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A study of the representation of women in Veronique Tadjo's Le royaume aveugle and Loin de mon père

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> Indeed, I too would have wanted to write one of those stories, with a beginning and an end. But as you know only too well, it is never like that. Lives mingle; people tame one another and part. Destinies are lost. Véronique Tadjo (Tadjo, 2000: iv).

INTRODUCTION

As Francophone African literature evolved from the last century onwards, several themes such as colonisation, resistance, tradition and modernity have been treated by a host of men and women writers across almost all literary genres. As far as written literature in the form of the novel is concerned, the representation of women has been a thematically controversial and an interesting literary subject at the same time as it has seemingly taken new dimensions distinct from early novelistic writing. The portrayal of women in novels has been gradually changing over the years and whilst this phenomenon results from a plethora of factors, it can mainly be attributed to the birth of both feminine novels as well as feminist writers.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the representations of women characters in Tadjo's *Le Royaume Aveugle* and *Loin de mon père.* The study will focus particularly on her idiosyncratic representations and what we see as the redefinition of womanhood as it may differ or at times converge with her female counterparts, in the Francophone African fiction, in the of a literature that has historically been male dominated and saturated with contested images of women. In the same vein, the study explores how the author's adoption of a different narrative style in each of these texts enables rich and varied feminine representations.

Tadjo is an academic, writer, artist and poet. Born to an Ivorian father and a French mother in 1955, she grew up in Côte d´Ivoire. She did her undergraduate studies at the Université de Cocody-Abidjan and her doctorate, specialising in African American Literature and Civilisation, at the Université Paris IV, Paris-Sorbonne. In 1979 she taught English at the Lycée Moderne in Côte d´Ivoire. Four years later, she went to Howard University in Washington on a Fulbright Research Scholarship. She then returned to Côte d'Ivoire where she became a lecturer in the English Department of the Université de Cocody-Abidjan until 1993. She has travelled extensively and has lived in Lagos, Nairobi, Mexico City, and

London among others places. Currently she resides in Johannesburg. Her literary career spans over three decades and her works include poems, novels as well as children's stories. She has also been a member of judging panels for several literary international prizes such as The Caine Prize and has been a facilitator in numerous creative writing workshops. In 2005, *Reine Pokou, concerto pour un sacrifice* was awarded *Le Grand Prix Littéraire d´Afrique Noire*, a coveted French literary accolade.

In as much as this study looks at feminine representations in a woman writer's works, it does not seek to dissociate feminine writing from masculine writing nor the broader context of the Francophone African literature *per se*. For instance, mention should be made about the influence that literary male stalwarts like Ahmadou Kourouma had on women writers like Tadjo. For example, Kourouma's originality of writing as well as the use of words that are not found in Standard French coupled with his diction of French which he combines with loan words from Malinke language (such as "l'assis", "le vide", "le mort"), among other stylistic innovations in the fellow countryman's *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1970), seem to recur in Tadjo's writing as well as his own portrayal of strong women who break the mould of feminine clichés.

In her narration, composed of some long sub chapters and some very short, sometimes made of only two sentences as in a poetic stanza, Tadjo discards conventional ways of writing, her prose often containing poetic devices and images. Although she treats themes such as love, violence, power and colonisation, it is, in our view, her thoroughly original representations of women that are of primary interest to us here.

Because this investigation will be restricted to the context of Francophone African literature, we will begin, imperatively, by contextualising the research question in its right time and place. First, I wish to highlight the emergence, evolution and major developments of the Francophone African novel itself, with a particular focus on its women characters.

In Francophone African literature, it seems that the novel form is the most enduring: since the nineteenth century, the novel has proved the most amorphous of all literary genres, the most easily adaptable to continually changing social and political climates (Blair, 1976: 181). Whilst Blair speaks of the European novel here, the same has been true for Francophone Literature in Africa. A thorough study of Francophone African literature would show that the novel has undergone a series of changes under various distinct literary waves. Each of these

waves has been marked with certain particular as well as dominant characteristics of the novel.

To start, the early novel is characterised by its autobiographical and historical nature. According to Blair, the majority of the first novels were more or less autobiographical, sometimes with mention of recent, contemporary or historical events (Blair, 1976: 182). In other words, the novel tended to focus mostly on the life of the writers themselves as well as major events that occurred in the past. This is typical of Camara Laye's writing, for instance. *L'Enfant noir* (1953), undoubtedly one of his best known works, is an autobiographic account, of his own childhood as a Guinean blacksmith's son (Pageard, 1972: 73, my translation). The genre is also dominated by the theme of the conflict between tradition and modernity. Kesteloot argues that the early novel often treats the conflict between tradition and modernity as embodied on the one hand by the inherited wisdom of traditional African and on the other by the European way, which entails painful compromises in an idealised vision of the traditional familial setting (Kesteloot, 2001: 235, my translation). This is evident, for example, in Seydou Badian's *Sous L'Orage* (1963). In the second half of the twentieth century, African novels written in French take on a militant tone as they denounce colonisation, often treating of its negative effects on African societies. For example, Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (1971) is a story about workers on the Dakar-Niger railway line in 1947, protesting against socio-political injustices. The women in the novel are portrayed as highly militant as they become part of the national strike against the missionary colonial system. From the mid-1960s, the novel is caught between hope, despair and disillusionment. The transformations which Africans had thought would come along with political independence did not, for the most part, materialise. Corruption, violence and autocratic tendencies continued or were worsened in the post-independence era. That time is epitomised by Kourouma's satirical caricature, *Les Soleils des Indépendances*, a story of an imagined newly independent African State.

Increased access to education for women, among other factors, meant that, from the 1980s, women writers start appearing on the literary scene. It is important to point out that with the exception of Cameroonian writer Therèse Kuoh Moukoury's *Rencontres Essentielles* (1979) their presence was not yet substantial. Kesteloot affirms that strictly speaking, before the 1980s, there was no woman writer in Africa (Kesteloot, 2001: 280, my translation). Today we count numerous feminine writers such as Mariama Bâ, Calithxe Beyala, Animata Snow Fall,

Liking Werewere and Véronique Tadjo, to mention but a few. Their immense contributions have enriched literature by adding entire new perspectives in the field. Yet, there is still relatively little available criticism on the feminine voices that have emerged over the last three decades and in particular those publishing today.

In the preface to *Francophone African women writers: destroying the emptiness of silence* (1994), D'Almeida acknowledges a shortage of literary scholarly material on women's novels, which she equates to a critical silence. According to her, very little criticism of this work, no extensive study and certainly no book entirely devoted to Francophone African women from Africa south of the Sahara is available (D'Almeida, 1994: ix). Although D'Almeida makes reference to the past, I feel her comments are still relevant to a considerable extent today. Also, until recently, in the late 1990s, the portrayal of women figures had been mostly expressed in works written by men. To understand the images and representations of African women in women writers' novels today, it is important to first give an overview of how male writers have depicted women characters in their novels before the emergence of feminine voices. For Ebelo Oke, and this is a crucial point that is worth commenting on, men's novels are a lowland of male writer's idealization, rigid conventionality, stereotyping, superficiality and non-balance, occasionally relieved by realistic and inspiring portraitures (Oke, 1996: 210). This suggests that the bulk of masculine novels' depiction of women resembles similar and often repeated but biased characteristics as well as static viewpoints that do not change over time. This is the case, for instance, of Seydou Badian's *Sous l'orage* (1963).

On the other hand, and this serves to mitigate Oke's claims, there were indeed some novels, where women were portrayed in a fairer manner in their active roles of everyday real life, outside the fictional word of the text portrayed in all its importance. This is evidenced, for example, by a positive inspiring portraiture of women as they are represented playing a pivotal role in the strike, central to Sembène's *Les bouts des bois de Dieu*. Cazenave argues that eventually several women declared that it was high time for women to speak for themselves in order to give a more authentic and faithful portrayal of the feminine reality (Cazenave, 1996: 6). Feminism thus first sought to redress historical imbalances and to change the world in favour of women (Emenyonu, 2000: 28). Hence, first came the consciousness of their oppression and then the desire to fight for liberation. Globally, feminism's main drive has always been centred on gender equality and the focus on the

political, social, economic and moral spheres, all aimed at women's liberation from all kinds of oppression.

In Africa, feminism is believed to have gained momentum in the mid-20th century as a result of decolonisation which inevitably brought, with it, the necessity for women's own emancipation. Feminist literary critics focus on the collision between ideology and literature, focusing on the ways ideology is inscribed within literary forms, styles, conventions, genres and the institution of literary production (Green and Kahn, 1985: 2). African feminism specifically has focused on the fact that in patriarchal societies women's roles and contributions in society have always been regarded as less important than men's. Stratton argues that African literary feminism is assertive and individualistic breaking away from the norm and presenting a more balanced and plausible picture of the African female character (Stratton, 1994: ix). Emenyowu adds that African feminism also seeks to give women a sense of self-wealth while it rejects stereotypes or any form of idealisation (Emenyonu, 2000: 29). Pro-feminist novels are authentic fictional re-representations drawn from the realities of women's subjugation and their struggle against the established order (Rosenfelt, 1991: 169). Rosenfelt suggests that the content of feminist fiction is based on the re-interpretations of various forms of oppression that women encounter in the real world, their discontent with these oppressions as well as their rebuff to these oppressions (Rosenfelt, 1991: 169). The encoding is performed through literary expressions of women's daily experiences of marginalisation in different spheres of daily life such as in the home, at work, or within society at large that is perpetuated by masculine domination.

Whilst feminism may have evolved with time, Florence Stratton is right in stating, and most other feminist critics agree that what is of central importance in the study of African Feminism is the common idea that women's problems are a result of their sexuality and the fact that gender is a social construction, based on the cultural orientation of a society (Emenyonu, 2000: 28). At first, black women writers were reluctant to label themselves as feminists, though they were already advocating women liberation. This is partly because they were suspicious of western feminism and its negative connotations (Adebayo, 2000: 279). It seems that, as we shall see, Tadjo's writing in the two novels adopts this same approach. Essentially, the notion of gender itself seemed to have been understood very differently and the claims for equity based on different sets of values. Hence, terms such as womanism and motherism for example have been coined and linked to African Feminism. Alice Walker, for

example is credited for having coined the word womanism to refer to African women's feminist claims in order to differentiate them from those of western feminism. For the purposes of this study I shall not dwell much on such terminology. I concur with Amina Mama, a leading contemporary feminist critic, that regardless of these terms the bottom line and the central concern in Africa is they were all stemmed from the feminist discourse and they all signal a refusal of oppression and a commitment to struggling for women's liberation from all forms of oppression (Salo, 2001: 59-60). As such, feminism cannot be undermined by diverse cultures but women everywhere should be free to name their struggle as they desire (Kolawole, 2002: 97).

Graves and Davis propose an interesting inclusive feminist ideology that does not exclude men. They articulate that whilst African feminism is concerned with the marginalisation of women and male dominance, a genuine African feminism recognises a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of domination and that it is not antagonistic to men but challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalised oppression of all other peoples (Davis and Graves, 1986: 9).

It seems to be that this definition of feminism corresponds to Tadjo's own positioning within the discourse. Our analysis will show that Tadjo fits this definition of men and women being partners in fighting socio-political inequalities. This remains to be investigated through the novels chosen for our analysis. African Feminist literary theory looks at fiction as a way to women's liberation. African feminism focuses on the relationship between literature and patriarchal biases in society as well as on the potential fundamental role that literary texts can play in overcoming such biases (Booker, 1996: 89). This entails the analysis of texts from women's perspective, that is, approaching literary texts from the point of view of their possible influence on women in socio-cultural, political and economic discourse. Sharon Verba reiterates the idea in pointing out that among the issues central to African feminist theory and criticism are the importance of feminism as a literary critical method in analysing the representation and / or mis-representation of women in literary texts (Verba, 1997: 3).

Adebayo alludes to the fact that whilst African women's works are fiction, to a very considerable extent, these novels are deliberately very close to their personal experiences, which explains the predominance of semi-autobiographical mode and social orientation of their writings (Adebayo, 1996: 39). The most illustrious example of this is of course Senegalese writer Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* where not just polygamy, but all other aspects of

women's lives (love, education, work, freedom etc.) are tackled candidly yet powerfully, in the epistolary form. Similarly, a myriad of real challenges facing young African women today form the core of Tadjo's writing's thematic content. I therefore seek to establish, in this thesis, how Tadjo tackles women's issues in her novelistic writing and in doing so; I wish to determine where she positions herself within the African feminist discourse discussed earlier.

Because African literature is still male dominated, it has and is still endangering reactions from concerned female and male writers who are rewriting the history of the emergent literature, countering and challenging male chauvinism by presenting conscious, active, resilient and courageous female characters in their novels. It is this anti-male domination crusade that has given concreteness to the feminisation of heroism in African literature (Jude, 1998: 603). Another task here would therefore be to investigate in what way Tadjo proposes a revision of womanhood in the selected novels. We will thus explore what I see as a redefinition or self-definition of femininity in *Le Royaume Aveugle* and *Loin de mon père* in order to define the author's idiosyncratic perspective on the issues explored. African literary critics continue to say that it is difficult to establish the extent of the challenge that Francophone women writers have exerted on the traditional voice and portrayal of the woman character in the novels. It is in the interests of this thesis to try as well to establish the impact of this challenge as well as its extent through the analysis of women characters in selected texts.

Through a narrative analysis of two key texts, *Le royaume aveugle* (1991) and *Loin de mon père* (2010), we will investigate the author's idiosyncratic representation of women and pose the following fundamental question: how do Tadjo's female characters agree or disagree with the context just elaborated?

This dissertation seeks to add to the little existing critical material available on Tadjo's writing through an analysis of her representation of her female characters. It is against the background of male domination detailed earlier that this thesis seeks to analyse the portrayal of women characters in Tadjo's *Le Royaume Aveugle* and *Loin de mon père* within the context of French African literature and the history of feminine writing through an analysis of the narrative techniques used by the author and which differ from text to text. I seek to explore how the allegory and the autobiography help create rich feminine characters in the counterbalancing effort against male dominated novelistic writing.

What interest us here is to look at the appropriation of their voice by women writers, in this case, Tadjo, within a particular historical context in which Francophone African men writers and even some women writers have not always upheld feminist principles. In Bâ's words, women can no longer be satisfied with the nostalgic songs dedicated to the African mother and confused by men in their anxieties with Mother Africa (D'Almeida, 1994: 8). From the 1980s, women started speaking for themselves, telling their own stories, telling them their own way. The aim of this dissertation is to elucidate, through a narrative analysis of two of her novels, with particular attention to the representations of female characters in these texts, the Ivorian writer's positioning within this context.

We will show that characters in her selected works are complex and refuse to be trapped by their circumstances. It will become evident that Tadjo creates a literary dimension where female characters display a strong sense of identity and their femininity, while refusing to be classified in the ordinary notion of womanhood.

We will strive to answer these fundamental questions through an exploration of the images of women in Tadjo's *Le Royaume Aveugle* and *Loin de mon père* and, more precisely, through a critical reading of the selected texts, focusing, in particular, on the narrative technique used in each of these particular novels. It will become evident that Tadjo paints strong and complex female protagonists who go against the usual female stereotypes. For instance, in *Le Royaume Aveugle,* Tadjo portrays modern women who refuse to be bound by the laws of marriage in the society in which they live in. Despite her father's wish and it being considered a taboo for the King's daughter to do so, Akissi, falls in love with Karim, someone who has not been destined for her. Another case in point is that in *Loin de mon père,* the inquisitive main protagonist, Nina, goes through her father's possessions and finds out more than she should have, about power and tradition.

I chose Tadjo because her works are like modern allegories whose events and characters seem to have even more meaningful interpretations in the real modern social world, outside the confines of their literary context. Indeed, we will show that her works extend beyond the fictional sphere to authentically reflect conditions of women in societies depicted. In doing so, Tadjo's novels seemingly, impart knowledge on current topical issues pertaining to femininity in society.

In fact, as it shall become clear in our analysis, Tadjo's entire literary career is marked with allegorical works:

> I can almost associate each of my texts with a little flag. Each text is marked by the place in which I wrote it. I borrow and incorporate a number of elements gleaned here and there, much like a collector bringing back souvenirs from her trips (Tadjo, 2005: 61).

It is easy to draw similarities between Ato IV's kingdom and the continent as a whole since Tadjo's portrayal of Ato IV's monarchy bears resemblance to many post-independence stories in Africa. This is so because, after the attainment of independence:

> For a short while people were hoping for a turn of the tide of history, yet African leaders were not able or willing to shake off their neo colonialist tendencies. Hence for the majority of the people, hopes for a better future were crushed. People's expectations for their newly independent countries did not materialize, and in most cases dictatorial governments took hold (Tadjo, 1991: 96).

The concept of allegory in literature entails that an allegorical tale cannot be restricted to a particular time period in history. The writer herself stresses that in writing *Le royaume aveugle* she wanted the story to create a timeless dimension; especially because she thought that it was very topical (Tadjo, 1991: 102). *Le royaume aveugle* was published in 1991 yet it vividly tallies with events that took place in the author's native land, Côte d'Ivoire, more than a decade later. One can say that Tadjo had foresight. The rebellion which took place in September 2002 culminated into a deep political and military crisis in this West African Republic (Tadjo, 1991: 104). This attests to Tadjo's narrative is in many ways, timeless. Interestingly, Tadjo's tale can also be read as resembling even more recent political developments in her native country. Almost twenty years after the publication of *Le royaume aveugle*, the 2010 crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, dubbed in political circles as 'The second Ivorian

civil war', resulted in hundreds of people losing their lives (Nossiter, 2011: 1).[1] It is therefore clear that this narrative cannot be confined to a specific space nor to a particular period.

This strong reference to her cosmopolitan experiences is visible here in *Le royaume aveugle*:

> Absolutely, in the characterisation of Ato IV, I was greatly inspired by some aspects of Houphouet's figure as a political man. In my mind, our former (and first) president acted like a true Akan King all through his time in power up to his death […]. Having been at the forefront of independence, he behaved as if he owned the country. I came to the conclusion that all his life he had ruled over a kingdom and that the members of the elite were totally blind to social injustices. They kept living in luxury while the economic crisis was in full swing. I chose to call the king in The Blind Kingdom, Ato IV (a name from the East of Côte d'Ivoire), because I wanted to show that it was the nature of absolute power that leads to violence and rebellion and not the "ethnic" origin *per se* of the ruler (Tadjo, 1991: 106).

More so, my choice of Tadjo pertains to the fact that her literary works are good examples of emerging feminine contemporary African fiction in French, with her most recent novel, *Loin de mon père*, having only been published in 2010. Few studies of Tadjo's literary works, if any, offer any analysis which focuses on the writer's idiosyncratic representations of women. More often than not, it seems that the few available literary criticisms on the works of Tadjo address mainly traditional themes of analysis such as colonialism, independence, tradition, modernity and love. I certainly believe that this thesis could widen the scope of analysis of the works of this important contemporary writer.

Lastly, I have chosen works that offer a fairly wide coverage of her literary career as well as a good illustration of the variety of narrative styles used by the author: *Le Royaume Aveugle* (1991), for its part, reads like a modern African allegory while her latest novel L*oin de mon père*, published in 2010 evidently contains autobiographical elements. The choice of my texts

[1] The crisis, which swept across the entire breath of this West African nation, was triggered by a dispute about election results between two presidential aspirants, namely Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara of the opposition, which resulted in violent spates of violent clashes (Nossiter, 2011: 1).

thus affords me the possibility to examine the evolution and / or progression of the central theme of our analysis.

To analyse Tadjo's selected works, we will draw from seminal texts of African feminist theory which will serve as my theoretical framework for the analysis of the representations of women in the selected works. Various forms of feminism as well as the evolution of feminism over the past years will be incorporated into this discussion.

CHAPTER ONE

LE ROYAUME AVEUGLE: OF POLITICS AND THE FEMININE CHALLENGE

1.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to examine various literary representations of women in *Le royaume aveugle*, through an African literary feminist oriented reading of the story. As shall be highlighted in our analysis of the narration, Tadjo's writing offers a multiplicity of extraordinary female personalities. These women offer themselves in direct confrontation to the shackles of male domination, as they fight injustices on the socio-political front.

