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Polyphony is a common aesthetical strategy of novels written by African women that deal with the subject of polygyny. These novels intentionally stage the dialogue and contrast between several voices and stories of women living in or connected with various forms of polygyny. The result is generally not a harmonious concert but a disharmony that disconcerts us with many unanswered questions and contradictory perspectives. Moreover, if the reader—specially the reader from the North—is looking for what might be an outright disavowal of this form of marital union, (s)he may well be deceived. African women writers prefer to offer us complexity than to comply with a simplistic, colonial or neocolonial perception of women in African societies: a perception that imprisons them in the passive role of victims of their own patriarchal culture, of tradition, of ignorance, of poverty, regardless of the diversity of locations, subject positions, intersections and life paths that occur in extremely heterogeneous political, social, cultural and territorial landscapes.

The idea of the “eternal victim” applied to women from the so-called Third World has been denounced for a long time by several feminist critics from different non-western geographies as an imprisonment by and of the western gaze, including the feminist (Mohanty 1988; Mama 1995; Oyewùmí 1997). Polygyny seems to be one of the many tropes that build this idea and actively produce invisibility and silencing, thus hindering the full grasp of the complexity of the subject matter and of its implications both for activism concerning African women and for feminist theory and solidarities. In fact, African women become locked within a Eurocentric framework of perception that directly and exclusively associates monogamy with equality and emancipation (as precarious as this association may be, for there

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are patriarchal power relations within the monogamous couple). When monogamy is thus set as a norm, an abyssal line¹ is drawn that has consequences upon the very possibility of knowing. Indeed, we become incapable of understanding that there are as many forms of polygyny as the subjects involved and that this form of marriage is not inevitably connected with the submission of women, but may be a conscious choice in the frame of different notions of freedom, of well-being and self-fulfillment when marital unions themselves are understood otherwise and have different social values in diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts. Normative thinking along Eurocentric abyssal lines also blinds us to the agency of African women within or in relation to polygynous unions, as well as to the creativity and intelligence they reveal in modes of dealing with tension and conflict, of resisting domination and opening spaces of power and freedom that can be more rewarding for them than monogamous wedlock. As we read recent articles in the press concerning autonomous adult African women with important social roles in the urban public space that opt for polygynous unions², we should question the implications of the normative association of monogamy with emancipation, rather than compensate our incapacity of conceptual revision with vague statements of the persistence of cultural determinism (that we are always ready to see impending upon the Other but never upon ourselves). As for the women of the North, when polygyny is at stake, the focus on the supposed violence and oppression exerted on women of the South blinds them not only to the violence they are subject to themselves, but to the similarity of situations they may have experienced but would never subsume under a category that is colonial (for instance, when men have mistresses). Polygyny as a concept is applied exclusively to women of the South even if practices by men in the North that may be different at the surface, but deep down are comparable, have been current historically and are still current nowadays. The difference between the century-old male practice of having mistresses and today's recent practices of polyamory is basically consent by women. Should we not be applying the same concept

1. I draw here on a concept proposed by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura Sousa Santos who considers that colonial power draws abyssal lines that actively produce that which is located on the other side of the line as non-existent and therefore unknowable. This way, knowledge becomes amputated to its Eurocentric hegemonic form and creates a cognitive injustice that is at the basis of other forms of exclusion, subalternity and oppression (SANTOS 2007). Feminist theory from the North has also incurred in this mistake, as is echoed by the many appeals to decolonize and enlarge feminist epistemology (KISIANG'ANI 2004; OYEWUMÍ 2004; LAZREG 2005).
2. For instance, "Côte d'Ivoire, des femmes libres et sans mari", in *M le magazine du Monde*, 23.01.2015 <http://www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2015/01/23/en-cote-d-ivoire-des-femmes-libres-et-sans-mari_4561422_4497186.html#AFR7XtOOFJxoUaq2.99>; or V. KOWAL (2014) or S. HUMEZ, "Sénégal: la polygamie séduit les jeunes diplômées", in *pikturetank* <http://pikturetank.com/___/series/e55acba5a31a52908d401feff6b40f39/fr/a/S%C3%A9n%C3%A9gal:_la_polygamie_s%C3%A9duit_les_jeunes_dipl%C3%B4m%C3%A9es.html>.

for African women if they consciously enter polyamorous unions? Is this not an evidence that a colonial abyssal line persists that does not acknowledge agency by African women? Far from being a defense of polygyny or of a careless—and thus, ethically and politically dangerous—application of cultural relativism, this article will use literary fiction by African women writers to gather a number of differentiated views on the theme of polygyny that have consequences upon how this social practice is perceived as well as upon other associated concepts that are essential for feminist thought, such as resistance, emancipation, agency and power.

Polygyny—The Impossible “State of The Art”

To produce a useful state of the art regarding scientific or informative literature about polygyny in sub-Saharan Africa would not only be utterly beyond the scope of a journal article, but probably also an impossible task³. Indeed, literature on polygyny presents such a wide variety of colliding perspectives, characterizations and interpretations that it is extremely difficult to understand the dimension, the forms, the motivations of this modality of marriage in the region and what it means for those involved. This fact is not only due to the diversity of polygynous traditions, but has mostly to do with the focus, the location and the intent of the author of the bibliographic source in question, which must thus be analyzed with a sharp critical eye regarding the historical and political standpoint from which it is produced. In fact, polygyny is present in texts concerning law (from family to international law), economics, medicine and health care, development studies, psychology, religion, morals, philosophy, history, politics, among many others. They discuss a phenomenon that may be considered, according to the point of view, a biological tendency, a form of marriage, a type of social or economic organization, or a certain way of exercising sexuality, among other things. This inter-disciplinary interest and plurality of irreconcilable definitions show, above all, that polygyny is the field of an extremely intense political dispute between very different kinds of powers. Across this debate that is full of contradictions, what comes to the fore is the symbolic construction of cultural identities that reflect distinct power interests or ideologies. Although these are extremely nuanced, their main tendencies place them on the two sides of a conflict of a colonial kind, several decades after the independence of most African countries: on the one hand, the persistence of colonialism or neocolonialism and, on the other hand, the affirmation of African cultures against heterogeneous manifestations of this colonial power. Both are enacted at the costs of women.

3. A brief search on the internet or basic bibliographic databases is sufficient to show how the subject proliferates in academic publications, informative works and websites by NGOs or political organizations, newspaper articles, etc.

