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Feminism in Burkinabe English Literature

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Abstract - A survey of Burkinabe literature written in English shows variations in literary portrayal of men and women. The purpose of this paper is to show that the images of women promulgated by Burkinabe literature in English are mostly traditional ones and cannot be a representation that mobilises social constructivism in modern times, as few educated women would be ready to play the role patriarchy assigns to women. The comparative approach in this analysis shows that two out of the three selected writers advocate women's situation as natural, part of Burkinabe age-long tradition. Only one writer, Noélie Yaogo, tries to fight against traditional beliefs and customs that go against women's empowerment; she shows that the roles traditionally assigned to women as well as the women-related mores are socially constructed. Critically analysing three selected works by these three Burkinabe novelists with the theory of feminism, specifically Simone de Beauvoir and Irigaray's body-related feminist theory, Hélène Cixious' *écriture féminine* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's feminism, this paper examines the representation of women in these literary works and specifically shows that the novels of Michel Tinguiri and Bali Nebié have a patriarchal agenda while Noëlie Yaogo's, despite the authoress's claim of a feminist agenda, is actually ideologically conflicted.

Keywords : Feminism, Burkinabe literature, culture, patriarchy, emancipation.

Résumé - Une étude de la littérature burkinabè d'expression anglaise révèle des différences dans la représentation littéraire des hommes et des femmes. Le but de cet article est de montrer que les descriptions féminines dans la littérature burkinabè d'expression anglaise sont principalement traditionnelles et ne peuvent pas être une représentation qui mobilise le constructivisme social à l'époque moderne, car peu de femmes instruites seraient prêtes à jouer le rôle que le patriarcat attribue aux femmes. L'approche comparative de cette analyse montre que deux des trois auteurs sélectionnés pour l'étude défendent la situation des femmes comme étant naturelle, faisant partie de la tradition séculaire burkinabè. Une seule écrivaine, Noélie Yaogo, tente de lutter contre les croyances et coutumes traditionnelles qui vont à l'encontre de l'autonomisation des femmes; elle montre que les rôles traditionnellement attribués aux femmes ainsi que les mœurs liées aux femmes sont des constructions sociales. Analysant de manière critique trois œuvres choisies de ces trois romanciers burkinabè avec la théorie du féminisme, en particulier la théorie féministe liée au corps de Simone de Beauvoir et Irigaray, l'écriture féminine d'Hélène Cixious et le féminisme de Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, cet article examine la représentation des femmes dans ces œuvres littéraires et montre spécifiquement que les romans de Michel Tinguiri et Bali Nebié ont un agenda patriarcal tandis que celui de Noëlie Yaogo, malgré la prétention de l'auteure au féminisme radical, est en réalité idéologiquement conflictuel.

Mots-clés : féminisme, littérature burkinabè, culture, patriarcat, émancipation.

Introduction

In most Burkinabe tribes, in both urban and rural areas, men and women are traditionally assigned different tasks according to patriarchal ideology

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(Badini, 1994; Ouadrago, 2016). In rural areas for instance, both man and woman do farm work but an activity involving blood shedding such as "hunting and butchering is always a male activity" while culinary activities and "the collection of firewood and water is seen… as female tasks." (Ouadrago, 2016). In addition, husband and wife have different statuses in society according to patriarchal ideology. The husband is supposed to be the head of the family and should solely provide for it (Adichie, 2017, p.8). To be a wife and mother stands first and foremost in woman's role in Burkinabe society. As Ouadrago (2016) underlines it in his description of Burkinabe cultures and traditions, a woman in her thirties who is still unmarried or childless is severely stigmatised socially, and the married but childless woman is likely to be repudiated (Ouadrago, 2016). Noëlie Yaogo (2007, p.6) clearly says that, in Burkina Faso, "according to villagers' culture and mentality, it is very awful for one to look at a childless couple" and makes the point that the aim of marriage is nothing but childbearing. The importance given to childbearing may explain the high average fertility rate of 6.2 children per woman of reproductive age in rural areas (CIA, 2016). Arranged marriages and leviracy are still practised in countryside.

The Burkinabe society is thus organised in a patriarchal manner. How do Burkinabe writers relate to this patriarchal ideology in place? Do they reinforce it or undermine it? In other words, are Burkinabe writers advocating Burkinabe women's social situation as natural, part of Burkinabe age-long tradition and content themselves with reproducing these roles in their works to perpetuate it? Or are they trying to fight against it, question the authority behind it by showing that the roles assigned to women may be socially constructed?

Since French is the official language of Burkina Faso, Burkinabe literature in French is well-known, especially with Salaka Sanou's publication of his *Littérature Burkinabè: l'histoire, les hommes, les oeuvres* (2000), which unfortunately makes no mention of Burkinabè literature in English, most of which appeared recently. The choice falls on this literature because it is unknown and is very limited in number, therefore, a manageable scope for a study.

