Almost half a century after colonialism has officially come to an end, Africa still figures prominently in the European imagination and it functions as the European “Other”, as “that which we are not”, thus playing an important role in the affirmation of European identity. On the one hand, European discourse frequently pictures Africa as “the continent without” (Franche 291): a continent without history, scientific achievements and democracy, but with tribal wars, cannibals and wild animals instead. Media reports about dictators, corruption and wars alternate with those about hunger and sickness, and many Europeans tend to reject the African continent as a “degenerated entity” (Amselle 47).

At the same time, seemingly paradoxically, recent years have witnessed an increasing interest in and attraction for African and other so-called “exotic” cultures in Europe. A number of “ethnic” stores and restaurants have sprung up in Western European capitals, allowing their middle- and upper-class populations to indulge in “African” fashion, furniture, tableware, jewelry, cosmetics and food. Building on a long tradition of exotism, “ethnic” marketing usually depicts Africa as a resource for Europeans searching to be “regenerated” through the contact with cultures considered purer, more original and closer to nature than the West. Consequently, as an alleged counterpoise to the continuing mechanization of the industrialized states, “Africa” has become affectively and libidinously overcharged.

Thus, associated with “wars, famines and tam-tam” (Musa 99), the image of the African continent in Europe is ambivalent and “blurred” (Musa 99). Jean-Loup Amselle stresses the “delicious shiver” (51) running down European spines when thinking of Africa, an “at once libidinous and viral manner” (2002, 52) of picturing the continent and its inhabitants. In an argument recalling Adewale Maja-Pearce’s highly controversial critique of Nigerian fiction, A Mask Dancing: Nigerian Novelists of the Eighties (1992), Togolese writer Kossi Efoui is equally critical of the idea conveyed of Africa: according to him, the continent “seems to exist only through fictions functioning as masks” (Efoui 65).

Heavily influenced by the theories of Michel Foucault, postcolonial critics since Edward Said have focused on the discursive construction of “Africa” and “Africans” in the West. The African continent (just like the European) is seen as having no existence on its own and only coming into being through a multitude of “discursive occurrences” (Kail 42). These discourses do not develop spontaneously; their production is

à la fois contrôlée, sélectionnée, organisée et redistribuée par un certain nombre de procédures qui ont pour rôle d’en conjurer les pouvoirs et les dangers, d’en maîtriser l’événement aléatoire, d’en esquiver la lourde, la redoutable matérialité (Foucault 1971, 10-11).

[at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous awesome materiality (Foucault 1993, 216).]
Moreover, the “machine to construct Africans” (Musa 98) is not exclusively situated in the Northern hemisphere and Africans themselves take an active part in its configuration. As a result of their public position, artists play an important role in the discursive construction of “Africa” through the image they convey of the continent. As pointed out above, the ground for “exotic” products is fertile in present-day Europe and artistic creation comes as no exception. A series of contemporary African art exhibitions have taken place in recent years and African art galleries have sprung up all over Europe, attracting a middle and upper class audience as well as art dealers and collectors.

Similarly, the popularity of African music is increasing. In the face of the multiplication of festivals dedicated to music from sub-Saharan Africa, the organizers of Würzburg’s Africa Festival, presented as the biggest festival of that sort in Europe, have even felt obliged to apply for a patent on the designation and to warn potential visitors of qualitatively inferior copies (Hempfling).

Just like African art and music, African literature has become increasingly fashionable. Whereas until the end of the 1980’s the search for African authors’ works often led into obscure corners of bookstores, they are now frequently placed in more prominent spots. Some writers have even found their way into the main sections where they attract a wider and non-specialized readership. Several Western publishing houses have reacted to the increased demand by creating special African writers collections, such as the prestigious Gallimard’s Continents noirs, where more than twenty texts have been published since January 2000.

The choice of texts published in these series is not determined exclusively by literary criteria, nor is it ideologically neutral. Literature does not exist independently from a given society. In order to be successful, literary texts have to correspond to the interests and concerns of their potential readership, which are generally closely attached to the dominant discourses. For African writers, this results in an ambivalent situation: African discourses and concerns are not necessarily shared by Europeans, but many African authors are published in Europe and their texts correspond to the demands of the European market. The number of publishing houses in Africa is relatively small and, considering the high rate of illiteracy as well as the comparatively elevated costs of paper and books, their impact is limited.

In turn, however, their writings are sometimes rejected by their African compatriots. In “Qui a inventé les Africains?”, Hassan Musa analyzes the question of the “Africanity” of contemporary African art fashioned according to the tastes of a European audience and similar reflections have been expressed about African literature. The debate has been particularly virulent in connection with certain African women writers touching upon subjects that are still marginalized or even taboo in their countries of origin. So while their novels are enthusiastically acclaimed by most European feminists, they do not generally encounter undivided approbation south of the Sahara. They treat issues considered by some commentators as exclusively Western and alien to African societies, such as feminism or lesbianism.

