
Power and Agency: A Critical Analysis of the Role of Mistresses in Francophone African Literature

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ABSTRACT : *In the context of postcolonial literature, mistresses are often portrayed as subjugated concubines seeking job opportunities, career advancement, and income security in societies that are characterised by stark social inequalities. In environments lacking social justice, adulterous concubinage becomes entrenched in social and political norms. This study examines the portrayal of mistresses in francophone African literature, highlighting their integral roles in society's economic and political spheres. Through critical discourse analysis, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory, the study reveals that gendered power dynamics are central to the framing of mistresses. This analysis underscores the complex and active roles of mistresses in the socio-political landscape of francophone African literature. Contrary to traditional passive roles, mistresses are depicted with significant agency, enabling them to influence decisions by wielding power leverage over their philandering partners who hold important positions in the societies.*

KEYWORDS: critical discourse analysis, feminist theory, francophone African literature, gendered power dynamics, mistress, postcolonial theory.

INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of mistresses in human interactions has a long history. Maria Wyke's study (2002) examines both ancient and modern depictions of Roman mistresses, showing how adulterous concubinage has played a significant role in shaping gender relations. Similarly, Kirsti Bohata's research (2017) analyses mistresses and maids in nineteenth-century fictional narratives, revealing their concealed roles in "homoeroticism and cross-class desire". These studies illustrate that the concept of the mistress is deeply embedded in literature and social dynamics, reflecting broader themes of power, desire, and social hierarchy. Wyke and Bohata's works highlight the enduring presence and influence of mistresses in various cultural and historical contexts, underscoring their complex roles and the ways in which they have been not

only represented but also understood across different eras. This ongoing examination reveals the intricate ways mistresses navigate and impact societal structures and personal relationships. Marnie Anderson's study (2017) delves into the persistent depiction of adulterous concubinage as a normalised reflection of contemporary gendered relations, highlighting how this ancient practice continues to influence and shape modern perceptions of gender dynamics. By examining historical and literary examples, Anderson reveals the ways concubinage has been used to reflect and reinforce societal norms regarding gendered interactions. Additionally, John Wertheimer's research (2006) investigates the phenomenon of adulterous concubinage from a legal perspective, exploring how different societies have addressed and regulated these relationships. Wertheimer's analysis provides insights into the legal frameworks and societal attitudes that have historically governed concubinage, illustrating the complex interplay between law, morality, and social norms. These studies offer a comprehensive view of the representation of mistresses and concubinage, shedding light on its enduring impact on gendered roles, relations, and legal systems; and emphasising its significance in understanding the broader context of human relationships and societal structures.

Furthermore, in francophone African literature, there is a significant representation of the dynamics of gendered interpersonal relations and interactions, including the complex societal roles of mistresses. These women, often portrayed as sexual subjects, are integral to the socio-economic and political fabric of their societies. This representation is deeply rooted in the colonial legacy (McFadden, 1999, Prah, 2013), which has left a strong mark on the cultural, political, and social landscapes of African nations. The complex portrayal of mistresses in this body of literature not only reflects historical and contemporary realities but also challenges conventional perceptions of women's roles in societies.

This representation of mistresses is indeed deeply intertwined with the colonial legacy that has shaped the cultural, political, and social landscapes of African nations. Colonialism not only imposed new power structures but also redefined social roles and relationships. In many colonial contexts, mistresses were used as instruments of control, with their relationships to powerful men serving as a means of consolidating power and influence leading to self-fulfilment. These dynamics are reflected in the literature, where mistresses are often depicted as navigating a complex web of power relations to secure their own survival and advancement. Nevertheless, mistresses in francophone African literature are often depicted as more than just sexual subjects; they are seen as pivotal players in the socio-economic and political realms. Their relationships with powerful men often aim to secure economic stability and political influence. This depiction challenges traditional notions of mistresses as passive victims, highlighting instead their strategic use of relationships to navigate and manipulate power structures. Through these relationships, mistresses gain access to resources, information, and opportunities that are otherwise inaccessible, showcasing their agency and resilience in the face of societal constraints.