The focus will mainly be on three novels which represent the three main stands on patriarchal ideology. Through a comparative study of these representative novels, this paper strives to present a feminist analysis of Burkinabè literature in English. In fact, focusing on the three works while referring now and then to the others, and using feminism as a critical approach, specifically Simone de Beauvoir and Irigaray's body-related feminist theory, Hélène Cixious' *écriture feminine* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's feminist viewpoints, I want to examine the representation of women in their literary works and specifically show that the novels of Michel Tinguiri and Bali Nebié

have a patriarchal agenda while Noëlie Yaogo's, despite the author's claim of a feminist agenda, is actually ideologically conflicted.

Since the representation of men and women in literature generally provides the role models which show to people of each sex what constitutes acceptable and legitimate manners pertaining to males and females, the paper also aims at showing the ~~degree~~ extent to which traditional representations of women cannot be a representation that mobilises social constructivism in modern times and so the examination of the patriarchal ideology behind the portrayal of women characters in these three novels of Burkinabe literature in English constitutes, therefore, ways of challenging these portrayals of women as 'other' or as part of 'tradition' and thus draw women's attention to the literary 'stars' that they might aspire to imitate.

1. Representation of women in Tinguiri's novel

Feminism has drawn attention to the destructive role of patriarchy in equating femininity with submission, encouraging women to let themselves be taken care of by men and to view marriage as the guarantee of happiness and the proper reward for a good young woman (Tyson, 1999, pp.87-88; Adichie, 2017, p.31). Observing that the African world still largely values a woman's marital and maternal roles more than anything else, to the extent that at baptism ceremonies some guests already wish the baby girl a good husband, the Nigerian feminist critic and novelist, Adichie (2017), in her feminist manifesto in fifteen suggestions, advises her friend to be a feminist in these terms:

> "Do not define yourself solely by motherhood. Be a full person. " (pp.7-8).
> "Reject the idea that motherhood and work are mutually exclusive." (p.9)
> "Question the idea of marriage as a prize to women." (p.15)
> "Never speak of marriage as an achievement." (p.30)

Like the Igbo culture, Burkinabe society is mostly organised in a patriarchal manner (Badini, 1994; Sanou, 2000; Janin, 2010). Most Burkinabe literary writings in English bear witness to the presence of this patriarchal ideology. In many works (Yaogo, 2012; Tinguiri, 2014; Ilboudo, 2017), the representation of women is similar to nineteenth-century English fiction in the sense that the focus of most female characters is on marriage. The preoccupation is to find a marriage partner who will look after them and make them happy. In Tinguiri's novel, for instance, female characters number nine and all of them are or have been married. For example, no sooner are we told that Banambonon, the protagonist's daughter, is an eleven-year-old youngster, than the narrator shifts to talking about her marriage seven years later (Tinguiri, 2014, p.85). This passage from her childhood directly to her marital life is so swift, without a

tangible transition, that it takes the reader by surprise. Marriage is thus presented as the target of all female characters, following patriarchal ideology. The decision of this girl's mother, Banko, to remarry, following the difficulties that arise after her husband's death, further shows to what extent woman's happiness is inside marriage under the supposed care of a husband. Such an idyllic presentation shows the female or male readership of this novel what any woman's aspiration or fate should be in a patriarchal setting.

In addition, in Tinguiri's novel, in all cases, the reader is told that all female characters beget children as soon as they get married. Marriage and begetting children are inseparable. For example, the narrator says that after her marriage, "a year later, Banambonon was blessed with her first child" (Tinguiri, 2014, p.91). Then, later he informs the reader that Banambonon's brother "Gontan married Sè and had a handsome little baby boy called Tchiri." (Tinguiri, 2014, p.145). Earlier, the reader was told that her father N'Djilékou "married Banko and they had three beautiful children." (Tinguiri, 2014, p.14). As it can be noticed, the schema 'Married + and + children' is a repetitive pattern in these examples and throughout the whole novel. The plot of this novel implies that marriage to the right person of one's choice, or chosen by the tradition one believes in, is a guarantee of happiness and the proper reward for a right-minded girl. The death of Banko's husband signals the end of her happiness and her remarriage the opening of another era of happiness.

Begetting children is also presented as a key to woman's self-realization. In this sense, it is understandable that, describing the traditional marriage procedure, the narrator lays emphasis on rituals related to reproduction. For example, *mèwara* is a ritual intended "to keep away bad luck and evils from undermining the woman's reproductive capacity." (Tinguiri, 2014, p.89) The reader is informed that any sexual intercourse without this tradition being accomplished can sterilise the woman.

