

Calixthe Beyala. *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996. 120 pp. \$9.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-435-90951-2.



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Since 1987, the Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala has practically published a novel a year. She has chosen to live in voluntary exile in Paris where, she says, she benefits from the necessary independence and freedom to speak and to write (Matateyou). Beyala's innovative aesthetics and daring thematics have been compared to writings by authors such as Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana and Alice Walker from the United States.

The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me (1987) is Beyala's first novel. It concerns the struggles of Ateba Leocadie, a young woman in the Quartier General (QG), an African shanty-town. At nineteen years of age, Ateba becomes conscious of herself, her body and her surroundings. At that moment, she decides to unseal her lips and talk about the past, the present and the future of women. From her observations of women's lives in the QG, Ateba is determined to break the miserable chain of violence that will eventually link her life to that of her mother, her grandmother and great-grandmother. Ateba's mother, Betty, a prostitute, abandoned her when she was nine years old. An aunt, Ada, raised her but brought the child her share of

abusive "papas." In her words, Ateba wants to save the future and teach the children of Africa how "the confusion of values, ideas, feelings, memories had ended up by killing history all the way back to its beginnings" (p. 2). She wants to save women and get them back to the stars where, according to Ateba's imaginary legend, women came from before their subjugation by men on earth.

With this first novel, Calixthe Beyala distinguishes herself from the previous generation of Francophone women writers whose writings have been characterized as personal or autobiographical. (See Mariama Ba's epistolary novel *So Long a Letter* [1979] and Nafissatou Diallo's autobiography *A Dakar childhood* [1975]). The novel treats some common themes of Francophone African literature produced by women such as motherhood, womanhood, abandonment, alienation, modernity versus tradition, the generation gap, male power and female victimization, and deconstruction of Black women's images in both European literature and African male literature. However, this novel sets a new tone for these

themes that is more intense, aggressive and revolutionary. Beyala relates in detail the characters' daily lives of violent misery in the unbearable heat of the auto-destructive QG. Beyala's depictions of sexuality, including scenes of masturbation and rape, have shocked some readers.

Because of its complex style and structure, *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* is hard to follow at times. The novel is written in fragmented non-linear narrative. The author mixes standard, oral, and street language of the QG. The narrative alternates between the first person singular and the third person singular. The "I" appears to be the inner voice that incessantly invades the third person. The former is rebellious and constantly desires to speak up against men for the love of women. If, in Ateba's imagination, the "I" writes and talks to women about female empowerment, the "She" is hardly able to voice her revulsion of men. In the end, this conflict between the two main voices, amplified by the tragic events that strike the heroine's friend Irene, leads her to commit an ultimate act of violence.

The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me's strongest point is its attempt to show the interconnectedness of various traditionally silenced discourses. This complexity allows the critic to approach the novel from different perspectives. The reader might be shocked by the unabashed scenes of violence, real or imagined, sexual or otherwise. Beyala parallels the decline in women's status with the QG's decay in trenchant language: In this "greasy, dirty, neglected, sloppy shanty-town,...the fronts of the houses resemble wrinkled old ladies and the old ladies look like old, rusty tin cans, all of them gnawed at by life, mummified in their endless wait for life" (p. 5).

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