Thus, African literary texts published in Europe do neither exclusively nor necessarily reflect actual discourses and preoccupations of the majority of the African population. Rather, these works give an insight into European discourses and the concerns of the European readership. Therefore, Edward Said’s statement that “Orientalism has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (12) also applies to the image of Africa presented in works by African authors. Many scholars have since referred to an “Other” of Western civilization and in White on Black. Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture (1992), Jan Pieterse Nederveen remarks:

Representations of otherness are […] indirectly representations of self. Accordingly, images of Africa and of blacks in Western cultures must be interpreted primarily in terms of what they say about those cultures, not in terms of what they say about Africa or blacks. […] Images of “others” do not circulate because of their truthfulness but because they reflect the concerns of the image-producers and consumers (232-233).

Gender issues depicted in novels by female African authors published in Europe constitute no exception to this phenomenon and in that light, we shall examine the representation of the gendered
European “Other” in novels by African women writers. Our analysis will focus on the depiction of
gender in three award-winning novels by three African women writers who are among the most
widely read African authors in their countries of publication: *The Joys of Motherhood* by the Nigerian
Buchi Emecheta, first published in 1979 in Great Britain, *Der verkaufte Traum* by Amma Darko from
Ghana, first published in 1991 in Germany and *Maman a un amant* by the Cameroonian Calixthe
Beyala, published in 1993 in France.

*The Joys of Motherhood*

According to Amazon sales figures as well as critical reception, *The Joys of Motherhood* is
undoubtedly among Buchi Emecheta’s most popular and most frequently discussed novels. It was
published first in Great Britain by Alison and Busby in 1979 and then by Heinemann’s African
Writers Series in the same year. It was reprinted four times by Heinemann before its second edition in
1988 and five times before the actual third AWS edition published in 1994. In 1979, it received the
Best Black Writer in Britain Award.

*The Joys of Motherhood* is set in the years before, during and after the Second World War. It is the
story of Nnu Ego, who, after a childless union with her village husband Amatokwu, moves to Lagos to
join her second husband, Nnaife. The novel leads us through the episodes of her life: the birth of her
first child and his sudden death, which almost pushes her to suicide; the birth of several other children
in the following years; the arrival of a co-wife; Nnaife’s forced departure to join the army; the difficult
war years in Lagos and her husband’s return with a comparatively large amount of money. Their sons
are sent to school and the eldest leaves for the United States, while Nnaife is arrested for trying to kill
his daughter’s lover. At the end of the novel, Nnu Ego dies a lonely death in the village; shattered are
her dreams of seeing her sons succeed in life and take care of their mother.

If we set out to ask Europeans of both sexes about “the condition” of African women, polygamy
would very probably be the issue named first, and the topic features prominently in *The Joys of
Motherhood*. Immediately after the opening of the novel, we encounter Nnu Ego’s father Agbadi, a
wealthy polygamous chief. When the young woman gets married herself and has not become pregnant
after several months, her husband feels obliged to take a second wife. He explains: “What do you want
me to do? […] I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is
infertile. I have to raise children for my line” (32). Nnu Ego yields to his decision, but she is desperate,
even more so when her co-wife becomes pregnant immediately. After a prolonged stay at her father’s
house, she decides not to go back to Amatokwu and gets married to Nnaife, who works as a washer
man for British colonists in Lagos. Again, she is her husband’s first wife, and this time she becomes
pregnant and gives birth to a number of children, the two eldest of whom are sons.

However, being a mother of male children does not protect her from polygamy. Nnaife finds himself
the head of the family after his brother’s death, inheriting his brother’s wives. The youngest, Adaku,
comes to Lagos to live with the couple and their children. Just as with Amatokwu, Nnu Ego accepts,
even though the pain is even greater this time, as in Lagos the whole family shares one room and she
has to witness Nnaife’s and Adaku’s sexual encounter:

Nnu Ego tossed in agony and anger all night, going through in her imagination
what was taking place behind the curtained bed. Not that she had to do much
imagining, because even when she tried to ignore what was going on, Adaku would
not let her. […] Nnu Ego bit her teeth into her baby’s night clothes to prevent
herself from screaming (124-125).

She tries to comfort herself with the position of a senior wife and mother of sons and accepts the
situation because she does not see any other solution. When Adaku leaves during Nnaife’s service in
the army, Nnu Ego is once again the only woman in the household, but as soon as her husband has
returned from war, he goes to the village to exercise his right over his deceased brother’s senior wife,
Adankwo. Nnu Ego
knew that Nnaife’s pride was wounded when he found out that Adaku had left his house; from all the rumours people had been supplying him with, he knew that the young woman was doing very well without him. Nnu Ego suspected that he wanted to go home to make Adankwo his wife in the normal traditional way (183).

In the village, Adankwo is taken in by Nnaife’s reputation as a war hero. She becomes pregnant but refuses to come to Lagos with her new husband, so that he takes a young girl of sixteen as a “help” for Nnu Ego, as he pretends, and his second wife. However, for once, Nnu Ego does not swallow her anger:

Have you gone mad or something? […] We only have one room to share with my five children, and I’m expecting another two; yet you have brought another person. Have you been commissioned by the white people you fought for to replace all those that died during the war? […] I don’t want that girl sleeping in my bed. I am not giving it up this time, and I don’t care what your friends say (184).