In addition, in Tinguiri's novel as well as in Somé's, emphasis is laid on women's roles as the persons in charge of cooking, fetching wood and water. Somé's narrative shows his mother carrying him at her back to go to the farm or to fetch wood and carry it home on her head for cooking (Somé, 1994, pp.14-15). Likewise, in *The Tribulations of the Sahelian Traveller*, female characters like Banambonon are described fetching water (Tinguiri, 2014, p.85); her mother's neck is said to have been shortened from carrying bundle of wood and basin of water on her head (Tinguiri, 2014, pp.126, 131); Alima offers water to her husband's guests for their needs (Tinguiri, 2014, p.168); and Fatima and Nado are praised for being good cooks (Tinguiri, 2014, pp.72, 134). Yet, once a woman becomes a widow, all ~~of~~ her late husband's possessions are passed on to one of her brothers-in-law. For example, when Banko's husband dies, she and all her children and all that the family possessed are taken by her brother-in-law,

Touko who is already married to Bèrè. The narrator describes Touko and the ill-treatment of the widow in these terms:

> Touko, N'Djilékou's senior brother, was a man with a stony heart, a self-centered person whose only concern was to drink traditional beer and merry. He had no compassion at all for Banko and her children. Touko had collected the entire heritage and had sold everything. Touko … plundered the heritage to the detriment of Banko and her children. (Tinguiri, 2014, p.122)

After enduring such ordeals for some years, the widow Banko finally makes up her mind to remarry, leaving her children with their uncle as tradition requires. Tired from suffering in their uncle's house, the children will later go to their married sister's house where they receive hospitality for some time and finally have to go back to live with their mother and her new husband.

It can be noticed from these examples that the writer describes women who live and do things in the way they are traditionally required. There is no attempt at challenging women's situation as socially constructed and not natural. The novel has a patriarchal agenda. It does not criticise the gynophobia or loathing of women as sexual and reproductive people. Femininity is equated with submission, tolerance of familial abuse and marriage as reward for "right" conduct.

To a limited extent, the author of this novel could be seen as an African feminist of the first generation who just fought for more equality between men women without strongly challenging traditional roles of women. I say to a limited extent because even these early African 'feminists' would not tolerate his unquestioning of the widows' plight, being disinherited of their late husbands' wealth, even though the fact of merely exposing the state of facts may draw people's attention to fighting against it.

Yet, to a certain extent, one can see an attempt from the part of the writer at women's empowerment through the character of Aunt Pèlo. She is the only woman who is apparently not taken care of. She is said to have children and grandchildren and spends her time daily to spin cotton to meet their needs. Nothing is said about her husband. None of her children is mentioned; only one grandson is referred to by name, Kô. She looks then self-reliant. She provides clothing for the whole family (Tinguiri, 2014, p.12). Through her, the reader can perceive the writer trying to empower women, encouraging them to stop depending on men and work to take care of themselves and their families if not they will die poor and in silence like Louti, a wretched woman (Tinguiri, 2014, p.84). Unfortunately, such an interpretation falls short of stronger arguments when the narrator gives the information that what Aunt Pèlo does—taking care of her grandchildren and spinning cotton—is what is traditionally expected of women when they grow old (Tinguiri, 2014, p.12). It can be considered as a positive aspect of patriarchal ideology that is worth keeping. So, all being

considered, the novelist, Michel Tinguiri, is at best an anthropologist who happily describes Burkinabe traditional customs for foreigners' attention without taking position or really challenging them as socially constructed. Yet, the comparative approach shows us that his stake on the matter is milder than some of his peer writers whose works appear masculinised as opposed to the strongly feminist "*écriture feminine*".

2. Secrets of the Sorcerer as "écriture masculine"

"Teach her that the idea of 'gender roles' is absolute nonsense. Do not ever tell her that she should or should not do something because she is a girl." (Adichie 2017, p.14) This is the third suggestion the feminist writer Adichie is giving to a friend of hers. This idea of gender roles against which feminists are fighting is strongly expressed in Bali Nebié's *Secrets of the Sorcerer* (2017). Similar to Tinguiri's novel, female characters in Nebié's one are happy playing the roles traditionally assigned to them. The narrator describes women busy fetching water for household use and serving as stewards dedicated to offering welcome water to the house guests for drinking as well as having shower at morning and evening (Nebié 96-98). Polygyny is accepted therein as normal. The following description of Gnama, the protagonist of the novel, and his two wives, Atia and Maawa, gives the reader a glimpse of how a polygamous household operates and the traditional roles women play in it in a patriarchal society.

> Both women [Atia and Maawa] tolerated each other as much as two co-wives could. […]. Maawa was breast feeding, and so, no longer had access to Gnama's hut at night. She demanded that whenever it was her «turn to cook», Atia should not be allowed access into Gnama's hut. She was hoping that this would somehow delay a possible pregnancy for her rival. In polygamous homes, … the one who had the kitchen turn of the day was expected to share the man's bed for the night. (Nebié, 2017, p.114)

The two women "share" the same man. Each is happy having a man and children. They even show rivalry as to who will have more children than the other and each one tries to find strategies to prevent the other from becoming pregnant. So, they all look to marriage and giving birth to children as a woman's self-fulfilment. They are good women because they are submissive and follow the patriarchal ideology.