In the discursive dispute over polygyny, the silence about what this social practice represents to women in terms of power, of rights, of voice, of the possibility of fully living their subjectivities, is notorious and of great significance. We witness in fact a gendered colonial/anticolonial struggle that is also based upon gendered constructions of identity and difference. Common to the diverse expressions of this struggle is the fact that it is fought by patriarchies, for which women are no more than instrumental. In the notion of patriarchy I include not only men as agents, but foremost patriarchal symbolic constructs and discourses that are often adopted by women as well, both in the North and in the South, in their understanding of themselves through the representation of their "others". These constructs are still pervaded by western colonial discourse and determine the identity contours of African men and women in a manner to well known: both are located in a state of nature and primitivism, a primary state of evolution characterized by the lack of control over sexuality and basic impulses, in a normative scale that goes from polygyny to monogamy, according to social evolutionary theories. These are supported by Christian doctrine and morals that include the incentive of monogamy and the eradication of polygamy in the "white man's burden" of the civilizational mission of colonialism. This process of conversion of mores regarding marriage and sexuality happened differently and according to varied negotiations in heterogeneous geographic, political, social, cultural and religious contexts and under diverse colonial powers. A major difference can be noticed, obviously, between Muslim and non-Muslim countries.

If in western colonial discourse polygyny is used as a mark of lack of civilization and inferiority of Africans, it is not surprising to find a reconceptualization of the notion and opposed representations of the phenomenon in anticolonial discourses. The affirmation of African black culture was extensively based upon the inversion of the negativity ascribed to polygyny by white colonialism. A new construction of African black pride, of which the *Négritude* movement is only an example, happened through the search and idealization of pre-colonial identity essences, social models and patterns of culture whose added value was reconfigured by converting the notion of primitivism into the notion of the birthplace of humanity and civilization (e.g. Egypt). The independence projects of the postcolonial countries with their respective national particularities would be built upon this pan-African essence. Although women took part in anticolonial struggles in different ways, these projects, the corresponding images of the Nations and the representations and narratives associated to them reveal a patriarchal order in the roles assigned to men and women (Boehmer 2005).

The reconfiguration of the notion of polygyny is instrumental both in the anticolonial affirmation against European rule, and in the construction of a post-independence political, social and cultural order that would be dominated by men. Polygyny is affirmed not only as a fundamental tradition of an ancestral social structure but also as an instrument of complex

political strategies of African heads of Empires or States (which contradicts the colonial portrait of Africans as incapable of State-like organizations, let alone of political strategic thought) (Lam 2007). Although polygynous marriage was indeed a way to build strong Empires in the African continent, as a guarantee of unity amongst chiefs and tribal leaders and of political alliances, this androcentric History of polygyny is, to say the least, deficient concerning the role of women, namely of those who belonged to important lineages and who played political roles of leadership equivalent to those of men or had themselves noteworthy vassals within a feudal structure of power.

The use of polygyny at the service of male power goes beyond the historical narrative of this “African essence”. Across disciplines and in every form of characterization of polygyny we hear the discourse of patriarchy. Polygyny is presented as a way of raising productivity in rural production units organized around a man, but whose working force is supplied by women and assured furthermore by their reproductive function. Polygyny is justified by the need of men to assure progeny (when the first wife is infertile) or male descendants (when the first wife “produces” female children only). Polygyny is legitimated furthermore as a form of social protection of widows and orphans through levirate, or as a way of containing male sexuality through the norms that guarantee equal distribution of care, protection and means of subsistence to each wife and their children. The present debate about HIV/AIDS reveals very clearly the persistency of colonial and anticolonial discourses and how polygyny is defined in a way instrumental to both: in Eurocentric discourses, it is the explanation for the higher prevalence of the virus in the African continent; according to Africanist discourses, it allows to contain extramarital sexual intercourse that would promote higher levels of dissemination of the disease (Gausset 2001).

Once again, the discussion involves men and excludes women. These are objectified in both the Eurocentric and the patriarchal African construction of “African culture” (both guilty of Africanist essentialisms). The discourse from the North, including that of some feminist tendencies, wishes to rescue African women from a male-chauvinist practice that is oppressive to them. However, this discourse becomes equally oppressive since it subalternizes Africa and African women, who are viewed merely as victims to be saved from their own men and their own culture. Patriarchal Africanism inscribes polygyny in a dogmatic cultural essence, defended by conservative political and social movements in Africa, including women’s movements. Opposition to this construction is considered as a violation of the authenticity of African being, which is focused, for women, upon the values of the enlarged family and motherhood⁴. Only the most progressive women’s

4. In this kind of conservative discourses of religious inspiration (and that in no way reflect the diversity of African feminisms), the “African woman”, to whom a native essentialised identity is ascribed, will opt freely for polygyny as a result

movements in the African continent seem to come forward with an opposition to polygyny, which is not new, but has been persistent and reveals interesting developments in different countries. In South Africa, for example, the debate has come strongly to the fore due to the polygynous President Jacob Zuma and the ambiguities of a law that recognizes traditional and customary marriages, along with civil ones⁵. The same happened in Mozambique, in 2003-2004, when Family Law was under discussion. When women manage to be heard, the debate shifts to issues of rights, liberties and of the subjectivities of the involved parties: they denounce the absence of voice and of decision power in a family unit led by the man alone, who may or may not abide by the rules of equity for wives determined by tradition and religion, particularly when polygyny is associated with forced or arranged marriages. They also criticize the exploitation of women as slave workers within the polygamous family considered as an economic unit, as well as the impoverishment caused by the multiplication of wives and children, with the consequent lack of protection for women, reduction of material subsistence resources and of access to education for children. Women also give voice to the physical, emotional and psychical consequences either of increased domestic violence in a context where women are less protected or of the difficulties of many wives living together. They protest against the control of women's sexuality while men preserve all the freedom in this respect and finally, among other arguments, against the increased probability of dissemination of sexually transmissible diseases, given the number of partners involved and the impossibility felt by women of rejecting unsafe sexual intercourse. In sum, polygyny is rejected because it violates women's right to equality, in spite of every notion or narrative of tradition⁶.

of what are considered to be authentic "African" values: heterosexual marriage, harmony between men and women, a large family and progeny as the basis of society. In a clearly anti-western discourse, these Africanist women's movements claim for African women the identity of "mothers of civilization" from whom "the power to define what is family" cannot be stolen <<http://www.africanmarriage.info/#polygamy>> (access 06.02.2015). This has, of course, been criticized by so-called "post-African" feminism, which rejects essentialised notions of "being African" and rigid representations of "African women" that are blind to their heterogeneity (DOSEKUM 2007; MUPOTSA 2007; MEKGWE 2010).