Hence, the portrayal of mistresses in Francophone African literature is not monolithic. It varies widely, reflecting the diverse experiences and strategies of mistresses across different contexts. While some narratives depict them as victims of exploitation, trapped in relationships with

powerful men who use them for their own gain, others portray these women as strategic actors who use their relationships to achieve their own goals and secure better futures for themselves, their families, and friends. This duality in the portrayal of mistresses highlights the complexity of their roles and the multifaceted nature of their agency.

A critical analysis of these narratives reveals that all these women operate within a framework of patriarchal norms that limit their opportunities for independent agency. However, they find ways to exert influence and shape outcomes within these constraints. By examining the discursive features and practices used to depict mistresses, broader societal norms and values that inform these portrayals can be unveiled. Such a scope of analysis sheds light on the ways in which gender, power, and colonial history intersect to shape the experiences and representations of mistresses in Francophone African literature.

The aim of this study is to examine the portrayal of mistresses in Francophone African literature, focusing on their roles, capacity for agency, and resistance that underpin gendered power dynamics. Firstly, the study examines the role of mistresses as victims of a system that commodifies their bodies and emotions and limits their opportunities for independence. Secondly, the scope of analysis explores the tension between agency and exploitation in the portrayal of mistresses. Thirdly, the study examines the literary representation of mistresses as active agents who use their relationships to gain access to resources and opportunities. This multidimensional perspective is a central feature of the representation of mistresses, highlighting the complexity of their roles and the multiple layers of power dynamics at play.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In postcolonial Francophone Africa, literature often mirrors the socio-political realities of the time. The portrayal of mistresses can be understood against the backdrop of colonial legacies, historical gendered subjugation, and contemporary inequalities (Munyangayo, 2023). According to Boehmer (1995), postcolonial literature frequently portrays the aftereffects of colonialism, including the entrenchment of social hierarchies and the perpetuation of economic disparities. These disparities create environments where mistresses emerge not only as romantic figures but as participants in the socio-economic, and political landscape.

The gendered power dynamics in Francophone African literature are central to understanding the roles of mistresses. Feminist theory provides a lens through which these dynamics can be analysed, revealing how mistresses navigate and sometimes subvert patriarchal structures. Feminists emphasise the importance of examining how power operates within gender relations (Gouws, 2022), a perspective that is crucial for understanding the agency of mistresses in literature. Hooks (1984) argues that power dynamics in gender relations are not just about overt domination but also about subtle forms of control and influence.

In many francophone African literary texts, mistresses are portrayed as complex characters in concubinage relationships who both conform to and resist the expectations placed upon them by a patriarchal society. In her novel *Reine Pokou : Concerto pour un sacrifice* [Queen Pokou:

Concerto for a sacrifice] (2005), Véronique Tadjo reimagines the legend of Queen Pokou. While not focused solely on mistresses, the novel delves into the power dynamics and roles of women in pre-colonial African societies, including relationships with powerful men. The narrative explores themes of sacrifice, leadership, and the complex roles women play in the socio-political sphere.

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* [The Suns of Independence] (1968) provides a critical look at post-colonial African society through the eyes of Fama and his wife Salimata. While the novel does not centre exclusively on the concept of mistresses, it touches on themes of male infidelity and the societal acceptance of men taking mistresses. This is portrayed as a symptom of broader societal changes and the disintegration of traditional values in the face of modern challenges. Similarly, in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* [So Long a Letter] (1979), the protagonist Ramatoulaye reflects on her husband's decision to take a second wife, Binetou, a common practice in certain African cultures. The novel explores the emotional and social implications of this decision, shedding light on the delicate balance of power within polygamous relationships. Ramatoulaye's introspective narrative reveals how she deals with feelings of betrayal and empowerment, ultimately asserting her dignity and independence despite societal pressures.

In *La grève des Bâttu* [The Beggars' strike] (1979), Aminata Sow Fall depicts the role of women in the urban setting of Senegal. Although the novel primarily addresses socio-economic issues, it also touches on the roles of women who engage in relationships with powerful men for economic survival. These relationships, while not explicitly labelled as mistress arrangements, reflect the economic dependencies and social manoeuvrings women must navigate in a patriarchal society.

