Europe: fragmenting identifications

In my presentation I shall be referring to the work of non European artists, and specifically what African artists have offered to the re-thinking and development of issues related to power and gender in the New Europe.
I shall premise my presentation by saying that when referring to New Europe I am not just including the former Eastern and Central European countries which are included in the enlargement process of the EU, but also the increasing presence of migrant groups from other continents and cultures. For the purpose of my presentation I shall be describing the New Europe as a hybrid and multi-cultural space.
Gender and power in the New Europe have to be contextualized in a fragmented and diverse political and civil society consisting of groups whose identity can no longer be described as unified but as unstable and multiple, under an uninterrupted process of construction through different discourses, practices and positions which often contradict each other or even conflict.
In this respect the fragmentation of the symbolic imaginary concerns also the gender construction although it can still be seen as virtual because of the lack of visibility of all those migrant women whose condition limits their political participation and voicing of opinions.
However, before dealing directly with the issue of fragmented identifications in gender constructions, I would like to distance myself from the common practice of Anglo-Saxon feminism where sex and gender are seen as two distinct and separate categories. I shall be following Braidotti’s position and classical continental European Feminist Theory whereby sexuality is seen as a material and symbolic institution, ruled by the dynamics of power and domination which operate both materially and as a discourse.
In this respect a rethinking of the fragmented landscape of gender representations implies dealing with their underlying power relations: for instance in the case of migrant women, the identification with an identitarian nationalist rhetoric and the possible consequent alliance of these women with the male order of their communities unlike European Feminist Movements may be explained by the overlapping of the gender issues with the power relations between the West and the colonial subjects.
Therefore, the possible claim made by migrant women that gender relations are different in migrant communities and for migrant women has to be analysed in the face of a complex network of power relations

How African Theatre Contributes to Gender and Power Theories

My main interest lies in the discourse production, in the production of a symbolic imaginary which feeds into and is driven by the identification processes of the various political actors. In the light of the complex
landscape of discourses and representations on power and gender in Europe militant Feminists, political movements, Trade Unions, cultural and academic groups have produced, I am going to focus on the contribution by African women writers and artists. In fact I see art as a field of cultural production strictly intertwined with the political domain but at the same time able to deal with the openings and drive beyond the mere contingency and lead to changes especially where conflict is especially strong, as happens in post-colonial Africa.

I shall be concentrating on some artists who, in my field – Francophone Africa –, are points of reference for African communities in Europe although they do not necessarily live in Europe itself. They are also important partners in dialogue with European Feminists for reasons I shall be explaining.

Many Francophone African artists and intellectuals have written and thought about gender issues in post-colonial Africa: of the many, I have selected those who have transferred their questions onto the theatre stage. There is a number of reasons for this.

Theatre is inherently a social artistic form: the audience, the existence of a stage and performing, all contribute to the creation of an alternative communitas between actors and audience, immersed in a space/time other than everyday life. Common sense and symbolic structures are suspended for a time to leave space to other time frames, discourses and drives. Theatre is a space where the audience is prepared to cast a critical view on their culture, to question the way they look at the world and at themselves, to deal with conflict, fear and the stress of the world they live in. Artaud’s thinking on theatre offers a good idea of the critical and regenerating strength of the theatre: «Le théâtre est donc un formidable appel des forces qui ramènent l’esprit par l’exemple à la source de ses conflits. (…) Il dénoue des conflits, il dégage des forces, il déclenche des possibilités». From this point of view theatre can be considered as initiation, where societal conflicts are symbolically processed. The aim is to trigger what Werewere Liking, a playwright from Cameroon, calls «productive, creative reactions».

Many African authors consider it as a pedagogical tool or a means to express political dissent: in Africa the theatre had and still has a central role in the way writers and intellectuals develop the dynamics underlying social and human relations. Furthermore, for African women the scene acquires an additional value when compared to the writing itself, as the mise en scène is the transition between women’s marginalized words “behind the scenes” to an embodied and visible word, fulfilling a desire of presence, renewing a «présence au féminin au monde».

As for French speaking Europe, there are a number of events that have favoured the circulation of African theatre among a mixed and international audience: the Festival International des Théâtres Francophones in Limoges and the Concours Théâtral Interafricain of RFI. African women playwrights such as Marie-Charlotte Mbarga, Jeanne Ngo Libondo, Werewere Liking, Odia Kanku, Camille Otogo, Jeanne Rasoaanasy, Michèle Rakotoson, Charlotte Rafenomanjato, Jaqueline Lemoine, Saafi Ndara, Marthe Diur N’Tumb have taken part in all these events with a European as well as an African audience. Non African men and women have therefore benefited from their theories on gender and power in post-colonial Africa, as well as their work being considered representative to a degree.