5. See "Gender links for equality and justice. Policy Brief April 2013. Women's Rights and Poligamy" <http://www.genderlinks.org.za/attachment.php?aa_id=16129> (access 06.02.2015).
6. On the case of Mozambique, which I will discuss further down, see different publications by WLSA (Women and Law in Southern Africa Research and Education Trust), <<http://www.wlsa.org.mz/artigo/por-que-e-que-a-poligamia-e-inaceitavel-na-lei-de-familia-a-luz-dos-direitos-humanos/>> (access 06.02.2015).

Polygyny in Literary Fiction

In literary fiction the theme is also recurrent and mirrors the above mentioned colonial and anticolonial conflict, the national and patriarchal forms of actual and discursive domination, as well as feminist responses, which aim at inscribing women and disputing a place of legitimacy in the narratives of “African culture” that have relegated them to a subaltern position.

Since the pioneers of African literatures, like the Nigerian Chinua Achebe (2008 [1958]) in *Things Fall Apart*, we witness the construction of an African pre-colonial essence through the portrait of rural communities composed of polygynous family units, in which the man is the absolute authority and the exploitation of women (in domestic, rural and reproductive work) and domestic violence appear as part of a praised traditional order that is under the threat of colonialism. Indeed, this threat motivates the representation of a reinforced virility of men as warriors with an insensitive rigor in the observation of traditional rules, whose aim is to counter the colonial representation of the native as less manly than the colonizer (Stratton 1994; Martins 2011).

This shows that dominant male identities and subordinate female identities are fundamental axes of gendered national narratives, as is demonstrated by the continuity of the hypertext of literature written by African men: in the post-independence period, in which national elites fail to fulfill the promises of development of the new countries, the subject of polygyny reappears, for instance, with the semantic lines of *Xala* by Ousmane Sembene (2000 [1973]). The *Xala* (impotence caused by magic) of a polygynous member of the male bourgeoisie that controls the country’s economy and politics, as he marries his third wife, is a critical allegory of the corruption and ambition of the elites that betray the independence projects and fail at fertilizing the Nation’s body (whose metaphorical figuration is the female body). The narrative is told from a male perspective and the voice of women is not heard. Indeed, they appear dysphorically as a parasite element that contributes to the failure of that generation of men through their demands of luxury goods. Interestingly, a not very different picture is present in the tragedy inspired in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* published recently by the Bissau-Guinean Abdulai Sila (2011), *As Orações de Mansata* (“Mansata’s Prayers”). Though the dramatist carries out a pitiless critique of the corrupt and criminal members of contemporary bloody dictatorships in West Africa, this view does not include a critique of polygyny as a system of oppression for women. This social practice is represented as a form of obscene ostentation of richness (women being luxury objects) by the ambitious government elites and refused as such, not because of what it can mean to women. Again, wives appear as fatal Eves that seduce men into destroying their countries. As in the Genesis, men are thus absolved of the initial sin that was fatal for all humanity.

The pioneer African novel written by a woman which specifically addresses the issue of polygyny dates from the same period as *Xala* and comes from Senegal as well: *Une Si Longue Lettre*, by Mariama Bâ (2005 [1979]). Other women writers, such as the Nigerian Flora Nwapa (1978 [1966]), in *Efuru*, or Buchi Emecheta (2008 [1979]), in *Joys of Motherhood*, also tell narratives where polygyny is present. These three novels by women, like those written by men mentioned above, show an evolution that is revealing of how the stories of polygyny reflect the ample political debates that I discussed earlier. As landmarks of African women literature, these novels are also extremely relevant to an understanding of the construction of African and national identities and the different place that men and women occupy in them. The same debate persists in the more recent novels that I will discuss at greater length below—*Riwan ou Le Chemin de Sable*, by Ken Bugul (Senegal) (1999), and *Niketche. Uma História de Poligamia*, by Paulina Chiziane (Mozambique) (2002).

In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, events are set in a context of weak colonization where traditional socio-economic structures and gender roles are still preserved from colonialism to a significant extent. Here, polygyny is described as a conscious option taken by women who are political and economic agents in a broadly considered public space, and possess freedom concerning marriage decisions: they choose their partners, even against their father's will, but they also can opt freely for divorce, a husbandless life, or decide that their husbands should take another wife and pick her themselves. Usually this decision is taken after conversations on the subject with women of other generations that play an important role in the novel. Polygyny is in this case a women's choice, motivated by an emancipatory pragmatic need. Indeed, *Efuru*, the protagonist, wants a new wife at home to assure household chores and reproduction, so that she, as senior wife and childless, can have more time for her economic activities, through which she gains a remarkable social status, much higher than that of the man she had married. It is she the head of the household in every point of view. She is also recognized as a community leader who distributes help and advice to men and women of lower social levels. The portrait of *Efuru* clearly contradicts the idea that polygyny is an outright act of oppression of men over women as well as the representation of African women as victims of their extremely patriarchal culture. Indeed, when considering *Efuru*, we have to reconcile notions that western thought finds difficult to combine due to the persistence of a Eurocentric colonial bias: that of a traditional culture in which women were autonomous and possessed power, agency and voice in the private and public spheres; that of emancipated African women in such a context; and, finally, that of emancipated women opting for polygyny as a means of enlarging and reinforcing their freedom and power. Consequently, polygyny clearly has to be considered within a more complex frame of analysis that includes more factors than just gender identity or gender roles understood exclusively within the man-woman binary relationship, as both Oyewùmí (1997) and

Amadiume (1987) underlined in their studies of women's roles in different Nigerian traditional communities—to a point that Oyewùmí (1997, 2004) even discarded the notion of gender as a Western construction. This might be justified in the case of *Efuru*: the intersectionality with other subject positions, such as those provided by a culturally specific economic and social structure, as well as with other identity-building elements, like class and age, has to be taken into account to ascertain locations of domination and of subordination. In Nwapa's novel, *Efuru* exerts power over her husband and over other women—younger and of lower social ranks. This means that polygyny is both emancipatory and oppressive for women and that, thus, gender, the form of marriage, and the husband-wife dualism are insufficient to account for the power relations that can occur within or associated to this practice⁷.