In Calixthe Beyala's *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* [The sun hath looked upon me] (1999), the character of Irene navigates her position as a mistress in a post-colonial African society. Irene's relationship with her lover is fraught with tension, as she seeks to assert her own identity and desires against the patriarchal expectations. Beyala's portrayal of Irene underscores the ways in which mistresses can both challenge and reinforce traditional gender roles, highlighting the ambivalence and complexity of their positions.

In *Un chant écarlate* [Scarlet Song] (1982), Mariama Bâ explores the cultural clash in an interracial marriage between a Senegalese man, Ousmane, and a French woman, Mireille. As Ousmane engages in an affair with his childhood friend, Yaye Khady, the role of mistress underscores the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations, beyond intersections of race, culture, and gender, as well as the power dynamics at play in extramarital relationships.

Fatou Diome's *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* [The belly of the Atlantic] (2003) explores the lives of Senegalese immigrants in France and their connections to their homeland. The novel touches on the experiences of women who, due to economic necessity or social pressure, become involved with wealthier men. These relationships are often fraught with power imbalances and

highlight the women's struggles for autonomy and respect within both African and European contexts.

The *Aya de Yopougon* [Aya of Yop City] by Marguerite Abouet (2005) is a graphic novel series set in Ivory Coast during the 1970s that offers a vibrant portrayal of everyday life, including the relationships between men and their mistresses. Through the character of Aya and her friends, the series sheds light on the social dynamics and expectations surrounding such relationships, often depicting mistresses as pragmatic women who navigate their circumstances with agency and resilience.

Alain Mabanckou's semi-autobiographical novel, *Demain j'aurai vingt ans* [Tomorrow I will be twenty] (2010), set in Congo-Brazzaville, provides a child's perspective on adult relationships, including the concept of mistresses. The protagonist, Michel, observes the relationships around him, including those of men who keep mistresses. These portrayals offer insights into the normalisation of such relationships within the society and the impact on familial and social structures.

The two novels used for this study, *Les fleurs des lantanas* (Flowers) by Tchivéla (1997) and *Le prostitué politique* (Prostitué) by Mbailao (2021), offer a rich exploration of the portrayals and roles of mistresses in Francophone African literature.

In *Les fleurs des lantanas*, the plot centres on Bukadjo, a medical doctor who faces severe consequences for his integrity. Bukadjo is arrested and imprisoned under false accusations of mismanagement, embezzlement, and collaborating with a clandestine opposition party, despite his well-known apolitical stance. The true reason for his arrest is his refusal to ensure the success of a regime dignitary's young mistress in the entrance examination for the School of Nursing. This unjust incarceration leads to the death of his wife and the end of his relationship with his mistress. Upon his release, Bukadjo is assigned to a remote rural hospital. His exemplary reputation among the local population incites the jealousy and ire of Motungisi, the regional prefect. Feeling threatened by Bukadjo's popularity and integrity, Motungisi orchestrates a plot to eliminate him. Bukadjo is ultimately killed in a staged accident during a hunting expedition.

In the novel *Le prostitué politique*, the main character is Jean-Jacques Bahi, born and raised in Tador, an imaginary country that serves as a representative of many African states. After successfully defending a doctoral thesis in biology in France, he returns to his homeland with the intention of contributing to its development, believing in the safety assurances he secured from the county's unmerciful dictator. However, Bahi faces persecution and humiliation, and when he is unexpectedly offered a ministerial position, he sacrifices his integrity and decides to enjoy the splendour of political power. When he is eventually excluded from power, he resorts to any means necessary to reclaim his political position.

While Bahi is the central figure in the narrative, the character of Yolande, initially perceived as secondary to the political stakes, proves to be crucial to the novel's structure. Yolande's roles

as a mistress and a police officer responsible for issuing identity cards and gathering intelligence position her as a key player in the story. Her access to information, in a society plagued by dictatorial abuses, grants her significant powers. Through Yolande's multifaceted roles, the novel explores themes of power, information control, and the complexities of personal and political dynamics within a dictatorial regime. This nuanced portrayal of mistress underscores her importance in the narrative.

