

## A New Hybridity in Calixthe Beyala's *La petite fille du réverbère*

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Calixthe Beyala belongs to a new generation of francophone Sub-Saharan African writers. As a Cameroonian living in Belleville in Paris, her works address the lives of immigrants, as well as life in the *bidonvilles* of Cameroon where she grew up. In particular, Beyala's writing focuses on the lives of women in post-colonial society where one of her main objectives is "RETROUVER LA FEMME" (*C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* 70). Through her writing, Beyala explores the many roles of women: women as mothers, daughters, grandmothers, lovers, wives, friends, and as girls growing up in a world "en voie de développement" (*Assèze l'Africaine* 348). Her writing centers on women in the Francophone, post-colonial context both in Cameroon and as immigrants living in France. Throughout her literary career, Beyala has not conformed to "perceived notions and accepted stereotypes of 'African literature'" (Jules-Rosette 269). One of her latest books, the semi-autobiographical *La petite fille du réverbère*, is no exception. In this story of the education of Tapoussièrè in a *bidonville* of Douala, Beyala succeeds in setting forth a new notion of hybridity or cultural synthesis, one that reflects the difficulties of negotiating two different cultural spaces at once. Tapoussièrè is growing up in a house where the traditions of her ancestor's village reign, and she spends most of her days at a French school where French cultural traditions are upheld and validated.

The notion of hybridity is not a new one. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba discusses different theories of hybridity as they have been used in the post-colonial and diasporic context. Loomba points to Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity as being "the most influential and controversial within recent post-colonial studies" (176). Bhabha's theory places hybridity in a "Third Space," a site "which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 37). The Third Space, then, becomes a site of hybridity, a place where new cultural practices are negotiated when two or more cultures come into contact. In this site, the binaries of colonizer/colonized, black/white, colonial influence/traditional influence are dismantled and new cultural traditions are created.

Although Bhabha's concept of hybridity seems appealing, he has been criticized by other post-colonial theorists who claim that his concept "work[s] to downplay the bitter tension and the clash between the colonizers and the colonized and therefore misrepresent[s] the dynamics of anti-colonial struggle" (Loomba 181). It is this tension described by Loomba that Beyala represents as a part of the hybridity of her main character, Tapoussière. Tapoussière's character development is influenced by two very different types of education that complement and contradict each other at the same time. Her grandmother teaches her about her ancestors and their traditions while she attends a French school where she learns about "[ses] ancêtres les Gaulois" (44). As I will demonstrate in what follows, the approach and concerns of Tapoussière's two educators (her grandmother and her school teacher) serve as a basis for the main character's hybrid development.

Tapoussière grows up in her grandmother's house in Kassalafam, Cameroon. The story begins with a narration by Tapoussière of her family's history from before she was born until the present, at which time she is somewhere between the ages of 9 and 12. Her story includes a description of the society her grandmother had lived in before the invasion of the French. Grandmother (as Tapoussière calls her) was the chief of her village, Issogo.<sup>1</sup> From Tapoussière's description, we learn that Grandmother was a just and fair ruler with much authority until the day the colonizers arrived. With the influences of colonialism, life in Issogo changes and Grandmother begins to lose some of her power. The villagers then begin to leave the village for the city where there is more work and where they can live a more modern and Western life-style. Since her grandmother is un-

successful in stopping the migration and the village eventually empties, she decides “de quitter Issogo parce qu’il était temps de toucher du doigt cette France, ce *poulassie* qui avait foncé dans sa vie comme des milliers de criquets dans un champs, saccageant tout!” (14) This brief synopsis of Grandmother’s life before coming to the city demonstrates the mounting tension between the traditional society that Grandmother is trying to preserve and the modern society being created by colonial influence that results in a rural exodus. Traditional society is in conflict with modernity and thus, Grandmother goes to the city because “‘Il est temps d’affronter l’ennemi’” (14).