1.2 Synopsis of the novel

Le royaume aveugle tells the story of young and determined blind Akissi, the only daughter of a king, Ato IV of an unnamed monarchy in Africa, who shows great resilience in the wake of adversity. Her mother is also blind. Although the narrative is predominantly set in Ato IV's palace, its structure is appreciably circular in that as the plot evolves and unfolds, it shifts from the palace to a remote rural place named The Great North, and then ultimately recoils back to the palace, where it ends. This is evident in the division of the chapters - the second chapter is entitled 'The king's palace', Chapter 16 is entitled 'The sky of the Great North' and the last Chapter which is entitled 'Death/Life' is set in the prison cells of the palace. The narration, which is told in the third person, is mainly centred on Akissi's arduous and passionate search for truth. She seeks knowledge, experience and greater understanding. She is described thus as having a:

> […] more than skin-deep sensitivity and a desire to hear the truth. And it was this desire to hear the truth that tortured her and made her weary, because she knew that in this palace where lying and betrayal

> were customary, there was nothing there to quench her thirst or open her eyes. Nothing to cure her of anemia (Tadjo, 1991: 18-19).[2]

As we shall show, this means that Akissi's quest is of its own kind as it sets itself apart from the norm. It assigns her new feminine identities, distinct from early novelistic writing representations of women merely as mothers or wives. It also entails that this motive is of great importance. She feels she can no longer accept her father's tyrannical rule which is characterised by famine, corruption, poverty and is on the brink of total collapse. Therefore, she openly renounces her protected and privileged childhood life at the palace.[3] She leaves the parental home in search of a better understanding of the meaning of life. Mindful of her physical disability, she co-opts Karim, the King's secretary, in her mission by seducing him. She heads for the Great North, Karim's native land, to get to Karim's mother (the Old Woman) where she is taught about values, identity and life. The Old Woman tells her to remember everything that she has told her and still many other things so that the world can rebuild itself. She urges Akissi to create better societies free of vices. The Old Woman also tells Akissi to hold on dearly to the knowledge from the earth and give it new forms (*TBK* 64). For instance, she is taught that memory is one of the most important elements of human existence. She gains better insights into life because of these teachings. Strengthened by the initiation that she undergoes, which enlightens her as a result, she comes back to her father's palace to stage a militant protest against his corrupt rule. Together with Karim, Akissi is arrested and thrown in prison. While Karim loses hope, she remains determined and optimistic and, from her prison cell, she mulls over new strategies pursue her mission. Both Akissi and her mother are depicted as women whose physical blindness is neither an issue nor an obstacle to their self-fulfilment. On the contrary, their blindness seems to be a mark of higher insight. They relentlessly fight to reach out to the needs of others, in fighting inequalities and injustices in their society. Akissi's mother disagrees with the King, her husband, on several issues regarding his governance going as far as demanding that he shares

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[2] All quotations of the text from the 1991 edition, will be referenced as *TBK* .

[3] The title of the novel refers to many different types of blindness. Here it can be related to the king's complete disregard for his people and the resulting political and social turmoil in the land. I shall elaborate on the metaphoric importance of the title and concept, further on.

his ruling power with her, but to no avail. Similarly, Karim's mother has a sound knowledge of the secrets, the values and the culture of the land. The novel, which ends with Akissi giving birth to twins – a boy and a girl, can be read as a political allegory.

1.3 The question of allegory and feminine representations in *Le royaume aveugle*

> Allegories when well-chosen are like so many tracks of light in a discourse that make everything about them clear and beautiful (Addison, 2010: 219).

Since I propose here, to analyze the feminine characters of *Le royaume aveugle*, and show that the novel functions on an allegorical level, it would be ideal to start off by refining our understanding of the allegory in order to demonstrate that the novel is a powerful political allegory whose key players are its female characters. *Le royaume aveugle* is an allegorical tale constructed around autonomous, agency as well as rebellious female characterization. Through the analysis of the function of the allegory in this novel we will show that Tadjo paints extraordinary feminine characters whose strength and insight offer the possibility of hope for better understanding and, ultimately, justice in a world without hope.

In simple terms, the literary allegory is a symbolic story that serves as a disguised representation for meanings other than those indicated on the surface where the characters have no individual personality, but are embodiments of moral qualities and other abstractions (Quilligan, 1979: 12). The purpose of the allegory is to tell a story with a goal of either teaching or explaining ideas and principles, perhaps even to preach some kind of a moral lesson (Stephen, 1998: 160). From this, we deduce that the primary function of the allegorical tale is to illustrate and communicate particular teachings, and not just to entertain.

Let us consider another definition:

> An allegory is a narrative fiction in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived to make coherent sense on the 'literal,' or primary, level of signification, and at the same time

> to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events (Abrams and Harpham, 2011: 4).

This suggests that an allegorical tale has two levels of significance and meaning. In the first place an allegory may simply be regarded as a mere story in that it makes full fictional sense. Secondly, an allegorical tale bears non-literal sense in which meaning has to be deduced. This second inference is complex in that the reader is required to interpret the figurative language and symbols that characterize allegorical writing in order to derive the implied meaning of the story. For example, as we shall elaborate on in a moment, the kingdom is described in form of a bat as it was built on a gigantic hill and spread its wings over the city like a monstrous bat (*TBK 5*).

This is true of Tadjo's story. In the first instance, primary literal meaning is attained as per the synopsis elaborate on. At the same time, the text also bears figurative meaning, a secondary level of significance, that of the depiction of the postcolonial era in an imagined African state which embodies many African states.

The author herself confirms that her fictional account is allegorical and reflective of authentic events. For instance, she refers to the opening pages of the narration as having been inspired by her stay in Mexico City for a while. The first pages, which paint a graphic portrait of destruction in the wake of an earthquake, relate to the famous 1985 Mexico City earthquake that ravaged the city[4]:

> The earth jolted, violently – all of a sudden – while most inhabitants still slept. In a matter of seconds, the world turned upside down. The ground split open, trees fell, walls shifted and collapsed, stones rolled around, torrents of dust darkened the new morning. The ground trembled, furiously. The earth revolted. Everything appeared to sink into an immense abyss. Sleepers awakened in the middle of a nightmare. Roofs crumbled down on their shoulders; wailing destroyed their throats; panic seized their entire being…Then the

[4] In 1985, Mexico City suffered an intense earthquake which left a huge trail of destruction behind in most parts of the capital.

> world's belly burst open. An atrocious heat bore down. Death knocked and the sky remained merciless (*TBK 3*).

In the author's own words, this earthquake is a metaphor for colonization:

> Later on, when I started to work on the novel, I needed an image which could express the type of devastation that shakes the foundations of a country, a people. The Mexican earthquake came to my mind. I used it as a metaphor of colonization and the traumatizing effects it had on African societies as a whole. It destroyed the fabric of African life. Already before that, the Atlantic Slave Trade had turned the world upside down for Africans. The novel starts with people trying to salvage what they could after a major earthquake (Tadjo, 1991: 96).

Her affirmations imply that similarities can be drawn between the devastating aftermath of an earthquake and the devastation left by colonization. The same dreadful effects of earthquake can be understood as resembling the atrocities that colonization brought on African people and its aftermath. This is so in that the novel starts at the end of the colonial era and Ato IV's kingdom is an allegory for corrupt post-independence African states. The traumatizing effects that she speaks of are clear as people died by thousands, crushed under ruins, lost in crevices, drowned in the river's muddy waters that flowed (*TBK 3*). These effects are characteristic of the catastrophic effects of colonization on colonial subjects, their societies, their history, their culture and their identities. The following enumeration that "the ground split open, trees fell, walls shifted and collapsed, stones rolled around" (*TBK* 3) points to the various effects of an earthquake, which are metaphorically similar to the ravaging grip that colonization had on the continent. The emphasis of the extent of this earthquake is attained through very short sentences that "dogs barked incessantly. Livestock escaped from their pens. Horses went crazy. No one knew where to go" (*TBK 3*). These short sentences give the narrative a fast pace which echoes the panic that gripped those victims of the catastrophe. The unexpected pace of the toll of colonization since everything happened "in a lightning flash" (*TBK 3*). The repetitions of "fear" in the phrase "fear, and it was a disgusting fear" underlines the grip and extent of fear, which is later qualified by "disgusting" (*TBK* 3). The personification of death

in “Death knocked. Death had taught them a lesson in humility. Death had shown them her unrivaled might by swallowing whomever she wanted” shows that the effects of colonization were catastrophic (*TBK 4*).

The metaphor of the earthquake as the colonial era is carried through the entire first chapter, as a sort of gloomy and tragic introduction to the world we are about to encounter in the novel: that of the postcolonial devastation. Indeed, this first section is a damning portrait of colonial times and serves to introduce its horrific aftermath.

After the earthquake, Ato IV becomes the ruler of the newly established kingdom of the BlindPeople. His government is greedy, accumulating wealth and totalitarian power, which is characteristic of many postcolonial leaders, whilst ordinary civilians suffer, stricken by poverty. The devastation of colonialism left newly independent countries open to abuse by those who saw the power vacuums as an opportunity to grab and accumulate power and wealth. This is the case here. All the king is concerned with is power and personal riches as it is hinted in his own words:

> The slum dwellers must be kept in awe by the splendour and luxuriousness of the festivities. The cortege will move across the city with all the fanfare. Gold and silver will dazzle their eyes. I want people to be talking, in one hundred years, about this wedding party! And what’s more, in the most remote regions. One must proclaim to the world and to the slum dwellers that the kingdom has never been this prosperous! And one day, it will be my daughter’s turn. Then, I will make the entire world tremble with envy! The ceremony feast will be so grandiose that the power of my name will surpass the boarders of the Universe! And everyone will know that my reign is limitless and that my throne is cast in solid gold! (*TBK 6*)

Akissi’s father is preoccupied with personal wealth and showing it off to his people to dazzle their eyes. This train of thought emphasises his wrongly placed vision, which continues to w widen the conflict between him and his daughter – a vision that is ignorant of the needs of others. His desire, furthermore, grotesque – he wants to show off his immeasurable wealth to his subjects, who because of him, languish in abject poverty. The continued repetition of the words “my” and “I” illustrate his egocentric ambitions.

Rather than regarding independence as an opportunity to rebuild, after the horrendous effects of colonial rule that had torn the continent, some postcolonial era leaders merely perpetuated colonial oppression but in another form. The same inequalities and injustices which were characteristic of colonial times continued to exist in independent states. With power, and in particular, illicit power comes paranoia and megalomania and Ato IV is a symbol of this. The description of his palace illustrates this point:

> Built on a gigantic hill, the palace spread its wings over the city like a monstrous bat. The huge room with a hundred mirrors where the king held court formed the body of the beast and its wings were raised ballrooms where banquets and meetings were held; the king's chambers and those of his daughter were located in the head of the creature. They jutted out and were decorated with fine fabrics and gold encrusted ceilings. At the top of the structure, surveillance radars scanned the kingdom and picked up every sound-wave that moved across the realm. A bat was curved on the throne and the royal scepter because the bat inhabits the night and masters the sky despite blind eyes. Because the bat with its mysterious cries is the possessor of infinite powers. Because darkness is the bat's force (*TBK 5*).

The zoomorphism of the palace as a bat, illustrates the absolute power and control of the king. This palace is compared to a monstrous bat which alludes to Ato IV's outrageously evil inhuman practices. This shows how unjust his rule is. Similarly, the image that in the middle of the creature are the king's chambers implies that he is at the center of all the horror.

The juxtaposition of the evil description of the palace and gold undermines Ato IV's rule. It characterizes on one hand the greed of the wealthy political elite, and on the other hand, corruption and extravagance among other problems continue to besiege society[5].

[5] Similar allegorical tales of post-independence disillusionment and strife in postcolonial francophone African literature include the award winning Abdourahman Ali Waberi's *Le pays sans ombre* (1994) and fellow Ivorian literary icon Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances*. These works have one major theme which runs throughout - the non-materialization of independence in Africa because of the glaring lack of tangible

All the hope in negated by the alarming level of injustices:

> These creatures, (the bats), multiplied at an uncontrollable rate. In this way, they colonised all the trees in the city and drove away the sparrows which fled, gradually towards the North. They attacked the children, getting entangled in the hair. They scratched and emitted piercing cries like needles on eardrums. Early morning servants washed down the palace's steps and façade. They had to rub, scrap and scrub to get rid of the excrement that these flying mammals left everywhere. The atmosphere was invaded by a stifling stench and the gardens resembled garbage dumps. Green and blue flies buzzed around the ears of His majesty Ato IV (*TBK* 5-6).

The reproduction of the bats which takes place at an alarming pace can be read as the narrator's attempt to show the rate of manifestation of so many injustices within the palace. As a result, these injustices bring a grip and untold suffering on people's lives, including innocent children, as these birds of the night colonised all the trees. The alliteration produced by the narrator's use of the recurrent sounds in rub, scrap and scrub draws the reader's attention to the considerable effect that injustices brought, hence the need for rigorous efforts to rid the palace of vices. The narrator makes a mockery of royalty by reducing it to a stinking place, which probably could be representative of a palace rotten with corruption.

1.4 Blindness / Sight

One of the attributes of allegorical story telling is to be able to bring polarities or oppositional relationships into focus. To do so, certain figures, and thus ideas, are arranged against one another (Webb, 1996: 50). The oppositional relationships may include such ideas as darkness and light; night and day. In several instances, tautologies are used and must be corrected: death and life juxtaposed alongside each other. Here, the greatest polarity is between Akissi

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benefits brought about by independence and the huge mismatch that exists between people's expectations and the results of independence. Waberi metaphorically puts across these injustices as a shadow in that, in most cases, these socio-political injustices continue to characterise the modern day politically independent Africa.

and her father. As will be elaborated, whilst Ato IV is ignorant to the needs of the others, Akissi reaches out to others and has her community at heart. This is evident when Akissi tells her father that they have been living together and close to each other yet they have been strangers, which of course implies the hugely contrasting points of view they hold. The same difference can be said of hope and despair as evidenced by the image of birds flying to the Great North on one hand and bats around the palace on the other hand. These birds may be considered as symbolic of hope whilst the bats may be a symbol of despair as they had "conquered the palace" (*TBK* 5). Another fascinating polarity is highlighted through death and life. The entire last chapter, as shall be clear in our analysis, revolves around the idea of despair that is shown as Karim faces death from his prison cell. On the other hand, the idea of life is evoked by Akissi's giving birth to their children.

Ironically, whereas Akissi is aware of the unjust status quo and wants to leave in search of discovering the realities of the world, Ato IV is in his own fantasy world in that he does not perceive any wrong nor the deteriorating situation at hand except consolidating his power. Akissi urges her ignorant father to be aware of the absurd injustices which have gripped his rule: "Listen, Father, the wind is blowing backwards, the rains are slow in falling, the grass is dry. The sun is at war" (*TBK* 20). The king is not aware of the upside down state of affairs which now characterise his rule. Akissi tries to draw her father's attention to the chaos inherent in the palace. This is emphasised by the word listen that she repeats five times. Akissi makes efforts to show him his lack of control of the deteriorating situation as emphasised by the image of his voice and hands which are now "trembling" and "no longer firm" (*TBK* 14). She therefore demands transformation from her father who is ignorant of the needs of his people:

> You must change. I thirst for a life where to sleep with closed fists is not a sign of weakness. A life written in bold letters, clean with nothing crossed out. You have spoken on behalf of everyone and the voices were made quiet so that each one of us could hear you. Now, it is you who is to be silent and sit in a corner of history. […]. There is a wall between us. We are unknown to each other. We have been cloistered together in one world without ever becoming close (*TBK* 20).

Akissi wishes to take over in creating a violent free society. She has a strong desire to create a community marked with freedom of expression for everyone, unlike that of suppression of people's views as characterised by her father's rule. Meanwhile, her father remains in his state of blindness and hence cannot foresee the impending dangers. This is illustrated by the image of the wall that separates them. The image suggests that he is well out of touch with the reality of the new developments taking place in his own territory. Contrary to her father's insensitivity, Akissi is well aware of the problems that are inherent in the palace. Hence Akissi comes across as a unique young woman figure.

Although the story is in the third person, the narrator makes substantial inferences into Akissi's inner thoughts on several occasions from an omnipresent standpoint. Although she physically has no sight, the various inferences into her inner thoughts that "she knew all too well what all this meant" (*TBK* 11), "Akissi woke up. She knew that she had arrived" (*TBK* 11) and "she understood that the Old Woman knew the secrets of the soil and that she must certainly have white hair" (*TBK* 45) shows her as a young woman knowledgeable of the happenings around her.

Akissi knows that the palace, which she describes as having "cloistered" her father and her, would double her blindness and therefore she seeks the truth (*TBK* 20). They have been cloistered, for example, in the sense that they are leading a protected life that is characterised by riches such as diamonds, gold, and extravagant ceremonies whereas the masses are starving. Yet her father continues to live in this world, "all my life I have lived by your side; and yet, we do not know each other" (*TBK* 20). Escaping this kingdom has beneficial effects simply because it would afford her the opportunity to leave a protected life and learn more about reality. It would be a window through which she would escape living in sad circumstances, thus a way of regaining her sight. In this case, Akissi's desire for sight is also allegorical: she seeks to escape a privileged life in the palace to fight various injustices such as corruption and hunger that besiege her society. For her, to see is to be able to perceive the injustices of the society and then create a better world for all. Akissi's quest does not only stem from oppression by a father or a husband, but it emanates from the anger at the poverty, the hunger and the corruption affecting others and deeply rooted in her father's rule. As a result, this motivates her journey to the Great North in order to learn more about life and fight this oppression for the benefit of her society. This affords her a sense of sight since it empowers her to perceive the problems of the other.

This image of young Akissi, of her reaching out to and being conscious of community injustices, points to the idea of agency in her character for she places herself right at the forefront and refuse to stand in support of the down trodden and pariahs of his father's masculine dominated society.

Whilst Akissi is on a campaign to learn more about fighting injustices, the king's goal is only centred on the consolidation of his totalitarian authority and power. His is solely preoccupied with absolute power, it seems. His image tallies what Adebayo refers to patriarchal authority that tends to tyranny (Adebayo, 1996: 95), as evident in his own words:

> I am going to show them, I, Ato IV, what power is! […].
> Because I am the one who created this country. I, who built it by my own hands, shaped it according to my own will. I am the one who made from its mire and chaos this grandiose site! I am the one who gave it prosperity, strength and eternal life.
> Without me, there would be nothing here.
> Without me, everyone would be starved.
> I am the rock on which the kingdom is built.
> I am the king of still whose power generates the future.
> I am the one whose voice makes the mountains tremble.
> The one who stops time.
> The one who governs.
> By day as well as by
> Night! (*TBK* 7)

By addressing himself by the full title of his reign Ato IV as well as the repetition of the first person and definite article the in the phrases it clearly shows the authority that Ato unilaterally invests in himself. Ato IV also says that he has a God given mandate of power since he is the rock upon which the kingdom is established. He goes on to claim divine supernatural forces as he says that he can conquer nature and time. He also refers to himself as the source of life.

1.5 Feminine revolt: rebellious wifehood

The oppositional relationship upon which *Le royaume aveugle* is constructed upon is that of the rebellious wife. Through Akissi's mother, Tadjo puts across a wife who confronts traditional dictates of patriarchy.

Akissi's mother is powerful and rebellious and she challenges her husband. Because her husband is king, she is essentially challenging the monarchy itself. Through her portrayal of Akissi's mother, Tadjo's writing is unquestionably undertaking a "writing back African women back into the literary canon" (Valerie, 1998: 35). This is so in that she lambastes exclusionary practices, effected upon women, of male domination as echoed by African feminism. This implies assigning key tasks to women in fiction, against a historical background of feminine absence or insignificant appearances in early masculine authored texts. In such texts, gender inequalities are common:

> Women are naturally excluded from public affairs; they are viewed as unable to hold positions of responsibility, rule men or even be visible when serious matters of state and society are being discussed. Women are viewed to need tutelage before they can be politically active; politics is considered the absolute realm of men; women are not considered fit for political positions (Valerie, 1998: 35).

In the narrative under study, an instance of such natural exclusion that is illustrated in the king's words is evident. This concerns the criteria by which power is assumed or transferred: "never ever would I share power. It is passed along bloodlines, and Akissi is my only heir. Flesh of my flesh. Blood of my blood" and not shared as she demands (*TBK* 6). By demanding to share power, Ato IV's wife challenges the tradition that stipulates that power is only reserved for, and above all, passed to descendants of the blood line. Through the royal wife, the author makes a phenomenal portrait of a woman who provokes the classic conservative frameworks of the concept of inheritance of power.

Furthermore, it is clear, as evidenced by the king's remarks, that his wife is exceptionally witty. Therefore, she needs neither any apprenticeship nor tutelage for her to assume political power since she already has the intellect to do so, something which Ato IV acknowledges:

> Pssth, he sucked his teeth, this woman from the Great North, this woman with unparalleled intelligence. She had to go. Never ever would I share power! The king sighed trying to reclaim himself (*TBK* 6).

From the king's assertion, the oppressive masculine dogma that women do not have the necessary skills and competences to run politics and as a result have no space in the political domain is dismissed. The fact that Ato IV sucked his teeth expresses the huge threat he faces in the wake of her wife's demands of sharing political power. In the king's wife, Tadjo challenges such relegation of women to the background of the political sphere brought to pass by men. She hints at matriarchy, where power runs through women. Tadjo reduces the gender equation of female marginalisation by a female character of unparalleled intelligence who disagrees with the one in power on matters concerning absolute power (*TBK* 6). In the author's own words, making reference to Akissi's mother, she says that "she disagreed with the king on major issues. She tried to oppose him and bring about change. Ato IV felt challenged" (Tadjo, 1991: 99).

