

## OTHERNESS AND FEMALE IDENTITIES: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S *THE SECOND SEX*

As a child in the Congo, the first intimation I had of what emancipation entailed was through Negro- Succes's propaganda song "Mwana ya quinze ans" proclaiming a woman's desire for the freedom to marry the man of her choice and disseminating the governmental slogan "new man, new woman, emancipation." The government, according to this song, held women in high esteem and considered her emancipation a major priority. At the age of thirteen the theoretical notion of female emancipation was nothing but blurry. I did however understand that it was about women riding "mopeds," dressing well, sitting on sumptuous chairs, and socializing. The emancipated Congolese female was nothing more than the colonial female, catered to by servants and kept captive within the home. Unlike the majority of non-emancipated married Congolese females who went by their maiden names, the liberated female was generally Mrs. so and so. Like all the non-liberated Congolese females, she also marked her status and personal worth through the numerous kitenges<sup>1</sup> she wore, especially the *Kitenge Mon mari est capable* (my husband is capable). Her emancipation was, thus, limited to and defined by material possessions and social status and her selfhood acquired through the realizations of her more meritorious spouse.

During the seventies "emancipation" became clearer to me with the government's mobilization of high school female graduates into the army. Women were to be equal to men; they were to be in the army, the political apparatus, the administration etc. We, Congolese women, became increasingly female ministers, members of Bureau Politique, directresses of institutions, *Condifa* (the Condition of Women and the Family), engineers etc. "Emancipation," hence, became synonymous with holding male-reserved Western professional positions, initially also denied her male counter-part during colonization.

While most colonial Congolese women were limited to gardening and home economics, female education became increasingly a means of emancipating them. As the second generation of high school girls at Lycee Tuendele to be encouraged to attend college, I was among the few privileged "emancipated Congolese females" who were able to further their education in postcolonial Congo. Our predecessors,

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<sup>1</sup> Wrappers worn by Congolese females.

unfortunately, had been trained foremost to fulfill their wifely and motherly social obligations. Their education, as the *evolués*<sup>2</sup> had petitioned the colonial authorities, served men for whom they were to be a better and more adequate partner rather than themselves.

The intellectual freedom and camaraderie we believed to achieve in college was also only partially fulfilled, since obtaining a degree at the University of Lubumbashi was far from an emancipatory experience. We were, indeed, deemed intellectually competent for our new academic challenge, yet we continued to be enslaved and abused by the body. As university women, we learned we were unfit for marriage, for we were collectively considered prostitutes. Dubbed "Chic, Check, Chock" (elegance, checks, and sex), our bodies were collectively defiled and our intellect appreciated only as status markers in sexual transactions. While our intellect made us men, our bodies were displayed and controlled to assert male superiority. We quickly discovered that introductions to civics classes were essentially sexist lessons belittling powerless female students. Hence, the presentation of the geographical and cultural background of the Congo included a lesson in the differences between the Congolese steatopygic female and her Western counter-part. Not only were we stereotyped, humiliated, and silenced at times but we were also taught that our intellect was inessential, for grades could be bartered through corporal transactions. To have an intellect one had to resist patriarchy, sexism and clearly mark the body "NOT FOR SALE." Those of us that did not conform to that general idea of supposedly *Bodowes* or "loose women" were simply dismissed as "bookinists," as an important government official once noted. Bookinists<sup>3</sup>, or not, we were all spoiled and ruined, for we had developed reason and would never, supposedly, submit or be sufficiently malleable to make good mates.

College was a learning experience -- one in which I struggled to define my space and self within a world that collapsed identities and denied women respectability outside marriage. An intellectual discussion, a dispute on a bus, or an altercation on the streets could all be terminated on the grounds that the interlocutor was a woman. Although womanhood was an enjoyable position that allotted some prestige, love, devotion, and material positions, it remained a sign of inferiority. This biological handicap explains, perhaps, the predicament of Beatrice Chimpa Mvita, a seventeenth century woman who

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<sup>2</sup> Westernized and literate Congolese who have been matriculated.

<sup>3</sup> Bookworms.

challenged the Catholic Church and fought for the reunification of the kingdom of Kongo. Although respected by the king of the Kongo and her fellow countrymen and women, she was nonetheless burnt at the stake for failing to be asexual. It was not the heresy of having Africanized Christianity that brought about her death, but rather her inability to have an immaculate birth.

