

Strange Coincidences,
Uncomfortable influences



The Rage of

Calixthe Bayala

BY the time her second novel, *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* was published in 1988, the 'phénomène Beyala' (the Beyala phenomenon) had already become a favourite subject of discussion in the vibrant literary circles of Paris. After celebrating the creative genius of the likes of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Sembene Ousmane and Ahmadou Kourouma for upward of three decades, the French public was once again being held spellbound by another African writer, this time an angry Cameroonian feminist named Calixthe Beyala.

If, as is often claimed, a prophet is not without honour but in his own country, can the prophetess possibly expect to fare better, especially in an Africa that is still largely governed by the codes of a seemingly immanent patriarchy? This Biblical allusion best explains the paradox of her first novel, *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* (1987). While the French critical establishment celebrated the novel, critics in Beyala's

Pius
Adesanmi

native Cameroon welcomed it with what Joseph Ndiinda has called a 'conspiracy of silence'¹ (my translation). When they overcame this initial aphasia, some of them condemned the novel for its provocative tone while some others accused the author of plagiarism, triggering off a crisis of originality that has dogged Beyala's heels ever since.

Ndiinda reports that during an interview she granted Radio Cameroon in 1989², the interviewing journalist turned the session into an interrogation, accusing Beyala outright of lifting the title of her first novel from one of the works of Aimé Césaire. Fortunately for the embattled writer, it turned out to be that the journalist 'forgot' to read the novel's epigraph which clearly indicates that the title was taken from the first chapter of the Song of Solomon in the Bible.

With the vapidty of this first accusation of plagiarism established, Beyala went on to publish other works in rapid succession: *Seul le diable le savait* (1990); *Le petit prince de Belleville* (1992), *Maman a un amant* (1993), *Assèze l'Africaine* (1994). And in her desire to give a discursive anchorage to the pressing thematic concerns of her fiction, she published the disturbing epistolary essay, *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses soeurs occidentales* (1995).

The unbridled transgressivity of her quasi-pornographic diction and her anarchic battle against what she often refers to as 'dictature des couilles' (dictatorship of the balls) were all Beyala needed to become the most visible African writer in the French media in recent times. And this alone should have made her a lot more circumspect in the handling of her literary influences.

Already in 1992, the publication of her fourth novel, *Le petit prince de Belleville* had plunged her neckdeep into another controversy of plagiarism. The American clown and writer, Howard Buten, announced to the world that about forty passages in Beyala's novel were copied from a successful book of his which had even been adapted for the cinema by Jean-Pierre Carasso. As the controversy raged on, the influential French satirical newspaper *Le Canard Enchaîné* also announced that it had discovered about ten 'careless borrowings' in *Le petit prince de Belleville*. The newspaper accused Beyala of lifting those elements from *Fantasia chez les ploucs*, a detective novel by Charles Williams.

Beyala's defence at that time was that those 'careless borrowings' must have crept in unconsciously while she wrote. The defence in itself is an uncomfortable rehash of Christopher Okigbo's arguments while acknowledging the fact of his sources. In Okigbo's words, 'it is surprising how many lines of my *Limits* I am not sure are mine and yet do not know whose lines they were originally. But does it matter?'¹³.

Unfortunately, Beyala's explanations did not convince Marie-Madeleine Magueur, head of the panel set up to look into the allegations. Consequently on May 7, 1996, Beyala was

found guilty of 'partially copying' Howard Buten's novel. The novelist and her publishers, Albin Michel, were each asked to pay 30,000 FF as damages to Buten and Carasso. The panel also ordered Beyala and her publishers to expunge all the disputed parts from *Le petit prince de Belleville*. Reacting to this setback, Beyala waxed philosophical: 'I have decided to let the dead bury the dead. These things are of no importance and cannot impede my work'¹⁴ (my translation).

She thus continued undeterred with her writing and media campaigns. And in 1996, Beyala's seventh novel, *Les honneurs perdus* (*Lost Glories*, my translation) was published by Albin Michel. On 24 October 1996, the Académie Française awarded the novel its prestigious *Grand Prix du roman* worth a staggering 100,000 FF. The importance of this event can better be understood against the backdrop of the fact that Beyala became the first black writer, male or female, to win the said prize. But the euphoria that greeted this unprecedented achievement in the whole of Francophone Africa was tragically bound to be shortlived. In a cruel ironic twist, the award winning novel played out the semantic import of its ominous title. On 24 November 1996 - exactly a month after the prize was announced - Pierre Assouline, a journalist with the literary magazine *Lire* accused the new laureate on television of 'flagrantly plagiarising' Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* which incidentally won the Booker Prize in 1991. Expectedly, this allegation resulted in the worst literary scandal in 1996.