In turn, Buchi Emecheta (2008) in *The Joys of Motherhood* questions the centrality of marriage and motherhood in the essentialized representation of the African woman and criticizes both as grounds for the submission and misery of women, namely through forced imposition of polygyny. In the novel this practice is scrutinized both in rural and urban contexts and throughout the transformations caused by colonialism in Nigerian society in the 1940s and 1950s. In her native village, the protagonist, Nnu Ego, fails in her role as reproducer and becomes an outcast due to her profound desire to become a mother—a traditional gender role that ends up censured for being imposed upon all women in every circumstance and bringing little or no reward. Nnu Ego is then forced to marry a man who works as domestic help for a colonist family in Lagos. After he inherits one of his deceased brother's wives (levirate), Nnu Ego must live with this woman and her daughters, her own children and their shared husband in a small suburban lodging for the colonized. Since she does not have money or paid work, Nnu Ego lives in extreme poverty, in violence and tension, until she is abandoned by her sons and dies in utter loneliness. Unlike *Efuru*, Emecheta's novel rises up against polygyny and presents education and economic independence as solution for the emancipation of women. This kind of autonomy is enacted in the novel by the protagonist's rival, who frees herself from the constraints of polygyny and male power through a polemic economic activity that is nonetheless presented as positive and legitimate: prostitution. This fact is relevant: not only is sexual work not stigmatized,

7. I am aware of the fact that *Efuru*, the novel's protagonist, also makes another choice that is extremely controversial from a Western point of view: that of submitting herself to female genital mutilation. However I will not enter this discussion, because it brings up other kinds of complex problematics that do not fall into the scope of this article. It is indeed an option taken by an adult woman that has to do with the construction of an "African" identity and the relation to a probably idealized tradition, which is relevant, but it does not make the constellation of gender power relations as evident as polygyny, which is my subject here.

particularly in a social and economic tissue that left women little alternatives, but it can be seen as a form of polygamy—polyandry—which allows for an inverted perspective of polygyny. The choice of having multiple partners is, in this case, centered on the woman as a conscious agent that manages her business strategically and intelligently, by deciding freely upon the use of her own body. This way Emecheta also rewrites the semantics of the female body of the nation which becomes the instrument of an expressive process of empowerment, rather than being servile, an instrument for male reproduction, or a parasite, as it is portrayed in male narratives. It is also important to note that in the two novels I described affection, love, spiritual affinities, sexual attraction or reasons other than convention (maternity/progeny), economic safety, or other pragmatic motives, play little if any role when it comes to marriage. This may elicit the question as to whether marriage, in these cases, is viewed as a private affair or a matter in which factors of the public and political domain converge in a preponderant way, so that private and public become impossible to separate.

Mariamama Bâ's novel, on the other hand, presents interesting complexities related to the debate that goes on since the 1970s in Senegal, a country with 95% Muslims and where Islamic religious powers are very strong in politics, the economy and society. However, it is also a country where women's movements are very relevant and develop important processes of intervention and negotiation. The protagonist of *Une Si Longue Lettre* is a cultivated woman and a teacher. Ramatoulaye is a member of Dakar's urban and modern middle class, which led the nationalist movements in the 50s that included women and the demand for equality. She is very literate in politics and follows political debates about development policies and the participation of women very closely. In this epistolary novel, the protagonist and narrator describes how she had met her husband in her youth and their union had been founded upon love, tenderness, sexual attraction, but also mental affinities and the construction of a common project for the future, both for the couple and the country. Unlike the protagonists of the novels I discussed earlier, convenience, arrangement and pragmatic, material motives did not play a role in this marriage. The same happens with Ramatoulaye's best friend, Aissatou, who marries a doctor against the will of his family for the bride comes from one of the inferior castes in Senegalese society. Still both women enter marriage with dedication to a partnership between equals and although they are obliged to combine their jobs with housework and child rearing (Ramatoulaye has 12 children), they believe their effort is recognized and compensated by the respect of their husbands. This is so until the day when both men decide to take second wives, a fact that both consider a betrayal of their affection and commitment to a full and equal partnership, as well as of the nationalist and equalitarian utopia they had fought for together. Thus, the novel is a critique not only of polygyny as a system that diminishes women to the category of objects that can be used and discarded by men, but of the male elites that took power after

independence but never overthrew Muslim traditions or Islamic power. To be rigorous, neither Aissatou nor Ramatoulaye live in polygynous unions. The first divorces her husband, improves her financial situation by studying and finding a better job abroad and raises her children alone. Ramatoulaye does not have the courage to divorce, but must also struggle to maintain a household and raise the children on her own. She and her children are abandoned by the husband/father, who is seduced by a young girl of a lower class as old as his daughter and invests all his wealth in satisfying her wishes and the demands of her family, specially of his mother-in-law. Since she maintains the condition of wife, Ramatoulaye must suffer the traditional rituals reserved to widows when her husband dies. She must give away all her possessions and live secluded during four months. She is also proposed to enter a levirate marriage with her husband's brother, which she, however, is strong enough to refuse on account of the objectification this represents for women.

The Senegalese and Muslim system of polygyny is thus strongly criticized in the novel, though we do not witness common and most complicated situations of co-habitation or husband-sharing among wives. Men are denounced as hypocrite, weak, unscrupulous, disrespectful and oppressive of women. However, there is not a simple gender division between oppressors and oppressed in this critique. In fact, in both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's cases, it is women who initiate and incentive or almost force men into entering second unions. Mother-in-law, that is, women of an older generation are thus portrayed as agents of women's oppression by promoting polygyny and forced marriages for motives of social ascension, social recognition or preservation of a lineage. They appear as more powerful than their sons and do not hesitate to submit both their daughters-in-law and their daughters to unhappiness. In turn, the second wives are seen by Ramatoulaye as victims of this system and of the women of the older generation (not so much of men), for they are either educated for the purpose of serving men or forced to abandon their studies and an emancipatory path to sell their youth and beauty to satisfy the middle-age pride of a man they do not love.

Maybe Bâ's novel can be read as a pioneer literary manifest of Islamic feminism, for it questions religion and its practices from the perspective of a woman who claims Muslim culture as a part of an identity she does not intend to renounce to. It is she that claims the right to be both a free woman and a Muslim, something that, for the West, is most often a paradox. Nevertheless, to a great extent, the set of questions that the novel raises concerning the place and the role of women at all these cultural, social, political and religious intersections are unsolved by Bâ. Ramatoulaye's unhappiness, isolation and impotence indicate that the inscription of a female subject in the Senegalese social text is impossible if this text is not substantially altered. Such a social revolution entails a number of profound transformations: the novel points out, first, for the need of a reform of Islam that includes

the annulment of certain cultural and social practices, like polygyny, creating equality for women, and second for the need to change both men's and women's mentalities. The attitudes of the younger generation, Ramatoulaye's daughters and sons-in-law, are seen as open windows for a brighter future for women both in the private sphere, within partnerships founded on affection and affinities and which include sharing domestic responsibilities, and in the public sphere, through education, professionalism and political activism by women.