As I began reading for my *license* thesis on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, I came upon a sentence, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, affirming that females were not born women but were the products of societal Othering and other social factors. It was at this moment that I realized the significance of my life long struggle as a child with the Church, my father, and my school. All my life I had, unknowingly, resisted categorization, limitation, and inferiorization, perhaps even more so because I am an urban site of inter-ethnicity and inter-culturality. I had struggled against the internalization of wise, sound female advice to be subservient, to be of service, and to remain immanent. Why should a woman not speak her mind? Why should she maintain peace in her household by putting water in her mouth during a dispute? Why should happiness be contingent solely on her silence? Why should she serve relentlessly, even when she is tired, only because a woman never tires? "*Mwana Muke achokake (A woman never tires)*," I was told. Why should household chores be the sole responsibility of girls and women when boys whiled away time on lively soccer fields and men debated, laughed, and awaited their meals under cool mango trees and in living rooms.

The home with its proverbial wisdom was not alone to define my place in-the-world, especially in relationship to men. Intellectuality was a male domain, my high school principal also sought to teach me. Women's space was in the home, and when they did occupy the public space, they remained invisible. Women were not to attend Mazembe/Lupopo soccer games, especially not jump on the field from the stands like men, he declared before the entire school after meeting me fortuitously at a soccer game. Women, he enjoined, were not to speak to boys in a co-ed school but to keep to themselves. Transgressing the speech boundary for visiting me at home or speaking to me in the schoolyard, one upper class male student was expelled from school for refusing to tell the principal the nature of our exchanges. Talking to my male classmates from then on became a subversive and dangerous activity. Females, became, for them, objects of contamination. No wonder my four female classmates' voices were

absent in class and when they were called upon by the teacher to speak, they could only stammer inaudible sounds.

Having dared to appropriate speech and affirm my intellect, I became for my principal, who had predicted I would never finish high school, the object of his disdain and abuse. Each academic period and end of semester concluded with a painful gender war when the principal came to proclaim the results of the class. First of the class, he would blurt my name and toss the report card to the ground. Prostrating, as he so desired to see me, I would pick up my report card. Achievement was not robed in glory but in dark humiliation. "What are you boys doing in this classroom," he would query? The principal's remonstrance subsequently led to my peers' verbal intimidations and mandate that I not excel the following period so as to ensure their superiority. Stubborn and unyielding, I refused to yield to their desires. Instead, I defiantly challenged them to a fistfight. No wonder I cannot remember their names! By the end of the academic year, my three female classmates had been definitely silenced. One was on the street and two were married as their fates so decreed.

Reading de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* enlightened me on the reasons why I was literally and figuratively constantly in rebellion against the Father. It was de Beauvoir's study that enabled me to understand woman's marginal position in the world, how she is defined, and how her values are informed by patriarchy. She made me understand that I could and should rightly rebel and resist embodying a female essence, perhaps biologically circumscribed, that is mostly the invention of an individual other seeking to position himself at the center. After all, "one is not born," as she claims, "but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (267). It was *The Second Sex* that empowered me to apprehend the contradictory images of woman and the mystical, devious and religious adoration she elicits. Through de Beauvoir's exploration of the historical representation of women, I discovered why the female body--defining her ontological role in society but not her gender-- plays a seminal role in society's perception of woman and her association with nature. She is at once held in high esteem and abhorred. Through de Beauvoir, I understood that woman's mystical essence educated man to control her. I understood that the societal edict that menstruating women be purified and denied the right to sit in a chair a man might use and to add salt or cook a meal for a

man were all simple mechanisms of control. It was de Beauvoir who also made me realize that American women's need to shave was in the same order a refusal to acknowledge her sameness with man in her alterity and the need to purify her and submit her to her child-like condition in the name of hygiene. Does not de Beauvoir claim, "The other --she is passivity confronting activity, diversity that destroys unity, matter as opposed to form, disorder against order. Woman is thus dedicated to evil" (80).

Like the medieval quarrel on the nature of women, discussed in *The Second Sex*, the Congolese évolués debated her future and profile. She was to be placed under modern patriarchy, so they thus demanded the abolition of the matrilineal system. Congolese emancipation was, hence, placed under the banner of the mother and the complementary spouse. For Patrice Emery Lumumba the Congolese female was a legitimate and an equal partner in the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism. Mobutuism appropriated the latter's vision of female emancipation and created the new Congolese, equal to men according to the constitution of the republic. This feminist agenda paralleled with that of the politics of authenticity put the Congolese woman, valorized for her maternal role, on a pedestal of motherhood. We became a nation of Papas and Mamans and Mobutu, the supreme Papa, became the shepherd of the people and the protector of women. Papa for males was a biological position invested with authority. Thus governors, ministers and high level officials or professionals became papas. On the other hand, the worker was a simple worker or a citizen, yet man. Women also became "mamans professor," "mamans minister," "mamans Condifa," and "mamans directresses," but motherhood did not grant equal status, for the mamans were differentiated in their treatment according to whether they were "mamans travailleuses" (working mothers), or "Mamans paysannes" (mother peasants) and limited to enacting traditional roles within male spaces. Thus Mayuma Kala, Minister of Condifa was responsible for feeding the participants at the 4<sup>th</sup> MPR (Popular Movement of the Revolution) congress. Worse, these mamans could not, according to Congolese codes of family law, open a bank account or travel without spousal consent.