To prove his case, Assouline proceeded to do a televised page by page comparison of the novels. The first instance concerns a fight between a man and a woman in both novels. In *Les honneurs perdus*, the scene is described thus:

Sa femme ne l'écouta pas. Elle l'attrapa par le pantalon et le traîna. Il tenta de se libérer de cette poigne de fer qui, en plus du pantalon, agrippait ses testicules (27).

(His wife was not listening to him. She caught him by the pants and dragged him about. He tried to free himself from this iron grip on his pants and, above all, his testicles) (my translation).

This can now be compared with Okri's description of a similar event in *The Famished Road*:

The woman stopped listening. When we went past the crowd we saw that she was dragging him about, yanking him around by the pants. He kept trying to free himself from her masterful grip on his trousers, a grip which encompassed his private parts (36).

As the fight continues between the woman and the man, Beyala's novel begins to read dangerously like the French translation of *The Famished Road*. A few more comparisons are necessary to buttress this delicate assertion. In *Les honneurs perdus*, one reads:



Après mille exploits des doigts avec lesquels le docteur-pharmacien essaya de se libérer de l'emprise de la grosse, la rage l'habita et il se mit à proférer des injures que personne ne comprenait... Puis, à la stupéfaction de tous, il gifla sa femme. Quelques hommes se précipitèrent à la rescousse mais la grosse les prit de vitesse. Elle empoigna l'entre-jambe du pharmacien. Il cria et sans lui laisser le temps de réagir, elle le souleva sur ses épaules et l'envoya valser dans la poussière (27).

(After trying a thousand tricks with his fingers in order to free himself from the fat woman's grip, rage took hold of the doctor-pharmacist and he began to scream insults which no one understood... Then, to everyone's surprise, he slapped his wife. Some men rushed to the rescue but the woman was faster. She grabbed the pharmacist's crotch. He screamed

and, without giving him the time to act, she lifted him on her shoulders and flung him into the dust) (my translation).

In *The Famished Road*, the story reads thus:

He tried to prise her fingers apart and when that failed he took to hitting her hands, screaming insults at everyone... Then, he pounced on her, lashing at her face. Dad started towards him, but his rescue attempt was cut short. The madame grabbed the bad loser's crotch and he screamed so loud that the crowd fell silent. Then, with a practised grunt, she lifted him on her shoulders, turned him round once, showing his mightiness to the sky, and dumped him savagely on the hard earth (36-37).

Pierre Assouline went on to reveal other 'strange coincidences' between Beyala's novel and *The Famished Road*. One such coincidence borders on the distribution of essential com-

modities by vote-seeking politicians to the gullible electorate in an African village. The only difference being that while Okri's politicians distribute powdered milk, Beyala's men opt for maize.

Interestingly, the international hoopla which greeted Assouline's revelations has had a diversionary consequence, preventing as it were further comparison of Beyala's text with the works of other writers to determine if there are other sentential coincidences. Using Assouline's criterion as the basis of such a comparative process, I have discovered that it is possible to establish at least one instance of uncomfortable similarity between *Les honneurs perdus* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

In both novels, there is a situation in which some socially handicapped, coloured characters - African Americans in *Song of Solomon* and Parisian black immigrants in *Les honneurs perdus* - are being mentally prepared for the tough life of material deprivation they are bound to face in decidedly racist contexts. Such characters are made to realise that some things will for ever remain beyond their reach owing to their inferior position in the social stratum. In *Song of Solomon*, Railroad Tommy drives home this point to a terrified Guitar and Milkman thus:

Y a des tonnes de trucs qui sont pas pour les immigrés dans ce pays. T'as pas l'amour de ton homme mais t'as pas non plus de domestiques qui te servent au lit. Et t'as pas non plus de belles baignoires électrifiées à l'intérieur, et t'as pas non plus le droit de voter, d'ailleurs, oublie ça, tu connaîtras jamais; et t'as pas non plus de voyage en première classe avec des hôtessees qui font tes quatre volontés et tu vas pas pour autant tuer la terre entière parce que t'as pas ça (353-354).

Since the passage comes in the unrefined street French mostly used by Beyala's characters, it is necessary to translate it into the unrefined American street English of Morrison's characters so as to put the coincidence in proper perspective. Hence, Beyala's passage above will read thus in American:

(There's hundreds of things that ain't for immigrants in this country. You ain't got your man's love but you ain't got no servants to serve you in bed too. And you ain't got no beautiful jaloopies with electrified interiors either; and you ain't got voting rights; besides, forget that! You never going to have it; and you ain't going to travel first class with hostesses doing everything you want; and you won't kill the whole world because you ain't got all that) (my translation).