Nnaife agrees to look for a larger and cheaper house, but Nnu Ego feels guilty for her outburst. She is certain that her dead father would not have approved of her behavior: “Even in death, Nwokocha Agbadi ruled his daughter. She belonged to both men, her father and her husband, and lastly to her sons” (185). Consequently, she does not persist in openly refusing her co-wife’s presence and, once again, accepts her in her home.

Nnu Ego does not consider herself an independent entity, but only as existing through the men in her life: her father, husband and sons. She feels she belongs to them, and submission to their desires is one of the essential elements of her self-definition as a woman. Even though the author presents moments that could serve as the basis for revolt, Nnu Ego affirms once again at her husband’s trial towards the end of the novel: “Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us” (217).

However, Nnu Ego’s submissiveness is not tied to Nnaife as a person, but only to his status as a husband. She never learns to respect him and, at the most, draws strength from his presence at moments of great despair. When she first arrives in Lagos and is waiting for her new husband in his house,

in walked a man with a belly like a pregnant cow […]. The belly, coupled with the fact that he was short, made him look like a barrel. His hair, unlike that of men at home in Ibuza, was not closely shaved; he left a lot of it on his head, like that of a woman mourning for her husband. His skin was pale […]. His cheeks were puffy […]. And his clothes – Nnu Ego had never seen a man dressed like that […]. Why, marrying such a jelly of a man would be like living with a middle-aged woman! (42)

Nnu Ego is shocked to find out that this man, so unlike the wiry, tanned village men she is accustomed to, is indeed her husband. In addition to his “unmanly” appearance, Nnaife earns his living as a washer man for British colonists, thus exercising an emasculating activity par excellence. Nnu Ego exclaims: “a man who washes women’s underwear. A man indeed!” (49). She wants him to get a more respectable job, but Nnaife refuses and she wonders: “How could a situation rob a man of his manhood without him knowing it ? […] I want to live with a man, not a woman-made man” (50).

The only reason Nnu Ego stays with Nnaife is her desire for children, especially sons, who are considered more valuable than daughters in her society. After the first night with her new husband, she prays: “O my dead mother, please make this dream come true, then I will respect this man, I will be his faithful wife and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance” (44-45). In her eyes, Nnaife is a tool permitting her to obtain what she needs to live a fulfilled life, to be a “complete woman” (158), and not to be considered a failure by her family and society. He is not involved in the relationship she perceives between “her and her chi and her coming child. […] He was just the father” (78).
Motherhood is the novel’s dominant theme and is introduced from the start by the title, *The Joys of Motherhood*. It is equally present in an important number of chapter headings, from “The Mother”, “The Mother’s Mother”, “The Mother’s Early Life” and “First Shocks of Motherhood” through “A Mother’s Investment” and “A Mother of Clever Children” to “The Canonised Mother”. As a result, the reader tends to perceive Nnu Ego primarily as a mother. This is reinforced by the novel opening with Nnu Ego’s attempted suicide after the death of her first son, which, to her, signifies the loss of her womanhood.

Later, Nnu Ego realizes that she is “imprisoned by her love for her children” (137), that it is “her chain of slavery” (186), and finding herself alone in the final pages of the novel, she wonders “where it was she had gone wrong” (219). It is too late now to change her life; she has never learned “how to be anything else but a mother” (222).

Whereas, not surprisingly, the theme of motherhood is omnipresent in *The Joys of Motherhood*, fatherhood occupies a less prominent position and only features in two chapter headings, “The Duty of a Father” and “The Soldier Father”. However, just as motherhood plays a fundamental part in the constitution of Nnu Ego’s womanhood, men are equally pictured as being dependent on children for proving their manhood and continuing their line through sons. Thus, Nnaife reminds Nnu Ego that she “put Amatokwu’s manhood in question so that he had to marry again quickly and have many children in quick succession” (49), and he affirms: “Of course I am happy to know that I am a man, yes, that I can make a woman pregnant” (50-51).

Furthermore, Nnaife’s self-confidence as well as the authority he exercises over his family are intimately linked to his professional situation and financial power. Unlike Nnu Ego, he never questions his position as a washer man for the white people, but when he loses his job and has to look for another one, he enjoys leaving the house to go to work like other men. Moreover, with his return from the sea, Nnu Ego notices that his behavior has changed:

> Since he had come back, Nnaife had suddenly assumed the role of the lord and master. He had now such confidence in himself that many a time he would not even bother to answer her questions (112-113).

Similarly, his job as a grass cutter for the railway earns him “the respect and even the fear of his wife […]. He could even now afford to beat her up, if she went beyond the limits he could stand” (117). His new confidence is reinforced by the presence of his brother’s youngest wife, who is presented by Nnu Ego as the “type of woman, who would flatter a man, depend on him, need him. Yes, Nnaife would like that. He had instinctively disliked her own independence […].” (118). Soon, however, Adaku reveals herself as too bold for Nnaife and he calls her “a bad influence in th[e] house” (134).