Congolese male feminists, such as Kitenge Ya, were also quick to theorize on the nature of her ontology and desires. "This woman appears to be. . .," writes Kitenge-Ya. In light of de Beauvoir's feminist theories, the latter scrutinized the condition of the Congolese female in relationship to the Western woman and within

traditional/modern contexts. Despite the perceptive and insightful analyses of his studies, Kitenge-Ya's male gaze reduced her to her biological condition. Interestingly, as advocator of the emancipation of the Congolese female, he notes in a study on the Congolese phenomenon of "bureaucratie" (second offices or mistresses) that this urban practice is not to be castigated but rather applauded because it heralds the advent of monogamous relationships based on love. Accepting to co-habitat illegally with a man as a second spouse is, according to him, a sign of emancipation for it is in this female category that feminists who do not feel the urge to assert themselves through motherhood and believe in eroticism and not procreation are to be found. Kitenge-Ya most certainly read de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* well. Yet when he continues to claim that in addition to creating a new model of marriage, free from materialistic constraints, "bureaucracy" also has hygienic and sanitary values, one can only pause and ponder on the true ideology underpinning his feminism. According to him, "l'homme qui dispose d'un deuxième bureau s'épargne par cela même beaucoup de risques des maladies vénériennes. Il est donc, d'après nous, malséant de jeter hâtivement l'anathème sur cette forme d'union" (159) [A man who has a "second bureau" protects himself from risks of sexual diseases. It is, therefore, inappropriate to hastily condemn this kind of relationship]. It is evident that although this text echoes *The Second Sex*, Kitenge-Ya continues to filter the Congolese female's experience through his male privileged gaze. "Bureaucracy," according to him, allots women freedom yet he fails to see the oppression and suffering endured by these women who continue to be victims of patriarchy. Interestingly, he notes, in the very same article, that women who choose to be "second bureaux" are generally cupid women who aspire to be independent, who have been designated by their families to provide for the material needs of the latter, un-wed mothers, and intellectual women who have failed to find partners. His very description of the "second bureau" bespeaks the oppression and frustration of the Congolese female. The Congolese female's identity and image--pre-articulated by feminist males and facilitated by males designated by international organizations-- was thus circumscribed by male discourse, so when the Congolese woman attempted to transgress the established boundaries, she was simply dismissed and dubbed a "feminist."

Caught between the Congolese intellectually inspired male discourse and that of de Beauvoir, in which I view myself as "a primitive" and akin to the Othered Arab female "scorned in the Koran," I read de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as an interstitial subject. De

Beauvoir's description of pregnancies as an invasion and mothers as "fertile organisms" (495) compelled me to reflect on my own experience of pregnancy. Yes, pregnancy is a means of oppressing, commodifying and subjecting woman, for it is, as a Congolese woman I once interviewed stated, an object of economic exchange. In a pauperized Congo where obtaining a new *Kitenge* is a major financial sacrifice, pregnancies, rewarded with new clothes upon delivery, become a currency of exchange. "I am on the battlefield until I die," declared the lady. Babies alone ensure a new *kitenges*.

While pregnancies oppress women who must of necessity define their value and ensure their marital security in the Congo through multiple pregnancies, I can not totally espouse de Beauvoir's concept of this phenomenon. She writes: "Ensnarled by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal, a stock-pile of colloids, an incubator, an egg; she scares children proud of their young, straight bodies and makes young people titter contemptuously because she is a human being, a conscious and free individual, who has become life's passive instrument" (495). I fail to see through her eyes the oppressive nature of pregnancies and the female body, as described through her perspective, for the body, in my society, is not a mere esthetic object, but one subject to perpetual change and honored as it assumes its various functions and maturity. What captures my gaze, instead, are the eyes of the barren woman who full well knows she will be buried with a piece of charcoal to signify her failure to fulfill her womanly role. Moreover, I cannot concur either when she claims that pregnancy is respectable only for a married woman, for the unwed woman is far from being an outcast and an offense in my Congolese society. It is better, in my society, to have a child even through a polygamous relationship and prostitution than none. After all there are no natural children and a legal contract does not define a marriage but a dowry. It is motherhood as a form of self-realization that I question. Who oppresses whom in polygamous relationships? Is it those that fulfill their dreams of motherhood at the expense of those who wish to fulfill themselves through their marital others or is it the male who objectifies and fulfills himself through women? Or is motherhood, as construed by Congolese society, a form of sexual emancipation to be extolled?