Tapoussièrè is the daughter of Andela, her grandmother’s youngest daughter. After leaving an unhappy marriage, Andela returns to her mother’s house where she proceeds to have relations with many different men. When she announces to her mother that she is pregnant, Grandmother responds, “Cet enfant m’appartient! . . . Je suis son père, je suis sa mère! Cet enfant a été conçu pour satisfaire mon désir de reconstruire mon Royaume” (33). Grandmother demands to raise Tapoussièrè so she may pass on her heritage. Thus, Tapoussièrè grows up under her grandmother’s supervision and Andela leaves after her birth in order to make a life for herself elsewhere. While growing up, Tapoussièrè benefits from the two educations mentioned before: one from her grandmother who represents Africa and her traditions and the other from the French school she attends. For her grandmother, the education of this young girl is of capital importance because, as Tapoussièrè says, “Grand-mère m’aimait parce que j’étais son espoir, celui de reconstruire un jour le royaume des Issogos” (43). So, in the name of her kingdom, her grandmother wants to pass on all of her knowledge hoping that Tapoussièrè will someday return and rebuild it.

Tapoussièrè’s education begins with a number of lessons from her grandmother. It is through these lessons that we can see Tapoussièrè beginning to develop a sense of critical judgement. For example, Grandmother tells stories that convey certain morals to the young girl. Tapoussièrè learns to make inferences from the stories her grandmother tells. As she begins to develop an aptitude for critical thinking, she begins to question some of her grandmother’s teachings and stories. For instance, when Tapoussièrè expresses her desire to know who her father is, her grandmother gives her all kinds of opinions about men that Tapoussièrè does not believe:

– Arrête de poser des questions stupides! Qu’est-ce que tu ferais d’un père, hein?

Je n'osais répondre et Grand-mère en profita pour me dire que les hommes n'étaient que des assassins en puissance et j'en doutai; elle m'affirma qu'ils guerroyaient, détruisaient l'humanité et j'en doutai encore; elle dit aussi qu'ils pouvaient en toute bonne conscience cuire le cerveau d'un frère et le dévorer sans dégoût, j'en doutai toujours. (68)

Here, Grandmother is misleading Tapoussière out of the fear of possibly losing her granddaughter to the influence of a man. In Rangira Gallimore's analysis of Beyala's work, she reveals a quest to "se passer de l'homme pour retrouver la femme" (107). In *La Petite fille du réverbère*, the fulfillment of this quest seems possible in the relationship of Grandmother and Tapoussière which establishes a matrilineal link to the past. Grandmother tries to ensure this link by convincing Tapoussière that all men are violent and work to destroy society. However, Tapoussière shows her ability to recognize the exaggerations of her grandmother. She can distinguish between what she knows about the men who live in her community and the so-called "truth" her grandmother is trying to teach her. Therefore, although her grandmother may wish her to believe that men are evil, Tapoussière has learned important skills from her grandmother's teachings which allow her to think critically and judge for herself.

In this incident, we can see that Tapoussière's developing skills in the area of critical thinking work to turn her grandmother's lessons back against the very person teaching them. By judging her grandmother critically, Tapoussière learns to ignore certain information that her grandmother would like her to believe unconditionally. Tapoussière's position here leaves her open to influences outside her home, influences that may not work to instill in her the traditional values Grandmother wants her to appropriate. In essence, Tapoussière is open to accepting other cultural influences that may result in a hybrid identity.

At the same time that Tapoussière is receiving an education at home, she also attends the French school along with all of the other children in her neighborhood. At school she learns, as did all schoolchildren in French colonial schools, that the French are her "ancêtres les Gaulois" (44). She is only a mediocre student until the day when her schoolteacher becomes very irritated and decides by chance who his best students will be. One day in class, after the students rebel against him, the teacher decides "que sa mission n'était pas globale, mais sélective" (46). So, he calls six students to the front of the class, including Tapoussière, and tells them:

Vous êtes mes élus. Vous allez représenter notre classe et prouver aux yeux du monde entier que notre belle République est en

bonne santé. Cette année, vous êtes censés réussir votre concours d'entrée en sixième ainsi que votre certificat d'études primaires élémentaires. (46)

Tapoussière, then, is doubly chosen because her grandmother considers her to be the heir to the Issogo kingdom who will rebuild that lost civilization and her teacher chooses her as one of the students he will help to succeed in the French school system and by doing so, she will help prove Cameroon's worth to the rest of the world.