Akissi's mother denounces traditional gender codes of behaviour that are normally perpetuated by husbands, by refusing to lead a subservient and subjugated life. Here, Tadjo explores the same line of direct feminine confrontation to patriarchy as Werewere Liking in her narration, *La mémoire amputee*. In this story, the narrator's mother, Naja, challenges her husband's patriarchal right of custodianship of their children (Liking, 2004: 53).

Ironically, Akissi's mother is barely present throughout the plot. She is only pictured in a snapshot, yet she emerges as a strong threatening opposition to masculine rule's abuse of power. She undoubtedly breaks taboos in challenging the abuse of political office by the Ato IV. Despite her being in the background of the narrative, and more so the reader only getting a glimpse of her portrait through the king, she still exhibits a powerful as well as influential woman figure. What make the author's feminine characterisation idiosyncratic here is that Ato IV's wife does not utter a single word in the entire plot of the narrative plus the ironic fact that the reader is given an insight into her personality through his husband, a male figure, yet she emerges powerful. This narrative stylistic is unique to Tadjo in that in many instances where a character is mentioned in passing, as is the case of Akissi's mother, then that

character is bound to be a passive one. On several occasions, there is no mention at all with regards to the character's personality. Such marginalised characters rarely contribute to the plot.

Deducing from Ato IV's wife's antagonistic portrait, more projections and inferences may be made into her personality. That Akissi's mother is a royal wife and yet no mention of her co-wives is made by the narrator throughout the entire storyline merits mention. This, by its own nature, automatically elevates her. It shows her as a liberated woman. One can consider Ato IV's wife as free from the oppression that is steered by polygamous relationships, which numerous scholars on feminism have identified as a source of women subjugation.[6] Such extraordinary portraits of a royal woman, who is in a monogamous relationship and has a single girl child, in a palace which is traditionally a symbol of patriarchy, bear enough testimony to the author's redefinition of womanhood.

With reference to Ato IV's wife's fate the author says that since her husband felt that she was a threat to his rule he chose to get rid of her. Tadjo adds that we don't know if she was killed or if she was just sent away. But judging by the mystery that surrounds her one can expect the worst (Tadjo, 1991: 99). The destiny of Akissi's mother is deliberately enshrouded in mystery probably to allow one to draw one's own conclusions. In the light of this, even should one conclude that she was killed, at the hands of the shackles of patriarchy, although tragic, cannot be deemed a failure by any feminist standard. The adage like daughter like mother could be true in this case. This is so since the king says that Akissi is "just like her mother" (*TBK* 6). Akissi's mother has passed her complex rebellious personality to her daughter. This representation of women who pass (Akissi's mother) and inherit (Akissi) matriarchal values even within a patriarchal system sets apart Tadjo's feminine identities. It surpasses, though it is almost similar to Beyala's in *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (1988). Beyala's novel tells the story of Tanga, a young woman dying in a prison cell. Before her death, she imparts her values, endeavours and all of herself to her cell mate, Anna-Claude by telling her life story. As the plot evolves, Anna-Claude appears to have inherited Tanga's personality.

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[6] Feminism challenges the masculine consideration that the number of wives, and later the number of children a man has, as a status symbol. By the same token, patriarchy denotes the number of children a wife has as of paramount significance and directly proportional to prestige and dignity. Childlessness and sterility are taken as serious matter of shame and consequently such women are in most cases stigmatised along these accustomed paternal lines (Milolo, 2000: 153).

Tadjo's idiosyncratic portrayal of a rebellious royal mother proposes a feminine voice of reason. In a broader context, the text appears to suggest that women, if intelligent and capable, should not be ostracised from positions of political power if that is in the interest of just and fair governance. Here, Tadjo shows a woman with a high level of political assertion through a critique of patriarchy in her bid to unchain African women and men.

1.6 Feminine resistance: rebellious daughterhood

The pattern of oppositional relationships set up by the allegorist allows for an expression of conflict between rival authorities. This conflict, with one ideal pitted against another, then becomes the motor force that underlies the development of the narrated action (Webb, 1996: 51). This is clear in our narrative where the plot develops along Akissi's motive for enlightenment. Akissi is shown struggling against the corrupt and mal governed order of her father's authoritarian rule, and this becomes clear very early in the novel. Within the scheme of moral polarities, the allegorical hero generally moves through a pattern of action, a network of obstacles and temptations (Webb, 1996: 50). Hence Akissi rebels against her father's imposition typical of masculine chauvinistic attitudes. Here, Tadjo's writing echoes African feminist discourses which highlight a shift in recent writing by women in representations of daughterhood:

> Masculine practices by men regarding women as nothing else than goods and chattels in which fathers' only interest in their daughters relate to either their personal selfish pride or the amount of money or they will bring into their coffers in form of bride price do not come to fruition (Palmer, 1999: 89).

The patriarchal yoke of oppression does not spare the female characters in the novel. Akissi defies the long arm of oppression through tradition which wants to impose its full wrath on her and deprive her of her personal choices.

By disobeying her father and king, an emblem of masculine authority and power, Akissi continues the resistance to the patriarchal order begun by her mother. Once more, the king is

challenged more than he wishes: "Ahh, how I would have loved to marry off Akissi? Ato IV was thinking as he returned to his chambers" (*TBK* 6). The exclamation "ahh" plus the repetition of the conditional past phrase "I would have" numerous times shows flawed egocentric patriarchal endeavours in the wake of a militant daughter. Also, he does not seem to understand his daughter's motivations: "I do not understand my child, my own daughter. She hides her lovers" (*TBK* 6). This leads to great disappointment: "I should have been able to persuade her to accept a man of my choosing. If I impose someone on her, she will cloister herself inside her chambers never to leave again" (*TBK* 6). The king's words highlight two things. Firstly, the use of possessives reinforces the idea of masculine domination as they confirm (at least in the eyes of the father) their power over their children. His sense of failure however stresses Akissi's own powerful stance and self-empowerment. Critics identify a plethora of factors that contribute to women's subjugation in the family, and chief among them, "traditional structures set up by fathers as one of the mountains on the back of an African woman" (Adebayo, 2000: 18). Whereas Tadjo allows her female protagonist to overcome these traditional structures, one thinks of Kany in *Sous l'orage* by Badian among many other novelistic characters who do not manage to disentangle themselves from subjugation, at least not without help. Akissi, for her part, goes against the stereotype that women cannot achieve their emancipation on their own terms and without help from men.

Despite the lavish wedding party that her father could have potentially thrown for her, Akissi does not waiver. Ato IV says: "I would have had made for her a silk dress pearled with the world's largest diamond and I would have placed on her head a crown of rubies and emeralds" (*TBK* 6). She dismisses the stereotype of women as materialistic loving beings when she rebukes the offer in spite of all the flamboyance that could have come along with the wedding, had she subscribed to masculine demands. Her characterisation here is in line with feminist principles. She "tears the veil and so that it does not mask her identity, muffle her voice and distort her vision" (Adebayo, 2000: 23).

Adebayo's affirmations imply that women must make efforts to defy the oppressions, which she equates to the veil, which are imposed on them and perpetuated by tradition. The image of the veil symbolises any form of oppression that destructs and impedes women from realising their full emancipation. Denouncing patriarchal oppression is of fundamental importance since she views masculine domination as one of the obstacles in their journey to women liberation. Otherwise, if women do not act, their opinions and ambitions will remain

unrealised. A case in point is when Akissi defies the rigid conventions of tradition and later on her resistance results in her freewill prevailing when she chooses to fall in love with Karim, a man of her own choice and of the "wrong" background, which is heroic of her. For her, love does not mean submission to tradition and culture dictates. It is neither surrendering her liberty nor the end of her mission but rather it is her solid starting point to fully realise as well as a way to attain fulfilment.

Akissi's falling in love with Karim is a twofold resistance to the patriarchal system into which Akissi was born. First and foremost, Akissi directly challenges tradition in breaking a taboo. As the king's daughter, she is prohibited to start a love affair with a man like Karim, a mere secretary to the King and thus from a lower social class. To make matters worse, he is originally from a different community than that of Akissi.[7] Furthermore, she is very assertive about the matter that Karim would enable her to and help her in her quest for truth in exploring new horizons.

Here, Tadjo's portrayal of Akissi sets her female characterisation apart from a host of other African novels which treat of the generic theme of tension between tradition and modernity. For instance, in Mame Younousse Dieng's *L'ombre en feu* (1997), although at first Kura refuses her father's wish to give her hand in marriage to an old friend, she finally gives in to her father's demands. The same goes for Kany who, trapped in masculine domination, gives in at the end in Badian's *Sous l'orage*.

1.7 Women as bearers of tradition and spirituality

A crucial dimension of the allegory is that it allows writers to put forward their moral and political point of views. A careful study of an allegorical piece of writing can give us an insight into the writer's mind as he views the world and how he wishes the world to be (Abrams and Harpham, 2011: 5). In light of this assertion, we know that Tadjo's aim in writing this book was to envision a better postcolonial world.

[7] Kings in most African societies are widely perceived as preservers and bearers of culture and tradition. Starting with their families, and later alone the entire society, their primary function is that of instilling and enforcing the social fabric by upholding values of culture and tradition (Milolo, 2000: 40, my translation).

Le royaume aveugle gives us an insight into the writer's conceptions of culture. For Tadjo, "it is important that as a people, we recognise our cultural differences as a source of richness. We must work harder in strengthening the concept of nationhood by looking at the country as an economic and social entity" (Tadjo, 1991: 104). This calls for the solidarity of diverse cultures in building societies. In the novel, the strong feminine relationship that is fostered between Akissi and the Old Woman, who hail from two different cultures as well as generations, may be viewed as two cultures coming to unite for common good of the society as they fight injustices.

Whereas some narratives highlight tradition as conflicting with modernity[8], and where tradition is used to perpetuate gender oppression, Tadjo employs tradition in *Le royaume aveugle* otherwise. In her narrative, knowledge of culture is used as a catalyst to explore women's oppression. It is used for the development of the social cohesion of various communities. Culture and tradition are thematically treated in an original manner here, not in terms of the conflict between tradition and modernity but, rather, as represented by the strength of a young woman whose spirituality and culture lead her in her struggle against contemporary injustices. The Old Woman's traditional knowledge which she imparts on Akissi enlightens her in her mission. Much like Akissi's mother, the Old Woman has no name yet her knowledge and strong spirituality renders her a powerful figure in the novel.

Firstly, the Old Woman is kind, receptive and hospitable. When Akissi arrives at her compound, she receives her warmly:

> Even before shaking her hand, the contact had already been established. And when their hands finally met, the palm of the Old Woman seemed as rugged as the earth. And it was this sensation that went straight to Akissi's heart. Welcome, my daughter the Old Woman said, and may the spirits protect you (*TBK* 45).

[8] Kesteloot and many other literary critics note that the postcolonial novel, starting from the 1960s, mainly treats the clash of modernity and tradition (Kesteloot, 2001:235).

The story suggests to us that emotional attachment had already been established even before the physical contact is evident of a heart filled with compassion and love. The Old Woman's hand, very rough and cracked as it is described, is sharply contrasted with her soft heart since the sensation of her hand went straight to Akissi's heart. Thereafter, the Old Woman lets her visitors into the house and offers them a calabash of water (*TBK* 45).[9] The Old Woman's care and mentorship for Akissi has a parental quality to it as the Old Woman considers Akissi like one of her own: "she took a look at Akissi then she said in a voice filled with kindness that that's good. She is already my daughter" (*TBK* 46). The Old Woman humbly accepts to teach Akissi about life. The fact that after the meal the Old Woman "unfolded her mat and stretched it out close to Akissi's" is characteristic of continued compassion and hospitality (*TBK* 47). This gesture is a physical expression of the manner in which the Old Woman has already affectionately stretched and extended her heart towards Akissi when she arrived.

The diverse subjects which the Old Woman touches on confirm the importance of social justice. Her cultural attachments are not portrayed as a source of women subjugation, but as of concern for the common good of society at large. This becomes clear in a conversation with Karim's messenger which touches on various issues. The Old Woman "listened attentively while punctuating his sentences with guttural sounds" as Karim's messenger was sharing news from the city (*TBK* 45). Despite her old age and her wisdom, she remains curious enough to seek knowledge from others and she keeps abreast of current developments and of the city - which in fact is symbolic of modernity in all its manifestations. When the messenger finishes, she in turn speaks of the issues affecting the village, from deaths to births. The Old Woman is abreast with, and has at heart, social, economic and political problems gripping the society she lives in. From the conversation, the idea that the placing of the Old Woman side by side with Karim's messenger, a man who is not identified by a name, could be considered by the reader as one of those deliberate attempts that accord the Old Woman a more important role to that of the messenger's. The plot is subsequently pinned on Akissi's visit to the village. He is constantly referred to only by his sex as the man in the conversation as well as on many other occasions.[10] More so, through her attachment with

[9] In many cultures, like the Manyika and the Korekore cultures in Zimbabwe, offering water is an expected gesture of hospitality and it is done upon a visitor's arrival.

[10] The man who drove her talked to her about drought, empty wells and lack of water (*TBK* 43); But the man was easy in this landscape (*TBK* 44); The man took her hand and helped her to get out (*TBK* 44); The man

culture and tradition, the Old Woman can explain every natural phenomenon and shows knowledge of the spiritual realm and she also makes comments about climate change:

> You understand we surely should have been in the middle of the rainy season when the earth drinks big gulps of water to hydrate itself. But, instead, we are still waiting for the sky to burst open. The gods are abandoning us and most of the youths are leaving for the city (*TBK* 50).

It is obvious here that the Old Woman becomes the spokesperson for contemporary problems besetting African countries.

What is striking in her depiction is that she is dignified and commands respect even from men. In writings such as *Freedom of expression for women: Myth or reality*, African feminist critics claim that in traditional African communities, with age, the woman deserves greater respect because by this time of her life, she would have acquired great wisdom (Magona, 2000: 21). This affirmation is true here. Early in the morning a man had come to see the Old Woman to relay a message from a group of Elders that the Mask would be out soon (*TBK* 48). In the very first instance, the greeting that the man offers to the Old Woman confirms this respect:

> Elder mother, good morning!
> May I enter your house?
> How are the people in your courtyard?
> How is your guest?
> How is your tobacco field?
> How is your body feeling? (*TBK* 48)

The poetics in the greeting stress the honor given to the Old Woman. This is attained by the emphasis of the short verses in which the man asks everything concerning the Old Woman,

started the decision (*TBK* 45); Finally the man came to the point of his mission (*TBK* 45); The Old Woman accompanied the man as far as the neighboring courtyard where he had to eat and spend the night before getting back on the road at day break (*TBK* 46).

from first of all permission to enter her courtyard then her health to even her tobacco. The repetition of the same question words "how is your" adds to underlining the respect with which the Old Woman is greeted. Like the other man who had accompanied Akissi to the village, the man who greets her is merely a messenger who has come to relay a message to the Old Woman. The depiction of the male messenger gives him a lesser important role to that of the Old Woman. Equally, several people stopped to talk with the Old Woman at that moment, further confirming her privileged status in society (*TBK* 48).

The messenger, who has words from a group of Elders for her, further confirms her key role in her land and the respect the Old Woman commands in her community.[11] This underlines the idea that she is involved in the running of the spiritual affairs of the village since she occupies a central position in the village. She breaks previous ideologies of female oppression by men that women are not fit to hold positions of authority as evidenced by her central role regarding the Mask: "come my daughter, I must explain to you what is going to happen soon. Everyone, even the people who are not from this village, must participate in the ceremony by giving an offering to the Mask" (*TBK* 49). The notions of gender roles entail a division of chores solely on the basis of sex, and not ability. As a result, this sexist stance has resulted in women's space being defined as the kitchen and looking after children. Feminist literature has been informed by this gender imbalance, hence its primary focus on the fact that women's roles in literature always render women less important and inferior to their male counterparts and ultimately its quest to elevate women characters to greater and meaningful positions in literature through their portrayal of the woman (Green and Kahn, 1985: 2). Milolo concurs in that the feminist novel encompasses the extension of women liberation and roles in society at large (Milolo, 2000: 47, my translation). This is the case where works reveal societies which are inclusive of women and where they play pivotal roles that are even, at times, greater than those of men.

In Tadjo's female characterisation, cultural attachments are closely related to freedom of choice. The Old Woman is highly independent and is free to be particular in her choices. She knows exactly what she wants when she deliberately chooses to stay alone, and she is respected for her choices:

[11] African fiction is full of 'Groups of Elders'. These groups are highly patriarchal in that they are composed specifically of old and wise men in the village. A 'Group of Elders' is the highest decision making body of such communities. It is a symbol of masculine authority in itself.

> She had wanted it that way and the people of the village respected her choice. But she had not been abandoned. They gave her gifts, even in this difficult season: a chicken, a little cassava, some rice or corn. Women especially brought her tomatoes, eggplant and salt. Her son also sent her money, but when she received bills that came from the city, she folded them delicately and went to hand them over to the village chief. She did not want to change anything in her life. She preferred to stay in the house where, before his death, her husband joined her at night fall and where, one morning, Karim was born (*TBK* 47).

By staying alone in her courtyard, she defies the oppressive patriarchal structures of levirate marriages, forced marriages in which the widow is obliged to marry the brother of the deceased:

> Customs demand sometimes that in case of death of a husband, his wife must be remarried off to the closest relative of the deceased. African traditional societies have been regarded as full of levirate marriages. This succession is done from the first born to the last (my translation, Milolo: 2000).

Although she lived alone, the Old Woman had not been neglected.

The Old Woman's high degree of independence is in agreement with feminist notions since it denounces the common woman character in some male authored texts that Stratton rebukes. In these texts, feminists point out that:

> The woman character has no autonomy, no status as a character, for the person and her story are shaped to meet the requirements of her vision. Whether she is elevated to the status of goddess or reduced to the level of a prostitute, the designation is degrading, for he does the naming, whereas her experience is trivialized and distorted.

> Metaphorically, she is of the highest importance, practically she is nothing (Stratton, 2000: 5).

In the novel, culture is also a means to spirituality, which, in turn, is of fundamental importance to society. Karim's mother is a prophetic figure because of her attachment with tradition and her culture and most importantly because she can communicate with the Mask, a very important oracle in her community: "the knowledge of secrets belonged to her. She could approach the Mask and speak the secret language of the initiated" (*TBK* 47). Her indispensable expertise, unique abilities and skills render her highly spiritual and mystical figure. The Old Woman's representation is consistent with the following feminist claims:

> The life experiences of black women are treasures in traditional settings as these experiences are about reality, life, culture, history, and ultimately a legacy. As such, women must recognise and celebrate independence and strength which come as a result of these (Robinson, 2001: 87).

This is evoked in the story. The Old Woman's vast knowledge of mythology is considered of value:

> At nightfall when the entire village seemed plunged into an atmosphere of togetherness, the Old Woman recounted to Akissi the myths and legends of her people. She smoked her pipe and closed her eyes so as to better concentrate (*TBK* 50-51).

She knows the history of the Mask very well and its significance to the village. She is a teacher of culture, tradition and customs of civilization in society. She performs rituals in her society. Through her connection with the Mask, her image concurs with feminist ideals and she defies the notion that tradition, in the form of symbols such as masks can promote gender inequalities:

> Gender discrimination has been effected with the mask. Even where the woman, as among the Dogon, had been the originator and agency of mask's medium, she was promptly emasculated from being its bearer once the mask has become a source and symbol of communal authority (Adebayo, 2000: 102).[12]

Tadjo debunks this particular myth by emphasising the Mask's feminine origins. [13] Feminists note old women's fundamental cultural role in the spiritual affairs of the community:

> All success is accompanied with religious and magical ceremonies in which animals are killed as sacrifices. Women, who are the link between the source (the ancestors, the idolised dead) on one hand and life (the living) on the other hand, pour animal blood on the ground to invoke the ancestors to help the community (Milolo, 2000: 81, my translation).

The Old Woman plays a pivotal role in the spiritual affairs of her people as an intermediate between the spiritual realm and the real one. This makes her a cultural link bridge of community on one hand and the spiritual realm, which has power over both the living and the dead, and to whom the sacrifice of a goat will be made (*TBK* 49). Karim's mother's spirituality renders her powerful. She hints at power in the hands of women by making reference to matriarchy, where women have more power than men. According to Tadjo, the Old Woman is a bearer of tradition. "Her power comes from the land, her culture and her community". She is also highly spiritual having been initiated into the ancestral religion (*TBK*

[12] A mask is a code that is capable of embodying both sacred and profane contents. The mask does not offer itself to simple lateral meaning and interpretation. In the mask is concealed a plethora of meanings waiting to be decoded. There are, broadly speaking, two types of masks. One presents a living person and therefore serves profane uses, mostly entertainment and amusement. The other type is employed for the purposes of ritual – (Olorunyomi, 2002: 87).

[13] The mask originated as a result of a woman who had lost her mother and danced around her corpse as a way of paying tribute to her (*TBK* 51).