All the novels portraying philanderers illustrate both the precarious positions of mistresses and the complex power dynamics in social and political interactions in Francophone African societies. The examination of the mistresses' roles in the novels provides a nuanced understanding of gender and power in post-colonial African contexts. They illuminate how women navigate their positions within patriarchal societies, often finding ways to assert their agency and challenge traditional norms despite the constraints imposed upon them.

Theoretical frameworks

The portrayal of mistresses in Francophone African literature is a rich and multifaceted subject, offering a window into the broader socio-economic and political dynamics of postcolonial societies. This study delves into the complex representations of mistresses, challenging traditional notions of passivity and subjugation, and inviting critical reflection on the pervasive structures of inequality that shape women's lives in these contexts. By using critical discourse analysis, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory, this study aims to uncover the different ways in which gendered power dynamics are central to the framing of mistresses in Francophone African literature.

Furthermore, Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a methodological framework to dissect the language and narrative strategies used in literary works (Breeze, 2011). Fairclough (1992, 1995, 2002) posits that discourse not only reflects social realities but also constructs them. In this context, the depiction of mistresses in Francophone African literature can be seen as both a reflection and a critique of the socio-political environment. This study examines the ways in which the language used to describe or interact with mistresses often underscores both their subjugation and strategic roles in leveraging power and influencing decisions within patriarchal societies.

In this regard, Fairclough's framework emphasises the ways in which discourse both reflects and constructs social realities, asserting that language is a form of social practice that is intricately linked to power structures (Fairclough, 1992). This perspective is crucial for understanding how the representation of mistresses in Francophone African literature is not merely a reflection of cultural norms, but also an active site of ideological contestation. Critical Discourse Analysis, as articulated by Van Dijk (2008), is also a methodological approach that scrutinises the relationship between language, power, and society. The representation of mistresses in this body of literature often challenges traditional notions of passivity and subjugation associated with female characters. Instead, it presents mistresses as complex figures navigating the intersections of gender, power, and agency.

The study of mistresses in Francophone African literature, through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), offers an insightful examination of the complex socio-economic and political landscapes of postcolonial societies. The narrative characters often wield a form of agency that complicates their position within the societal hierarchy, suggesting that their relationships with male protagonists are not solely defined by exploitation but also by negotiation and resistance. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to CDA further elucidates how these literary portrayals contribute to broader societal discourses. Van Dijk (2008) posits that discourse shapes and is shaped by social cognition, meaning that the representations of mistresses in literature can influence and reflect collective attitudes and beliefs about gender and power. By analysing the cognitive dimensions of these narratives, the study reveals how mistresses are positioned within the collective imagination, often serving as symbols of both subversion and complicity within the postcolonial context.

Furthermore, by using CDA, this research goes beyond surface-level interpretations to uncover the underlying power dynamics and ideological constructs that shape the portrayal of mistresses in these narratives. CDA enables a critical reflection on the pervasive structures of inequality that shape women's lives in Francophone African societies. The economic and political conditions of postcolonial states are strongly linked to global systems of power, and the portrayal of mistresses often mirrors these broader dynamics. For example, the dependence of mistresses on wealthy males can be seen as a metaphor for the neo-colonial dependencies that characterise many African economies. This dependency highlights the unequal power relations that persist in the postcolonial era, reinforcing the idea that personal relationships are deeply enmeshed with broader socio-economic structures.

Apart from CDA, Feminist theory offers a lens through which to interrogate the gendered dimensions of the gendered portrayals. Feminist theory helps to illuminate the ways in which women negotiate their identities and assert their agency within a context that often seeks to confine them to subordinate roles. It can allow critics to explore how mistresses are positioned within patriarchal structures and how their representations challenge or reinforce gender stereotypes. Hence, feminist theory will be used to analyse the portrayal of mistresses, exploring how mistresses are represented to challenge traditional notions of passivity and subjugation and inviting critical reflection on the pervasive structures of inequality that shape women's lives in these contexts. Feminist theory, particularly the works of scholars such as Bell Hooks (1984), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988, 2003a, 2003b), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), provides a critical framework for understanding the complex representations of mistresses in literature. These theorists emphasise the importance of intersectionality and the ways in which race, class, gender, and colonial history intersect to shape women's experiences and identities. In her work on *Feminist theory: from margin to center*, Bell Hooks (1984) argues for the necessity of considering the intersecting systems of oppression that affect women differently based on their social locations. This perspective is crucial for analysing the portrayal of mistresses in Francophone African literature, as it highlights the need to consider how colonial history, economic dependence, and patriarchal structures collectively influence their roles. Mistresses in this literature are often depicted as navigating these intersecting