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The coincidence is obvious enough. And it becomes even more dangerous when the comparison is done between Beyala's novel and the French translation of *Song of Solomon*. What remains to be determined are the modalities of its occurrence. It will also be necessary to determine the precise point at which an author's use of influences becomes inadmissible

Who's teasing? I'm telling him the truth. He ain't going to have it. Neither one of 'em going to have it. And I'll tell you something else you not going to have. You not going to have no private coach with four velvet chairs that swivel around in one place whenever you want 'em to. No. And you not going to have your own special toilet and your own special-made eight-foot bed either. And a valet and a cook and a secretary to travel with you and do everything you say... And you not going to have no breakfast tray brought in to you early in the morning with a red rose on it and two warm croissants and a cup of chocolate. Nope. Never. (59-60).

In *Les honneurs perdus*, the heroine, Saïda, is jilted by her boyfriend when he discovers the 'abnormality' of her being a virgin even at the approach of her menopause. She decides to go on a vengeance mission and is apprehended in the street by a sympathetic black immigrant who feels compelled to offer her a piece of advice:

more dangerous when the comparison is done between Beyala's novel and the French translation of *Song of Solomon*. What remains to be determined are the modalities of its occurrence. It will also be necessary to determine the precise point at which an author's use of influences becomes inadmissible. For apart from the instances of syntactic propinquity between *Les honneurs perdus*, *The Famished Road* and *Song of Solomon* as evidenced in the passages cited above, other situations exist in Beyala's novel which enable the informed reader to establish links between her text and those of some older writers in the French world.

In *Les honneurs perdus*, the story has the autobiographical tinge which characterises most of Beyala's stories. Before emigrating to Paris, the heroine lives out the drama of her life in Couscousville, a slum which is in fact the fictional equivalent of New Beil, the slum in which Beyala spent the better part of her underprivileged childhood in Douala, Cameroon.

Using Beyala's emblematic realism, the first person narrator gives a vivid description of the squalor of Couscousville in the first part of the novel. But the tone of the description and the nauseating images of rust and decay immediately begin to cast the reader's mind on Aimé Césaire's somewhat similar description of the Antillean slums in the opening pages of his classic *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Furthermore, the epidemic which hits the whole of Couscousville after the inhabitants have consumed the bad maize distributed by politicians and the manner in which the afflicted populace and the government react to the issue easily remind one of a similar case in Albert Camus Algerian setting of Oran in his novel, *La peste*.

For sure, these points are not strong enough to be considered as plagiarism. At least, one cannot pin down near syntactic homologies between Beyala's text and those of Césaire and Camus. But at the purely situational level, the resemblances are striking enough. This brings us to a few thorny questions to which literary practitioners have seemingly been unable to provide palpable answers through the years, a failure which

Closer to us in Africa, instances abound in the past of accusations and counter-accusations of plagiarism which were mostly resolved in a manner that is anything but tidy. Thus were opportunities which could have been exploited to resolve the tricky question of what actually constitutes literary plagiarism wasted. The case of Camara Laye readily comes to mind. The author of *The African Child* was once accused of plagiarising Kafka and Camus in another novel of his, *The Radiance of the King*. The Malian Yambo Ouologuem was also violently accused of plagiarising André Schwartz-Bart's *Le dernier des justes* in his highly polemical novel, *Le devoir de violence*. Despite the allegation, Ouologuem's novel went ahead to win the Prix Renaudot in 1968. And in the 1970s, our own Chinua Achebe was accused by Charles Nnolim of having lifted the material for his *Arrow of God* from a tiny historical pamphlet, *The History of Umuchu*, purportedly written by a retired corporal of the Nigerian police force.

Interestingly, while Calixthe Beyala and all the other mentioned writers have all suffered accusations of plagiarism and the attendant embarrassment, the same cannot be said of

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has had serious negative implications for the global literary process: at what precise point does plagiarism occur in literature? Are there universally acceptable criteria for determining that offence?

The pertinence of these questions becomes clearer when the fact is considered that the production of literature in all cultures has had a very long history of textual coincidences and interpenetrations which can actually undermine the authenticity of a monumental textual corpus the moment any hard and fast rule of originality is taken into consideration.

The works of French classical tragedians constitute a good case in point. Racine and Corneille have never denied their indebtedness to antecedent Greek and Roman tragedians like Sophocles, Euripides and Plutarch. And, of course, La Fontaine's fables read like French translations of the fables of Aesop in several instances. Indeed, if the same nebulous rules that are now threatening to destroy Beyala's career are to be applied to the works of these great writers, France is sure to have a considerable part of her literary patrimony seriously undermined on the grounds of 'partial plagiarism'.

the deceased Congolese playwright and novelist, Sony Labou Tansi, despite the incontrovertible fact of his indebtedness to Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Indeed, the Francophone critical establishment has come to consider *La vie et demie*, the novel that placed Labou Tansi on the international literary map, as an African version of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, two Marquezian masterpieces.