Considering Nnaife’s polygamous marital status as well as his obvious desire to dominate the women in the household, it comes as no surprise that Western readers, and among them literary critics, tend to see the character in an entirely negative light. The psychological and physical violence he exercises is frequently considered as contrasting with Nnu Ego’s submissiveness and her position as an unconditional victim. However, although it is undoubtedly true that Nnaife is the representative of a strongly patriarchal society, he is not devoid of sympathy for Nnu Ego’s feelings at the beginning of their marriage, especially after the death of their first son. Nnu Ego, for her part, makes no effort to understand her husband’s situation as white people’s servant and seems to enjoy deliberately hurting him. Her self-definition as a woman does not develop significantly in the course of the novel. As the story progresses, Nnaife’s negative aspects become dominant and Nnu Ego’s position as a victim is reinforced. In the end, both characters seem perfect examples of an “Other” against which Europeans may measure themselves.

**Der verkaufte Traum (Beyond the Horizon)**

Although originally written in English, Amma Darko’s first novel *Der verkaufte Traum* was first published in its German translation by Stuttgart’s Schmetterling Verlag in 1991. A dtv paperback edition followed in 1994 and the novel was re-edited by Schmetterling in 1999. After receiving the
Ghana Book Award in 1998, Amma Darko was elected Autorin des Jahres 1998 by the Afrikahaus Homburg.

Der verkaufte Traum is set in contemporary Ghana and Germany and its central character is Mara, who, just like Nnu Ego, moves from her village to the capital in order to join her husband, Akobi. He soon leaves for Europe, where he marries a German woman, Gitte, in order to obtain his residency permit. When he sends for Mara, she first has to pretend to be his sister and then start working as a prostitute. But she manages to escape Akobi’s control and later on breaks up his carefully woven life in Germany. Afraid to return to her country, she sends her earnings to support her family in Ghana and stays in Germany prostituting herself.

In the novel we find elements that we have already discussed in relation to Buchi Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood. Again, readers are confronted with the issue of polygamy, but in a different form. Like Nnu Ego’s father, her first husband and Nnaife, Akobi surrounds himself with several women, but his marriage is not officially polygamous. Thus, he hides his relationship with Comfort, a colleague at the Ministry, from Mara while, at the same time, he keeps Mara’s existence a secret before his fellow employees. Only from a neighbor, Madame Kiosk, does the young woman learn that her husband has kept up the relationship with Comfort and has even presented her as “Frau seines Lebens” (52) [“his woman for life” (41)] to their colleagues. Mara explains:


[Yet, although it worried me, I raised no objection for after all polygamy was inherent in my upbringing and tolerance was the code word here. Just so long as I didn’t witness or hear him sleep with the other woman! (41)]

Therefore, when Akobi tells her that he has married a German woman, she is profoundly shocked, but only because the procedure which obliges the husband to inform his first wife’s family of such a decision has not been respected. Neither are the prerogatives of privacy accorded to the women of a polygamous union: when Mara moves in with Akobi and Gitte, she shares Nnu Ego’s experience of suffering from “sharing” her husband with another woman.

Still, like the heroine of The Joys of Motherhood, she yields to her husband’s wishes and considers herself the man’s property. From the beginning of their marriage in Ghana, she considers it “ganz natürlich” (20) [“natural” (12)] to wait on him and comply with his every desire: she has been taught by her mother that a wife is “einzig und allein für das Wohlbefinden und Vergnügen des Mannes zuständig” (21) [“there for a man for one thing, and that was to ensure his well-being, which included his pleasure” (13)]. In this light, less obedience and servitude to her husband would diminish her womanhood, just like the absence of menstruation would.

Nevertheless, Mara’s self-confidence grows with the financial independence she obtains through selling boiled eggs at the bus station and taking away other people’s rubbish in exchange for food. Her pregnancy and the contact with her neighbors also contribute to her increased self-assurance. She runs to them for help when Akobi tries to beat her and later returns to her village because he threatens her. She intends to ask for the annulment of her marriage, but faced with the lack of support from her family, she renounces and pretends to have come home in order to give birth there. Thus, Mara’s first attempt to break free from Akobi’s control is thwarted by her family.

Therefore, she returns to Accra a year later, only to discover that her husband has sold her valuable jewelry. She has failed to definitely free herself from Akobi, but she is beginning to stand up to him. When he threatens her physically, she defends herself:

Sofort ergriff ich einen der Steinklöte, die das vierte Standbein des Tisches ersetzen. […] Der Steinblock war genau auf ihn gerichtet. Erstmals in unserem
Eheleben schien Akobi verunsichert. Hatte ich wirklich vor, ihn zu schlagen, oder war es nur ein Bluff? (44)

[straightaway I snatched one of the piled broken block pieces supporting the fourth leg of the centre table [...] I aimed the concrete piece directly at him. For the first ever time in my whole married life I saw that Akobi was unsure. He was unsure whether to take my threat to hit him with the concrete piece seriously or as a bluff (33).]