Western and African Feminisms: difficult comparative exercise

African women writers have developed a very interesting position on gender and power as their thinking cannot be merely assimilated to any of the positions in the European feminist movement - and I am referring to Werewere Liking, and to Calixthe Béyala, for example. Western feminist critique has labelled them as African feminists but they have felt the need to distance themselves from this definition and have sought other definitions for themselves. This proves a resistance against the hegemony of the Western discourse – feminism being assimilated to it – as well as expressing the will to develop the different origin of feminist thinking in Africa. Ifi Amadiume, is a Nigerian intellectual and sociologist: I would like to quote her provocative and different thinking on African thinking on gender and power: «In the social structure of African societies, the household and the family are usually distinct units with distinct terms. In the European system, they are synonymous since European women never achieved a formal autonomous matriarchal system in their social structure. They lacked the types of women’s organizations that were historically basic to African societies. (…) As European feminists, locked in the production-reproduction debate, seek possible ways out of their historically oppressive patriarchal family structure, inventing single parenthood and alternative affective relationships, I argue that in the African case we do not have to invent anything. We already have a history and legacy of a women’s culture – a matriarchy based on affective relationships – and this should be given a central place in analysis and social enquiry». 
Ifi Amadiume’s statements provocatively shift the axis of the debate on the ‘duty of the feminist’ from the invention of a new order, other than patriarchy, which she identifies with the West, to the African horizon where non-patriarchal gender relations of pre-colonial African societies have to be rediscovered. In my presentation I shall not consider the doubts anthropologists and African historians express of the existence of a ‘pre-colonial matriarchy’ in African societies: I shall relate to the interest I have in this debate, that is the symbolic strength of this vision, that is the existence of gender relations not governed by patriarchal order in pre-colonial Africa. A non hierarchical principle of complementarities between sexes is applied by African women intellectuals and artists, and this is the principle that becomes so symbolically powerful. Amadiume states that «in the African case we don’t have to invent anything» and states this in opposition to Western feminism, maintaining that pre-colonial female cultures have to be rediscovered as they were squashed during the colonial period when the male order was strengthened. As a result her theories on gender and power are based on a postulate of strength whereby the current subalternity of African women in post-colonial urban societies can be seen as a passing development and not as a well rooted and historically motivated condition.

Ifi Amadiume’s position is echoed in many African writers, and especially in a playwright such as Werewere Liking. In a paper for «Les Cahiers de la Francophonie» for Femmes en Francophonie Liking wrote: «If one were to refer to the old education systems in Africa this could shed light on some of the traditions: in fact the role of women was held in such consideration that a separate education had been developed. The fact of being a woman was considered both as a state (état) and a statute (statut), a task and a function, an art for life. For instance Bassa culture had a several levels of female initiation. As a depository and promoter of tradition through arts, women were initiated to songs, epopees, myths, and cosmogonies as well as tribal and family history. Mystical and occult training made women into mediums, healers and priestess… However, above all women were mothers and wives, givers of life, guaranteeing continuity in the community or society, shaping men and their fates. At some level these forms of initiation revealed women’s hermaphrodite nature to themselves, their autonomy and responsibility, prepared them to transcend appearances». Clearly an approach such as this could seem ambiguous to a critical European eye, as the roles of mother and spouse are associated to that of a patriarchal society controlling the fate of women. References African writers and intellectuals make to traditions might be seen as ambivalent in that it could be seen as conservative, as a mere a-critical acceptance of a male afrocentric discourse.

If the aim is to understand the complexity and opacity of these representations, then an understanding of the underlying power relations can prove useful: what power do African women have as defined by above, what power is attributed to women in society and how is power represented?

Werewere Liking

Werewere Liking is an important figure in this landscape, not just because she has been a main character on the African artistic scene for at least twenty years but also because she has worked more openly than others on issues of gender and power in Africa. Her production as a writer and playwright is also a theoretical production that has been translated into social experimentation.

Werewere Liking was born in Cameroon in 1950 but has been living in the Ivory Coast for over twenty years. Right from her first steps as a writer and theatre director she chose to associate her work as a researcher in the theatre and in theory to political and social practice.

In 1985 she founded the Village Ki-Yi, a community of artists committed to research into pan-African art and experimenting a collective model which drew inspiration from the village society. Liking managed the Village Ki-Yi and her work is an interesting example of how theory, formal research and social experimentation can be put together, a first in its kind in Africa.