Yet, Atia and Maawa are the rare women characters ever paid attention to in this novel. The descriptions of these women as engrossed in following patriarchal and cultural expectations of them are only meant either to meet the curiosity of foreign readership's curiosity or to show off men. The writer is more preoccupied with men — the tradition holders — than with women. Throughout the novel, women just appear as types or stereotypes. They are used as appendage to men. Thus, one can understand that Gnama's filthiness

does not prevent him from having a real harem of women, a hundred of them (Nebié, 2017, p.29) who give him so many children who can't even recognise him as their father, so seldom do they see him (Nebié, 2017, p.76). Women are objectified, heavily dependent on men in such a point that they give themselves to anybody who is rich, regardless of how smelly he is. They stubbornly assume the role patriarchy has assigned for them. Patriarchy, thus, plays a destructive role, as Tyson (1999) observes, in her explanation of feminism, because it "equates femininity with submission, encouraging women to tolerate familial abuse, wait patiently to be rescued by a man, and view marriage as the only desirable reward for 'right' conduct." (p.87).

In Tinguiri's novel, all the villagers, men and women alike, are uneducated, except Kô who goes as far as the fifth grade and Gontan who decides to enrol in adult evening classes. But in Nebié's novel, characterization reveals that women are discriminated against regarding education and employment. The patriarchal concept of femininity at play in this novel is similar to that described by Tyson in her description of feminism, in which she points out its link to weakness, timidity and modesty, everything that contributes to disempower women in the real world, with injunctions such as "it is unfeminine to be successful in business," "it is unfeminine to be very intelligent," "it is unfeminine to earn a big salary," "it is unfeminine to have strong opinions, or to assert one's rights." (Tyson, 1999, p.87). As a matter of fact, none of the women in this fiction is a civil servant, a politician or a leader of the village. All government people, educated and influential people in this patriarchal society are men. The novel is about the secrets of the brotherhood, of which it is said that "No woman can be a member" (Nebié, 2017, p.141). Women are not at the centre in this novel; they play marginal roles. It is all about men. From the perspective of feminist criticism, this novel serves then as a case of *écriture masculine*, as opposed to the feminist Cixous' *écriture féminine*.

This *écriture masculine* is also expressed in the fact that the writer does not think women as important as naming them at all. Some female characters are nameless. The narrator refers to them as X's wife or by using the possessive pronoun "his". It is the case of Claude's wife and Robert's wife who are always referred to in this way (Nebié, 2017, pp.32-33; 58-59). Claude and Robert are two politicians and opponents. Their wives are under shadows, unknown; only their worries about becoming widows sometimes come to the fore, but are quickly silenced by their husbands. They exist insofar as they contribute to give prominence to their husbands. Similar to Victorian women in England, their role is reduced to making their homes safe havens for their husbands, where the latter could find strength to face the daily struggles of the workplace. Everything is focused on men.

Worse, women are sacrificed at the altar of men's social advancement. "The Djadjo demands the life of your wife… as condition for your initiation!" (Nebié, 2017, p.117), Gnama was told by his master, Old San, who also sacrificed his first wife for the initiation of his son Tiécoura (Nebié, 2017, p.137). Women are, in this *écriture masculine*, preys that can be used by men for their ignominious purposes.

Lastly, women pay the price of the fraud involved in witchcraft and sorcery that are reserved to men only. Old San, in a dialogue with Gnama whom he newly initiated into sorcery, indexes patriarchy to explain the plight of women who are the only people being accused of witchcraft:

> In patriarchal societies, women find themselves in a fragile position: they are considered to be strangers both in their own immediate families and in those of her [sic] husbands. Just like everywhere else, when a community is faced with a major difficulty, the first suspected culprit is almost always the stranger. (Nebié, 2017, p.152).

Women are seen as nomads by nature because marriage is deemed to play an important role in their self-fulfilment in patriarchal societies.

Yet, though being an *écriture masculine,* Nebié's novel as a whole makes a feminist point that there are no (female) witches, but only (male) sorcerers. This feminist statement follows a deconstruction of the patriarchal conception that there are mainly (female) witches. In the novel, Old San explains to Gnama that women cannot be witches, members of the brotherhood of men-lions because they do not meet the profile physically speaking, and cannot stand the rigours of the rules of witchcraft, emotionally (Nebié, 2017, p.141). To belong to the brotherhood of men-lions requires that one hold feminine qualities in contempt as in any patriarchal society. Women in this patriarchal society have their own body in which the old ones initiate the younger ones into the sex life of a home (Nebié, 2017, p.141).