99). She epitomises spirituality and humility since she is a noble woman figure of integrity endowed with exceptional powers. She is an outstanding character, a repository of knowledge of legends which is testimony to her being powerful. The Old Woman, who is powerful because of her knowledge of culture, is reminiscent of the grandmother in one of the most celebrated Francophone African women writers from Cameroon, Calixthe Beyala's *La petie fille du réverbère* (1998) which scooped the *Grand Prize of Unicef*. Beyala's narration is an account of an old woman whose profound knowledge of secrets, wisdom, stories, values and healing power allows her success in a new setting of the town, after leaving her village following its collapse. In town, the grandmother is successful. Despite the challenges of the city, she establishes herself as a reputable businesswoman.

The Old Woman's role is also to impart her knowledge to a suitable successor. This is why her tirade is punctuated with words to equip Akissi to face the truth of her mission: "My child, hear well and understand the call of blood. Hear well and understand what it tells you. Times have changed and you will need convictions" (*TBK* 64). The anaphora that is produced by the repetition of the words "hear well" and "understand" in the two successive sentences express the importance of the words that Akissi is to acquire. The tirade is full of words and phrases of wisdom and encouragement to prepare Akissi to fight for a better tomorrow. The repetition of the word "go" in the imperative tense at the beginning of each of several sentences shows an authoritative command and that Akissi has been chosen and is now equipped will all the necessary skills that she need in her quest for the truth. It follows that the Old Woman has made her bold and ready to take head on whatever form of oppression that might seek to imprison her will:

> Go, life will know how to make you cry from joy and from pain. Go, be careful, because there will always be someone to try to imprison your will. Go, there are many ways of dying and the hardest is not the one you are thinking of (*TBK* 64).

The Old Woman prophetically evokes her upcoming death which means that Akissi will have to take over:

> I am telling you all of this now because my death is approaching. It will not be my tired body that will kill me, it will be this violence that is unleashing inside me and breaking my bones (*TBK* 64).

Upon her realization, she chooses to leave a legacy of her expertise to Akissi, who symbolizes the next generation.[14] One of her lasting lessons is on the importance of self-knowledge and identity:

> My daughter, never lose sight of your own self image, the one that lines the walls of your spirit and pushes you to think that you are on the road. Do not squander your soul, and if one day you must die, let it be after you have given your life to stop the end of the world (*TBK* 65).

She points out to Akissi that the main reason for existence is the creation of a better world. Hope for a better tomorrow is displayed through women such as the Old Woman. The Old Woman's lasting message seems to reinforce the allegory for the hope of a better world:

> Memory is our most precious gift. With it we can conquer time that traps us. You must remember everything that I have told you and still many other things so that this city in ruins and dying villages can rebuild themselves. Hold on dearly to the knowledge from the earth and give it new forms. Thereafter, you will be able to erect huge buildings that reach all the way to the sky and you will be able to search for what makes life easier and less heartbreaking (*TBK* 64).

[14] Many scholars, including sociologists and anthropologists believe that a lot of very valuable knowledge concerning such issues as herbal medicine, tradition and culture at large, have been lost through generations, when knowledgeable persons die without writing down or , at the very least, telling someone the knowledge they possess. An old African proverb has it that "In Africa, when an old man dies, it is a library burning down". Here, the construction "man" was done way back in history but today because of the evolution of gender discourses or for the context of our citation, it refers to either sex – male or female.

In making reference to the society then would embody power and the force to take full control of even natural metaphysical forces such as time, the allegory is centered around the concept that tradition and culture bear hope for the future, not only for feminine liberty but for all in society.

Asked about the multi-layered nature of *Le royaume aveugle*, Tadjo responds that photography inspired her and she wanted to capture the reality of life in all its forms and manifestations, as life itself is complex – the essence of her writing is to mirror society. She further comments that literature in this sense offers numerous possibilities and that with time listeners/readers can understand the story on many different levels, depending on their maturity, and grasp of the cultural, historical or political preferences. And with more time and added knowledge, they always get something from it (Tadjo, 1991: 102). This particular text is undoubtedly to be read as an allegory symbolic of the postcolonial crisis and the hope of the future, especially in a society where women are given equal opportunities to contribute positively.

Another attribute of the allegory is that the personalities of an allegorical narrative are introduced and little information about them is given. This attribute of an allegorical tale is a no exception to the Old Woman in *Le royaume aveugle*. Besides the Old Woman, in the text, a number of characters are not identified by their names and their details such as physical appearance or age are not mentioned. They are introduced by their functions and roles. For instance, the man who escorts Akissi to the Great North is only identified as "the man": "the man was at ease in this landscape", "the man came to the point of his mission" (*TBK* 44). The same applies to two other men – namely the man who had come to relay a message from the Elders as well as the man who was seated around goats in the market. Specific details about these characters are not included. Even for some characters that are identified such as Ato IV, the Old Woman, the mad man, no mention is made of their physical appearances or other personal attributes. Characters like the Old Woman, the mad man are not identified by their names but rather by their roles in the story. The names the BlindPeople, the Blind kingdom, as well as the Great North can be easily related to the ideals or ideas and vices and virtues they stand for. This is attained by emphasis on naming, as the concept of allegory entails, which is also present in the novel. The naming of the Great North may be appropriate in that the place is of significance in the story. It is indeed befitting in that it is where Akissi goes to Karim's mother to learn about life so that she can be enlightened in her mission to fight

against injustices. The Great North is also associated with intelligence as we get from the inferences of the king's innermost thoughts. The king feels challenged by his wife because of her outstanding wit: "this woman of unparalleled intelligence from the Great North" (*TBK* 6). The detailed description of the Great North also confirms it as a great area beaming with life:

> The closer one got to the Great North, the clearer the sky became and the purer the air felt. The light changed into a crystal blue, so clear that it seemed to verge on pink. Clouds, like down, drifted softly. One would have said foam from a silent sea. The sun was strong and solid, sovereign and sometimes devastating. When evening fell, everything became purple and crickets started their vibrating chant (*TBK* 53).

The visual images used to describe the attributes of this place all point to light. The greatness of the area is expressed in the idea that it can support all forms of life. It is an area that is bubbling with life to a point where even animals of all sizes, small insects such as crickets' life is supported as they chirp in their vibrating chant. The personification of the sun, which is the source of all life, as solid and sovereign points to a life marked with freedom. It is an area with amazing qualities and Akissi is astonished by its charm. She asked herself how she could have lived such a long time without knowing this area. In doing so she had mutilated her country and cut her soul into pieces and she had so much to learn (*TBK* 53). She regrets and curses herself for not having known such a pleasant place.

The attractiveness of The Great North is contrasted with the OtherPeople's land, where misery rules:

> The view was unending with sight of buildings and structures that blocked the horizon. From left to right, concrete enclosed and imprisoned. A dirty layer of dust hung over the roofs and stopped the sun from piercing through. It seemed that night was always ready to fall. All the walls appear to be faded […] the only people to go around on foot, coughed, spat, and choked. And what's more, being

> in city was like being in a sand storm, a thick fog clouded their view. Smoke rose slowly from the factories in operation […]. Misery crawled at the speed of a cursed snake and infected entire areas. The OtherPeople gathered on the hills and waited for the impossible. Each morning they left for the city that swallowed up their life (*TBK* 13 - 14).

The physical blocking by concrete of the people's view that is created may be compared to the absolute difficulty of life as a result of its hardships. People have neither optimism nor a vision as sight is blocked by the horizon, which points to a bleak future of the OtherPeople. The absence of even a slightest idea of life among the OtherPeople is further underlined by the source of life, the sun, which cannot even pierce through to their community. Therefore, it is difficult to sustain life, be it plant or animal life, since faces aged, trees become skinny and grass turns yellow. All that characterizes such a life is suffering as evidenced by the enumeration of all the different kinds of anguish which manifest themselves in the form of coughing, spitting, and choking that the OtherPeople endure. All hope is negated and there are no expectations. The naming of the Blind People is also befitting. The blindness is also metaphoric here, referring to the king's ignorance to the problems of his rule. As explained earlier, it implies the incapacity of political leaders to perceive problems of their people in society.

1.8 The unquenchable thirst for truth

The motive of the quest, which is usually archetypal and of more than individual significance, is commonly present in allegory (Webb, 1996: 51). It also entails that this motive is of great importance as it is not only an individual quest, but a communal one. In the novel, Akissi engages on a quest which is archetypal and essentially of its own kind:

> She only knew palace life; but to her credit, she had more than deep-skin sensitivity and a desire to hear the truth. And it was this desire to hear the truth that tortured her and made her weary, because she knew that in this palace where lying and betrayal were customary, there was

> nothing to quench her thirst or open her eyes. Nothing to cure her of anemia (*TBK* 18-19).

She has such a great desire to learn and to reach out to others that it haunts her as it tortures her and makes her weary. She chooses to be aware of the problems of others and reaches out, which is metaphorically compared to her thirst and gaining a sight or even her motive is likened to a cure for the deadly disease of ignorance. And what she stands for in all this is not for her individual benefit but is for the whole society, as Tadjo would say a sense of community (Tadjo, 1991: 97).

In fighting not only for women but for the common good of her entire society, Akissi's characterisation goes even beyond the rebellious woman which some feminist scholars speak of. For instance, it is noted in the African feminist scholarly that such a woman who perceives the problems of other women as her personal problems and therefore she seeks to solve them (Milolo, 2000: 189). Akissi's fight in the narrative is not inspired by women's oppression only. As Tadjo puts it across, what is striking is that she is not afraid to seek the truth. The power to see comes from within from the realisation that injustice is unacceptable. It also comes from the desire to be open to other people. It comes from a sense of community (Tadjo, 1991: 97). From the author's words, Akissi's unwavering determination to search for the truth is not merely as a result of personal issues such as women oppression but it is axed on the oppression of the entire society. She is intrinsically motivated to denounce injustices because she has the problems of community at heart.

Tadjo's extended representation of Akissi is marked with portraits of a young woman even as an initiator of change in society as illustrated by Akissi who is militant in demanding positive transformation in the community. The author paints an image of a feminine character which demands answers in anticipation of changing the society for the good of all! What comes to one's mind is the fact that Akissi is a spokesperson of the society, through which positive transformation of societies can be brought about as they speak in denouncing injustices as illustrated by Akissi who fights tirelessly not only to denounce female insubordination but equally to bring emancipation on a higher level for both sexes through fighting vices that grip society.

Here, Tadjo offers a female character out of the prescriptions of the scope of populist constructs of femininity. She presents a woman who has the ability to go out into the world in search of the truth. Her total commitment is evident:

> Did she really know what she had committed to? Was she ready to renounce all her privileges and the slow pace of time? She thought she was able to struggle, but will she have the strength to go all the way to the end of her quest? (*TBK* 33)

These rhetorical questions highlight the importance of Akissi's choice - she renounces all the royal privileges of being the king's only child, a princess, including a palace specifically designed for blind people to go and reside in an uncomfortable remote area, simply for the desire to learn about truth. This shows Akissi as a tenacious young woman capable of surmounting great paternal obstacles that could potentially hinder her on her path to self-actualisation. With little effort, Akissi is able to surmount these shackles of patriarchy.

With regards to her blindness which gives her a strong desire for search for truth, it goes without saying that she is a young woman with a high degree of independence in which truths can be discovered as epitomised when she goes out into the world to discover what life is all about as well as meaning attached to it. Her blindness "is not a debilitating one" (Tadjo, 1991: 97), says Tadjo in an interview. Akissi's search for truth is reminiscent of Halla Njokè, the female protagonist in the Cameroonian fellow woman writer Werewere Liking's most recent publication, *La mémoire amputee* (2004). Both Akissi in Tadjo's *Le royaume aveugle* and Halla in Liking's *La mémoire amputée*'s are preoccupied with search for truth, independence as well as self-fulfilment. As Volet remarks in her book review of *La mémoire amputee,* Halla Njokè's endless search for truth, independence and self-fulfilment in a world bent on reducing her freedom to naught is thus proposed to readers as a composite portrait that goes beyond her individuality: one that captures significant aspects of women's multi-faceted fight against adversity. The two young women protagonists' relentless fight against women subjugation based on gender biases accords the two women protagonists character traits that surpass long established masculine conceptualisations of women. The two women's personalities entail significant aspects of women's multi-faceted combats not only through oppressive male rule through patriarchy but also corruption and hunger that pose threats on

societies in the contemporary world. This is evident as the both women protagonists decide to live according to extraordinary ideals and a sense of self-awareness that is opposed to traditional dictates and expectations of male rule.

Like Akissi's father, although Halla's father has a high status in that he is well educated, he loses sight of his responsibilities and leads a life dominated by violence as he beats his wife and molests his daughter. Like Akissi, she has to fight oppression from her father. When she wishes to pursue her education, her plans are rebuffed by her father who turns her into a housemaid and sacrifices her future for the sake of selfish values such as his fame and fortune.

Although Tadjo writes strong feminine identities, as already mentioned in passing in the introduction, it goes without saying that, here, the author does not adopt a radical feminist stance. She shows men and women being partners in fighting socio-political inequalities. Parallel to Akissi's characterisation, she creates a balance for she equally displays Karim's great character. For instance reading *Le royaume aveugle* as a political allegory allows us to recognise, in one of its male fictional characters, commendable and plausible traits drawn from real politicians. In creating Karim's character, Tadjo's intentions, in her own words, were for him to be a practical person with strengths and weaknesses (Tadjo, 1991: 98). It seems to us that Karim is inspired by revolutionaries like Kwame Ture, Stockley Carmichael, Patrice Lumumba and even Che Guevara because they have an aura that pulls people towards them and this aura can also be charged with sexual energy (Tadjo, 1991: 98). Karim is introduced as an attractive person:

> This was a handsome man, lithe man. His body had a sensual scent and he often laughed to the point of breathlessness. She pretended as though she had not noticed him, but in reality, she was perfectly conscious of his presence. This happened without any effort, one day, he was right there and she could no longer pretend not to know it. Days went by and Akissi dreamed of Karim. That's all that she did. He mesmerised her. She went to bed and woke up with the memory of him. All she wanted was him by her side. She longed to talk to him. Tell him what was in her heart (*TBK 16*-17).

Karim is physically attractive to the extent that Akissi could not resist him. Not only that, his attractiveness renders her an approachable personality. At first Akissi wonders if he is approachable and she hesitates to talk to him.

Karim plays a heroic role in helping Akissi in the realisation of her dreams because he sends her to his native land to be taught more about life. His intentions of supporting Akissi's cause come out clear from the words of the messenger who accompanies Akissi to his mother upon their arrival at Karim's mother's place. "Mother, Karim asks that you welcome Akissi and take care of her as if she were your daughter. Teach her how to see" (*TBK* 45). Karim has Akissi at heart and is supportive of her quest to fight injustices since he pleads with his mother to consider Akissi as if she is her "own daughter" (*TBK* 45). During her stay with the Old Woman Akissi is enlightened. This enlightenment makes her ready to confront her father's rule, which will be elaborated on later. In being attractive and approachable, Karim's characterisation is almost that of a cliché of young idealistic revolutionary.

Despite her initial shyness, Akissi ends up approaching Karim and learns that he is also concerned with fighting socio-political injustices. Like Akissi, he is concerned with liberating his people. Indeed, he secretly goes to meetings with slum dwellers. There, he cuts a heroic figure as he "plunged into a world he knew" and "learned what was essential and took many fertile thoughts" during conspiracy meetings about bringing Ato IV's government down (*TBK* 74). It is Karim's sense of identity and concern for his society that extends to the social cause for his community that drives since he "felt tied to them by the navel and with them he found once again a reason for living, deep motivations from all his bitter years and personal sacrifices" (*TBK* 74). The image of physical attachment through the umbilical cord that the navel evokes gives him a strong connection and a strong sense of belonging with the slum dwellers. He identifies with them and this becomes the main motivating factor in his fight. He feels that he owes much to the oppressed, since a common birth unites them.

Karim is also bold and keen to learn himself: "he was there to trace new directions with them and to be enlightened by their words on his perilous journey" (*TBK* 74). His heroism also comes out clear in the wake of probable dangers and risks around his efforts to topple Ato IV's government. For instance, he may be killed in trying to oppose the king's rule but Karim is a man of strong beliefs:

> Karim thus lived a double life that helped him to advance and continue. Living was still burdensome and overwhelming but he was not dead. His soul remained intact, his reasoning always alert. He had stayed the same; the child of the savanna, the little one with the balloon-stomach who ran around on the arid land. He had remained the son of the dust and of the red soil, the protégée of spirits and dry wind […]. A constant passion that had matured with time in him since his youth (*TBK* 22).

This means that Karim is a resilient man who since his youth remains and feels connected to his roots. As a result, this made him tough and he is prepared to give up everything to achieve what he believes in.

His strong attachment to his native land makes him hold on tight to his beliefs. This is illustrated in this extract:

> He had convinced himself that he would go over there, to the city, in order to save his village that was dying a slow death, giving way to his own fate. He knew, from that point on that he was not one of those people prepared to accept destiny sitting down nor a person who left it to time to make things happen. He knew that in the big city, there was power, so he could liberate his village from slavery. That was his obsession, his main wish and it was embedded deep into his skin. It guided his every footstep and every decision, robbing him of the care free life of youth, and turning him into some kind of spokesperson (*TBK* 73).

Karim is ready to liberate his village from all form of injustices which he views as slowly crippling his society. This makes him a man of the people as he is concerned with the masses. It is obvious that from an early age, Karim's motivations are for social justice. He is willing to fight and "he knew well that life in the palace was harmful. He wanted to stop everything,

and have this monstrous edifice exploded" (*TBK* 22). He is also well conscious of the trappings of palace life but he remains resolute.

Yet Karim is not without weaknesses. Although he has the interests of his people at heart, he is afraid of physical confrontation: "Never to know the smell of blood. Never to be the one through whom horror would enter into the country, but to be the one to inscribe in white the name of new found freedom" (*TBK* 73). The implementation of his plans remains impossible because of his fear. The prophet also echoes his weaknesses: "you want to save the world and you think your crufixation will change the course of history. Beware! If you fight alone, you will die alone- or, with a few lonely comrades – what difference would it make?" (*TBK 73*)

His dreams and intentions to free his people remain wishful to a large extent because he is pacifist. As if to haunt him, he has nightmares which can be read as a result of his unfinished business. More so, it is evident in the rhetorical questions at the end of the whole chapter that describes him that his dreams remained far from being realised: "but where was the fire they needed to make their words burn deep? Karim asked himself. Where was the strength they needed to give to their words some cutting edge, the power of weapons?" (*TBK 74*). Even at the end of the story, Karim himself realises that his dream does not come true as he ponders:

> Had I known how to understand history, I could have reacted in a better way. Life is not written in black and white. I underestimated the various forces, burned too many bridges, bypassed reasoning, neglecting true analyses (*TBK* 83).

Karim understands that his mission is not an easy task. His dream and plan of liberating his people lacks concrete steps in order to be achieved.

1.9 Women as bearers of hope

Tadjo underlines the philosophies inherent within feminist discourses with her female characterisation which exceeds the confines of masculine authority. As several feminist critics remark, in their philosophies, that feminist novelistic writing is assertive and individualistic breaking away from the norm and presents a more balanced and plausible picture of the African female character, so is the author's characterisation of Akissi, the young woman protagonist (Stratton, 1994: ix). As already elaborated, Akissi's characterisation is interesting in the sense that it diverges from, and in some cases even surpasses, that common image of an oppressed woman whose space of influence has been reduced and reserved for the house, for instance. It is this autonomy that renders her the credible personality that Stratton mentions.

When Karim and Akissi get jailed she refuses to give up the struggle:

> You must not give up hope. We will start all over again. With more experience and vision. We will take into account how strange and complex this world is. From there on we will dismiss easy and simplistic ideas. We will know how to deal with reality (*TBK* 83-84).

Despite the failure of her plot to overthrow her father's corrupt government, Akissi continues to urge and encourage Karim. She takes on an authoritative voice when she tries to convince Karim not to quit. Akissi's repetition of "we will" illustrates her strongwill and hopeful anticipation for a victorious future: "but for now, we must accept defeat and learn how to survive" (*TBK* 84). Akissi is also a reasoned strategist: she elaborates her plan to deal with problems such as corruption and poverty inherent in her father's monarchy. The repetition of the phrases "we will" could be considered as outlining strategies for her quest. She chooses to view her present failure as a learning platform for the establishment of a better tomorrow, characterised by virtues such as the emancipation of not only women but society at large. Her burning desire to learn more about life continues. She decides to come to terms with reality as a starting point in accomplishing her mission, encouraged by the fact that this will serve for even deeper understanding, enabling her to correct her past mistakes. Despite the sad destiny that is imminent and cruelly imposing itself upon them, Akissi takes control not only of her

own fate but of Karim's as well as shown in her words of encouragement. On the other hand, Karim's attitude is diametrically opposed to Akissi's. His passiveness is in stark contrast to Akissi's fighting and determination. This suggests, perhaps, that he feels weak in the face of Akissi's strength. He says that "I'm disappointed, I'm weary. I'm at the end of the rope for hoping" (*TBK* 29). Here, we have a reversal of traditional gender roles in patriarchal societies in which women are not decision makers. In such societies, it is usually required and expected of women to be submissive, and neither to question orders nor instructions received from men. On the contrary, Akissi uses the second person singular and the future tense to express optimism, decidedness as well as her desire for unity of purpose. Karim, for his part, uses the first person singular and the present tense, which points to his pessimism and the idea that it is the end of the road for him. In displaying sheer determination by going to the very bitter end of her quest, Akissi carries hope in her actions. This she shows when she denounces submissiveness, a common personality trait ascribed to femininity. The question which is posed in the early pages, that "she, with volatile strength and open hands, did she know the dangers of the truth or of the path she was taking?" is thus simply a rhetoric one (*TBK* 29). We have here an image of a young woman who deals with her own problems and will find a way out of her traumatic experiences. Akissi does not shut herself off.