Her song-novel Elle sera de jaspe et de corail, also called the journal d’une misovire (1983) speaks of her intellectual and artistic growth, as the new word misovire suggests. The word draws from a Greek and Latin root, echoing the word misogyny: in fact it means “a woman who can not find a man to admire” which veers away from the more literal meaning of “man hater”. Her song-novel could be seen as a systematic approach to a theory that the international critique labelled as feminist. In her journal, the misovire rethinks the regeneration of the African society through nine key nodes, each one filling in a page of her proto-diary. However, the programmatic nature of Elle sera de jaspe et de corail means that Liking does not address in that text that land of shadows, contradictions and ambiguity which are a feature of African women’s condition and which Liking has depicted with great skill in her theatre work.
I shall therefore be referring to Liking’s theatre work, where she highlights a complex landscape of power and domination relations in which women live and thrive.

**Liking’s misovire Theatre**

I shall be dealing specifically with three of Liking’s plays, *La queue du diable*, *Singuè Mura*, and *Sogolon*. The plays were written at different times: *La queue du diable* in 1979, although it had won the third prize of the *Concours Théâtral Interafricain* in 1977-1978 under the title of *Ngonga ou les bâtards*; *Singuè Mura* in 1990 which was shown at the *Festival International des Théâtres Francophones* in the same year; and *Sogolon* in 2002 running for the 2003 MASA. The three plays are ritual theatre pieces although their formal structure differs. Furthermore the main character in all three plays is a woman who is in conflict with her community.

In *La queue du diable*, Ngonga is suspected of having murdered six of her nine daughters. She challenges social conventions and uses the death ritual of one of her daughters as an opportunity to challenge conventions and accuse her former husband, the father of her daughters of incest thus breaking the false harmony of the village.

*Singuè Mura* bears the name of the main character: Singuè Mura is a successful, emancipated and able woman who forces her husband’s village to undertake a healing ritual in the hope of saving her from death. In fact she tried to kill herself after hearing that her husband was going to take a second wife to have the offspring Singuè failed to bear him.

In the last theatre piece, Sogolon Kédjou, is the heiress and princess of the Kingdom of Do, future mother of one of the most important emperors of Africa – Sundjata –, a fearless warrior woman and huntress who fights a battle against an unfair male power that has deprived her of the right of succession simply because she is a woman.

In all three cases Liking theatricalises the rebellion of a woman faced with a society regulated by a male order: thus Liking depicts the sorts of domination African women have to suffer in a society where power is unilaterally in the hands of men. Liking also rethinks the costs African women pay to their freedom in the family, social and political environments. «Unlike men, women have more than one creative power and relinquishing one or the other is a mutilation which sooner or later is experienced, and dramatically so. Our maternal emotion is mutilated when we have to give the idea up to emerge; it’s our flesh that is scarred during the curettage or abortions, regardless of it being legal. We are the ones who experience the suffering of our flesh. Our nerve cells suffer from atrophy when we cannot fully develop our intellect»

Interestingly, the examples of female resistance which Liking theatricalised did not lead to the radical questioning of women’s status within the African society, nor more specifically did it suggest emancipation: none of the three had a wholly positive outcome, never was it liberation, never was it the victory of a rebellious woman fighting male domination. Ngonga’s public accusation against her husband, her hindering the natural outcome of the ritual leads to solidarity in the village towards the accused husband. All this ends with the murder of her only male child.

Singuè Mura’s coma leads her to come to terms with her choices, life and death – three abortions and then sterility – the price of her success. Her attempted suicide does not stop her husband taking a second wife and in fact his wedding takes place as Singuè Mura wakes up from her coma.

Lastly, Sogolon vindicates the loss of her throne through the son she generates. Her son Sundjata is a brave warrior and future emperor, although he will unify the Mandingo people through bloodshed and violence.

**Male Power and Female Powerfulness**

Liking does not represent the overturning or changing of the gender power relations: it appears to be more a re-thinking, an exploration on the power of women starting from, within a given system of relations. Liking theatricalises a complex network of interdependence, among all the subjects involved. The rebellion staged by Liking’s women involves three types of relations, family, social and political. The main character appears to have interdependent relations during the phase of submission and domination as well as during the rebellion: this interdependence towards a society, towards a community and with a network of relations and roles means that if rebellion is a moment of change, of movement, there will never be a moment of total rupture of the gender and power relations women belong to. All is based on a configuration of gender relations based on complementarities, that is on the principle of completing each other. An African woman’s role as a mother and a wife is never altogether questioned: the need to rebalance the gender power relation is at stake.
by recovering female power and taking this power as focal in the building and reproduction of our society. This process requires taking responsibility for it since, as the theatre plays show, each time a character opts for freedom this will impact on the community as a whole. I would like to refer to the interview I had with Liking last summer, when she said: «I teach my women they are responsible for life, as a result they have to bear more responsibility than the men. This may be why they do not appear to be too liberated: I believe it is important for them to look after their homes, their children and that they should not consider this role as a hindrance, something blocking fulfilment. All this enriches them… Women have multiple creative skills and should not fear the creativeness they have, as well as childbearing. It is merely a matter of being more aware, so as to manage the other side of spiritual, intellectual, artistic and social creativity. One has to manage one’s self effectively to develop all these facets: it is more complex for women than it is for men and I prepare women so that they are completely autonomous and self-reliant. I do not teach women to look for a wealthy spouse, but to look for a man who can understand them, accept them for what they are, share their lives, their situation with great respect…» I believe one can say that in theatralising women’s rebellion, Liking is opposing women’s powerfulness of life and death to men’s (oppressive) power. Women’s potencia can not be measured against the ‘minor’ forms of power men have. This is why it is the more terrifying. «God is a woman and women know it and women keep it quiet, God knows why», is one of Liking’s favourite sayings. According to Liking, in some way the power of the African women seems to be much greater than men’s. However, the European gaze would not see them as bearers of emancipation or freedom. So let us go back to the starting point.