Compared to *Une Si Longue Lettre, Riwan ou Le Chemin de Sable* by Ken Bugul, also from Senegal, and published 20 years later, has caused lively controversy because of its apparent conservatism: the author seems to support not only polygyny, but also a patriarchal tradition that mixes local cultures with Islamic religion and involves arranged and forced marriage of adolescents. It is my contention, nevertheless, that the novel demands deeper attention in its analysis, as the author pointed out in an interview that she gave me in February 2013. Bugul underlines the subjectivities of the parties involved in polygynous practices and the complexities of contexts, stating that notions such as freedom, power and happiness may be understood by each subject according to individual paths in which multiple referents intersect. The author does not stand for polygyny nor for the oppression of women, as her own biography demonstrates extensively. Still, she was confronted with particularly difficult life circumstances, in which "*celle dont personne ne veut*"⁸ found reasons to look for the protection and the social and mental sense of order that traditional knowledge and spirituality could offer her. In the wake of her previous novels, such as *Le Baobab Fou* (1997), Bugul's strongly autobiographical novel tells the story of a 30 years old woman who had a Western education and a university degree, had travelled in many European countries, and had relationships with European men. After having experienced these ways of living and forms of partnership alien to her culture, her religion, her tradition, the protagonist finds herself lost. Her choices and what she believed would be the path to emancipation and happiness had not led to personal fulfillment and inner peace. She returns to her natal village to seek for a framework of references that will give her this fulfillment and a sense of belonging to a collective. There she meets a Muslim community leader, a marabout, in his 70s, with whom she first becomes friends and later marries, as his 28th wife.

The protagonist, Bugul's alter ego in the novel, denounces colonialism and the colonial representation of African men as savage, brutal and oppressive to women as the first fracture that caused her disconnection with her culture of origin and that made her opt for a modern Western model of womanhood. This image of African men had driven the protagonist away from the marriage dreams common to Senegalese women of their generation, as well as from the comprehension and acceptance of heterosexual

8. This is the meaning of her pen name in Wolof.

relationships, forms of marriage, notions and practices of sexuality, and from the rituals associated with all this in Senegalese society. Nevertheless, the monogamous relationships she had been involved in in the North had also fallen short of the promises of emancipation of European feminist discourse. Romantic monogamous love in Europe is described in a very simplistic and reductive manner as little more than a sense of possession and control that caused tension, jealousy, loss of freedom and unhappiness for both parties. In the perspective of the protagonist, the result of this kind of affective attachment for women is neurosis and not inner or emotional growth nor independence. This is one of the reasons why she seeks reintegration in her native society. The novel tells her story and contrasts it with two other stories of women in polygyny: Nabou Samb's and Rama's.

Nabou Samb is a young woman from Dakar's middle class who has a secondary level education. She consciously decides to become the fourth wife of an older, richer and more ignorant man. It is an arranged marriage, understood as a contract that will provide wealth, social status, physical and psychic well-being and safety for the wife. The union is celebrated according to a series of traditional rituals, which the narrator describes with extensive detail. Indeed, the author seems to attribute an essential value to the symbolic surrounding polygynous marriage for the comprehension of the referents and expectations that may explain why it may be empowering and a source of happiness for some women and the opposite for other women. In an arranged marriage, in which love and affinities are never an issue (and women such as Nabou Samb do not expect it to be), self-esteem and self-fulfillment are grounded exclusive in the extent to which material and social expectations are met. Marriage rituals are the guarantee of the celebration of the bride who thus acquires a sense of power over her husband and the co-wives. These include bride-price and a number of rich presents to the bride and her family which are far from being viewed as the reduction of women to an object being traded. On the contrary, the higher her "market-value", the more the woman feels she can exert power over her husband, which she does through further material demands. Rituals concerning sexuality are also included in this complex power-game that may be a puzzle from a Western perspective. They include, for instance, the verification of virginity which is patriarchal because it is part of the control of women's sexuality (while men are allowed to live it as it pleases them). But these rituals also comprise clothes and ornaments that enhance female sensuality and are welcomed by women because they are a sign not of their subjection but of their domination of men through sexual seduction. This is again problematic: does the idea of sexual seduction of men by women correspond to a men-centered idea of pleasure? Is it a reduction of women's condition to that of a body, a piece of flesh to be consumed by men? Or, on the contrary, is it an ingenious and creative strategy of power that involves the body as well as intelligence and while it does not exclude sexual pleasure for the woman, it may enhance it through that very sense of power? In

Nabou Samb's narrative, there is no register of sexual dissatisfaction or of the search for it outside of wedlock. On the contrary, with the material safety and the social status acquired through marriage and the power of seduction over the husband, a strategic know-how in dealing with her co-wives (without the prison of jealousy), the autonomy of her own home (here modernity transforms tradition for there is no co-habitation of the wives in the same polygynous home), and the freedom she gains from the frequent absence of the husband, Nabou Samb finds in polygyny the ideal circumstances for happiness. This, of course, is not a praise of polygyny in itself, but a description of how it can be empowering for a particular female subjectivity if a number of other factors are given within a certain framework of expectations.

According to the perspective presented by the author in the novel, the experience of living in polygyny in the Muslim leader's harem, though diverse, also offers possibilities for the well-being and satisfaction of women. It is true that they are imprisoned in a specific area of the marabou's house and have towards him a relationship of full submission. They are always subject to their husband's will and he has both marital and religious authority over them. The novel clearly denounces this fact. Nevertheless, it also describes the collective life of the harem wives as harmonious, peaceful and marked by general contentment, although women from very different social ranks, ages and education levels are concerned. This general satisfaction is based on the social status acquired through the husband, the fulfillment of material needs, a financial autonomy achieved through the commerce of small handicraft (which generates a small economy of accumulation and a sense of self-worth through the acquisition of luxury goods), and finally an inter-generational conviviality amongst women that includes the exercise of sexuality or of sexually connoted practices like dancing. Moreover, like Tia Maria, one of the characters of *Nikette*, who is also the 25th wife of a traditional king, these women are queens and exercise power over the rest of the community. They are served by the rest of the socially inferior community of women and men, within an enclosed space that is paradoxically perceived as a space of freedom because it is the center from which this power emanates. This means that freedom of movement or territorial freedom is not necessarily a requirement for the sense of "being free", for it is class and wealth that determine the semantics of freedom in this case. Moreover, gender is not in itself sufficient to define a location of power or of subalternity without the intersection with other parameters of identity.