In her representations of women, Tadjo's portrayal of Akissi is not that of a super heroine who cannot fail. She also accepts defeat as Akissi and Karim "took stock of their mistakes and of their victories. But it was about their mistakes they talked especially" (*TBK* 33).

Had the story ended there, Akissi's mission would have seemed unaccomplished. Rather she gives birth to twins. This symbolises hope for a better tomorrow. In this light, the ending of the story is not tragic. The story ends on a consoling note as hope is passed in the matriarchal way, from Akissi to her children. Like the last chapter, entitled Death/Life, the entire novel is construed around polar opposites which the writer in fact brings together. This is the case of Ato IV's blindness and Akissi's sight; man (Karim) and woman (Akissi); modernity (Akissi) and tradition (the Old Woman) and Akissi's giving birth to a boy and a girl. The author closes the gaps between two opposites. The newly born twins represent a new lease on life, new thoughts and ideals as well as a continuation of their mother's struggle. In fact, Akissi's giving birth to twin children in itself, a girl and a boy, may be taken to signify that men and women are born equal.

This entire last chapter is narrated in a way that creates direct parallels between the birth inside the jail cell and the events outside the palace. As Akissi's contradictions come closer and become stronger, so is the approaching angry mass of protestors. A rhythmic harmony is created between the birthing of twins and the pace of the protestors. She seems to be the one dictating that pace, so in a way, Akissi's strength of will is powerful enough to break through her imprisonment and impact those for whom she wants to fight for. The narration attains an alignment of everything – eagles, children, women, mad men, a prophet and wise poet. At the same time, hope is also generated by the contrast of the opening of the story as the opposite of what was taking place in the beginning takes place. Now, in the end, these bats, symbol of darkness, become prey to eagles:

> Eagles drew huge circles in the sky, their powerful wings cutting the air like bolts of lightning. All of a sudden, they would swoop down into the trees and stick their claws into the skin of bats. Then they flew off carrying their prey. While kite-flying, they unlocked their grip leaving the bats to crash, like ripened fruit, onto the arid ground. And meanwhile, a short distance from the prophet, children were having fun dissecting bats and looking at their guts (*TBK* 94).

The dissection of bats by children right to the animals' guts, the core of their anatomy, gives an image of total defeat of forces of oppression and vice. This creates the impression of the end of an era and an uprooting of a reign of oppression as the bats are now being preyed upon by a force as powerful wings of eagles take control. It marks the prevailing of hope. Also, the circles that the eagles draw in the sky can be a sign of completion. Hence Akissi, against all odds, ends up victorious: "Soon thereafter, not a single bat remained […]. It was as if the world had turned itself upside down. As if the laws of nature had become something else" (*TBK* 94). The words "extinction" and "upside down" mark the end of an era of injustices as well as vice and signifies hope of a new and virtuous dispensation and order. In fact, this hope recreates another opportunity to rebuild; similar to the one that presents itself after the earthquake.

The structure of this last chapter contributes to the general feeling of hope. Indeed, the chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section is about Karim facing death: "in

the middle of the night, Karim was awakened. Without saying a word, they led him to the other side of the prison yard, to the place where hangings were held (*TBK* 93). Karim's tragic fate is juxtaposed with Akissi's giving birth, in the second part, in broad daylight.

The general feeling of hope is embodied too in the personality of the mad man. This emphasises Akissi's denouncing of injustices. The use of madness, in fiction not only destabilises postcolonial patriarchal power hierarchies but also allows the female protagonists to navigate the nervous condition that is the lot of women in Africa (Chipara and Ncube, 2012: 1) It means that the madman is used as a literary trope in that he is a spokesperson of the will of the people. Let us consider these comments from feminist D'Almeida:

> The mad man is the greatest representation of wisdom. It's a gift from the gods so as be close to the immortals! Only the mad can find the doors of the lost paradise! They alone can teach you what no teacher or oracle will ever tell you! They alone are gifted with magical powers! They alone are close to the Great Spirit and the bad spirit, because their mental state does not allow them to benefit from the great influence that they would have had on the universe had they been normal (D'Almeida, 2002: 24, my translation).

For D' Almeida, the madman is a figure that possesses divine power and whose words are not always to be interpreted literally and this is true in *Le royaume aveugle*. This is what the madman says:

> The lives of some people we cannot comprehend. Fate is not to be explained. Everything happens as if there are two parallel worlds with nothing in between. I invite you to hope, to share the pain of suffering together. Nothing is possible without sacrifice. You must be ready to offer your soul as sustenance and give freely off your bodies without keeping count. I invite you to hope. Hope is like a flash of lightning that breaks up the distance. I speak of a light in the dusk (*TBK* 97).

The repetition of the phrase "I invite you to hope" is nothing else but hope for a mission that is nearing its accomplishment. The words that the mad man uses such as "sacrifice, soul"

evoke the divine nature of his message.[15] He alludes to the importance of sacrifice, and we know, here, that it is about Akissi who made the biggest sacrifice, much a black Madona.[16] One is reminded here of Florent Couao-Zotti's short story *L'homme dit fou et la mauvaise foi des hommes* (2000) where a similar character fights against corruption and nepotism to a point where he confronts the chief of the World Bank, whom he addresses with wise words.

1.10 The other side: the perpetuation of masculine rule

Although the novel proposes strong feministic women characters, there are few instances, where the portrayal of women may be regarded as contrary to feminist ideologies.

For instance, the Old Woman is told to be "no longer a woman because she can no longer give birth" (*TBK* 47), seems to perpetuate sexist conceptions about womanhood and motherhood.

More so, the idea that women, during their menstrual periods, and Akissi in particular, have to go into isolation when the Mask comes out because the Mask cannot welcome such women may be a form of sexist discrimination. The Mask having come to existence in the village through a woman and women regarded at a later stage as outcasts to society, especially on central occasions in the village is discriminatory. However, Akissi's going into isolation proportionately displays some high degree of *esprit de corps* of female solidarity. The women bonding and female friendship that African feminist literary critics identify (Adebayo, 1996: 23) the feminine novel with, is also present here. As a result of this female solidarity, she no longer wants to quit:

[15] Christian faith lies in the doctrine that Jesus offered himself freely for sacrifice. Hence victory came into the world.

[16] In another of Tadjo's novels, the award winning *Reine Pokou: concerto pour une sacrifice*, the woman protagonist makes a big sacrifice, similar to that of Akissi. The legend is a story of a woman who sacrifices her only son by throwing him into the river to appease the gods and secure a safe passage across for her people. After a safe passage, she establishes her kingdom on the other side of the river, named Baoule, meaning the child is dead.

> The mother knew how to calm her anxiousness as she took care of her every day. She washed her and she helped her clean herself. When she touched the young women's body, it was with slow, soft movements. After a while, Akissi resisted no longer and gave in to her helping hands (*TBK* 54).

Conclusively, the author's representations of femininity in *Le royaume aveugle* highlight some women camaraderie and sisterhood as Akissi finds comfort in other women. Tadjo employs flashbacks, third-person narrative, omniscient narrators, vignettes, poetry, and oratory among other stylistics. The narrative voice is often interjected by direct dialogues between characters. These devices show that although thematically the author treats postcolonial crises, she adopts and interweaves stylistics of her own in the novels. Hence Tadjo's works escape simple classification. Whatever stylistics she adopts, it is interesting to note that these stylistics reinforce the strong feminine characters that the author creates. This is the case even in our next text, *Loin de mon père*. For instance, the story is told from the third person narrative whereas the title of the novel, *Loin de mon père*, suggests a first-person narrative.

"I feel so close to you, and yet so much separates us" (Tadjo, 2010: 5).

CHAPTER TWO

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND FEMININE REPRESENTATIONS: *LOIN DE MON PERE*

2.1 Introduction

This chapter proposes an analysis of the representation of the female characters in Tadjo's latest novel *Loin de mon père* through an autobiographical reading of the text.

Although autobiography has been identified by numerous terminologies, one of which is auto-fiction, they all fundamentally argue for a similar concept. For instance, Jacques Derida has referred to the autobiography as "circonfession", Claude Louis-Combert as "automythologie", Poirot-Delpech as "fiction-bilan", H. Juan as "roman-mirror", Bellman-Noel as "biographie" and Jacques Roubaud as "prose de mémoire" (Ferreira-Meyers, 2000: 2). For the purposes of this discussion, whose aim is to discuss idiosyncracity of feminine representations, we shall not dwell much on the various conceptualisations of the terms which have evolved and taken different forms as critics observe: little did Doubrouvsky know that the neologism he had marketed would take flight in various directions. For instance, in some cases the fictional being dominant, whereas sometimes the reality dominating the narrative (Ferreira-Meyers, 2000: 1). I shall not plunge our discussion into the vast ongoing debate on this sub-genre which warrants a fully-fledged examination of its own. To highlight the further ambiguity of the sub-genre, works that are evidently auto-fictional/autobiographical such as Laye's *L'enfant noir* (even when the writers would have openly agreed and highlighted their intentions and position) have been categorised as not being so is some instances.

Autobiographical writing has been a subject of great interest in recent feminine literary works as it is, according to some critics, the preferred tools for female Francophone writers (Oke, 1996: 279). Reality for African women is neither homogenous nor embodied in a single identity; the female existence being as multifaceted as the women's diverse backgrounds and intrinsic personalities (Nnaemeka, 1989: 75). Because of this, there cannot be a notion of

universal womanhood. The primary goal of the autobiographical genre in feminine fictional writing thus seems to refine the blanket representations in early texts by way of discussions and inscriptions of new feminine identities in individual texts. Francophone women writers' conviction in the importance of the autobiography lies in the idea that it is entirely by being spokespeople of their own selves, by telling their own story, that women in general may be better understood. According to Raymond-Dufour:

> It is not surprising to observe that autobiographical tales occupy a very important place in feminine writing. Writing about oneself is a way of claiming one's existence back by making one's voice heard without any of the trappings of the fictional story. That way, these auto-bio-graphies challenge the silence and the absence of women by recognizing each person's unique socio-cultural background […] (Raymond-Dufour, 2005: 2-3, my translation).

To that end, and to consider these hypothetical remarks as our point of departure, the specific argument that poses itself at this point in our analysis is how writing oneself in *Loin de mon père* inspires redefined portraitures of femininity for Tadjo. The question that we address here is how Tadjo's own life story enables an inscription of diversified female images, and how this ultimately positions her within the broader context of feminine African francophone writing, if at all.

2.2 Synopsis of the novel

Loin de mon père (2010), the latest of Tadjo's addition to francophone feminine literature, is a contemporary novel whose story opens with Nina, a young woman, making her way back to her native city, Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire, for the burial of her father, Dr. Kouadio Yao. Nina is a cosmopolitan, modern and literate professional young woman who resides in France. The tale, which is told from the third person perspective, is punctuated with numerous flashbacks into Nina's past which give insights into the lives of Nina's late parents and family in their homeland of Côte d'Ivoire. Dr. Kouadio was a prominent politician for he was one of the founding leaders of Côte d'Ivoire. Nina's late mother, Hélène, who also features in these

childhood reminiscences, was a fine artist of French origin who met her husband in Paris and joined him in Côte d'Ivoire. Together with her aunts, Aya and Affoué, as well as other relatives and friends of her native community, Nina organises the preparations for her father's burial. This is a highly structured and complex affair which runs for days, in accordance with the traditions of her culture:

> During the meeting, all aspects of the upcoming ceremony were considered, down to the smallest details. Several groups were formed spontaneously: the welcome committee, the transportation committee, the catering committee, the committee in charge of furniture rentals, the security committee, and so on. Volunteers stepped forward to take care of floral arrangements and decorations. Everyone had something to do. A treasurer was chosen (Tadjo, 2014: 20-21).[17]

Nina learns aspects of tradition from her paternal culture which she did not know. She finds out that her father's funeral has to be postponed because of a certain traditional festival for instance. She also learns from her uncle Kablan, that her father was not only a family man, but that he was also involved in the community, as is tradition. The customs to which the family adheres to are often strange and incomprehensible to her.

Nina not only has to take responsibility for the organisation of her father's burial but she also has to come to terms with certain aspects of her father's life and personality which until now were unknown to her despite him being a father figure to whom as a child she had always felt close. To her shock, she discovers that her father had other children (namely, Amon, Kofi, Roland and Cécile) with different women. Kangha, her male friend, justifies Nina's father's secret families. He says that according to tradition, his secret families were silently acceptable. When she goes through her father's possessions, she discovers more shocking truths about the tradition of secret offspring. One of these is a manual on witchcraft, which leaves her dumb-founded:

[17] All translations from the French by Amy Baram Reid. My thanks to the translator for allowing me access to a draft of her forthcoming translation *Far from My Father* (Charlottesville: UVA/CARAF, 2014). All quotations of the text which are from this edition, will be referenced as *LDMP* from now on.

> In any event, Nina was too stunned by the news to be able to share it with anyone. Her mind was reeling under the weight of it all (*LDMP* 125).

She also comes across documents like invoices and letters about her father's credit with a *marabout*[18], from whom he had tried to solicit services for a better post after his dismissal from work. She learns from her other uncle, Nyamké, that her father was a power hungry man, whose failure to secure a ministerial post had led to his ill-heath.

This family drama takes place in a city and country torn by civil war, leaving its society fragmented, which Nina also has to come to terms with. She is struck by the negative changes her country has undergone in her long absence. Corruption, greed and insecurity are now rampant:

> No one knows where things are headed. People are speaking in harsh tones, growing more radical, more set in their opinions. Everyone is talking at once and no one is listening. We look at each other with stony faces, full of distrust (*LDMP* 9).

Nina is struck by these changes which bring about a great sense of loss: "Nina couldn't believe it. Was this really happening in Abidjan, the city where she had always felt so safe?" (*LDMP* 16)

Despite all the relatives, friends and neighbours constantly surrounding Nina at this time, she feels terribly lonely:

> Surrounded by the crowd, she realized then and there that her most challenging journey was taking place right in her own city (*LDMP* 37).

[18] A *marabout* is a witch doctor / fortune teller.

She thinks of her Parisian boyfriend, Frédéric.

Meanwhile, she waits impatiently for her older sister, Gabrielle, who lives in Canada. Gabrielle cuts ties with the family since her youth. Nina waits in vain. Gabrielle responds to Nina's mail to inform her that she will not be in attendance at her father's funeral. She does not wish to attend the funeral in protest of her father's extra-marital family:

> He isn't gone, he has simply retired. Life goes on […]. The body is just a machine. It just can't keep up with the soul […]. Everything else, that's for the others. If they think it necessary to organize pompous ceremonies, that's their right. But they shouldn't ask me to join in. About my things, it's up to you. I had already forgotten them (*LDMP* 183).

Gabrielle's refusal to turn up for her father's funeral is also due to the fact that she views memories as an important element in life. Consequently, she would rather remember her father in a good light by not confronting the sad realities of her new extended family. The novel ends with the burial of Dr.Kouadio.

2.3 Autobiography and the feminisation of heroism

Although autobiographical writing is relatively old, recent conceptualisations by a French author and literary critic, Serge Doubrovsky, in his novel, *Fils* (1977) are insightful and enriching. His contributions have broadened, and continue to broaden, the scope of the genre. In this now seminal work he makes reference to literary works that blend both reality and fiction. He stresses that autobiography is a fiction constructed with strictly real events:

> A dream instead I put what a *book* of course substitute it's not the original product it's not real its ersatz […]. One believes it says true but as a fable. Fiction, of events and facts strictly real […] (Doubrovsky, 1977: 10).

This complex conceptualisation of autobiography underlines one of the most important notions in the study of autobiographical tales: autobiography is characterised by two paradoxically contrasting notions. It comprises elements of facts and fiction at the same time on one hand it attempts to capture real facts, yet simultaneously, it contains imagined fictional elements. The author confirms that her story captures both facts and fiction, simultaneously:

> According to the principle of fiction, everything is true and everything is false. The tale is indeed based on reality, but in order to free myself of it, I then reshuffled everything. I revised and reordered everything. What remains is the lie of memory, of speech. So, yes, we can say that there are undeniable autobiographical elements, but at the same time, the purpose of writing is otherwise, because it is ultimately story and purpose behind the story that counts. The novel is set at the peak of the Ivorian crises of the 2000s (Tadjo, 2010, my translation)[19].

Tadjo's intentions as extrapolated here are illustrated in the preliminary pages of her novel:

> This story is true, because it is anchored in reality, sunk deep into real life. But it is false as well, because it is the product of a literary endeavor where what really matters is not so much the accuracy of the facts, but the intention behind the writing. Everything has been revised, reworked, reorganized. Some details have been muted, others, in contrast, emphasized. In short, what remains is a lie, or perhaps a joke on memory's part, a trick of the spoken word. Lost references. Is this taken from someone else or entirely my own? (*LDMP* 3)

It is apparent that the text under study at this point touches on the dual aspect of autobiography, that of fact and fiction.

[19] Radio France Internationale interview, source: http://www.english.rfi.fr/africa/20101117-veronique-tadjo-questions-identity-and-fathers-funeral, 17/11/2010.

A challenge that confronts the writer with regards to the autobiographical text is to accurately remember the past and capture it with precision. Inevitably, memory is not objectively reliable and thus it becomes hard for a literary account to be entirely true and candid. Since details of past experiences become blurred with the passage of time, the autobiographer is faced with the serious challenge of inventing characters and events:

> The autobiographer cannot artlessly retrieve memories and their original meanings from the past to accurately (re)depict the original lived experience. Memories are always partial and selective; coloured by attitudes, beliefs and values; reconfigured by experience; and fashioned by language (Halse, 2006: 97).

This points to a crucial factor that governs autobiographical fiction. For this reason, real life details are invariably modified to pass for an autobiographical fiction, as the story teller attempts to supplement the resource of memory with imagination or narrative inventiveness to suit his/her evolving purpose (Adegoju, 2007: 124):

> What I respect is an intimate truth, a mental landscape, what got engraved in my memory--what left an imprint on me, as Proust says--and not the factual or referential accuracy. Autobiography is not about factual accuracy, because writing sometimes requires a concentration of facts not to be repetitive and also because memory is not accurate. But the writer of autobiography has a pact with him/herself, which is not to lie, not to invent just for the sake of fiction, but to be as honest as possible, and to go as far as possible in his/her quest for truth (Camille, 2011: 25).

In the light of this challenge, the writer therefore largely bases his/her story on his/her own discretion. Critics thus argue that in reordering and recreating facts and fiction, autobiographical stories inevitably involve self-definition, self-creation, and self-invention. They may incorporate re-enactments of dramatic scenes that involve formations of identities (Howard, 2006: 8). In our case, this is confirmed by the author herself:

> You always give something of yourself when you are writing and the main thing is that you base your work in reality but then there is the whole work of rewriting, rearranging, reordering, choosing, leaving out elements, so at the end of the day it's kind of false truth and true lie (Tadjo, 2010).[20]

Tadjo leaves it to the reader to consider if *Loin de mon père* is her most autobiographical novel. She highlights that she would not know if it would be her most autobiographical since her first text was fairly autobiographical too. In the scope of our study, the bottom line is that from these affirmations, she expresses with clarity the difficulty of writing without revealing some things about oneself. This renders the text her self-story for it inevitably contains elements of her life story.

The crux of the autobiography in African francophone feminine writing has been explained as follows:

> It is a restorative counterweight to the legacy of muting endured in slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy. The preference of the autobiography lies in its dual dimension that it is both a witness and performer, restoring subjectivity, constructing a much-needed archive, disrupting conventional literary and cinematic representations, and changing our understanding of communities (Larrier, 2006: 148).

This purports that the autobiography entails some authenticity because it contains lived experiences from women, directly from the sources and subjects concerned. It also suggests that women's autobiographical writing can be a tool in challenging oppression. In our case, Tadjo tackles patriarchal oppression.

[20] Radio France Internationale interview, source: http://www.english.rfi.fr/africa/20101117-veronique-tadjo-questions-identity-and-fathers-funeral, 17/11/2010.