But one wonders whether this *écriture masculine* was the price to be paid to come to such an outcome. The point reached is a message in the direction of men, holders of patriarchal traditions; women are passive listeners. For sure, to have things change positively, men's mentalities should change. In this perspective, one can understand the focus on the male genre. Yet, in this novel as well as in Tinguiri's, women have not been provided role models to imitate than the patriarchal ones. Women readers are then more than likely to consider these portrayals of female characters as ideal, which would be counterproductive to well-intentioned writers. Yaogo takes the opposite counterfeit of these novels by adopting a style that is akin to *écriture féminine*.

3. The Odds are against Cycling as écriture féminine

In *We should all be feminists* (2014), the Nigerian feminist critic Adichie observes that "gender as it functions today is a grave injustice" (p.21). She is angry. This work as well as her *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) are her means of fighting against this injustice. Like her, Noëlie Yaogo in her first novel in French, *Les plaisirs du Mal… Les plaisirs du Mâle* (2007) (Devil's pleasures… Male's Pleasures), delves on women's issues of injustice. She revisits the patriarchal role assigned to women, showing women busy cooking and finding pride in procreating many children in polygamous families. Aware of how these age-long traditional laws and beliefs play against women's wellbeing, in *The Odds are against Cycling*, the author bemoans the fact that women, "unlike their male counterparts, getting into and staying in a position of power is somewhat awkward because of customs. Such beliefs are so deep-seeded that women in critical leadership positions are often hampered by various obstacles and pervasive moods" (Yaogo, 2012, p.110). Yaogo is committed, as a novelist, in taking effective actions against these deep-rooted customs and beliefs so as to break through the glass ceiling to make equality and pave the way for gender mainstreaming. She does so by using biking as a metaphor for women's emancipation, a means for fighting against patriarchal world order that traditionally stood against women's cycling. This good idea finds an echo in Adichie's feminist suggestion, in her feminist manifesto, of girls' "participation in sports" (Adichie, 2017, p.42) as a step forward in women's empowerment. Like Adichie, Yaogo is personally convinced of the importance of sports in woman's emancipation. She goes as far as saying that in the sport of cycling "the bike movement is a medicine for creating change in one's physical, emotional, and mental states." (Yaogo, 2012, p.67) Women's cycling can bring about physical, emotional and mental changes in the direction of effecting equality between women and men.

Cycling is, in fact, Yaogo's response to feminists' invitation to "write through their bodies" (Cixious, 1976, p.886) insofar as she is "convinced that the engine for [her bike] is [her] body—always fuelled by food" (Yaogo, 2012, p.58), with the muscles providing the power and energy to write or cycle. Cycling is the "impregnable language" Yaogo invented to, to use feminists' discourse, "wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes… submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reverse-discourse (…), sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread (…) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord" (Cixious, 1976, p.886). Her writing is strangely peculiar: the narrative, similar to postmodernism, has no thread or has a broken one and weird syntax at times, everything which makes its reading rebarbative. Maybe she has done this on purpose to look more feminist. If so, it actually plays against her as so

far nobody has seemed to have read her novel: internet websites specialised in selling books still appeal for first comments on this work.

For sure, she responds to feminists' call by showing a concern for women in general. The French feminist Cixious (1976) says that:

> woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement. (p.875).

Yaogo is responding to this feminist call. *The Odds are against Cycling* is actually about Noëlie Yaogo as a woman who likes cycling and who is striving to assert herself in a man-ruled society. The synopsis of the novel written by its authoress—which is peculiarly unusual—presents it as her biography. She introduces herself as a Burkinabe woman, an English teacher at a secondary school and a person who is eager to produce creatively. She attests that though she owns a Master's degree in English, she has no mastery of the English language, which explains the poor quality of her English expression, unless it is done on purpose to look feminist. Comparing her work to those of Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Kenyan writers, she says that "[hers] would just be a newness…, a break to a wordy routine" (Yaogo, 2012, p.159). She means that her work is strikingly different from the others. Her novel is strangely so, though the novels of her predecessors are more than "a wordy routine." She does not even explain why she says so. Nonetheless, her novel, which is born out of her own creative mind, is primarily all about herself; most of the characters are women and men appear only as shadows putting her and the other women into brighter light.

In her narrative, she shows a deeper concern for the woman's body. She criticises the systematic exploitation of sexuality whereby teenagers use their bodies for profit, where on streets, "bodies are competitively priced" (Yaogo, 2012, p.60). To this end, these girls preen themselves and maintain their bodies as commodities to enable them to entice men into matrimony for money or material gain. Their attentions to their bodies therefore take the form of producing them as objects for others' appraisal. Wollstonecraft saw in this strategy some dangers which have been echoed in feminist work up to the present day. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Wollstonecraft provides a clear example of the *disciplining* of the female body:

> To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! The limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles … artificial notions of beauty, and false descriptions of sensibility have been early entangled with her motives of action. (p.55).

Feminists usually regard embodiment with suspicion, choosing instead to stress the rational powers of the female mind, trying to break any suggested deterministic connexion between bodily characteristics and social role and

mental faculties. They require a distinction between sex as fixed by biology, and gender, as the variable social and cultural meanings attached to such biology.