Akobi manages to win over the young woman with his plans of going to Europe, but, realizing that he prefers to spend the time preceding his departure with Comfort, she is deeply hurt. From this setback, however, grows Mara’s wish to make the best of herself: “Akobi sollte nach seiner Rückkehr stolz auf mich sein. Ich würde alle Zweifel ausräumen, daß ich als Partnerin weniger tauge als seine Comfort” (58) [“I would begin taking the steps to do something about myself that would make Akobi proud of me when he returned, that would remove all doubts that I was as good as his Comfort” (46)]. Set on transforming herself into a “modern” woman for her husband, she takes sewing classes and changes her style of clothing to suit her “new self”. Her self-assurance grows with her scheduled departure for Europe and she explains:


[I was even able to go for a stroll around the compounds of the Ministries – something I never before then would have dared to do – clad in a red dress and summer sandals, my hair not plaited but afro-combed. [...] I, illiterate Mara, had turned into a modern woman, body and soul; a caricature pseudo-Euro-transformation that brought with it its caricature pseudo-high feel. It felt a new me (54-55)].

Even though the young woman does not resemble the “Mara von früher, die zu allem ja und amen sagte” (100) [“Mara of back home who said yes and bowed to every order without question” (81)] upon her arrival in Germany, she has not yet learned to truly oppose her husband on whom she is entirely dependent during her first months in the country. Akobi has paid for her journey to Germany only to exploit her, but she agrees to pretend to be his sister and follows his every order. When he pushes her into prostitution, she still tries to understand and defend him: “Es ist sein Traum, sein Traum ist schuld” (147)[“his dream is the reason” (116)].

Paradoxically, her work as a prostitute permits her to distance herself from her husband. She becomes newly self-confident after having obtained her residency permit through the false marriage with a German, and she manages to save some of her earnings and hire a detective whose investigations result in Akobi’s arrest. At the end of the novel, a colleague confirms the changes Mara has gone through: “Du bist nicht mehr du, Mara. Du hast dich verändert” (163) [“You are no more you, Mara. You’ve changed” (127)]. Unlike the character of Nnu Ego, who does not evolve significantly in the course of the narrative, Amma Darko’s heroine undergoes a profound transformation.

The importance attributed to motherhood by the central characters of the two novels also differs greatly. Whereas motherhood is Nnu Ego’s reason to live, it does not occupy a central function in Mara’s life. She is satisfied to prove her fertility to the world and to contribute thus to her family’s reputation, but having children is not an essential preoccupation for her. The two sons she gives birth to are almost absent from the story and she does not seem to miss their presence in her life, although she assumes financial responsibility for them.
Similarly, fatherhood is not an indispensable element to Akobi. He tries to avoid pregnancy and when Mara does get pregnant, he maltreats her. The young woman observes: “Er musterte mich von unten nach oben, wie ein Stück Dreck […] – sein Sohn hier offensichtlich nicht” (25) “He studied me like he was studying filth. His father might want ten grandchildren […], but his son obviously didn’t” (17). In Germany he uses condoms for their sexual encounters.

If Akobi does not care about children, he nonetheless resembles Nnaife in trying to dominate Mara. While still in Ghana, he beats her regularly and does not even restrain himself when she is pregnant. He expects her to serve him in all circumstances, but does not show any respect for her and is ashamed to be seen in her company by his colleagues. During his two-year absence, he only sends her a postcard and one short letter and in Germany does not give her the warm welcome she – naively – expected. On the contrary, she learns that he expected her to sleep with his friend Osey, who made advances to her when accompanying her to Hamburg, to cover the outstanding expenses of her trip. Akobi continually abuses her verbally and later pushes her into prostitution by filming her being violated by a group of men. In his eyes, Mara is only an object and when she complains about hearing him make love with Gitte, he only laughs as if to say: “Ach Mädchen, hast du jetzt auch schon Gefühle?” (142) “so you too have emotions?” (112).

Akobi’s fierce treatment of Mara is in strong contrast to his behavior with Gitte. Dependent on his German wife for his residency permit, he follows her orders and constantly worries about keeping her happy, especially with lies and stories about their future life in Africa. In reality, Akobi does not plan to return to his country. He has changed his name to Cobby to give himself a “European touch” and has also changed his style of clothing, but he does not hesitate to refer to superstition in order to avoid Gitte’s questions:

Immer wenn es mulmig wurde, bemühte er überzogene Sinnbilder des Aberglaubens. Damit traf er den schwachen Punkt seiner Frau Gitte, die wie alle Europäer den Afrikaner als ein dem primitiven Aberglauben tief ergebenes Wesen betrachteten (127).

[When the going got tough he would conjure up extravagant superstitions. Gitte, who, like most Europeans, believed that all Africans were full of primitive superstitions, always fell for it (102).]