The random choice by Tapoussière's schoolteacher and his worry to prove his country's worth testify to an inferiority complex in the face of the colonizer's culture. We learn from Tapoussière that her teacher "avait été envoyé en France, pendant six mois, avant de revenir éduquer les Camerounais" (44). Tapoussière's language here reveals a tension that exists in the hybrid cultural identity of the schoolteacher. He was *sent* to France, implying that he himself did not *decide* to go. Upon his return to Cameroon, he becomes a representative of French culture for a new generation of Cameroonian children. At this point in his career, he decides that he will not be effective in shaping these Cameroonian children into proper representatives of their "beautiful" republic. His greatest concern is how the rest of the world views Cameroon. Therefore, he chooses to concentrate on educating only a select few instead of working with all of the children in order to give them a good education.

With Tapoussière under pressure from two opposing sides, being chosen by her grandmother and her teacher produces both positive and negative effects on her life. When she announces to her grandmother that she has been chosen at school, Grandmother's response provides an important lesson for this adolescent:

- J'ai été sélectionnée parmi les meilleurs élèves, Grand-mère! Je vais travailler pour faire honneur au pays, entrer en sixième et remporter mon certificat d'études primaires!

Le corps de Grand-mère se raidit. Un sourire crispé fendit sa bouche et s'y figea comme une lave incandescente.

- Bravo, ma fille!

Puis son regard se perdit au loin, là où montent des pousses de maïs.

- Le *poulassie*, cette langue des Blancs, est comme de la canne à sucre. On la mâche et on la recrache. Tu me comprends?

Elle enfonça ses orteils dans la poussière..

- Je suppose que je dois composer avec cette nouvelle réalité, continua-t-elle. Je l'accepte... Je ne peux pas descendre plus bas.

Et j'eus la chair de poule tant elle était imposante sur ma route. (49)

This exchange between Tapoussière and her grandmother reveals the tension that exists between the culture of traditional Cameroon represented by Grandmother and the culture Tapoussière is taught at school. At first, Grandmother is cautious to react positively to her granddaughter's news, congratulating her for a job well done. Her caution shows that she is aware of Tapoussière's difficult position as a young girl negotiating between two cultures. However, after a moment of thought, she gives Tapoussière a stern warning against assimilation, directing her to "chew up" and "spit out" the language that the colonizers are trying to impose upon her. She recognizes that she must come to terms with her granddaughter being educated in the ways of the French, but to Tapoussière's mind, she also seems to physically block total complicity with the French culture. Her warning against the language of the colonizer instead provides a model for Tapoussière's own hybridity. Grandmother allows her to develop ties to a different culture, but only in the context of conflict. Tapoussière may learn about this culture, but she is instructed to use it for her own gain. It is during this exchange between Tapoussière and her grandmother that Grandmother's reaction provides Tapoussière with one of the most crucial lessons of the novel: her education in the French school system may be useful, but only if she appropriates it to serve her own duty to Africa and to her grandmother's fallen kingdom.

Although her grandmother's influence is a major factor in her education, Tapoussière's grade school teacher also becomes very influential in her life. When he picks her as one of the students chosen to succeed, her attitude towards school changes dramatically. She explains, ". . . je n'avais pas de destin mais, comme disait Maître d'Ecole, 'il faut le créer.' J'avais foi en ces paroles telle une malade en Jésus, la preuve de notre égalité fraternelle" (91). Tapoussière begins to believe in the French school system represented by her teacher. She even shows a certain level of belief in the ideals taught at the French colonial school. She considers her teacher's words to be "proof of our fraternal equality," an ideal made famous by the French revolution. She does not yet understand that "equality" in the terms of her former colonizer may not include those colonized by them. Tapoussière's hybrid cultural identity begins to take root here when she starts believing in the possibility of equality. She is led to accept French culture, not in the way her grandmother has advised, but by accepting certain concepts wholeheartedly.

However, even as she seems to be espousing ideals taught by the French, she states her belief in the creation of her own destiny, a destiny that will not be determined by the binary structure established through colonialism. Tapoussière comes to believe that she must build her own destiny, that it will be a creation forged from her own experiences which include both her interactions with her grandmother and the community around her as well as her interactions at the French school even if these two influences are at odds.