Acknowledging the fact that men and women are different in the sense that they have different hormones and different sexual organs and different biological abilities—women can have babies, men cannot—, and that men have more testosterone and are, physically stronger than women, the Nigerian feminist Adichie (2014) calls for an evolution in the ideas of gender by laying emphasis on the rational powers of the female mind when she underlines that "a man is as likely as a woman to be intelligent, innovative, creative" (p.18). Man and woman alike are qualified to lead the world today because physical strength is not anymore the most important attribute for survival as it was the case thousands of years ago. Because of this historical evolution, ideas of gender should evolve.

It is in this context of difference between biology and gender that Beauvoir's famous claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p.295) is usually quoted. Beauvoir claims that "woman" is not a natural fact but a historical idea. She makes a distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation of that facticity. Following this distinction, to be female is a facticity, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, by compelling the body to conform to an historical and cultural idea of "woman". So, the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives.

Beauvoir and Adichie actually explain that in childhood the young girl's body is experienced in a different way from that of the young boy. She is encouraged to treat her whole person as a doll, "a passive object … an inert given object" (Beauvoir p.306), mainly to please others. At the opposite, the boy is encouraged to climb trees and play rough games. In the African context, "baby girls are given less room and more rules and baby boys more room and fewer rules." (Adichie, 2017, p.19). Beauvoir says that this state of facts explains the situation that women live their bodies as objects for another's gaze, something which has its origin not in anatomy but in "education and surroundings" (p.307). Likewise, being aware that "gender roles is absolute nonsense" (p.14), Adichie (2017) invites women to question the Igbo culture's selective use of biology as "reasons" for social norms (p.49), so as to allow men and women alike to do everything that biology allows. There is nothing one should do because one is a boy or a girl. Cycling is not an exception.

The Burkinabe woman Noëlie Yaogo also attempts, in her writings, to contribute to giving women's bodies a positive value. She is on the footsteps of Irigaray, a proponent of *écriture féminine*, a movement to produce writing reflective of female embodiment. From her personal and social experience that male bodies are those that have identity, power and authority, and that female

bodies are defective male bodies, Irigaray argues for the need to reconstruct a positive imaginary and symbolic of the female body.

Like Irigaray, Yaogo wants to restore the woman body. She proposes that women use their bodies the hard way like men to earn their living. Cycling against all the odds, she paves the way for women. She is a model that many can imitate in order to free themselves from traditional boundaries. She wants to teach the other women, from what she learned through the hardships of cycling, that nothing worthy can be achieved without struggling and sweat.

> Biking is struggling, and it will still be emancipating women. In any case, the bicycle was the foundation of women's freedom, too. Indeed in the past, they were wrongly not allowed to cycle because of the so-called frailness of their female constitution. Were the male privates also examined? It would be a funny belief if a comparison were tried! Fortunately, the bike hurried disillusionment and other awakenings. Humans grew in wisdom; so were events. Furthermore, with the right new turn of mind in history, some long heavy-dressed women and others with tight bone corsets had been liberated from these outdated things in society, thanks to the bicycle. These women still applaud the bicycle. Social virtue, freedom, and self-reliance always take profit. (Yaogo, 2012, p.11)

The authoress is thus engaged in a task of deconstruction, questioning traditional conception of women regarding cycling and drawing awareness to it as being not 'natural' or 'normal' but a social construction. Cycling helps free women from these outdated traditions. She shows by her experience that women's emancipation is to be achieved by women themselves. Nobody can do it at their place. The efforts involved in cycling symbolise the ordeals women should become ready to endure if they wish to gain freedom. She knows from experience that in cycling "one must always be ready to overcome wind resistance" (Yaogo, 2012, p.58), both physical and symbolic of traditions against women's cycling.

Cycling enables Yaogo to become like man by acquiring manly physical strengths. It helps her build up her body physically, exercise the muscles of her back and legs, increase her cardiovascular fitness and improve her blood circulation. With this gained extra strength through efforts willingly made, she can take revenge on abusive men like Wotike whose fourth wife gave him a lesson in the following anti-patriarchal account:

> [Wotike] pushed the woman into the house, locked the door and put the key into his pocket. He hit her once. He was about to deal her a second blow when the woman stepped back, tied her loincloth tight, gathered strength, lifted Wotike and threw him onto the hard cement floor. The man could not believe what was happening to him. [...] She stepped aside, collected Wotike and smashed him against the wall before letting him down. She joined him there and began to mash him up like potatoes, pounding him like yams. Only then did Wotike realize that he was not dreaming. He started screaming for help. (Sawadogo, 2000, p.8)

Such an account is smashingly feministic. The possibility of a woman turning her husband into a thing that can be cooked like food, palatable to the eater which the two similes powerfully convey, can help women to gather

momentum against abusive husbands. It is by developing their physical strength that such a thing can be done.