Does the Congolese woman totally subsume her identity in her spouse's? How can one lose one's self, my grandmother once asked me? Can one be domesticated as though one did not have relatives? Marriage is a contract in which a woman must defer and cater to the needs of a man but to lose one's self? Perhaps this is why the

Congolese female has a strong sense of "kwetu," "home," as Buchi Emecheta's Nnu Ego would claim. She remains a "Mutoto wa benyewe" (other people's child) and one, as the Ndembu claim, must not be mistreated and deformed. Victor Turner attests to these women's sense of self when he betrays his frustration with the numerous divorces he observes amongst them.

What de Beauvoir has taught me the most is to live for myself and not be for others. My immanence can be balanced with my transcendence and that praxis is not solely male. Yet, I continue to argue with de Beauvoir about her assumptions of femininity when I think of my grandmothers and aunts. They had no education; they did not evolve in Western spaces, but they surely were not limited in their actions. Their biological ontology did not limit their sphere of action; they were mothers, but they were also businesswomen. They were both indoors and outdoors; they braved danger, tested the limits of their ability fishing, hunting small animals, gardening etc. They, unlike the majority of women she describes did not believe that "real activities, real work, are the prerogative of [their] man" (478). Yes, their dedication and renunciation were most certainly lauded; yes, they did find self-realization and marital security through their children, yet they were freethinking individuals. They owned themselves. As one of my sisters used to declare, "One doesn't have to fear marriage for there is a word called divorce. After all, our aunt was married four times and each time with a dowry." My models of strong women have thus been these traditional women, supposedly subservient through Western eyes. These were women who dared to go where none had gone, women who held their own in public spaces, and supported their families through their inventiveness and audacity. Gender division did not imply loss of identity. "Kakas, "big brothers" had their roles for sure, but they remained respected "dadas," big sisters.

Having grown up in multicultural environments and at the crossroad of intercontinental values, my African past was, nonetheless, filtered through my Western education and Christian values, permeating my educational textbooks. Those Saint Paul editions written for young Congolese presented love, the dowry, and African family practices from a Euro-centric perspective and invited women to docility and nurturance. It was only after I graduated from college that I realized that these books were in contradiction with my African world, and not all for the best. So to my father's surprise, I requested after having given birth to all my children and completed a doctoral degree that my spouse give my father a bride price.

My everyday Congolese world was filled with independent traditional women, free to claim the public space, to go to bars, to go to a soccer game, and dance roulet<sup>4</sup> at Kamalata. The younger women of my generation— Westernized and civilized, on the other hand, did not occupy Western public spaces. It is not until later that I realized that I, as a woman raised by a father who had other ambitions for her daughter than a kitchen, transgressed social codes as I went to Chez Monique the ice cream parlor and went to consulate and embassy receptions with my father. I continued to transgress Western spaces, specifically reserved for males and their "loose or free" companions, as a female professor, for was I not a man? As such I was entitled to respect and reverence; I could occupy territories prohibited other educated women when I did not encroach on male privilege. I could overcome class and gendered professions, but not gender. Even as I occupied a marginalized position within my society, my voice and actions could still be questioned and silenced by the word WOMAN. "You cannot tell me what to think," MAN would retort, 'You are a woman like my wife.' These words alone sufficed to trivialize my assertions. It is in these moments that I realize, as Simone de Beauvoir claims, that woman can not "escape from the traditional feminine world; they get from neither society nor their husbands the assistance they would need to become in concrete fact the equals of the men" (680). The best illustration of a man's desire to define himself is that of the businessman who married an educated woman. Because education bestowed the latter prestige and respect, to assert his own authority and value, he placed her diploma under the conjugal mattress so that when he submitted her to his sexual prowess, he submitted her and defiled or negated her intellectual superiority.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* may have its shortcomings and may relegate me to the margins, yet even as I stand between the interstices of West and South patriarchies, the book has empowered me to reflect on my double western and southern patriarchal oppressions. It has made me aware of the covert manipulations of my identity and articulated and echoed my desperate need for freedom. Along with other females, I was empowered to proclaim "I AM, " even as I struggle to free myself from my Western sisters' Othering gaze. At the crossroads of Western and African constructions of identity, de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is the catalyst that empowers me to question gender construction but also read

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<sup>4</sup> Form of dance that resembles a waltz.

African female gender as the Other of the other and correct and rewrite  
Congolese female identities without Western feminist and Western  
racialist mirrors.

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