Through the depiction of Akobi and his friend Osey, Amma Darko presents an entirely negative image of African men to a mainly Western readership. They are caricaturized as liars, pimps and libidinous brutalizers exploiting women whenever and wherever possible. While the male characters are static and denied any opportunity for evolution, Mara is permitted to change. At the beginning of the novel, she resembles Buchi Emecheta’s heroine: like Nnu Ego, the “early” Mara corresponds to the stereotyped image of the submissive “traditional” African woman from which European women like to distance themselves. However, this image is gradually deconstructed in the course of the novel and from a completely submissive wife Mara grows into what she calls “eine moderne Frau” (67) “a modern woman” (55). Ironically, she acquires emancipation through prostitution.

Maman a un amant (Mum has a lover)

Like Buchi Emecheta, Calixthe Beyala is one of the most prolific African writers. Maman a un amant is her fifth novel and it was first published in hardcover by Albin Michel in Paris in 1993. Its paperback edition by J’ai lu followed two years later and was reprinted three times. It was then out of print for one year before being re-edited with a different cover in 2002. The novel received the Grand Prix littéraire de l’Afrique noire in 1994.

The Traoré family the reader has already met in Beyala’s Le Petit Prince de Belleville (1992) is at the center of Maman a un amant. The novel is set in contemporary France and at its opening, Abdou, Maryam and their children are preparing for a vacation in the South of France. It turns out to be
turbulent: Maryam starts a relationship with Monsieur Tichit, which she continues after their return to Paris. She leaves Abdou in order to live with the other man, but eventually goes back to her family.

Like Amma Darko, Calixthe Beyala depicts the transformation of her heroine. During most of Le Petit Prince de Belleville, Maryam seems the perfect example of a traditional, submissive wife. She serves the whole family, especially its male members, does not rebel against her husband’s infidelities and accepts the presence of a co-wife, Soumana, who dies “par chagrin” (8) [“from sorrow”] because she cannot tolerate Abdou’s behavior. Maryam has never given birth, but she is the official mother of Soumana’s daughters and has also adopted Loukoum, the son of Abdou and one of his girlfriends. Towards the end of the novel, Maryam’s self-confidence is on the rise: Abdou is sent to prison and finds himself unemployed after his release. Maryam provides the family’s income with her commerce of exotic bracelets, while her husband takes care of the household, and this is how we encounter the family at the beginning of Maman a un amant.

The narrative is carried by two voices. While the twelve-year old Loukoum relates the events of the story, Maryam sends imaginary letters – she has not yet learned to read and write – to a fictive female friend. They are placed at the beginning of each chapter and in them, she reflects on her life as a woman. This permits us to perceive her “old” self that is virtually absent from the story of Maman a un amant.

Maryam’s former self-definition as a woman resembles that of Nnu Ego and of Mara in the first part of her story. Like them, Beyala’s heroine evokes the submission to men that has structured her being: “‘La femme est née à genoux aux pieds de l’homme.” Cette phrase a bâti mon royaume intérieur” (21) [“‘Woman is born on her knees at man’s feet. This phrase has built my interior realm”]. Later she explains:


> [What could I do, my Friend ? Rebell? With this assumption, no escape possible. […] Over there, in my country, I lowered my eyes before my father, like my mother before me, like my grandmother before her. The men commanded: “Take-give-do.” The women obeyed..]

Just as the heroines of The Joys of Motherhood and Der verkauft Traum, Maryam affirms: “Je célébrais mon époux comme l’autre mystère de la vie […]. J’étais à lui” (74) [“I celebrated my husband like the other mystery of life […]. I was his”].

She shares Nnu Ego’s preoccupation with children and invokes the “horreur que rien n’égale” (75) [“horror that nothing equals”] of sterility in a society that considers motherhood the sacred mission of women. She feels like “un arbre dessèché, ou un animal inconnu mi-homme mi-femme” (75) [“a dried out tree, or an unknown animal, half man, half woman”] and is profoundly hurt by the arrival of Soumana. But her desire for motherhood leads her to accept the younger woman in her home and adopt her children as her own. Maryam states:


> [I wanted to give him a child, I had failed. But where I had failed on my own, I wanted to succeed certainly, but differently, through Soumana. […] I had accomplished my mission.]

However, as in the case of Mara, Maryam’s self-confidence rises with her increasing financial independence. She now dares to tell off her husband: “Oh, la ferme […]”(53) [“Oh, shut up”] or
“Boucle-la […] je suis pas ta mère” (145) [“Shut your trap […], I’m not your mother”], acts more freely and dresses differently. Her son remarks: “C’est vrai que depuis un certain temps, M’am est plein de vie” (36) [“It’s true that for some time, M’am has been full of life”]. Her new assurance also allows her to reply to Monsieur Tichit’s overtures. She exclaims: “Oh ! l’Amie, j’ouvre les yeux sans oser. […] Je ne suis plus tout à fait la même ni tout à fait une autre” (186-187) [“Oh ! my Friend, I open my eyes without daring to. […] I’m neither completely the same woman nor completely another”]. Loukoum observes:


[During the following weeks, M’am was always going out, dressed like a loose girl. Besides, she told my daddy things like: “Your shorts smell bad, Abdou! Change them. Your feet stink, you’d better wash them.” Or again: “Your nails are black.”]