With extra strength through efforts willingly made, Yaogo shows that woman can do works so far reserved ~~to~~ for men because requiring additional strength, like emptying the depositories for the Church Charitable Works Committee, with men watching her to see if she can do the job well as men do (Yaogo, 2012, p.8). She says that her unusual physical stout constitution and hardworking always earn her comments from people. In the area of Pawamtore, for example, she is known as a master grass-cutter, brick-collector, and cement bag supplier (Yaogo, 2012, p.9). Through such works, she becomes financially self-sufficient, financing her own further studies and feeding her family.

In her English novel, Yaogo (2012) confides that she has been influenced by the cycling and hardworking life experience of other women. She has been "amazed by bikesick women, forcing the pedals, with uneasy carrying of earthenwares on their racks or loads on their heads. Fruits and vegetables constitute these loads. Well done! … The bicycle seems as good company as a husband. … I'm always witnessing that the bicycle is the right master of several issues" (p.58). The comparison of the bicycle to a husband is telling. It shows the strong link between the woman and her bicycle. They are as inseparable as good husband and wife. The bike is shown as a necessary means of transport, entertainment and sport. Yaogo says she uses it to get to her office, to perform errands or to enjoy life outdoors. This simile also reveals that the bicycle makes woman acquire through hard work what her husband can provide for her and the family, and thus contributes to her financial self-sufficiency. It is towards this end that she encourages her fellow women to embark on biking in an attempt at blanking out their "natural guilt" on this issue and reducing the gender gap (p.111).

In addition to the focus on women characters, gender issues occupy more space in Yaogo's novel. Even the names given to political parties are gender-related: Gender Neutral, Gender Blind, and the GAP (Grange of Assertive People) is said to be a gender sensitive party (Yaogo, 2012, p.112). The GAP is a women's party that tries to boot out the ruling party because it fails to solve socio-economic troubles in the nation where "the international UN target of 30 percent female representation in positions of power" is not yet reached (Yaogo, 2012, p.111). The writer tries to get her fellow women to engage in the fight toward achieving equality between men and women or empowering women in society.

She is very preoccupied about getting women to working hard or undertaking men's works, in a way that recalls Sojourner Truth's famous

speech to the Ohio Women's convention, calling on women to compete with men in work:

> I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash a well! And ain't I a woman? (Truth, 1851, p.117)

Like Sojourner Truth, Yaogo (2012) is cycling like men. She invites women to forgo some morally debasing jobs or activities like prostitution and idleness in civil service. In fact, she mentions different types of profession or activity women are involved in: prostitution, secretariats, trade, teaching. She says that "prostitution, an old profession, goes well and enslaves deep" (p.60); it has become a "modern enslaving work" (p.62). She sees it as being "more privileging and empowering to the male on the one hand, but rather quietening and enslaving the female on the other" (p.63). She implies that this is not a profession women should look for if they want to become free, to be considered equal to men, and not like objects used by men. She also criticises women-secretaries whose concern is more about appreciating clothes, discussing about tailors, playing cards and tattling too much on their men than doing their jobs (p.78). She praises women who, like herself, conduct income-generating activities.

All these reasons, especially the focus on herself, on women in general, on gender, and the specific syntax and narrative line, coalesce to highlight the transgressive nature of Yaogo's English novel which contributes to its being *écriture féminine*, which is "transgressive, rule-transcending, intoxicated" by its nature (Barry, 2009, p.128). She emphasises femininity as a social construction and invites her fellow women to imitate her through hard work.

Yet, it can be observed that Yaogo (2012) unconsciously reinforces patriarchal ideology in her use of "man" and "he", in her novel, to represent humanity or "man and woman," be they traditional sayings or proverbs she is using unapologetically. For example,

> "When a man does not know what harbor he is making for, no wind is the right wind". A first century Roman philosopher (p.4).
> "The best way to a man's heart is through his stomach," as was said. (p.38)
> "Life is a foreign language; everybody speaks his own." The writer. (p.160)

Yaogo strengthens patriarchal ideology by using the gendered language of the past, "man" and "he", to refer to members of both sexes, as it was the practice in the old days. The feminist critic Tyson reports that feminists claim that "we should not use the masculine pronoun *he* to represent both men and women" because such use "reflects and perpetuates a 'habit of seeing,' a way of looking at life, that uses male experience as the standard by which the experience of both sexes is evaluated." (Tyson, 1999, p.82). Feminists argue that

the use of the inclusive "he" is part of a deeply-rooted cultural attitude that contributes to ignore women's experiences and viewpoints in favour of men's (Tyson, 1999, p.82).