There is also a very controversial reason for the apparent contentment of these women. According to the narrator, it is motivated by a process of spiritual sublimation due to the inspiring personality of the marabou and to his qualities as a man. The portrait of the Muslim leader is too euphoric not to be polemic. The protagonist emphasizes the intelligence, the wisdom and the openness to knowledge of the old marabou that is eager to find out about other cultures and ways of thinking through intellectual debate with

a younger woman who has been abroad and studied. Indeed, she finds in him the intellectual partner she had been looking for and that acknowledges her life experiences without censorship. The protagonist also stresses the tenderness and sexual satisfaction he gives to his wives, in spite of his old age, and his natural talent to bring peace to the most disturbed and rebel minds and spirits. However, he remains the central agent of a social order that puts women at his service and even accepts the offer of adolescent girls as faith tokens by his followers. The wives, like all the religious community, are bound by the *Ndigueul*, a principle of the Mouride's doctrine (one of the main Muslim brotherhoods in Senegal) that promises paradise in exchange for voluntarily acceptance of submission to Allah. This may, in fact, be considered a form of alienation and oppression by religion. However, the protagonist, who is conscious of this, describes how spiritual peace becomes natural through a process of emotional learning by the individual, an inner growth that is fulfilling. Indeed, she deepens her self-knowledge with the women in the harem and is able to overcome rivalries, enhance the sense of autonomy and reinforce her self-esteem. It is nonetheless noteworthy that the protagonist maintains her own home and freedom of movements, unlike the other wives of the marabou. She is thus able to make choices that her co-wives do not have, for she is both inside and outside the polygynous family unit.

The invisible fractures in the marabou's harem are exposed through another character, Rama. As an adolescent she was simply delivered to the marabou as a religious gift and all her dreams concerning marriage and the rituals associated to courting and marriage ceremonies were frustrated. In this case, the traditional symbolic rituals that, according to the perspective inscribed in the novel, allow women to find sense and self-worth in polygyny are not carried out and Rama is left without the protecting roof of references that would allow her to understand her place in the cultural context that surrounds her and to make sense of her own experiences, namely of her sexuality or her role as woman/wife. Rama does not conform to a situation in which she is deprived of freedom and of the satisfaction of her desires and affective needs. She lives at the margin of the social structure of the harem and never takes part in the conviviality amongst wives. Finally, she becomes the protagonist of the major act of resistance to polygyny in the novel through adultery, when she is sexually attracted to another man. Rama's escape from the harem and the mysterious fire that burns her home and kills all her family build a tragic ending to the novel. This ending also includes the death of the marabou that stops eating and dies of weakness. Both cause a lot of perplexity to the reader.

To be sure the author does not consider polygyny simplistically as a practice that is always oppressive to women. As portrayed in Bugul's novel, both monogamy and polygyny may be adequate for some female subjectivities. Polygyny is not outright rejected but shown as an option for certain women who may find it advantageous and consciously chose it as the best

way for self-fulfillment. This choice depends on the diverse intersections that compose the identities of naturally heterogeneous women with complex life paths.

Controversy is deeper when it comes to women who had no choice and when we would expect the novel's critique to be sharper. Still, one of the virtues of the harem description is how it enables us to understand the marabou's wives as more than mere passive, resigned, impotent victims. Although some may have just traded the prison of poverty for the prison of the harem, although some have been handed in as pure merchandise (and the author clearly rejects this, as well as adolescent marriage), they reveal agency in the clever ways they find to achieve well-being and satisfaction. These include every day activities, handicraft, song and dance, the creation of a new symbolic value structure that is empowering. Though within deep restrictions—which are not due to polygyny, but to this specific kind of polygynous unit—women create a space of freedom and power of their own in the interstices of patriarchal power, a space that ends up leading to transformation in the very structure of this power. The inclusion of Rama's story and its tragic ending, including the death of the marabou, demand an allegoric reading that signals the announced death of harems as “state of exception” that will necessarily undergo changes and eventually come to an end due to the general evolution of society and of the role of women and men. It must be said, though, that the protagonist's mourning of her husband as a good man hurt to death by betrayal seems to point to the idea that men are caught by an oppressive system in the same way as women. The idea of a “forced oppressor” is, of course, one that does not hold.

Riwan ou Le Chemin de Sable is full of unsolved contradictions and definitely neither abides to the criticism of polygyny that might be expected by readers from the North nor to its defense as a part of an African authenticity. On the contrary, the accent on the diversity of subjectivities and the heterogeneity of experiences and the varied cultural rituals that offer a more complex reading of the place of women within polygyny is instigating against forms of feminism that may be still colonial and themselves oppressive over women, imposing notions of freedom and emancipation that may be foreign and undesired. Women cannot be freed in contradiction with their choices, but must free themselves according to their own conceptions of well-being and self-fulfillment. A hierarchy of cultures based on the degree of women's emancipation, measured according to Western criteria, still prevails amongst feminists from the North, unable to grasp the complexities, intelligence, creativity and power manifest in the strategies developed by Southern women to find dignity and well-being within their framework of references. Rituals and the symbolic—Bugul shows us—are not to be neglected here. On the other hand, we must also debate how this can or cannot, should or should not be articulated with a possibly dangerous cultural relativism. It is true that, like the author states in interviews (Mendy

Ongoundou 1999), *Ndigueul* is nothing but a sham (not unlike, as she underlines, other lures that society, culture and religion present individuals in different contexts and countries, all with the purpose of satisfying the desire for belonging and of sustaining community and social bonds and structures). It is moreover true, as Bugul also writes, that tradition “establishes strict rules that serve as barriers for the individuals and limit their deviations”, limits that the author always dared to break with the consequence that she was rejected as “deviant”. Nevertheless, the traditional order offers women frameworks of sense, negotiation spaces and forms of power, within hierarchies that do not have men as a point of comparison, and in which spatial confinement and obedience may be seen as social ascension and a way to the fulfilment. That is, Bugul leads readers to disconcert and to heterodox perspectives and reflexions about polygyny as a question that has much more to it than we would like to believe.