The disappointment that Nina and her family experiences when they find out that her father had an extra-marital family and had engaged in sinister practices such as witchcraft, discredit the male figure. When put side by side Nina emerges a stronger character than her father. The title of the story is significant here. Nina was not only far from her father physically, since she lived in exile, but metaphorically too. The metaphorical sense of the title is evoked in the end when Nina learns that Dr. Kouadio, who we may perceive as a symbol of patriarchy, is not the father figure whom she had always felt connected to in her entire life. There are huge ideological gaps in their approach and way of thinking about life.

At this point of our study, we could remind ourselves that one of the key realities of autobiographical writing is the need to talk about one's experience, the need to link fiction with reality to better understand, better exorcise, better accept sometimes an unspeakable reality in order to romanticize one's life (that is to say more beautiful) or invent possible situations: what could or could have taken place in reality (Halse, 2006: 97, my translation).

Loin de mon père is based on events drawn from real life. Tadjo concurs with this idea in saying that her story is constructed around several sets of memories and all sorts of mixed feelings about her relation to her native country, Côte d'Ivoire:

> Absolutely, I had always been a great traveller going all over the world, almost, and I had always travelled light in the sense that I knew that I would come back to my country any time I wanted and that things were in place, but after the civil war, after the deep crises, it has been different. I felt that something has been broken, that I had lost something that I will never be able to recover because the country itself has changed a lot […] a country that is no more the same. And I found that difficult because it has given me a feeling of exile which I didn't have before.[21]

[21] Radio France Internationale interview, source: http://www.english.rfi.fr/africa/20101117-veronique-tadjo-questions-identity-and-fathers-funeral, 17/11/2010.

A further interesting point is the preference by many autobiographers of a third person narration, such as Tadjo does here. The rationale behind this is that it allows for modifications of significant details or characters in order to use fiction in the service of a search for the self (Lindsay, 2000: 5).

Loin de mon père presents strong feminine identities and despite its third person narration, it is undeniable that the story is also Tadjo's own. Drawing from our knowledge and acquaintance with Tadjo, it is evident that *Loin de mon père* is Tadjo's attempt at writing herself, in a rather thinly disguised manner:

> Like Nina, Tadjo has lived most of her adult life outside Côte d'Ivoire: Tadjo's studies and her work as a professor have taken her from Côte d'Ivoire to France, the United States, Nigeria, Kenya, England, and now South Africa, where she has lived for more than ten years. As an author, her work is prolific, multiform, and increasingly political While Nina is a photographer, Tadjo is an accomplished visual artist (Cazenave, 1996: 171).

Several elements of Nina's life correspond with Tadjo's life in a deliberate manner. This is the case, if anything, of the family genealogy. Like Nina, Tadjo grew up in Côte d'Ivoire with an Ivoirian father and a French mother.

More so, in the novel a number of documents are quoted at some length, ranging from Nina's parents' marriage contract, the exposé extracted from a book on insects, to even an extract from the Bible. Rarely do we read extracts drawn from real life documents in fiction. Tadjo's text however contains authentic documents that are drawn from everyday life. These make lots of references to and allusions to reality as lived in real life. Indeed, *Loin de mon père* is an account that is strongly autobiographical (King, 2010: 10, my translation).

As purported in Halse's conceptualisation of the autobiography, *Loin de mon père* is based on the true story of Tadjo's lived experiences. It is obvious that Nina feels very similarly to the author's life experiences. Our story is principally set in the author's native country, Côte d'Ivoire, when Nina comes back for her father's burial. Nina, like the author herself, has

extensively travelled and lived outside her own country. Nina is also faced with the harsh realities of a country in a deep political and social turmoil, stirred by civil war.

On several occasions Nina is aware of changes in her native community. She struggles to come to terms with the degradation that has taken place since her departure, as her country is torn by corruption and civil war. This recounted experience is a common one in postcolonial African literature. In Boehmer's words:

> The post-independence era has witnessed the rise of less romanticized accounts of diasporic returns in both African and Caribbean fictions, representing the return more commonly as an emotional crisis, the end of a nostalgic dream, or a harsh encounter with a reality of continuing social and political hardship (Boehmer, 2005: 192).

Nina does indeed feel a sense of exile as her sense of belonging and identity are lost in her romantic quest for the mythical return to her homeland. This, of course, disrupts the intertwined narratives of home and nation (Davies, 2000: 113):

> She had been gone for too long. How could they not hold it against her? She had thought that she could travel freely, roaming wherever she chose until it was time to return. Come home? Then everything would be just as it had always been, each thing in its place. All she'd have to do is to drop her bags and pick up her life, right where she had left it. She'd be welcomed with open arms, all the richer for her travels. But that was before the war, before the rebellion. Everything had been turned upside down, had crumbled away. The full force of her exile hit her like a whip and sent her reeling. Voices began to shout in her head: "Just who do you think you are? You are nothing. Your house was destroyed. Your parents are dead and gone. No one wants you here. Get out!" (*LDMP* 7)

Nina's country has changed for the worse and Nina cannot relate to it anymore. Nina's sense of exile is confirmed in a long-distance call to her boyfriend Frédéric in Paris. She tells him

that there are more welcoming countries, other than hers, in the world. She openly expresses her discomfort at not feeling at home in her own country:

> But, no . . . don't you see? I'm less optimistic than you are. War can break out again at any moment. Many other countries have a lot more to offer. Why should I waste my life here? (*LDMP* 105)

Right from the opening of the story, it also occurs to Nina that her country has changed a lot and is no longer the same:

> The country was no longer the same. War had left it scarred, disfigured, wounded. To live there now would mean forsaking those outdated memories, ideas from another time (*LDMP* 7).

The personification of the country, combined with the enumeration of the effects shows the toll of the untold suffering of Nina's dear home land. As a result, it is now difficult to live in such a country. The menace of the civil war is present everywhere on the city streets, and this is unbelievable to Nina. She asks herself whether this is really happening in Abidjan, the city where she had always felt so safe (*LDMP* 16).

Because of several social and political problems that trouble her country, for Nina, it is now difficult to relate to the new socio-political dispensation in Abidjan. In fact, the first time Nina has something to relate to and find peace in is nature:

> Conversation fell as they drove along the road lined with coconut trees. Nina marveled at the landscape as if she were seeing it for the first time. It seemed to her that the trees, with their tall and elegant trunks, were standing guard before the ocean. Their fronds, tussled by the winds from the sea, waved gently to the rhythm of an unheard melody. Nina took a deep breath and felt so much better (*LDMP* 30*)*.

As Nina struggles to come to terms with the reality of her country which has changed for the worse, she finds solace in nature rather than in her country. She is like a privileged observer through which Tadjo can paint a socio- political portrait of developments in Côte d'Ivoire.

Gender is also another factor which contributes to Nina's problems:

> The romantic imagery of the return to Mother Africa has also been disturbed by approaches that take into account gender differences. As Piper Kendrix Williams suggests […] in feminine writing's representations of women's migrations back to the African continent, gender further complicates the already impossible return to the extent that the migrations […] turn quickly into exile. In other words, the diasporic African female revenant is always not only African/Black, but also *female*, and this very fact has an impact on the way in which return and home are experienced (Toivanen, 2010: 5).

In our view, Toivanen is right in identifying gender as a compounding factor in difficult returns. In the novel, Nina's difficulty in grappling with the political decay in her country is seemingly bent on gender. Gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities it becomes impossible to separate out the question of gender from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (Butler, 1998: 3):

> If she had a husband at her side, things would certainly have been better. Together at night in the quiet of their room, they would have figured things out, weighed the pros and cons, and examined the issues from all sides. The next day she'd have seemed less alone, less vulnerable in everyone else's eyes. She missed Frédéric, but they had decided it was best for him to stay in Paris (*LDMP* 115).

The challenge for Nina is evoked by her strong emotional attachment to her boyfriend Frédéric, and her wish for his presence to ease the burden:

> She felt incredibly sad […]. She felt a sudden need to call Frédéric, to hear his voice. He'd help her put things in perspective. As usual, when in trouble, she turned to him. He was such a good listener […]. Talking to him had done her good (*LDMP* 26-27).

In African women's writing, representations of national politics become most sharply visible through readings of familial structures and institutions (Andrade, 2011: 92). This is the case, for instance, in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* (1982) and Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* (1994) where politics are centered on the family set up. Even though these texts also treat of women perceiving the postcolonial crises in their countries, Tadjo's female characterization is distinct from Warner-Vieyra's and Emecheta's because Nina is not married.[22]

However, Nina's ability to be aware of the changes and coming to terms with a harsh reality affords her some form of power. Through its main protagonist, this autobiographical tale presents social problems which beset a country and give us a new understanding of women's awareness of nation-building issues.

The author redefines femininity from a gender perspective. She broadens the scope of femininity by bringing to discussion the question that women are not necessarily concerned only with feminine matters but may contribute as well to nation building. Nina's awareness of the socio-political challenges of her country is peculiar to Tadjo's women, expressing a postcolonial disillusionment through a feminine lens and putting women at the forefront. Whereas nationalist ambitions are most often accorded to male figures in contemporary African francophone fiction, Tadjo's female characters often show political ambitions and play a key role in fostering nationhood building. In *Le royaume aveugle*, Akissi's quest is constructed around her challenge of her father's abuse of political power. In the same novel, Akissi's mother challenges her husband to share political power with her. In *Reine Pokou: concerto pour une sacrifice*, Pokou sacrifices her only son to secure the safety of her people. After this, she establishes the Baolé kingdom.

[22] In fact, in Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* and Emecheta's *Kehinde*, the women protagonists' rationale for returning is inspired by masculine rule - Paris to native Senegal in *Juletane* and London to Nigeria in *Kehinde*. This in itself could be viewed as a form of domination, because the two women have no option but to comply with their husbands.

Because autobiographical reading is strongly concerned with identity, we examine Tadjo's constructions as well as reconstructions of women identities in telling the story of her life. It is obvious to us that, with this novel, Tadjo has indeed given much of herself through the portrayal of the text's key female figures (Nina, Gabrielle and Hélène) and by doing so she has enabled redefinitions of womanhood.

Whilst autobiography has been widely embraced in feminine writing, its study shows that it is a sub-genre that is still undergoing huge metamorphoses[23]:

> A contemporary phenomenon has emerged in autobiographical writing. Elements of one's self-identity have been projected on to the many, with which others can identify. A transfer has taken place from personal to universal (Howard, 2006: 8).

Thus, in their efforts to search for a single identity, authors are actually required to go to the other, to find the other in the 'Self' and so change its 'Self' (Ferreira-Meyers, 2000: 2). In other words the scope of the autobiography is widened and the identities portrayed gain universal appeal. The editors' note on the back cover of *Loin de mon père* echoes the idea:

> Quel est le pouvoir des femmes au sein de la famille, jusqu'où peut aller l'ambiguïté de leur comportement face à la polygamie, l'héritage familial ou les choix de toute une vie? D'une voix toujours plus déterminée, Véronique Tadjo questionne l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui, entre rituels et dérives politiques, destin individuel et portrait d'une culture ancestrale (Tadjo, 2104 : 198).

This translates as:

[23] Critics and practitioners have theorized the slippery hybrid; major colloquia and related publications have interrogated its forms; a website has been established; several studies have summarized the evolution of theoretical debate; still others have suggested productive templates for considering the creative fissures and fractures at work in auto-fiction (Jordan, 2012: 76).

> What powers do women have within the family? How far can the ambiguity of their responds to polygamy, family heritage or choices of a lifetime go? In an ever more determined voice, Véronique Tadjo questions Africa today, between ritual and political abuses, between an individual destiny and the portrait of an ancient culture (Tadjo, 2104: 198, my translation).

Through the characterisation of Nina, the context of the novel is broadened to apply to African women as a whole. Nina's coming to terms with her father as well as with a country rooted in postcolonial crises is projected on to the wider context of African femininity. It becomes so because Nina's personal experiences are taken as representative of any woman in her position. This is why I agree with the premise that autobiographical writing offers a rich literary resource for the African writer to project his/her individuality but also to locate it within a universal realm in a bid to probe and appreciate communal experiences as well (Adegoju, 2007: 122).

With this literary thrust, this writing places itself, therefore, in the context of African francophone feminine writing as it axed along the lines of the concept of autobiography being representative of the universal.

2.4 Far from the father: the disappointing paternal figure

Nina's father's burial is a tip of the iceberg in that it exposes the fact that she and her father were truly estranged and Dr. Kouadio is in fact not the one she had always felt attached to. A critical look into the images of Nina and the ideals or principles which she thought her father upheld on the other hand denigrates patriarchy. This theme of the disappointing paternal figure is also explored in *Le royaume aveugle* in that Akissi's problems stem from the paternal figure. Here, the author's uniqueness in her feminine characterisation is evident in her use of the autobiography to stage a seemingly subtle confrontation to a patriarchal figure, yet there is a powerful force that leaves the paternal figure defamed behind it. The subtleness is achieved by the use of a vivid narrative style yet it is all through flashbacks into Nina's childhood reminiscences through which the story is told.

Let us consider, in this part of our analysis, what Nina (a feminine figure) had thought her father (a masculine figure). From this, we shall see the later shocking discoveries of a completely different personality of Nina's father.

Let us begin by demonstrating why Yao Kouadio appears to us as the quintessential representative of male dominance / the patriarchal system. Right in the beginning of the story, there is an incident which gives us a glimpse of the patriarchal system of Côte d'Ivoire which Tadjo denounces. It happens upon Nina's arrival when she speaks to an official interrogating her:

> "How many days will you stay?" Nina hesitated. "I'm from here. Does it matter how long?" "I asked you a question." Suddenly the man's face lit up. "Are you the daughter of Dr. Kouadio Yao?" he asked, holding the passport open in front of him. "Yes," Nina replied apprehensively--she wasn't quite sure where he was heading with all his questions. "Oh, I know your father well! We're from the same place. You'll have to say hello to him for me. I'm Corporal N'Guessan." He stamped her passport and handed it back with a wide smile, one meant to suggest their complicity, then added quickly, "Welcome home!" (*LDMP* 10-11).

The corporal's interrogations, make Nina feel unwanted in her own native city. It is only after he learns who her father was that the corporal gives her a warm welcome. One may say that the basis of her being allowed to pass through security, without further questioning, is based on patriarchal acquaintance of the corporal and Dr. Kouadio:

> On her arrival, the old homeland with its heavy bureaucratic practices makes Nina feel an unwanted revenant. Firstly, at the customs, Nina is treated like an intruder until the official realizes that she is the daughter of a prominent national figure. This clearly implies that the country she is returning to is that of her father, not hers (Toivanen, 2010: 11).

The conversation evokes the dominance of masculine rule in Nina's father's native country. As a result, Nina's efforts to emotionally connect with her father by paying him her last respects seem gargantuan:

> Her return is marked by a deception on the part of the male figure (father) who has initiated or motivated the whole venture of return. The fact that in Tadjo's novel the protagonist's return is motivated by her father denotes a very direct engagement with the (paternal) nation. The absence of a husband in Tadjo's novel does mean that the female protagonist has the possibility to renegotiate more actively her own relation to African fatherland […] (Toivanen, 2010: 11).

Although the sole motive behind Nina's return to her home country is her father's death, the discoveries of new aspects of his life baffle her. Here, the author proposes a scenario where a young woman's problems are indeed caused by a man but, as we shall explain, she is not trapped by this nor by the dangers of male rule. In the end she finds a way out when she forgives her father. Nina's power is further emphasized by the fact that she does not have a husband and that she resolves her own problems without anyone's help.

The death of the masculine figure, as in the opening of our story is a direct effort to discredit patriarchy. It is symbolic silencing of the masculine voice, in favour of feminine strength and emancipation. It is implicit yet it opens up Pandora's Box for Nina who is left with little to appreciate of her father. As the plot unfolds, it turns out that, in fact, like Akissi's father in *Le royaume aveugle*, Nina's father becomes a masculine stereotype. We learn for example that he was politically ambitious:

> Nina finds out that during the latest years of his life, her father had, despite his former prominence, already lost contact with the rulers, turning into a relic of the ancient regime and deemed guilty for the chaotic state of affairs (Toivanen, 2010: 12).

This insinuates that his ill health and eventual death is brought about by his own personal failings. In Nyamké's words:

> It happened several years ago, your father just fell apart in front of me. It was the first time I had seen a man his age really cry like that. He had truly believed that the post of Minister of Health was his. The papers had already put him at the top of the list of candidates. But at the last minute, he was passed over and another man took his place. It must have been the biggest disappointment of his life. He never got over it. I think that he never really knew how to pull on the strings of power. Not enough of a party man, I guess (*LDMP* 54).

The use of direct speech, relatively rare in the text as a whole, adds credibility to Nyamké's account. Nyamké seems to insinuate that despite his greediness for political power, Dr. Kouadio, after all, was not capable of playing the political game.

Nyamké's portrayal of Dr. Kouadio also raises questions about his wealth:

> He was seen as one of the most important members of the family, even if it was sometimes whispered that he owed his success almost entirely to government connections (*LDMP* 55).

This leaves one doubting his success – whether it is earned out of his own hard work and deserved or if it is acquired from political corruption with his acquaintances in the new government.

The questions that Dr. Kouadio noted down to go and ask a pastor in Ghana show that the main agenda for his trip was accumulation of personal wealth and self-aggrandizement:

> Questions to ask the pastor:
> (1) The real reason why I was let go from the Institute.
> Answer:
> (2) My previous professional posts. Reason for their relative

> instability.
> Answer:
> (3) My future.
> a. Will I ever again hold an important position? If so, how many months before I start?
> b. Will I be named Minister of Health?
> Answer:
> (*LDMP* 78).

Another cliché of men that we perceive through Dr. Kouadio is that of sexual virility. Nina's father's extra-marital affairs were motivated by his need for a son. He becomes a cliché masculine figure whose secret extra-marital relationships discredit him entirely. His actions lead to untold emotional suffering for Nina and the family.

Dr. Kouadio is a man who had a spirit of polygamy. Nina's plea to her parents for a younger sister or brother was in vain. Despite her request for brothers and sisters, it had been categorically turned down:

> Throughout her childhood, Nina had asked her parents for a little brother or sister. In vain. They always answered: "You and Gabrielle are all that we need. And, you know, kids are a lot of work. And expensive, too." How could she have ever imagined things turning out like this? (*LDMP* 33)

Yet his father secretly had several other children with different women.

The author shows consequences that arise from such patriarchal practices. He seemed to believe in the idea that men are bulls and virility is marked by the number of wives or children a man has, especially from extra-marital affairs:

> Another element that essentially contributes to the protagonist becoming a stranger in her homeland is the growing cultural distance between her and the father for whom she has returned […]. Once again, it is an issue of having secret families and descendants, and the

> actions of the treacherous head of the family are common knowledge to all his relatives except his daughter. In a way, then, it is the tradition and the relatives that install themselves as obstacles between Nina and her father. The father and daughter are worlds apart (Toivanen, 2010: 19).

This entails that Nina's deception by her father is worsened by two factors. Firstly, tradition, which recognizes polygamous relationships and silently condones these unions in male dominated societies, is a source of women's oppression. This also hints at the idea that women can also contribute to the oppression of other women. Female solidarity is at stake here since Nina's aunts, who knew that their brother had other children, kept it a secret from her. The greater solidarity among women that is needed to alleviate the agony of female oppression in polygamous societies (D'Almeida, 1986: 164) is absent here:

> "No, it's the truth. You can ask your aunties if you'd like. They know us. Everybody knows the doctor was our father." Nina's blood ran cold. "And how is that I don't know anything about this?" Cécile was clearly embarrassed. "Because no one wanted to tell you. If you were home when we came to visit Papa, he didn't want us to stick around. He warned us that he would be very angry if we tried to talk to you or to your big sister."(*LDMP* 124).

More so, tradition continues to be a source of women oppression for Nina. Her aunts ask her to hold on to her father's ring until the end of the funeral. They tell her that according to tradition, it would be buried with him. Nina was deeply torn about this; she would have loved to slide it on her own finger (*LDMP* 125).

Tradition becomes a huge obstacle between Nina and her father when Nyamké tells her that her father owed him money:

> Nina struggled to hide her irritation. "I'm sure you have a note acknowledging the debt, some sort of paper . . . I don't know, something to show me?" This seemed to offend him. "Listen, Nina,

> you know how we do things here. I certainly wasn't going to ask your father to sign a paper. It was a question of trust. Your father did so much for me and I respected him immensely. I couldn't ask him to sign anything of the sort." "So you want me to give you four million, just like that? Listen, times have changed, you can no longer rely on someone's word alone. It's just not reasonable."… But I'll talk to my aunts about it. We'll hold a family meeting, if necessary. One thing is certain, I can't make this decision all by myself." (*LDMP* 57).

Even though Nyamké's integrity is questionable by saying that is the way they always do business, she openly challenges that. She proposes transparent and better ways of conducting business.