In addition, Yaogo (2012) uses "Mrs." instead of the feministic "Ms." For example, "I shall name you 'Mrs. Hulk' to remind me" (p.8); and many times pupils are calling their female teacher 'Mrs.' The case of Rita, one of the narrator's friends, who reverted to her maiden name "Rita" and "preferred to be called 'Miss Rita' rather than 'Mrs.' " (p.42) is also given. Yaogo is not strongly feminist with such a gendered language. The feminist Adichie explains that "the value we give to Mrs. means that marriage changes the social status of a woman but not that of a man." (Adichie, 2017, p.35). It is the reason why feminists prefer 'Ms.' which is similar to Mr. in the sense that it applies invariably to both married and unmarried persons.

Furthermore, Yaogo (2012), in her English novel, corroborates the popular idea according to which women do not have math brains (p.97). She then tells a joke, in the form of an acrostic, that shows a low-esteem for women:

"Do you know what the word 'woman' means now?"
"Yah! For me, it's a **W**orld of falsification!"
"An **O**rigin of appropriate retirement! And of sinning!"
"A **M**ind of weakened knowledge!"
"And still an **A**rea of entertainment!"
"It's also the **N**ame of an experiencing bull!" (p.97).

Such ideas are expressive of a patriarchal woman who has internalised patriarchal norms and values according to which "men are rational, strong, protective, and decisive," while women are "emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive." (Tyson, 1999, p.83). For feminists, the opposition between body and mind has become an opposition between male and female, with the female regarded as enmeshed in her body in a way that she can barely reach rationality. "Women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men" (Grosz, 1994, p.14). Reviewing the data of biology in the first chapter of the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir goes on to describe what are claimed as biological characteristics of the female *body* which, in addition to differences in reproductive role, includes claims that "woman is weaker than man, she has less muscular strength, … can lift less heavy weights" (p.66). Yaogo is not sufficiently challenging such assumptions which require feminists to confront constructions of sexed difference. Woman is thus presented as 'other', in reference to man. This ambivalent position of Yaogo towards women issues, both undermining and unconsciously reinforcing patriarchal ideology, makes her novel be ideologically conflicted.

Conclusion

Comparing these three novels that represent the three main trends in Burkinabe English literature, similarities and differences come to the fore in the treatment of feminism. First, traces of patriarchal ideology are observable in all three selected literary works, sometimes despite the two authors' and one authoress's explicit opposition to it. My analysis shows that all three writers may be seen fighting against it, but using different means and strategies. Tinguiri, like an anthropologist, describes the state of facts, which can make the reality known so that adequate measures be taken for a solution. Nebié is rather preoccupied with men, the tradition holders, whose mentalities need change if a worthwhile improvement of women's issues has to be effected. Yaogo, at the opposite of the other two, focuses on women, showing herself as a feminist example.

Second, the differences in all three novels lie in the role models provided to women readers to look up to in everyday life. The role models offered to people of each sex vary significantly from Tinguiri's novel to Yaogo's. *The Tribulations of the Sahelian Traveler* provides no other feminist role model than the patriarchal one. Patriarchy is strongly emphasised in *The Secrets of the Sorcerer* to the detriment of women who live under oppression. The novels of Tinguiri, Nebié, and Somé have a patriarchal agenda, reinforcing patriarchal ideology. Tinguiri, Nebié, and Somé either advocate women's situation as natural, part of Burkinabe age-long tradition or are silent about it, or just reproduce these gender roles in their works in an attempt to perpetuate it. It is only in *The Odds are against Cycling* that the narrator gives herself as a feminist role model that women can imitate. Yaogo's novel actually bears a feminist agenda as its authoress is trying to fight against traditional beliefs and customs that go against women's empowerment, showing that the roles traditionally assigned to women as well as the women-related mores are socially constructed. Focused on feminism of the body, she shows that gender is neither passively scripted on the body, and nor is it determined by nature, but is what is historically and culturally added on. The unpopularity around woman cycling is, for example, culturally related. Yaogo, thus, deconstructs gender issues and empowers women by fighting against patriarchal norms, going against the current or the odds.

Third, this paper shows the degree to which traditional representations of women in Burkinabe English literature cannot be a representation that mobilises social constructivism in modern times. Few educated women would be ready to play the role patriarchy assigns to women. Yet, despite Yaogo's strong feminist stand, it can be observed that the gendered language she

sometimes uses—Mrs, 'he' and 'man' as inclusive language—is detrimental to women's empowerment and full emancipation.

Finally, there are divergences between the three selected writers as regards the bearing of gender upon style of writing. Tinguiri's style is more descriptive as he straightforwardly exposes the traditions and customs of villagers to foreign readership. Nebié's style, on the other hand, is thought-provoking, gory and anti-feminist at times to the extent that it can be called "écriture masculine". As to Yaogo, the linguistic expression of her *écriture féminine*, at the opposite of the other writers, is repulsive to readership. One wonders if she could not have reached her target through better syntax construction instead. Her writing style may then account for the fact that the public and the critics have ignored her novel so far, unless there is a hidden operation of patriarchy behind the history of its reception.

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