Ambivalence or Many Meanings?

A discourse like Liking’s or like the one other feminists like Amadiume develop shifts the focus from a critical rethinking of the unbalance of power between men and women to the assertion of female powerfulness in the African society. This discourse in Europe is considered to lead to ambivalence and difference. The celebration of female strength and responsibility faced with an unequal share of productive and reproductive roles in society (reference being made to a discourse of complementarities) could be seen to justify a position of subalternity in women: in fact it leans towards a re-appreciation and strengthening of women starting from their existing condition rather than promoting change and the overturning of the status quo. However, since this discourse is one produced artistically, operating within the sphere of the symbolic imaginary, I feel its poietic strength, its projecting towards an other order, an utopian one, must be recognised.

African migrants in Europe take on the approach on gender and power that African intellectual and feminist playwrights such as Werewere Liking have developed, guided by a mechanism of separation, leading to a fragmentation of solidarity towards Western feminists. However, for the strength of its creativity and utopia, Liking’s discourse can speak to Western and specifically European feminists too. Along side the post-modern post-industrial cyborg woman, New Europe is witnessing the growth of an African imaginary of a powerful, divine woman who, in her creative evolution, develops into the form of a hermaphrodite. To quote again Liking on this issue: «At some level, these forms of initiation reveal women in their completeness as hermaphrodites, highlighting their strength, responsibility and power, they prepare women so they may transcend appearance». The figure of the hermaphrodite is one overcoming sexual differences, the hierarchical organisation of difference; it’s a figure inhabited by desire and creative power. According to me, the figure of the hermaphrodite is precious to women’s imaginary, especially at a time when but a few mere practical gender interests seem to be the only bond among European women, which appear to be separated, fragmented by different identifications. Faced with the many desires and wishes and the multitude of conditions European women are experiencing, faced with the political urge to build - as Donna Haraway says – «partial but real bonds» among the various «voices of the revolution» one should avoid to hastily label Liking’s misovire as obsolete; one should avoid to hastily say «no turning back ideologically and materially» and «not only is ‘God’ dead, but also the ‘Goddess’is dead» 13. This would lead to the re-building of – to use and play with Haraway’s figure – “a racist chain of the feminist being” 14, that is to say a hierarchical genealogy among feminist theories such that positions such as Liking’s or other African thinkers would be positioned at the back, a sort of African province leaving Europe as the avant-garde.
I believe in the importance of stressing that the goddess and the cyborg are both intertwined in the spiral dance Haraway speaks of, and that Liking’s woman/goddess/hermaphrodite is a figure that opens up onto a symbolic and utopian horizon able to nourish the imaginary of African but also of European women. A figure of potentia that fights with the cyborg against the potestas of the male order.

1 The contribution by individuals and institutions in the West involved in the training and professional development of migrants should not be underestimated in relation to the construction and reproduction of gender notions functional to the needs of the Western labour market.


5 The RFI Inter-African theatre competition, for instance, included an audience-based selection of all entries. RFI broadcasts nearly all over Europe and Africa.


7 I would like to thank Stefano Boni for having spared the time to talk about this subject and would like to refer to his Twentieth century transformations in gender, power, parenthood and marriage in southern Ghana: a critique of the hypothesis of ‘retrograde steps’ for Akan women, in «History in Africa», 28 (2001), 15-41.


10 Interview with Werere Liking, July the 20th, 2003, Ivory Coast.

11 This definition is opposed to that of strategic gender interests, as used by Maxine Molineux in analysing women’s mobilisation in Nicaragua at the time of the Sandinistas, see Mobilization without emancipation? in «Feminist Studies», 2/1985 and later in Margaret Levi, Marxism, E. Elgar Publishing Lim., 1991, Vol. II, pages 452-515.


14 Haraway uses the expression ‘racial chain of being’ referring the notion of hierarchy among races to the notion of “chain of being” of Platonic inspiration used as a taxonomic means to organise Nature hierarchically, see Haraway, ibid. page 56 and note 28, page 92.

References


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