The same happens in *Niketche* by the Mozambican Paulina Chiziane. Here, again, polyphonies around polygyny arouse questions that do not have simple answers. According to the author in an interview I conducted with her in 2011⁹, she went to a lot of bars in Maputo, the Mozambican capital, to listen to the stories of women that she gathered in her novel. Indeed, there are so many voices in *Niketche*, of women of so many origins, with so many different life paths that the novel seems to build what we may consider a feminist national narrative: first, because the author rescues these women and their lives from the silence they had been condemned to by the official History and the collective memory. The official national narrative of the past excludes the private and domestic sphere and is androcentric and teleological in the sense of the coronation of the Mozambican New Man. Second, because the novel is built as a complex weave with infinite tonalities and uncountable perspectives that interrogate both the cultural practices of different regions of the country (as a sort of national ethnography of intimacy) and historical processes (colonialism, wars) from the point of view of the power relationships between the sexes. In this sense, *Niketche* presents a postmodern disconcert, with multiple crossings of perspectives that converge in the protagonist—Ramy. This woman finds her double not only in her own mirror image, that confronts her with her fragmented self, but multiple doubles in the stories, life experiences and feelings of the many women she encounters as she struggles to find a sense for what is at stake—the place of women in the many forms of affective and sexual relationships with men.

Ramy undergoes a learning and emancipation process and promotes an identical transformation in the remaining female characters. She converts an extreme fragility into enormous strength and creativity in resistance to

9. <<http://saladeimprensa.ces.uc.pt/index.php?col=canalces&id=4584#.VNsy35hybIU>> (access 11.02.2015).

male and traditional power over women. Ramy is confronted with her husband Tony's extramarital relationships and with the other families and homes he possesses besides hers, the official wife's. Having mistresses is a phenomenon known in Mozambique as "amantismo", a kind of unofficial polygyny that is accounted for as reminiscent from traditional polygynous practices. Ramy tries to meet the other "wives" and finds out that because of the absence of wedlock they and their families live in utter lack of social protection and in total dependence of the polygynous lover who explores them sexually, in domestic and reproductive work. Tony successively seeks and takes on new, younger and more beautiful women who may satisfy his sexual appetite and desire for social ostentation. Curiously, each woman comes from a different Mozambican ethnic group and stands for the customs and histories of this group—an intended strategy by the author to present a national panorama of the situation of Mozambican women and the cultural and social circumstances that surround different subjectivities and various reasons to accept polygyny. Ramy meets women who suffer from abandonment, who had come out of utmost poverty, who had been raped or forced to prostitution, who, like herself, are obliged to live without affection and to raise their children alone, and helps them to become subjects of their own destiny. Solidarity among the wives, led by Ramy, becomes the key to invert power relations and defeat both the common husband and the patriarchal tradition that impends upon women. The progress of all these women from rivalry to solidarity, from utter dependence and submission to emancipation, financial autonomy, freedom of choice over their lives and their affective and sexual relationships is both extremely difficult and extremely inventive. Indeed, it brings to the fore a number of complex strategies that women have in order to deal with situations of oppression that have multiple and unexpected agents. For polygyny is hardly ever a mere marital relationship in which men dominate women. The interplay of social powers and interests at stake is enormous—and this, like the multiple forms of polygyny, from the traditional to the modern, urban, unofficial one, is fictionally analyzed in the novel. Power relations manifest in polygyny do not have a clear cut division according to sex: indeed, not all men are polygynous or possessive over women; not all women are against polygyny. On the contrary, Ramy and her co-wives confront women of other generations who become agents of the subordination of women to patriarchal tradition because they were victims of identical forms of oppression in marriage and do not know other realities. In other cases, they are conscious of the oppressive dimension but also of the liberating possibilities of polygyny—which, again, has multiple forms and may in its heterogeneity create power constellations that benefit women in their also varied subjectivities. Moreover, as can be seen in the novel, violence upon and oppression of women are not exclusive of polygyny, occurring also frequently in monogamous unions.

The novel compares, for instance, customary with modern practices of polygyny, along the lines of the debate that went on in Mozambique and

in other countries about the advantages of legally recognizing traditional practices concerning marriage. In order to remedy for the lack of social and economic protection of the unofficial families of her polygynous husband, Ramy organizes the traditional bride-price (*lobolo*) ceremony as a way to rescue these women and children from their invisibility and to make the man responsible for them, as used to be the case in highly regulated traditional polygyny. In a very ironic way, Chiziane converts the rules of traditional polygyny into the weapons that these women will very cleverly use to get rid of their husband and punish him. Thus, they summon the “conjugal parliament”, an assembly of wives led by the senior, and establish the duties the husband must equally respect towards every one of them. It is true that men are the center and keep women at their service, but women also have rights and are entitled to demand, for instance, subsistence resources, as well as sexual satisfaction. If the husband fails to comply, the “conjugal parliament” discusses the fault and forms of compensation, such as the possibility of the woman using a “conjugal assistant”. However, so that women can have some power in this context, it is fundamental that they are united and solidary. Ramy accomplishes this unity with wisdom and generosity while, at the same time, she encourages the other wives to emancipate in a modern way through work outside the home and small businesses that assure financial independence from the husband. This way they become psychologically and socially empowered, conscious of social gender roles and of the possibility of inverting them in their favor. In the novel, it is the simultaneous play with modernity and tradition that leads to the final condemnation of the husband. The wives free themselves because they do not need the husband’s money anymore, but they are able to take this step because they have morally gained superiority over him and raised their self-esteem through the use of tradition. Indeed, the moment of the novel when Tony is most humiliated in his virile identity is when all the wives, simultaneously, impose their naked bodies upon him, demanding a sexual performance he is too scared to provide.

Niketche portrays Mozambican society as one in which tradition still plays an excessively important role. Though this can have benefits (as is demonstrated by the creative use the wives make of traditional polygyny norms), the novel’s final statement about tradition is clearly a condemnation of its violent repression of women. This becomes evident when Tony is said to be dead and his family plunders Ramy’s, the official wife’s home, and leaves her and her children with literally nothing. They also humiliate her by cutting her hair and carrying out the *kutchinga* ceremony, in which the widow is given to one of her dead husband’s brothers for “sexual purification”. Civil law in urban Maputo seems to be powerless regarding these practices, perpetrated by both men and women, that not only deny women (and their children) every right to property and dignity, but are also extremely violent, psychologically, physically and sexually. Though this violence is clearly portrayed and denounced in the novel, Chiziane, again, presents an

ironic turn that converts it into the final victory of the oppressed wife. Ramy knows that her husband is not dead and avenges his betrayals by having sexual pleasure with his brother and getting pregnant by him—something that Tony, as he returns from one more love affair—is forced to accept as it had resulted from the imposition of traditional practices by his own family upon his supposed widow. At the same time, the remaining wives, who have autonomously guaranteed subsistence resources and established relationships with other men, reject the customary union they had with Tony and abandon him, thus showing a power of choice and decision they did not possess at the beginning of the novel.