Nina continues to defy tradition:

> Another thing bothered her: according to tradition, she shouldn't have accepted his invitation. The rules were quite clear: no entertainment until the end of the mourning period. She promised herself her aunts would never find out (*LDMP* 102).

She defies tradition when she meets with Kangha, whom she had last seen a long time ago.

Tradition continues to impose itself on Nina:

> "My daughter, we have some news for you . . ." Nina stopped eating. This sounded serious. Aunt Affoué looked at her intently. "Unfortunately, the date of your father's burial needs to be put back." "But, why?!" she exclaimed, at a loss for words. "The ceremony was scheduled right in the middle of the Yam Festival. No burials can take place then. It's forbidden." Nina couldn't believe her ears. "Forbidden, by whom? Come on, let's be serious, what century are we living in? […] Realizing that the decision had been made without her, Nina tried another angle. "But we've already announced the date of the burial in the newspapers and on the radio. We can't just change our minds now. This long period of mourning has been hard enough. He's been lying there in the morgue for almost a month now. This isn't right!" Deep

> sighs. "My daughter, you are quite right. We understand your reaction very well. This is hard for us, too. But it's not our fault […]. She left the room. They knocked at her door several times. She didn't answer but just turned off the light (*LDMP* 108).

Nina challenges tradition and expresses the idea that people should embrace new ways of thinking. This shows women's oppression on her aunts as well since although they observe the oppression that stem from such traditional stipulations, it is equally also hard for them.

Tadjo's advocations for women empowerment, good leadership and governance are undeniable in both novels under study[24].

Nina cannot relate to her father anymore because of her father's deception. As the male figure is castigated, the female figure is automatically elevated. Three entire chapters starting from page 136 are dedicated to a re-establishment of a new relationship between Nina and her mother, whom she had always mistakenly held responsible of all the bad things in the family:

> For a long time, Nina had blamed her mother for everything that was wrong. She had even held the color of her skin against her. She was troubled by her mother's helplessness, which cast a long shadow over her younger years. According to nature's laws, she was the one who was supposed to need her mother, not the other way around. She wasn't there just to provide some diversion for her parents. Now Nina realized how wrong she had been (*LDMP* 139-140).

Nina's innermost confessions allude to the idea that the further she feels she is from her father, the closer she becomes to her mother. Nina regrets having discriminated against her. Here, the author's unique style of feminine representation is clear in the structure of the story. The fairly long description of Dr. Kouadio is followed by Hélène's portrait, which is almost of the same length as her husband's. This gives symmetry and a double sided view of Nina's

[24] This is further reinforced by the author's comments outside of her fictional work in articles about current affairs in Africa and Côte d'Ivoire in such publications as the French papers *Le Monde* and *Libération*, as well as popular radio and television channels such as *Radio France Internationale* and *TV5 monde* (*LDMP* 205).

father and her mother which allows for an easy comparison of the patriarchal and the matriarchal figures.

In these representations, it appears that Dr. Kouadio's qualities from Nina's memories are negated by the reality which she now has to confront. Despite him having been a man of the people, whose door was open to everyone as he loved exchanging ideas, who always had people at heart, in the end Nina's father proved to be a complex figure which Nina thought she knew but did not know. This is why the family and Nina attempt to reconnect with the past father, but in vain:

> After the afternoon siesta, the aunts decided to give the living room a more solemn feel, since the photo of their brother was on display. It was a portrait that Nina had taken some years before, during a visit to the village. Her father had seemed particularly happy that day and Nina had captured the moment (*LDMP* 51).

Nina's willingness to seek a way forward comes from the same realization as that of Akissi in *Le royaume aveugle*.[25] Both come to realize the huge divide between their way of thinking and that of their fathers:

> Nina closed the book. How sinister! She would have liked to believe that the book was there in the drawer by chance. But the dog-eared pages made it clear that it had been consulted many times. Tears welled up in her eyes. In what sort of world had her father lived? She suddenly understood that they had been separated from each other by a distance far greater than the thousands of kilometers between them (*LDMP* 70).

This realization gives Nina the strength she needs to close the distance between her and her father. This, she will do by way of a reconciliatory act that we shall elaborate on later. Even

[25] In *Le royaume aveugle*, Akissi realises that her father is ignorant to the social injustices of his people.

though Nina faces deception, it is noticeable in the subsequent development of the story that she is able to negotiate her way out of this sad reality. She will not let herself be trapped by circumstances.

Tadjo's women possess a strong sense of identity and thus resist classification in the ordinary notions of womanhood. In both novels, Akissi and Nina's problems stem from the paternal figure. In *Loin de mon père*:

> Tears welled up in her eyes. In what sort of world had her father lived? She suddenly understood that they had been separated from each other by a distance far greater than the thousands of kilometers between them (*LDMP* 70).

Akissi feels the estrangement from her father in similarly spatial terms:

> There is a wall between us. We are unknown to each other. We have been cloistered together in one world without ever becoming close (*TBK* 20).

The young female protagonists are both fighting their fathers, who appear to be ignorant of the socio-political reality of their people. Nevertheless, Nina and Akissi distinguish themselves by their awareness of social and political problems in their respective societies, their concern for improvement and the initiatives they take to bring about the desired change (Yakubu, 1998: 271).

Even in her literary debut work, Tadjo paints strong feminine identities:

> *Latérite* (1984) shows the debut literary vision of the woman who part with the classic role that is hers in traditional society. Considering the minor importance given to the woman in this African society and aware of the urgency of a change of mentality, Tadjo depicts a

> woman ready to play crucial roles in the advent of a better African society (Gnapka, 2009: 52).

In addition, the narrative analysis of these two key texts has shown that Akissi and Nina are complex and refuse to be trapped by their circumstances. This we see when Nina and Akissi self-discover: they find out that solutions lie within themselves and they take it upon themselves shoulders to fight the socio-political status quo. Rather than trying in vain to find answers that would explain her father's choices, Nina looks inward to find answers of her own. How will she relate to the newly discovered members of her family? How will she fulfil her familial and financial obligations to them? Finally, will her relationship with Frédéric move forward and, if so, on what terms? Akissi denounces her privileged life in the palace and sets out to fight various injustices such as corruption and hunger with the hope to contribute to a better world for all. Likewise, Nina realises that the solution lies within her reconciliatory gesture and her bringing together her family, an act of refusing to be trapped in her father's bad heritage. Although at first she is baffled by her father's behaviour and appears hopeless, she later makes efforts to reunite her siblings. Nina and Akissi manage to stay strong and defend their own convictions despite the complex and corrupt environments in which they have to exist.

Also, women's problems emanate not only directly from their fathers, but from the entire paternalistic socio-economic system in which they find themselves. In Accad's words:

> What the characters discover is that they are not rebelling merely against a single custom, a particular oppressor, but they are facing the complex and total interrelationship between their own beings and the society that has shaped them (Accad, 1993: 250).

Through the investigation of Akissi and Nina's characters it has become evident that Tadjo proposes revisions of traditional representations of womanhood. No matter how seemingly powerless they appear in the first instance, both main protagonists surmount all possible challenges. Akissi's blindness and Nina's stay in exile could have been a source of great difficulty. Hope in the end prevails. Both novels end on a happy note: Akissi gives birth to

twins (tellingly a boy and a girl) and Nina's reconciliatory gesture evokes the need for forgiveness and moving forward.

2.5 Rebellious wifehood

A challenge to patriarchy in *Loin de mon père* is expressed by Hélène's rebellious stance. It is obvious that Dr. Kouadio was guilty of the most basic machismo:

> They'd been together for about six months when Hélène found out she was expecting a baby. As soon as she told him, Kouadio started to avoid her. When she stopped by to visit, Kouadio asked Étienne to tell her that he had gone out and that he'd only be back late in the evening (*LDMP* 85).

This shows that even before marriage, Hélène endures Kouadio's sexism. However, she is a defiant woman whose rebellion is a plea for women's voice in marriages to be heard, even beyond the grave:

> In the darkness of his room, he could hear his wife's voice as clearly as if she were still alive. "What has gotten into you? Why are you acting like this? Because of this marabout, you're just not thinking straight!" "Please, Hélène, don't start in on this again, not now . . ." "It's never the right time with you. Do you really expect me not to care when you're acting like this? I am your wife, after all. It's up to me to warn you if no one else will!" […] "Please, don't tell me that it's still about tradition! You are ruining your life. You aren't just anybody, you know. Or have you forgotten? This marabout is hurting you. You should be able to see that yourself." That's when, overwhelmed by it all, he cried out into the night: "You're the one who's poisoning me! You don't have any answers. Why don't you help me instead of just berating me like this?" "And how do you want me to help you? You've already given him all of your savings and you're ready to give him even more. Do I have to bankrupt myself, too? You have gone too far!" (*LDMP* 82-83).

For Hélène, marriage did not mean submissiveness nor the intersection of multiple oppressions (Rosenfelt, 1991: 50). From Dr. Kouadio's own conscience, her firm rejection of feminine oppression is highlighted by her voice which was as clear as if she was alive, even through the darkness. It appears that men hide behind traditional practices, which are synonymous to the mountains of feminine oppression at the back of African women and connect much strength and heroism to males, to perpetuate their unfair biased privileges (Valerie, 1998: 25). However, Hélène transgresses patriarchal norms in her perception of marriage because, for her, husbands have to be accountable.

Tadjo's women characters come out naturally as feminist, fighting all form of oppression:

> Feminism is sometimes confined to women's struggles against oppressive gender relationships. In fact, however, women's actions, both now and in the past, often have been against interconnecting relations of inequality and have involved many aspects of resistance around daily life and culture that are not simply about gender (Rowbotham, 1992: 6).

Hence women's challenge is not only centred and limited to gender-based oppression, but includes all forms of oppression. Dr. Kouadio's words also convey racist remarks:

> You don't get it. There are too many things that you just can't understand. With your Western ideas, you think you're smarter than everyone else, but you really don't know anything at all. I'm starting to get fed up with your criticism! (*LDMP* 82-83)

Here, as far as Nina's mother's marriage is concerned, another diverging picture in Tadjo's female characterisation lies in her conception of polygamy. Let us consider, firstly, feminine identities in previous early fiction:

> Polygamy is the epitome of female denigration and exploitation and domination in West Africa. If home represents a place where one is most at ease, the polygamous home is not home but hell for the core wives and their children as tensions reign supreme, fuelled by envy, distrust intrigues and all sorts of destructive passions (Emenyonu, 50: 2000).

Even though she treats the generic theme of polygamy in *Loin de mon père*, she problematizes it differently as Reid expresses here:

> She moves away from a discussion of the institution of polygamy *per se* to a consideration of what Mariama Bâ herself called man's polygamous instincts. Rather than drawing battle lines between men and women, Tadjo explores the consequences of infidelity by men and women on family relationships […]. In this, Tadjo's approach to the question differs markedly from that taken by other African feminist writers, such as Bâ, Ken Bugul, or Fatou Diome (Tadjo, 2014: 218-219).

Another angle of rebellious wifehood concerns women and education. Tadjo's autobiographical tale portrays women who are empowered by the tertiary education they acquired. In early masculine fiction young girls were denied opportunities to go to school. In highly patriarchal societies, if it happened that they were in school, it was after it had been heavily contested and faced opposition from fathers as well as brothers. Her education would empower her in her struggle against patriarchal oppression. Katherine Frank rightly articulates the indispensable function of education in the feminist novel in Africa:

> Most importantly education equips women to be economically independent, to prepare a job, a profession that will enable them to take care of themselves and their children without the help and protection of men. Perhaps just as important, though, education also gives women a vision of human existence beyond the narrow confines of their lives, it also bestows a kind of imaginative power, a breadth

> of perspective, an awareness of beauty, dreams, possibility (Frank, 1987: 23).

Education is clearly a tool for women's liberation in that it plays a fundamental role in fighting oppression by raising awareness to all forms of subjugation. Education, and later alone a profession are two important tools which express the value of women in patriarchal society as important entities. In the text, the young protagonist is an educated young woman who commands respect even from elders in her community. Like her mother, she also has gone to school and because of that she has a profession of her own in photography.

Nina is an intelligent student as noted in her participation in class and her questions: "Is it true that praying mantises eat their mates? She had asked her high school science teacher one day" (*LDMP* 61). She is a young woman who wants to know and expand her intellectual horizons. Nina's hard work in school is illustrated by the hours she spends in the library to find a single answer (*LDMP* 62). She is respectable because of her academic achievements: in the first instance the whole class had laughed at her but halfway through her exposé her colleagues no longer felt like laughing at her. At the end of her exposé, she got a good mark and earned the respect of her classmates.

Education is a liberating force and the degree of women servitude is inversely proportional to their level of education (Davis, 2000: 104). This implies that, as women and education are portrayed in the novel, the more a female is educated the less oppression she encounters and the less a female is educated, the more the oppression she is subjected to.

Through such representation of woman in institutions of higher learning, the author makes bold feminist insinuations that although the female sex may be considered as a biologically and physically weaker sex than her male counterpart, the same is not true of their sex when it comes to intellectual capacity and strength. Hélène and Nina are academic women who have a tertiary education in the arts.

For Nina, her career is a definition of liberation as provided for by African feminist critics. Feminist critics point out the fundamental role of education in women emancipation. Education is a platform that elevates women to self-awareness and the realization of their full potential. This means that education results in the expression of the autonomy of femininity.

Likewise, one can say that Nina's mother was emancipated by the education she got. For her, education gives her a career. The detailed description of Nina's mother's work place, exemplifies the high status of a woman who effectively plays a leading role in the family, in a previously male dominated environment. In fact, Hélène is someone who is preoccupied with self-fulfillment rather than domestic tasks:

> One day when she didn't feel well, Nina had knocked on the studio door. Everyone else had gone out. "Who is it?" "It's me . . . I have a stomachache, Mama." The door didn't open. "I already told you not to bother me when I'm working! Go back to your room. I'll come to see you once I'm done." When she finally did come to check on her daughter, she found her in great pain (*LDMP* 148).

More of her time is dedicated to her career and less time to household chores. Her satisfaction and self-fulfillment do not come from motherhood or marriage. She defies old stereotypes. Rather she derives satisfaction from her work. This is underlined in the following domestic scene:

> Dr. Kouadio watched the end of the news before falling asleep with the television on. Night had fallen without incident. Refreshed by the absence of the sun, the now quiet house began to breath once more. His wife was still working in her studio. She'd be there for a good while longer (*LDMP* 71).

Here, Tadjo's representation of Hélène defies gender stereotypes. The stereotype of men as workaholics and women as idle beings is inverted (Davis, 1994: 104). Hélène's passion for her work combined with her industriousness serves to emphasize the valuable contribution that she makes in the family, which is outside the periphery of womanhood, as customarily defined. Because of her education, she enables herself a place in otherwise previously male-reserved spaces. Hélène is the epitome of a modern woman who plays primary roles in the family, counterbalancing patriarchal traditional African images of women. In these traditional circles, the preserve of women has mainly been to carry out such secondary duties as

cooking, feeding children and offering hospitality to visitors. Here, we get a glimpse into Tadjo's idiosyncratic rebranding of femininity. What makes Hélène's representation uncommon is the fact that she is portrayed in the background and in flash backs. Like Akissi's mother in *Le royaume aveugle*, she may be considered a minor character since she is only heard and not seen, yet her representation resonates with all the strength of a role model.

Both Nina and her mother's work are of high caliber, and are even appreciated by men:

> I knew your parents quite well, especially your mother, with whom I often spoke about her musical compositions--especially her experimental phase, when she wrote compositions blending African and Western rhythms. I quite enjoyed our frequent chats. I found your e-mail address while surfing on the Internet. That's how I learned that you are a photographer and have already had several shows of your work. Congratulations (*LDMP* 110).

Thanks to their education and careers, Tadjo's female characters in this novel are financially independent. Nina is a financially stable young woman who is able to manage the expenses of her father's funeral:

> […] it was high time she got busy with the accounts. Money was disappearing right and left. With the rescheduling of the burial, expenses would only get higher. She congratulated herself on having been able to pay the month's wages on time […]. If nothing else, it showed she was on top of things, in charge of the situation. […]. Happily, most of the funeral expenses were covered […]. This left Nina halfway reassured (*LDMP* 111-112).

The author also offers relatively new insights into the possibilities of womanhood as emphasized by African women's entry into previously male-dominated fields such as commerce. This represents empowered women according to feminist critics who point out the contribution of commerce to the liberation of women: Commercial activities of their own enable women to lead honourable lives (Cazanave, 1996: 175). In the novel, there is a

remarkable presence of women as entrepreneurs. These women do business even on an international scale. This is evidenced by a woman who was to go to Ghana to secure some provisions for her business: "Mrs. Affoué Germaine was going to stock up on cosmetics for her small shop" (*LDMP* 35). The same goes for the owner of the restaurant that Nina and Hervé go to:

> The little restaurant was set back from the beach, but the clients still had their feet in the sand. The owner, a matronly woman, was a bit overbearing. She tended to talk too loudly and to turn the music on high, ruining what would have been an idyllic calm, if only the whispering of the sea were audible. Still, her maternal air and her perfectly seasoned cooking made the place a big hit (*LDMP* 31).

In this instance, Tadjo portrays women who not only own enterprises, but are successful in their business affairs.

Feminist critics seek to undermine the notion embedded in many male fictions that cities are male territory. This goes for Tadjo, whose portrayal of businesswomen functions as a means of reclaiming urban space for women (Davis, 1994: 104).[26]

Whereas women use education for their emancipation, for Dr. Kouadio it is a different issue. Dr. Kouadio is discredited for the reason that even though he was highly educated, he did not behave up to moral expectations of intellectuals. And this, we see through Nina's conversation with her male friend, Kangha:

> "He was an intellectual. He had traveled all over the world. He could have adapted to his times. People expected much more from him than this." "An intellectual? Just what does that mean, an intellectual? It's not because you have a few diplomas that you're better than other

[26] In numerous works of fiction, the city is regarded as a complex space where various cultures intersect. It therefore requires macho strength to live there. Because of this, it is perceived as a male territory (Cazanave, 2000: 58).

> people or make better decisions about how to live your life." "Now I really think you've gone too far! After all, there is a difference. Getting an education means you have a responsibility to set an example." Kangha leaned back and put his hands behind his neck (*LDMP* 137).

The masculine voice that we get through Kangha, Nina's friend, is an insightful representation of Dr. Kouadio's thoughts. Kangha justifies Dr. Kouadio's behavior on the basis that according to the generation her father belonged to, it was not an issue. Here, we see again a case where tradition is used to oppress women. However, Nina insists that education has moral obligations and should make good leaders. Tadjo makes bold feminist remarks that women can make good leaders too through Nina's last remarks to Kangha:

> You want to know what makes a real leader? I'm going to tell you: it's someone who knows how to put what's been broken back together, to reconnect those people who have been divided. But you have to have a vision to get there and that's what we're missing in this damned country! (*LDMP* 138)

Another challenge to patriarchy manifests itself through rebellious daughterhood. Like her mother, Gabrielle is also outside of the main action and yet she shares her rebellious attitude with her. Gabrielle goes as far as refusing to attend her father's funeral in protest of his extra-marital family. Gabrielle rises up against all patriarchal forces (Herberger-Fofana, 2010: 24).

What is important to Gabrielle are memories. Rather than learning of the shocking revelations of her father's personality, she prefers to keep the legacy of good childhood memories of her father that she has (*LDMP* 183).

Her birth and early childhood days also showed signs of rebellion:

> A beautiful little girl who cried loudly to announce her arrival in the world. She never stopped screaming for the rest of her life […]. She had erupted from her mother like a rebel (*LDMP* 90).

2.6 Nina as an agent of peace and reconciliation

Nina is an agent of peace for her country. This is evident in one of her last telephone conversations with her father in which she asks him about the political situation and if a peace agreement will soon be signed:

> What's the situation like right now? Is the peace treaty really going to be signed soon? She was trying not to show her fears. The last news she'd heard on RFI (Radio France International) wasn't good (*LDMP* 18).

Nina follows the political developments of her country from afar. She has her country at heart for she wishes that peace prevails.

Even in her family, she stands out to be an agent of reconciliation, peace and unity. She does all this despite her father's legacy:

> So, this was it. Her father had left them stranded in a bad place. His lie was enormous, outrageous. Like a tree whose roots were destructive tentacles, killing every living thing all around, it had sucked Nina's heart dry and weakened the very foundations of the family. He must have thought his actions would remain hidden away forever. Or had he just thought that after his death, it would be up to the living to sort out his problems? (*LDMP* 129)

Nina's love for unity is evident since she stands tall to be the beacon of hope in reuniting all her father's children:

> Sitting there with everyone else, Nina took comfort in this incredible show of family solidarity. Never before had she been close enough to see it firsthand. So this was how her father had lived, surrounded by

> the members of his family. Whether in the village or the city, the same cluster always formed, the same community helping each other to stand up to life's challenges (*LDMP* 26).

