.

The setting for *Mariage on Copie* is the capital of Mali, Bamako, specifically the “Studio Photo Diakitè” where four women have come to purchase a copy of the video-tape of Mariamme Keita’s marriage to Alou Coulibaly. Each time Diakitè clicks the video cassette to “play” the flood of images evokes a stream of consciousness in the minds of each of the four women, unleashing memories long buried in their subconscious. The camera is, in fact, le provocateur de mémoire (memory jogger). In this way, Fofana asserts that the camera has the power to capture and distribute reality; that the camera and the photographic process, characterizes perception; that indeed they have the power to select and “freeze” memory as well as to change the way we see the world.

The first of the four women to arrive is Jocelyne, a Frenchwoman married to a Malian economist, Tidiani. As the camera focuses on her and unfolds details of the ceremony in images and sounds, she is simultaneously transported to the past where her hidden self recalls the events of their encounter at university in France, their courtship, and marriage. As the camera picks up details not readily available to the naked eye (what the naked eye could not grasp), it throws into question the idea of the infallibility of sight. Pictures & sounds, which form the narrative of the film provoke remembrances of events that all characters would like to keep hidden. Jocelyne’s memories unfold the heretofore suppressed details of her courtship, marriage, and travelog visions of Africa:

...Afrique don't elle n'avait eu pour seule vision que les cartes postale épinglées ça et là sur les murs de sa chambre d'étudiant et qu'il lui faisait découvrir: magie de la photo qui à travers un petit rectangle, vous transpose dans un autre univers, et parvient à extraire du quotidien des clichés, fenêtre ouverte sur le rêve (p. 35). Et ces images sur l'écran, comme des morçeau de puzzle ajoutées Ça et là aux souvenirs que rassemble sa mémoire la ramenèrent À une réalité qu'elle n'avait pas voulu voir (Fofona, 1994: p. 36).

Translation: The only vision she had of Africa was what was captured on post cards tacked on the walls of her dormitory room, which she explored thanks to the magic of a photograph, through the device of a little rectangle which could transport you to another universe, a little window opened on a dream. And the images on the screen, like pieces of a puzzle reconstituted her memory bringing back a reality that she did not want to see.

This, like other interior monologues in the novel, reveals the subconscious thoughts of characters in the third person and past tense of narration. The literary value of this stylistic is that interior monologues provide a much more complex view of the workings of the character's mind, the essential female self, which is submerged under the various roles and guises assigned to them by the broader society.

In fact, the camera is a kind of character, perhaps the main character, for it, like the traditional omniscient narrator, sees and knows all:

Dans les bules de champagne, les souvenirs refont surfact. Rien n'échappe à l'objectif de la caméra... les images, Défilent à un rthme rapide. La Caméra comme enivrée, Tourne, tourne offre des prises de vue sous tous les angles... Sur une table, cravates et serviettes ne font pas bon m''nage et La caméra surprend leur querelle lassée d'un désir trop pressé D'afficher une certaine élégance, la serviette se désiste et La cravate finit dans la sauce (Fofona, 1994: p. 51)!

Translation: Memories resurface in the bubbles of champagne. Nothing escapes the eye of the camera... the images file forward to a rapid rhythm. The camera, like a drunk, turns and turns offering poses and views from all possibles angles. On the table tie and dish are not keeping a happy house together, and the camera surprises them during their quarrel. Over taken by a desire to maintain a certain elegance, the dish desists and the tie ends up in the sauce.

Each one of the women chooses to reproduce the portion of the video which holds the most significance for her. This process of selection releases memories which permit each of the characters to take a turn recounting the events of her life. Thus, Fofana insists that the reader make a critical distinction between that which is recounted on the digital screen and that which unfolds within the stream of consciousness of each character which, through the stylistic structure of numerous flash-backs, unravels the threads of the character's very existence. The narrative structure, itself an innovation, makes symbolic use of both material and mental objects of representation.

The first material object is the camera which plays a fundamental role. Like the four

protagonists, the camera functions as a witness, similar to a curious personage, both insensible and concrete at the same time, playing the game of the characters, diminishing the importance of certain events, and hiding the significance of others. Sometimes, to the contrary, the camera admits no disguises and divulges everything, without kindness to anyone:

Avec la complicité du soleil, la caméra arrive à saisir le Mouvement... cheveux défrisés, mèches synthétiques... Boubous aux multiples motifs, broderies sculptées sur le Basin... Rien n'échappe aux regards inquisiteurs de la Caméra... (Fofona, 1994: p. 40).

Translation: With the sun as its accomplice, the camera is able to seize Every movement... permed hair, synthetic wigs... boubous Of various styles, sculpted embroidery on Basin...nothing Escapes the inquisitorial gaze of the camera.

