**Women, and their Weapons**: The Resistance of African Women within *Houseboy*

Critics often argue about the revolutionary implications of Ferdinand Oyono’s fictional novel *Houseboy*, in which a Cameroonian man by the name of Toundi retells his experience with French colonization. Readers and critics alike are baffled as to how Toundi resists French oppression, or if he resists it at all. Yet, African women, who are often associated with the continent itself, weald and utilize a wide array of tactics of defiance to French domination, and it is often Toundi’s refusal to accept their actions that imprisons him. In the world of the colonized there are countless subtle forms of resistance, and in this case even mourning could be viewed as one such form. This is not to say that African women have access to power, in actuality they face both white European domination as well as Patriarchy; however, there is not ever complete submission to either of these norms, and in a sense through the women in the novel, the land of Africa subsists as its own entity apart from France.

It is Toundi’s mother above all others that he summons at his deathbed when he states, “My mother always used to say what my greediness would bring me to in the end…if I had known it would bring me to my grave…she was right, my poor mother”(4). Within this passage, Toundi is referencing his banishment from his birth village, as well as his introduction into French custom through the Catholic Church. Father Gilbert’s opening presence in Toundi’s village represents not only white male patriarchy, but also the feminization of African men. After Father Gilbert throws sugar at a crowd of young boys he launches a conflict in the village which initially occurs as a fight between Toundi’s mother and the mother of another child named Tinati. Toundi’s father comes to her rescue, and eventually the children’s fathers come close to killing one another. The entire conflict is attributed to Toundi’s “greediness,” but it seems more likely that Toundi’s father is, above all else, ashamed to see his son fighting over lumps of sugar. His anger manifests itself in the form of brute force. Toundi has no way of resisting this force; he states “I couldn’t cry out because that might have attracted the neighbors. My friends would have thought me a girl. I would have lost my place in the group of ‘boys-who-are-soon-to-be-men” (11). Toundi’s father is perhaps thinking something similar, i.e. that the other villagers will think him less than a man if he does not beat and subdue Toundi. But Toundi’s father cannot catch him and instead resorts to other means of punishment, which Toundi’s mother attempts to resist, “My mother got up and fetched the pot. I saw my father’s hand and my uncle’s hand go in. Then I heard my mother crying. For the first time in my life I thought of killing my father” (12). Toundi’s mother is unable to help him and in this way they are both trapped within the confines of his father’s patriarchal rule. Toundi’s mother then includes him in her mourning process, “My mother came to see me that night. She was crying. We cried together” (13). Not only do they both engage in a feminine form of coping, but Toundi’s mother also gives him her blessing, and in this way he is able to remain Maka and keep a part of his village forever.

Another important African woman within the novel is Sophie. Because of her good looks she is able to attract the most handsome Frenchman in town, “My God, she was beautiful. Her mahogany skin gleamed like bronze in the light that flooded over it” (37). Sophie is Africa herself, and she is being conquered sexually by France. Sophie temps the engineer, but she also resists him when she badmouths her lover to Toundi, she says “Fuck his country and fuck him […] we don’t mean anything to them either. It’s a good job its mutual” (26). But the question remains-is it really mutual? Sophie seems to go back and forth, often showing signs of love for the engineer, which leads readers to be uncertain of her rebelliousness. On their trip to the rural village Sophie mourns her disadvantaged position within society by crying out as to why she deserves such mistreatment. As Toundi comforts her, there appears to be a masculine confrontation between Toundi and the engineer, “Sophie began to cry again. She shut her eyes. Her long wet eyelashes turned into little black tufts of hair. Through the rear window of the cabin the engineer’s eyes met mine. He turned his head quickly”(38). From the passages it appears as if the engineer is ashamed of the way he is treating such a beautiful woman; he cannot even look an African man in the eyes.

Toundi’s very surface understanding of the complexity of womanhood is shattered by two events, one of which is his meeting of Kalisia. Kalisia has her own subtle way of defying white people and this often confuses Toundi. It seems as if her nonchallant confrontation with Madame assists Toundi in realizing Madame’s humanness,

“Everything about her seemed weary […] Kalisia stared at Madame with that look of insolent indifference that always infuriates her when it comes from an African. The contrast between the two women was striking. The *African* was completely calm with a calmness that seemed nothing could ever trouble her. She looked at Madame without concern, with the vacant look of a ruminant sheep…Madame changed color twice” (93).

Kalisia represents what it means to be *African;* this is one of the only instances when gender is not mentioned. She is calm, knows herself and is unafraid of who she appears to be. Toundi does not completely accept her stating at times that “her familiarity and abandon made me furious” (95). But he accepts that she exhibits her humanness without shame and uses her intuition to survive. When Toundi’s master becomes increasingly hostile toward him Kalisa gives him advice soaked in African traditional wisdom,

“ I’d go now before the river has swallowed me up altogether. Our ancestors used to say you must escape when the water is still only up to your knees […] you’ll be something like the eye of the witch that sees and knows…a thief or any one with a guilty conscience can never feel at ease in the presence of that eye” (100).

Not only does Kalisia speak of a powerful “witch”, but also of the “guilty conscience” which she assumes the whites have. Perhaps the powerful witch is Kalisa herself. Yet, Toundi does not heed Kalisia’s advice and seems to feel ashamed of fleeing. Instead, he chooses to accept his fate. Thus, when the engineer comes for him in search of Sophie and his missing money he responds by saying “I used to listen to her talking to me without really seeing her” (107). Toundi is exhibiting his masculine power, but it won’t afford him actual authority in the situations he subsequently confronts. Sophie’s defiance is indeed proven at the expense of Toundi, and Toundi continues to ignore the feminine influence. When his sister mourns his capture he thinks to himself

“The worst thing to bear was the women. They gathered round my sister, wailing shrilly and tearing their hair. My sister kept shouting that the whites were going to kill her brother, the only brother she had in the world. I felt embarrassed. This custom of useless lamentation over other people’s misfortunes irritated me” (111).

To think that at this moment of fear and hopelessness his only thought is to how useless the process of mourning is. Yet at the beginning of the novel, his mourning with his mother is valued. Perhaps this devaluation of African women’s voices and actions within the novel play some part in his downfall.

In Conclusion, an important difference between men and woman within the novel is that African women seem to harbor a sense of being wounded. At the end of the novel, Toundi seems to be lost in a trance, unable to make any real decisions because he has let himself be imprisoned physically, as well as mentally within French ideology. Perhaps the greatest weapon of the colonizer is their ability to overtake the minds and hearts of the colonized, but by utilizing subversive forms of resistance, African women within *Houseboy* leave their very own lasting impression, and thus they live on.

**WORKS CITED**

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