Another way in which the reader may detect a budding hybridity in Tapoussière's education is by her reaction to the stories her grandmother tells about Issogo. Since her grandmother wants her to learn about life as she lived it during her reign as the ruler of the Issogos, she recounts stories to Tapoussière about what life was like in the village before the French came. These stories are to serve as examples to Tapoussière of how she should live. Although Tapoussière is somewhat seduced by these stories of a different Africa, an Africa that existed before the colonizers came, she does understand that this Africa no longer exists. Speaking of her grandmother's stories, Tapoussière says, "J'aimais cette période de sa vie, cette Afrique pastorale, cette Afrique de son enfance que sa voix égrenait comme une berceuse" (80). Tapoussière's opinion about her grandmother's tales reveals that even though she recognizes her grandmother's Africa as a place that exists only in stories, she feels an attachment to that traditional, past Africa. This Africa serves then to inform Tapoussière's vision of the modern society she observes around her. She carries the vision of her grandmother's Africa with her to school and as she interacts with other members of the community. Therefore, her cultural development is strongly influenced by the traditions of her grandmother.

On the other hand, as a student at a French school in Kassalafam, Tapoussière also learns of another "mythical" place called France. This place exists in conflict with the "mythical," past Africa she learns of at home. She alludes to the fact that she would like to go to France a few times throughout the novel. She claims to be like the other children of Kassalafam who dream of a distant place that, as she learns later in life, "s'acharnait à [la] rejeter" (107). This place is, of course, France. However, we learn that although France is captivating for Tapoussière, it does not stand at the center of her universe. In fact, her desire to go to France produces tension with her desire to prove Cameroon's worth to the world. In a pivotal incident in the novel, Tapoussière who is allowed to carry the Cameroonian flag during a parade, drops it while dreaming of going to

France. Her friend scolds her "Tu ne peux pas faire attention, dit Maria-Magdalena-des-Saints-Amours. Tu viens de salir le Cameroun!" Tapoussière, distressed, thinks, "Mon patriotisme m'étouffa et j'eus envie de pleurer. Je me baissais, triste d'avoir infligé des salissures à mon pays . . ." (108). This incident opposes the desire for France and French culture to the degradation of her own country. Thus, the tension that Tapoussière feels between her two different educations is reinforced by the guilt she feels for having dirtied the Cameroonian flag.

Beyala's *La petite fille* ends with the death of Tapoussière's grandmother who leaves her a legacy of tradition to be re-established. In addition, as predicted, Tapoussière receives her primary school certificate and continues to be successful in the French school system. The two educations that Tapoussière receives simultaneously push her into a position where she must reconcile the influence of her grandmother with the influence of her school and schoolteacher. Beyala's character is raised in a situation where the tension between the culture of the colonizer and the colonized is obvious. Unfortunately for Tapoussière, there is no neat hybrid position in the middle of the two cultures where she can live without the "bitter tension" produced by the colonial experience. Instead she seems to inhabit a new kind of hybridity that is a result of a duality within cultural identity. She appropriates both the traditions her grandmother passes on to her and the lessons she learns about France at school. The seed for a long, arduous struggle for cultural synthesis has been planted in the young girl.

Beyala's work advocates this kind of hybridity. She leaves Tapoussière's future open for her own development and transformation of both her grandmother's culture and the culture of the colonizers through a synthesis of the two. Yet, at the same time, she does not present the reader with a romanticized view of cultural plurality existing in a mystical place called the "Third Space." In Loomba's discussion of hybridity, she calls our attention to Neil ten Kortenaar's reminder that

. . . *neither* authenticity nor creolization has ontological validity, but both are valid metaphors that permit collective self-fashioning. . . . Authenticity and creolization are best regarded as valuable rhetorical tools that can be made to serve liberation. It may also be liberating to remember that these constructions are effectively rhetorical. (40-41)

Beyala's strategies of hybridity, just as Bhabha's, are as Kortenaar says, "effectively rhetorical." However, in *La petite fille du réverbère*, Beyala represents a version of hybridity that is more useful because it relies on a



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more culturally grounded approach to the question of subjective plurality. In her novel, Beyala clearly recognizes that hybridity is not simply a question of cultural melding. Instead, she shows that when a post-colonial subject appropriates and accepts aspects of both their traditional and the colonizer's cultures, she comes to be inhabited by a duality. This duality as represented by Beyala illustrates the ways in which a post-colonial subject may always live in conflict with the two opposing sides that are the result of the struggle for freedom.

## Notes

1. Although this topic is not the focus of my paper, I would like to mention that Beyala does claim that much of African society was based on a matrilineal heritage before the colonizers arrived.

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