It is even arguable that Labou Tansi is far more indebted to Marquez than Beyala can ever hope to be to Okri or Morrison. Several passages in *La vie et demie* can be traced to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Even some of Marquez' characters are implanted in Labou Tansi's text with negligible modifications. In a curious article, 'Entre le renouveau et la modernité: vers de nouveaux modèles?'¹⁵, Daniel-Henri Pageaux actually compares passages from Marquez and Labou Tansi in exactly the same way as Pierre Assouline does with regard to Beyala and Okri. After revealing a welter of resemblances between *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *La vie et demie*, Pageaux concludes by celebrating what he calls Labou Tansi's 'original imitation' of Marquez!

Pageaux's case is not unrepresentative of the celebratory reactions to Labou Tansi's 'original imitation' of Marquez by most critics of Francophone African literature. And this brings us back to the questions raised earlier on about the precise meaning of plagiarism in literature: two writers 'lift' sentences from unacknowledged sources. One is condemned by the international literary community while the other receives accolades for being an 'original imitator'! Are different sets of rules to be applied to different authors when it comes to plagiarism?

It is perhaps this indeterminate state of affairs that has given Calixthe Beyala enough room to manoeuvre in her defence. First, she lashed out at her critics from a feminist and racial standpoint, accusing them of misogyny and racial hatred. In her opinion, the fact that she is the first black person (and above all a woman) to win the prestigious prize is a blow on the ego of the white male establishment. But she later shifted her argument to the site of the traditional confrontations between Africa and the West. Equating the attacks on her with the customary Western denigration of Africa, she declared heatedly: 'We are going to fight for that Africa and they should leave us alone'¹⁶ (my translation).

The most dramatic twist in Beyala's defence came on 26 November 1996 when she sent an eight-page fax message to Pierre Assouline claiming that it is Okri who is in fact guilty of plagiarising her first novel, *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée*! Says she: 'The similarities between *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* and *The Famished Road* are legion. Here, we are not talking of one, two or three sentences relating the same events but we are talking about a book which drew its inspiration entirely from my novel'¹⁷ (my translation).

Beyala's prevarications have not helped matters. It has even given her accusers grounds to dismiss her as unserious. In the words of Assouline: 'In that case, if one day a book of Elie Wiesel is critiqued, he will accuse us of anti-semitism; if a puzzle is found in a book of the Dalai Lama, he will say that it is primary anti-Buddhism... I am not going to be drawn into this debate because after explaining that you are not racist, she will tell you that you don't like women!'⁸ (my translation). As the hue gradually begins to die down, all indications point to the fact that the Beyala episode may pass away, like all the already mentioned antecedents, leaving the controversy of what constitutes plagiarism largely unresolved. And for as long as this remains the case, one cannot but agree with Brice Ahounou that "the whole of African literary creation becomes questionable" (my translation). **GR**

NOTES

¹ Ndinda, Joseph. 'Ecriture et discours féminin au Cameroun: trois générations de romancières' in *Notre Librairie*, no. 118 (July-September, 1994): p.7.

² Ibid.

³ Okigbo, Christopher. 'Transition Conference Questionnaire' in *Transition*, 11, 5 (July-August, 1962): p.12.

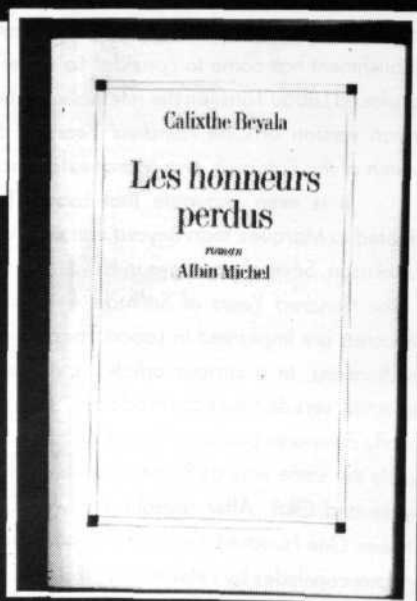
⁴ Quoted by Brice Ahounou in his article, 'Calixthe Beyala: au cœur d'un nouveau scandale' in *Africa International*, no. 300 (December-January, 1997): P.78.

⁵ See *Notre Librairie*, no. 78 (January-March, 1985): pp.31-35.

⁶ Brice Ahounou, op. cit.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.



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