After Jocelyne comes Niélé. They greet each other and again, the images on the cassette reveal the hospital. It is here through Niélé's stream of consciousness that Fofana takes the occasion to explore the deplorable conditions for women beginning with Niélé's thoughts about them and their trials during delivery all too often followed by the brutal reality of high infant mortality rates:

Dans sa vie professionnelle, elle avait connu des moments de Joie lorsqu'elle parvenait à ramener à lavie des petits êtres qui Luttaient contre la mort de toutes leurs forces. Elle connut aussi des moments de tristesse lorsqu'il était trop tard, parce Que l'on avait parcouru des kilomètres, et que la vie n'attend Pas lorsqu'il manque l'essentiel, lorsque la misère impose son Diagnostic... (Fofona, 1994: p. 23).

Translation: During her profession life she had know moments of happiness when she reached out to catch and wash the little beings who struggled against death with all their might. She knew also moments of sadness when it was too late because they had traveled a few miles and life wouldn't wait because they lacked the basic necessities when misery imposed its brutal diagnosis.

Niéle's retrospections also provide a forum for interrogation of traditional practices like arranged marriages and excision, practices in which women had no choice as part of a larger system where societal roles were pre-defined by the power of religion and patriarchy. In the case of excision, Fofana becomes one of the few African women writers to actually treat this crucial subject in fiction. It is important to note, however, that her novel was published two years before Alice Walker's seminal work on the subject, *Warrior Marks* (1993). In boldly pictorial language, relinquishing authority to the camera and the characters, Fofana delivers a stinging critique of the practice as a brutal violation of the woman's body and soul:

Plus tard Niélé avait fini par comprendre. Ce coups d'ou giclait Le sang qu'un geste malencontreux avait libéré, restait inerte. Ce sang qui, coulait, franchissait tous les obstacles dressés Avec des pagnes, de la cendre, de la bouse de vache. Cette Tâche rouge à présent devenait lumière incandescente dans Sa mémoire obscure,

ravivée par les feux de projecteurs Qui à présent sur l'écran balayaient une foule en liesse. A nouveau ces images l'interpellaient, étalaient sous ses yeux une réalité cruelle. Ce corps qui gisait devant elle lors des Cérémonies d'excision était resté immobile: vidé de Son âme (Fofona, 1994: pp. 47-48).

Translation: Much later Niélé came to understand. This stroke from which blood spurted, liberated by an untimely gesture remained inert. This blood which flowed, overcame all obstacles constructed with cloth, ashes, and cow dung, This red stain at that moment became an incandescent light in the obscurity of her memory, revived by the fires of the projector which at that moment swept across the screen a festive crowd. Once more these images interposed and spread out under her eyes a cruel reality. That body which imposed itself in front of her now, at the time of the excision ceremonies, remained immobilized: drained of its soul.

Throughout the text, the camera renders authorial testimony, crisscrossing between the images on the video screen in Diakité's studio and women's recollections. It is a narrative design which functions to create a predetermined mood and invoke the deepest held secrets from each woman's consciousness. In this fashion, Fofana, like Sanou, provides space for an exposé of her society, in particular as it regards the lives and desires of women. At the end of the novel, Amina, the last woman to come in, and Diakité discuss the power of words and images by noting the liberatory force of the camera as it induces a kind of healing of women's unconsciousness pain. It facilitates truth about life and death, as well as provides validation about those who are destined to die, even while they live. Indeed, in *La Dernière Épouse* and *Mariage on Copie*, Sanou Bernadette Dao and Aïcha Fofana reclaim the agency of African woman's stories and powerful voices often silenced by the colluding forces of patriarchy and post-colonial politics.

7. Conclusion

Magona (1990) remarks in *The Voice of African Women* that, in their struggle to claim their rightful place in African society and in the world, "African women writers, visual artists, and musicians chart the course of this struggle in a rich variety of artistic works." Indeed, through the majesty of their fiction, prose, poetry, drama, and many other forms, she claims, "African women share their thoughts and their perceptions about their lives and their societies" (Magona, 1990). Magona elaborates Adeola James' similar observation: "Our problem is that we have listened so rarely to women's voices, the noises of men having drowned us out in every sphere of life, including the arts. Yet women too are artists, and are endowed with a special sensitivity and compassion, necessary to creativity" (qtd. in Magona, 1990). From this perspective, then, Sanou Bernadette Dao and Aïcha Fofana respatialize not only the complexities of intersecting forces on women's lives but they also offer new perspectives on historical and contemporary issues of concern to their respective societies through bold, frank and innovative fiction. As a result, their contributions impact definitively the emerging literatures produced by contemporary women in the region and on the African continent in general.

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