Moreover, Monsieur Tichit induces Maryam to learn how to read and write, and she explains to Abdou:

Je veux la justice […]. Toute ma vie, j’ai passé mon temps à laver, à torcher le cul des mômes. Maintenant, il est temps que je prenne du temps pour moi. J’veux apprendre à lire et à écrire (145).

[I want justice. […] All my life, I have spent my time washing, wiping the kids’ ass. Now it’s time to take some time for myself. I want to learn how to read and write.]

Maryam invests “tout [s]on corps” (209) [“her entire body”] in learning how to read and write and literacy is thus intimately linked to her apprenticeship of love and sexuality. As a result, “elle se réveille autre. Femme” (225) [she wakes up different. Woman”] but “Femme de personne. Mère de personne” (226) [“Wife of nobody. Mother of nobody”]. Knowing how to read and write opens the world to her and allows her independence from her husband. However, just as Mara’s decision to become a “modern” woman is related to Akobi’s behavior, Maryam’s final transformation is triggered off by a man. Again, a man “rectifie le catalogue de [s]a vie” (208) [“rectifies the catalog of her life”].

The new couple’s happiness is short-lived. Monsieur Tichit obliges the woman to choose between him and her children and, realizing that he only cares about her body, she returns to her family. But she is disillusioned: “Abdou, mon maître ? Il est mon soleil déchu. Chaque posture de lui le déshabille, je le voit devant moi, nu, l’esprit plein de jouissance, de conquête et de domination” (240-241) [“Abdou, my master? He is my fallen sun. Every posture reveals him, I see him before me, naked, his spirit full of sensual pleasure, of conquest and of domination”].

If Maryam’s pain is principally related to her position as a woman, Abdou’s distress results from his status as an exile. His disorientation is the main theme of the imaginary letters he sends to a male friend in Le Petit Prince de Belleville, just as Maryam does in Maman a un amant. Whereas Abdou finds himself incapable of adopting Western ideologies, he has lost his traditional points of reference and, at the same time, much of his self-confidence. Unemployed after his release from prison, he is deprived of what was left of his former role as head of the family. Traditionally, power in the family is supposed to reside with the man, but Abdou learns painfully that this authority is closely linked to financial supremacy, which now belongs to his wife. The domination he exercises over the woman has become merely theoretical and devoid of content.

Consequently, a reversal of roles takes place: while Maryam assures the family’s income, Abdou takes care of the home. But their behavior is also modified on a more general level and we have already
observed Maryam’s evolution towards increased independence and self-confidence. Abdou, on the other hand, moves in the opposite direction becoming more and more passive and obedient.

Abdou’s vulnerability becomes obvious when he is confronted with Monsieur Tichit flattering his wife. Loukoum notices: “On dirait que Monsieur Tichit va manger M’am des yeux. […] Papa baisse la tête” (36) [“It looks as if Monsieur Tichit is going to devour M’am with his eyes. […] Daddy lowers his head”]. Abdou does not interfere with their flirting and merely leaves the room when he finds the situation unbearable. Monsieur Tichit tries to establish complicity with Abdou, who is furious and feels like hitting him, but does not dare to: “Ses mains sont retombées lentement, tellement qu’on aurait dit un escargot” (85) [“His hands fell back slowly, so slowly that one would have thought of a snail”]. Thus, the French man has a weakening and paralyzing effect on the African and their relationship shows characteristics similar to those observed between colonized and colonizers. However, unlike Africans in Africa, Abdou cannot turn to his society’s traditional points of reference and Loukoum worries: “depuis quelque temps, mon papa devient un de ces types qui ne sont plus sûrs de rien et il pourrait très bien ne plus savoir où est sa tête” (192) [“for some time, daddy has been becoming one of those guys that are not sure of anything anymore and he could well not know anymore where his head is”].

In Paris, Abdou’s attempts to keep his wife from meeting her lover fail and he is obliged to accept his new role as the housekeeper. Nevertheless, he starts looking for a job, which makes him feel confident enough to make Maryam leave their home. After her departure, however, he gives up: 

cça se voit à bout du nez que papa n’est pas dans son assiette, il ne fait que de boire.
Il nous prépare plus de bons petits plats. Il ne rie presque plus, il ne parle de rien, et il nous tape dessus. Et chaque soir, il sort (233).

[It’s obvious that daddy is not quite feeling himself, he does nothing but drink. He doesn’t prepare us any good little meals anymore. He hardly laughs anymore, he doesn’t talk about anything, and he beats us. And every evening, he goes out.]

Still, Abdou makes no attempt to understand the woman’s situation and shortly after her return, he takes up his old habits.

Like Akobi, Abdou seeks to dominate women and his character does not show any permanent development. However, his presentation is much more nuanced than that of the male protagonist of Der verkaufte Traum. Beyala does not merely depict or caricature the negative sides of a male character grown out of a patriarchal narrative context; rather, her novel investigates the contradictions between traditional patriarchal roles and the demands of contemporary Western life to which Abdou fails to adapt.