It is remarkable in the end that she is able to overcome all these hurdles that are posed at the beginning when she carries her family with her efforts to unify all the siblings. She is the epitome of peace, reconciliation and unity for she is able to look past the bad history and the sad circumstances in order to bring the family together:

> She wanted to meet the boy. Not to spend the rest of her life wondering if he was or wasn't her brother. She wanted to have a clear conscience. Then she'd know what to do: either bring him into the family, if he was really part of it (whether the others liked it or not), or be done with this mess once and for all (*LDMP* 35).

Nina is ready to stand for what she believes in, with or without support from her family. Here, her determination to seek the truth is evoked. Despite the danger that is posed by war as her cousin Hervé says, Nina is determined to go out to look for answers and get to the truth:

> Nina asked Hervé to drive her to Abobo, on the other side of town, where Koffi lived with his mother."I won't say no, but it's a good distance away. The way things are these days, it's best not to stray too far from home. We might get stuck over there." He seemed put out by her request."Listen, it's really important. Please do this for me." "I'm telling you that there are problems in Abobo right now. If we end up caught in a protest, it could get dangerous. There are often clashes between political parties, and . . ." "We'll be really careful, don't worry," Nina insisted, trying her best to sound convincing. […]In just a few hours the situation on the ground could shift drastically: burning tires, clouds of toxic fumes, spike strips spread across the road, bands of armed youths.
>
> Hervé agreed to go only after she'd promised that they would turn around at the slightest sign of trouble (*LDMP* 35).

This displays her bravery. Like Akissi in *Le royaume aveugle*, while she is well aware of the imminent dangers, her desire to establish the truth surpasses her fear. She is ready to go out into the world to seek answers for herself. And later, when she establishes that Koffi is indeed her half-brother, he is in her thoughts. It becomes clear that she integrates him into her new found big one family unit:

> And then there was Koffi. She wanted to make sure he was taken care of. After their first meeting, Hervé had brought him to meet the aunts. Everything had gone well. They had hugged him tight. Now he was part of the family. His last visit had been just a few days ago. […] (*LDMP* 113).

Nina accepts her other siblings, Cécile, Roland and Amon. Whereas Gabrielle rejects her father's indiscretions, Nina seeks solutions that include all. Despite his departing, Nina longs for peace and reconciliation with her father:

> The closing chapter depicting the obsequies can be read as a kind of reconciliation between the protagonist, her father and the land: Nina takes some soil in her hand to throw on the coffin, but some of it remains attached to her skin, and she is reluctant to leave the grave when the time comes. While it might be daring to interpret the novel's ending words — as a declaration of daughterly love to the African fatherland, it nevertheless indicates a reconciliatory gesture (Toivanen, 2010: 11). [27]

The imagery of the soil which remains in Nina's hands shows an everlasting emotional attachment between her and her father. The end of the novel demonstrates Nina's coming to

[27] This reconciliatory gesture is impossible in the returns of Juletane and Kehinde. This sets out Tadjo's idiosyncracity in her feminine identities, even in relation to other feminine writings.

terms with her father's betrayal and her forgiveness, showing her desire to look forward to the future rather than dwell on the past.

As Amy Reid emphasises, the last chapter also shows reconciliation with all of her new siblings:

> By the novel's conclusion, Nina has made clear her intent to provide financial support for her younger siblings, Cécile, Roland, and Koffi. Her recognition that they and Amon are part of her family strengthens Nina's resolve […]. Nina has also reconciled herself with her now greatly complicated image of her father; as the novel's final line proclaims, "She thought that she would always love him. Forever." (*LDMP* 224).

Tadjo's portrait of Nina in this case hints at the importance of forgiveness as a way of moving forward and trying to find solutions to resolve problems. It also affords women an important place in the home, where they can have a say to their male counterparts.

CONCLUSION

As discussed in the introduction, the aim of this research was to analyse the representations of the main female characters in two of Tadjo's novels, namely *Le royaume aveugle* and *Loin de mon père*. One of our main goals was to remedy the lack of critical literature available on this prolific and important writer. It is clear from the broad thematic content of our analysis that Tadjo's works are a significant contribution to African literature in French. Hence this research gives Tadjo's works the acknowledgement and recognition they warrant. This research explored how different narrative styles allow Tadjo revisions of femininity in francophone African literature.

It was also our aim, here, to establish the extent of the challenge that Tadjo's feminine identities pose on representations of women in early fictional writing. Our analysis shows that Tadjo's women go beyond gender boundaries and that is why her representations of women characters differ from previous works by previous Francophone African writers, both men and women. She challenges the established order of things. For instance, the mother figure, even if in the background as is the case in both our stories, is a figure of resistance unlike early fictional representations where mothers and wives were invariably submissive. Both king Ato and Dr. Kouadio want to oppress their wives but both women exhibit great resistance. In *Le royaume aveugle*, king Ato's wife demands to share political power with her husband. In *Loin de mon père* Hélène demands accountability in marriage in which she views both sexes as equal partners. This sets Tadjo's writing apart from other numerous previous writings.

Also, Tadjo shows that matriarchal heritage is a great source of strength in both young Akissi and Nina's lives. In *Le royaume aveugle*, we see the imparting that the Old Woman's words subsequently have on Akissi's quest:

> Memory is our most precious gift. With it we can conquer time that traps us. You must remember everything that I have told you and still many other things so that this city in ruins and dying villages can rebuild themselves. Hold on dearly to the knowledge from the earth and give it new forms. Thereafter, you will be able to erect huge

> buildings that reach all the way to the sky and you will be able to search for what makes life easier and less heartbreaking (*TBK* 64).

Memory links the past, the present and the future. History or the past enables us to get a sense of direction, for we first recall then tell where we are coming from. This allows for comparison with the present. Later alone, it entails that we can map our future, and perhaps, here, what the Old Woman is teaching Akissi to open her eyes to the oppression of women as well as all other forms of injustices of the past. Having taken note of these past evils, the Old Woman empowers Akissi by letting her know that the future is in her hands.

Literary critics highlight the importance of memory here:

> Over the last decade, 'cultural memory' has emerged as a useful umbrella term to describe the complex ways in which societies remember their past using a variety of media […].It has become increasingly apparent that the memories that are shared within generations and across different generations are the product of public acts of remembrance using a variety of media (Astrid & Anne, 2006: 111).

In the light of this, perhaps the Old Woman's words in her repeated use of the future tense twice to say that Akissi will be able to erect huge buildings that reach all the way to the sky and that she will be able to search for what makes life easier are inviting Akissi to create a better future. Akissi is enlightened by the need to fight injustices, thus advocating for a future characterised by gender equality and an oppression-free society, as symbolised by huge buildings.

The value and significance of memory in human existence is emphasised here:

> Memory is far from a passive act; it is an active interaction with impression left by external stimuli. Remembering historical acts of domination such as colonialism, can therefore, have a range of affective consequences on the individual and social consciousness,

> from trauma to shame to anger to cathartic self-recognition, even willful oblivion. Acts of remembering phases of colonialism and imperialism are therefore most meaningful when it helps those recalling such memories develop an understanding of the process and consequence of such domination. At a pragmatic level, this is historical self-awareness – on a more affective level they act as they would with any private trauma, to develop emotional, intellectual and psychic control over oppressive memories.[28] (Saikat, 2006:1)

These words symbolically give her strength as is the case in the other novel. Nina's mother's words echo the same sentiment:

> Nina listened, transfixed. Here was her mentor, right before her, her flesh too close. The connection was undeniable. But the maternal bond had given way to knowledge.
>
> "Abandon your pretentions. Don't waste time with compromise. Take nothing for granted, especially not what seems evident. Don't be afraid of what is inside of you."
>
> Nina didn't know if she should stay as she was or, on the contrary, change everything. She didn't see where her mother was going with this. Suddenly, her mother held out her hands. There were words written on the inside of her palms. Sacred symbols, psalms and verses. Words flew by before her eyes.
>
> "Take this statue, it's for you. Take it and keep it with you wherever you go." (LDMP 146-147).

Similarly, Nina's mother shows that she is an experienced and trusted advisor to her daughter. She is described as a mentor who imparts wisdom on her daughter. Tadjo shows the

[28] Memory culture is the way a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics (the study and development of systems for improving and assisting the memory), its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity. Source: https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd/holtorf/2.0.html, consulted 10/03/2014.

strength of the mother – daughter relationship since the maternal bond between Nina and her mother had resulted in her acquiring some knowledge. The same tone of an advisor continues in Nina's mother's words. The diction that is drawn from the Bible about sacred symbols, psalms and verses in Nina's mother's hands shows the fundamental importance of her words empower Nina in her endeavours to create a better world for all. The statue that Nina's mother gave her at the end is symbolic of the power that Nina gets from her mother.[29]

These maternal words have similar sentiments as the Old Woman's tirade, from which Akissi draws power.

Tadjo seems to usher in a new era of representations of women in that she has enriched literature with a special knowledge of her life and experiences (Cazanave, 1996: 295). This, she does through open endedness - by shifting her autobiographical novel, *Loin de mon père*, from a self-story to a story about women in general, much as Oke observes[30]:

> Of all the literary genres, the autobiography is the most privileged by the female African writers whose thinly vleid personal story is told as being representative of the female condition in Africa (Oke, 1996: 279-280).

In this tale, Tadjo concludes with many versions of the same legend, leaving her readers with various interpretations to choose from. These modifications, which are not uncommon in African feminine writing, highlight the impact these texts can have for the genre of autobiography as a whole:

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[29] A recent version of the legend of Pokou says that after sacrificing her only child by throwing her into the river, Pokou is later, in the newly established Baoulé kingdom, given a statue to replace her son. Reid reiterates our argument here by pointing out the significance of maternal heritage: Pokou's relationship to the wooden statue, which she recognizes as her child, poignantly figures the depths of maternal love (Tadjo, 2014:215).

[30] This open endedness is also reminiscent of the author's writing of Queen Pokou: Rather than purporting to provide an historically accurate rendering of how the Baoule came to settle in the present day Côte d'Ivoire, the work's multiple retellings of the story of Abraha Pokou open avenues for discussion about both the past and the challenges of the present […]. More to the point, in this work Tadjo asks her readers both to identify with Pokou as a woman - a sister, a mother, a lover, a leader- and to connect the dots that link this history to our daily lives and our future (Reid, 2005: 63).

> Through a review of written works provided by these women, we clearly see their willingness to revisit the history of Africa since unedited truth is hidden in there, unpublished verities hiding. We also see it as a recovery of orality, that is to say, the space of creation and feminine genius in African society before the colonial invasion. Women affect, by the collective literature they write (fables, legends, proverbs, songs and rhymes); spread the vision of the world and the practical wisdom of the world (Larrier, 2006: 45).

Tadjo's message in both texts is that women as well as men need to take up an active participatory role in the socio-political affairs of their country in order to build a better future.[31] She writes about different sexes, and in general, opposites having to come together for the positive. Death - life, awareness - ignorance, poor - rich, night - day, tradition - modernity, country -city, blindness - sight and Pokou and Akissi's royalty - humility, baby boy - baby girl and tradition-modernity are some of the binary associations that Tadjo highlights in her stories.

Although Tadjo's feminine characterisation is idiosyncratic, her writing, however still, finds a position in today's feminist writing:

> The current Africa is indeed in a state that requires the birth of a new breed of women. Women writers seem to have understood this. Therefore, they write in a way that does not support poles agreed in traditional African societies (Gnapka, 2009: 13).

She paints strong feminine characters and redefines womanhood through a negation of stereotypes of women as materialistic beings, dishonest, prostitutes, submissive and as dependant on men. Such stereotypes include cases where wives are rarely portrayed as

[31] Tadjo's *L'Ombre d'Imana: Voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda*, also highlights the importance of forgiveness in fostering nation building: This is one of my favourite stories because it sums up the problem of forgiveness in the simplest way possible. (http://veroniquetadjo.com/?page_id=492 /).

partners in marriage, they are shown as being there to serve their husbands and make them while they remain in shadows. Tadjo subverts these representations and her writing concerns the notion inherent in feminine writing.

Tadjo's use of complexities serves to close the gaps between concepts that are traditionally of female identities perceived as irreconcilable opposites is clear in all her works and these are always compassionate but never idealised.[32]

Almost a decade later after her writing of *Reine Poukou*, *Loin de mon père* is constructed along the same lines, the author drawing from both the allegorical and the autobiographical genres. In a recent interview, like highlighted before, it is clear that her personal encounters and experiences are blended to fiction in this novel.

Here, what is evident is that Tadjo draws from her personal experiences in this novel. Her writing is marked with strong feminine characters across the different narrative styles she adopts in her writing – be it magical realism, legend, allegory, or autobiography.

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[32] Here is an illustration of a citation from *L'Ombre d'Imana: Voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda*: Women murderers, genocidal women, women forced to kill, accused of killing their husbands, children, friends, neighbours, strangers, women who helped men to commit rape, who sang to give them courage massacre, who betrayed who looted [...]. They are mixed with armed militiamen and peasants […]. They came in hospitals, churches, schools to participate in the carnage. They took money from dead people, women's jewellery […] (Tadjo, 2000: 88-89). The author's intentions in writing *L'Ombre d'Imana: Voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda* confirms these claims: Yes. But beyond the feminine personage, is power and its nature is that I was interested in. I'm afraid of power. In Rwanda, women participated in the genocide alongside men. This experience has destroyed the nurturing image that I could get of woman. On the other side, recess, the fact that it is a feminine personage shows that women have also been active in African history, they have played important roles. African women are not only mutilated […]. The same is true of another of her award winning contemporary text, *Reine Pokou*: The legendary Pokou remains one of the most impressive personalities in African literature in French. It tells the story of a woman who sacrifices her only son by throwing him into the river to appease gods and secure a safe passage across for her people while running away from the enemy (Adebayo, 2000: 271). This shows that at the centre of Tadjo's stories, women come out strong naturally. Here, the author strongly advocates that women can make good leaders. She uses a woman character in a legend, which is not common in masculine fiction. Tadjo's feminist concerns become evident as the author confirms her intentions in writing the legend of Queen Pokou: *Reine Poukou* has not only a historical dimension but I also wanted to show a woman with a tragic destiny, but also who has the strength of character and remarkable intelligence. Her struggles symbolize all the sacrifices that women are forced to do when they want to occupy high positions in their communities. A reading of *Reine Poukou* allows us to see that Tadjo's fuses her feminine characterisation with her socio-political experiences: The French version of *Reine Poukou*, which was published in 2004, is an attempt to capture the political developments of her own mother land. The country was trying to recover from the civil war and general political chaos. And the feeling of exile is there as well here: Things changed with the Ivorian crises. I had the impression the door suddenly closed and left me outside. […]. I felt alienated, as if everything had started all over again. I believe that exile begins when you can no longer return to the country you left behind, when they way back becomes painful (Tadjo, 2005: 64).

Although this dissertation has attempted to analyse the representations of women in Tadjo's two texts, we also highlighted that the study would not rule out the author's images of men. The author's masculine portraits point to the idea that men are also important in the struggle for a better postcolonial world:

> In addition to the claim of sexual freedom of women and the place of women in African society that is echoed in Tadjo's writing, there is equally a different dimension at the same time. For the first Ivorian literary winner of the *Grand Prix Noir Afrique*, women and men remain complementary to one another in social life […]. Love, children, maternity, the family occupy a prominent place in society. By registering an inclusive approach in her emancipatory struggle for African women, Tadjo distances herself from radical feminists (Larrier, 2006: 52, my translation).

Though feminine concerns dominate her writing, in the two novels selected, Tadjo's masculine protagonists show that she is not a writer who unequivocally situates herself within the feminist discourse:

> In as much as Tadjo's writing is marked with strong feminine identities, men are not an enemy. Tadjo's feminism is that both sexes, women and men have a role to play in society, and to take part in post-colonial nation building. The author's writing bears the recognition that the collective is important to fight injustices and liberate society. The collective rather than the individual will tackle the post-colonial African crisis: it is not a single handed task, no sex can go it alone […] (Cazanave, 2000: 96).

Men's efforts to shape the postcolonial society are as important as women's in Tadjo's novels.[33] We have highlighted in *Le royaume aveugle* how Karim subscribes to the same

[33] Also, the concept of yin-yang suggests that yin-yang can be thought of as complementary (instead of opposing) forces interacting to form a dynamic system in which the whole is greater than the parts. This we see

ideals as those of Akissi of creation of a liberated society. He is equally an activist as Akissi. Similarly, in *Loin de mon père*, Kangha plays a pivotal role in assisting Nina fight socio-political injustices. He is obviously an intelligent young man, aware of his socio-political surroundings. Even Dr. Kouadio too is portrayed as a man of the people in his youth, a man who had assisted in building his society.

His letters that Nina browses through testify that he was a man who represented and understood ordinary people of his society. Dr. Kouadio had respect from his people as evidenced by the opening phrase of the salutation of the letter. Tadjo's portrait of Dr. Kouadio resonates that of Karim here. Like Karim, although he had his flaws, on the other hand he also had his own strengths. For instance, he had an aura for he could bring people together since he was requested to invite people to gatherings. The subject of the letter shows that he was also concerned with social problems of his people. For example, people requested money to foot their medical bills.

In the light of this, labelling Tadjo as a feminist constricts a fair appreciation of her works beyond the limitations of ideology.

Significantly, in as much as this study looked at feminine identities in a woman writer's works, it does not dissociate her writing from masculine writing nor the broader context of the Francophone African literature *per se*. The main thrust of Tadjo's *Loin de mon père* is to encourage a reflection on the position of African women in their community. Through the fictionalized writing of her life story, Tadjo presents a variety of strong women characters on the socio-political front. This is marked by the text's construction around key female characters and their various powerful representations. Nina's awareness of women's socio-political oppression shows that the story serves to illustrate women's response to social and political injustices that are perpetuated at both family and national level. This is in keeping with feminist theorizing which states that the role of women writers is to be agents of behavioral transformation in communities (Valerie, 1998: 6).

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in Tadjo's writing which suggests that partnership of sexes would work better than gender inequality as well as other forms of inequality (Latener and Leon, 2005: 869) and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yin_and_yang, consulted 05 march, 2014.

In *Le royaume aveugle*, the author offers new insights in presenting females whose character traits were uncommonly associated with women, at least until then. Throughout the novel, women are depicted as agents of transformation. These women are able to fight not only specifically against their own subjugation, but equally for the liberation of their societies from various forms of political, economic, social and gender-based oppression.

Both Akissi and her mother's resistance imply equality for all:

> In Tadjo's narration of *Le royaume aveugle*, the political death distinguishes and signifies itself by the female body's refusal to neither render nor to be of service to a tyrannical monarch that is represented by the Ato IV. The sorrowful and pitiful mood of the king is reflected in the state of disarray of affairs around his kingdom, in his complaints, in his impotence, but over and above all by the capacity of women to lead a virtuous life (Diallo, 2005: 6, my translation).

The king's own words confirm Diallo's reading:

> With a son, I could have conquered the entire world. But why did life decide otherwise? The women who stretched out in my bed - all of them had wombs empty as a gourd with holes. Dry, ungrateful wombs, carriers of still-born babies. The people had started to gossip (*TBK* 7).

In Tadjo's allegorical novel women are not only virtuous but they come to represent abstract ideas and ideologies such as freedom from tyranny and true democracy. The rebellious young Akissi is an embodiment of the will of the people as well as their resistance to all forms of evil or bad practices prevalent in their society:

> The impossibility on the part of the king to have a son is symbolic of the incapacity of his dictatorial powers to deliver the well-being and

> welfare of the people and to initiate conditions of development, that is, happiness. The rebellion of the female body is equated to the will of the people. The rebellion of the female through her body is tantamount to the incarceration of political opposition, which is synonymous to democracy as well as tolerance. The continued rebellion is emphasised by the refusal by Akissi, the king's only daughter, to marry according to paternal will and the sheer egocentrism of the king (Diallo, 2005: 10, my translation).

In my view, such inscriptions as proposed by Tadjo not only result in writing for the liberation of gender bondage, a primary aim of philosophical feminism, (since feminism equally implies a political agenda), but also offer a platform for the extension of this liberation to society as a whole. These women, who possess the qualities of excellent communal leaders, are reminiscent of other characters in Tadjo's writing such as *Queen Pokou*. In the eponymous novel Pokou is depicted as a formidable leader who has the interests of her people before her own, even if this means sacrificing her only child.

Tadjo's female characters do, therefore, show feminist tendencies without perhaps this being the author's primary aim. In our view, Tadjo's work belongs to the kind of writing that is politically oriented, and where the writer deliberately links poetics with politics (D'Almeida: 2000: 135).

To reiterate, what is particularly striking in these feminine portraits is the fact that Tadjo's characters fight to free themselves from the yoke of masculine subjugation while at the same time act as agents of political as well as social transformation, for the benefit of all. Tadjo thus does not openly fight for women's rights but, rather, fights for justice of all kinds in postcolonial Africa. It is obvious that after the earthquake of colonialism and the monstrous darkness that descended upon Akissi and Karim's country, the only battle was to overthrow the tyrannical system that governed them so that their children, the boy and the girl, could live in a better world.

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