To be true, none of the women in *Niketche* gives up the wish for heterosexual marriage, for many reasons, among which romantic love is certainly not the most important. Chiziane portrays in her novel the ambiguous and complex situations that women in her country go through as they find themselves between urban modernity and the persistence of traditional customs, an ambiguity that the law and the debates in civil society demonstrate: both in Ramy's liberation and in the choices of the other women, Chiziane condemns polygyny when it is unilaterally imposed, without knowledge and consent of all involved parties, and without rules. This is the case of unofficial polygyny, "*amantismo*", the cause of enormous pain for women and children, and a frequent social practice in Mozambique that, according to the perspective conveyed by the novel, ends up being sometimes worse than traditional polygyny, for the latter included a number of rights and duties for men and wives. Still, tradition is not the option for modern Mozambican women in *Niketche*: these prefer education, work, financial autonomy and monogamous relationships. They demand equality in the couple and sexual satisfaction. They understand the importance of solidarity among women and reject the idea of the absolute need of having a man and of keeping him if it means submission and exploitation. Ramy's commitment to an education of her sons and daughters guided by the principle of equality between the sexes confirms that the novel wants to show ways for social transformation.

In the various novels that I briefly commented, polygyny is presented as extremely heterogeneous and contextual. Its meaning is closely linked to the concrete conditions of every case, at the intersection of social, economic, religious and cultural factors and the complex subjectivities of the men and women involved. This heterogeneity, or disconcert, is what most challenges our thought. It challenges us, first, as a postcolonial assertion that is radically opposed to a colonial representation of polygyny in the South as an evidence of lack of civilization and of obvious oppression of women. Instead, it demands a differentiated analysis that takes into account diverse socio-sexual identities produced by multiple intersections and reciprocal transformations of sometimes contradictory cultural frameworks. Second, this heterogeneity defies us as a feminist assertion. Trying to understand polyphonies about polygyny by closely listening to women's voices is a challenge towards abandoning conceptual structures and points of view that do

not allow us to comprehend ways of living and women's choices and ambitions in non-Western social and cultural frameworks. It is a challenge to redefine feminist conceptual tools and pivotal aims, not in the sense that we should altogether abandon them but that they should not make us blind to different perceptions of complexities we are unable to grasp with our abyssal look. Should we be using words such as emancipation, empowerment, freedom, rights, while these remain narrowly associated to a Western paradigm that renders invisible not only the specificities of the pains, but most of all, the creativity, the ingenuity, the knowledge, the wisdom, and the resources that non-Western women find and build in the contexts they know better than anyone else, in order to create conditions for well-being, safety, self-fulfillment and happiness? For sure, these concepts and terms are used by African feminisms. However, these novels and the uncountable forms of polygyny described in them seem to point to a perception of the condition of women in ways that transcend men as a correlate, or the binary thinking that feminisms from the North have transcended in some theoretical proposals, but still hold to in others. I suggest that we need new perspectives that are capable of accounting for evidences of women's power that cannot be measured by comparison to the types and dimension of the power held by men. Likewise, emancipation of women can occur in ways that do not necessarily have to do with men, but with other forms and locations of power offered by social structures and dynamics. This redefinition of power implies an epistemology that crosses and transcends the gender category, because it may be used by subjects of any sex over individuals of both sexes, due to identity locations that are not merely defined by gender. This requires, at least, forms of intersectional thought, or maybe even reconceptualization of identity categories.



Finally what these narratives about polygyny confirm is the need to operate with disconcert when we analyze polygyny, avoiding the arrangement that will necessarily lead to levelling, invisibility and silencing, either of oppression within polygynous relationships, either of the possibilities of alternative ways of living social relationships between men and women and women and women that are not restricted to conjugality, sexuality and affection, or involve these and other factors in a complex interplay. For the many African women writers that go on writing about this subject, it seems that what matters most of all is to underline contexts, subjectivities and plurality, opening doors to other ways of comprehending these realities.

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to offer a feminist reading of two novels written by African women on the subject of polygyny. Other novels will be drawn into the discussion, in order to demonstrate how polyphony as an aesthetical strategy corresponds to a political intention of making as many voices of women as possible heard on the subject. A simplistic reading of polygyny as always merely oppressive to women, as opposed to monogamy as a desirable norm, is contradicted by an accent on complex power constellations, not to be defined through the parameter of gender alone, and by intersectional regards that discover invisible forms of agency and semantics of freedom and empowerment that feminist conceptual frameworks cannot account for so far. The enlargement of perspectives leads to an epistemological questioning of the possible Eurocentrism and colonial semantics of some central concepts of feminist theory, such as power and emancipation.

RÉSUMÉ

Déconcertantes polyphonies sur la polygynie. Riwan ou Le Chemin de Sable de Ken Bugul (Sénégal) et Niketche. Une histoire de Polygamie de Paulina Chiziane (Mozambique). — Cet article présente une lecture féministe de deux romans écrits par deux femmes africaines sur le sujet de la polygynie. D'autres romans seront inclus dans la discussion pour démontrer que la polyphonie en tant que stratégie esthétique correspond à une volonté politique de faire entendre le plus grand nombre de voix de femmes sur le sujet. Une lecture simpliste de la polygynie, considérée oppressante pour les femmes à l'opposé de la monogamie comme norme désirable, est remplacée par l'accent mis sur des constellations de pouvoirs complexes. Celles-ci ne peuvent être définies exclusivement par le paramètre du genre, mais demandent des regards intersectionnels qui mettent au jour des formes invisibles d'agencement, des sémantiques de liberté et d'autonomisation que les cadres conceptuels féministes n'ont pas reconnues jusqu'à présent. L'élargissement de perspectives conduit à une remise en cause épistémologique d'un éventuel eurocentrisme et des sémantiques coloniales de quelques notions centrales de la théorie féministe, comme « pouvoir » et « émancipation ».

Keywords/Mots-clés: Ken Bugul, Paulina Chiziane, African women's literature, polygyny/Ken Bugul, Paulina Chiziane, littérature des femmes africaines, polygynie.