Maryam undergoes important changes between the opening of Le Petit Prince de Belleville and the dénouement of Maman a un amant. Like Mara, she shares Nnu Ego’s submissiveness to men at the beginning of the novel, but gradually moves away from the European stereotypes of African women towards increased self-assurance and independence. Even though she eventually returns to her husband, her transformation is profound. When Abdou goes to meet a young woman he finds attractive, Maryam does not challenge him, but Loukoum explains: “Elle a tenu les assiettes dans ses mains quelques secondes, ensuite elle a tout lâché et ça s’est écrasé sur le sol avec un bruit de catastrophe” (247) [“She held the plates in her hands for a few seconds, then she dropped everything and they fell to the floor with a sound of catastrophe”]. We are free to imagine the continuation of the story.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the novels of Buchi Emecheta, Amma Darko and Calixthe Beyala present differences in setting. While most of The Joys of Motherhood takes place in Lagos in the years before, during and after the Second World War and mainly focuses on the question of motherhood, the story of Der verkaufte Traum moves from Accra to Germany and concentrates on the situation of illegal
African immigrants in contemporary Europe. With the Traoré family living in the Parisian district of Belleville, *Maman a un amant* shares the European setting of *Der verkaufte Traum* and a number of its themes, but there are differences in their presentation and Beyala’s novel is much more subtle than Darko’s.

Nevertheless, what the three novels have in common is the problematization of gender identities as well as gender relations. Their presentation differs, but certain elements are manifest in all works. In all novels, we encounter the submissiveness of female characters. We have observed that Nnu Ego, Mara and Maryam all declare at one point that they are their husband’s property. However, only in Emecheta’s novel set entirely in Nigeria, submissiveness to men remains an essential element of the heroine’s self-definition throughout the story. It is in the last pages of the book that, once again, she affirms her dependence on her husband. The female protagonists of *Der verkaufte Traum* and *Maman a un amant* develop towards increased self-assurance and emancipation. For both characters, these changes are the result of their stay in Europe: Mara has moved from her native Ghana to Germany, where she acquires financial and psychological independence from her husband through prostitution; Maryam’s transformation begins with her commerce of exotic bracelets in France and continues with her French lover.

Thus, while Mara’s and Maryam’s evolution is depicted as linked to the supposedly “liberating” contact with European society, their earlier submissiveness appears as intimately related to African society. Like Nnu Ego, the “earlier” Mara and Maryam represent the “traditional African woman” as frequently imagined by Europeans.

If “traditional” African female characters are presented as developing into “modern” women in *Der verkaufte Traum* and *Maman a un amant*, this is not the case for the heroes. The three male protagonists all seek to subjugate the women in their lives. While Nnaife’s wish to dominate his family grows with his financial power, the mental and physical violence Akobi exercises against Mara remains constant throughout the text. Contrary to Mara and Maryam, the male characters do not develop into “modern” men through the contact with European society. Akobi stays as brutal as before, and while Abdou’s position as the omnipotent head of the family is seriously threatened and even lost momentarily, he reverts to his old machist behavior at the end of the story.

To different degrees, the female and male protagonists of *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Der verkaufte Traum* and *Maman a un amant* all show characteristics presenting them as the “Other” against which Europeans tend to measure themselves in order to affirm their own identity. Contrasting themselves with the image of oppressed and submissive African women like Nnu Ego gives a sense of their own liberation to European women. Basking in their alleged emancipation, they frequently pity their African “sisters”, considering them as victims. European men, on the other hand, may relish the idea of their own receptiveness to issues of female emancipation. As a result, the fact that the situation of women in Europe today leaves a great deal to be desired and that women’s liberation movements are far from having attained their objectives is hidden. Instead, just as Africa “seems to exist only through fictions functioning as masks” (Efoui 65), Europe puts on its mask of successful female emancipation to contribute to the construction of Europe’s supposed superiority over Africa.

However, as we have noticed in relation to Mara and Maryam, Amma Darko’s and Calixthe Beyala’s novels do not content themselves with the presentation of female submissiveness to male domination. They depict female rebellion and participate in the deconstruction of the “Other”, the stereotyped image of submissive African women that is still popular in European representations of Africa. As a result, the definition of the African “Other” approaches that of the European “Same” in *Der verkaufte Traum* and *Maman a un amant*, and the theme of female emancipation presented in the texts meets the demands of a European audience engaged with issues of female emancipation. “That which we are not” is thus drifting towards “that which we are”.

**References**


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1 The translations from Franche, Amselle, Musa, Efoui and Kail as well as *Maman a un amant* are mine.
2 cf. Franche 29.
3 cf. Amselle 46.
5 “Who has invented the Africans?”
6 Amma Darko’s novel was first published in its German translation, *Der verkaufte Traum*, by Schmetterling and only in 1995 in its original English, *Beyond the Horizon*, by Heinemann African Writers Series. The translation of quotations from *Der verkaufte Traum* is taken from the original version of the text.
8 Female Author of the Year 1999