oppressions, which challenges the simplistic view of them as merely passive or subjugated figures.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her influential essay *Under Western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses*, critiques the homogenising tendencies of Western feminist discourse that often ignores the specific historical and cultural contexts of women in the Global South (Mohanty, 1988). By employing Mohanty's framework, the study can analyse how Francophone African literature provides a nuanced portrayal of mistresses, recognising their agency and resilience within the specific socio-political contexts of postcolonial Africa. These narratives often depict mistresses as strategic actors who use their relationships with powerful men to negotiate better socio-economic positions, thereby subverting traditional notions of female passivity.

Furthermore, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the *subaltern* in power dynamics is also pertinent for this study. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak discusses how marginalised groups are often silenced within dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988).

Spivak emphasises the need to listen to and amplify the voices of those who are often silenced within dominant discourses. In Francophone African literature, mistresses often represent subaltern figures whose stories and perspectives challenge dominant patriarchal and colonial narratives. As the portrayal of mistresses in Francophone African literature can be seen as giving voice to these subaltern figures, Spivak's theoretical framework allows to highlight mistresses' perspectives and experiences that are often overlooked or marginalised. By foregrounding the voices and stories of mistresses, this literature challenges dominant narratives that portray them solely as victims of male dominance, instead presenting them as complex individuals with their own desires, strategies, and forms of resistance.

The portrayal of mistresses in Francophone African literature is a rich and multifaceted subject that provides a unique perspective on the socio-economic and political dynamics of postcolonial societies. Within the broader historical and political context of postcolonial Africa, postcolonial theory allows to examine how colonial legacies and contemporary power dynamics shape the experiences and representations of mistresses. This theoretical perspective underscores the importance of considering the socio-economic conditions and cultural contexts that influence the lives of mistresses. It also highlights the ways in which literature reflects and critiques the ongoing struggles for autonomy and equality in postcolonial societies.

Postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Edward Said (1978), Homi Bhabha (1994), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), provides essential tools for analysing the complex representations of mistresses in Francophone African literature. These theorists emphasise the lingering effects of colonialism on cultures, identities, and power structures, which are crucial for understanding the roles and depictions of mistresses in postcolonial narratives.

Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* is foundational for understanding how colonial discourse constructs and perpetuates stereotypes about colonised peoples. In the context of Francophone

African literature, mistresses are often depicted in ways that reflect and resist these colonial stereotypes. Said's theory helps reveal how literary portrayals of mistresses can subvert the exoticisation and objectification of African women, presenting them instead as complex individuals with agency and subjectivity. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, as discussed in *The location of culture* (1994), is also pertinent to this analysis. Bhabha argues that colonial encounters create hybrid identities that resist simple binaries of coloniser and colonised. Mistresses in Francophone African literature often embody this hybridity, navigating between traditional African cultural norms and the influences of colonial power structures. This positioning allows them to exercise a form of agency that complicates their perceived roles as mere victims of patriarchy and colonialism. By exploring these hybrid identities, the study can illustrate how mistresses negotiate their positions within the socio-political landscape of postcolonial societies.

Finally, postcolonial feminist theorists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) underscores the necessity of situating the experiences of mistresses within their specific historical and cultural contexts. This approach allows the study to move beyond monolithic representations of African women, acknowledging the diversity and complexity of their experiences.

In conclusion, the portrayal of mistresses in Francophone African literature serves as a critical lens through which the complex socio-economic and political dynamics of postcolonial societies can be understood. To this end, critical discourse analysis, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory are the relevant critical tools allowing this study not only to challenge traditional notions of female passivity and subjugation but also to unveil the deeply embedded structures of inequality that shape women's lives. Through this multidimensional perspective, the theoretical frameworks allow the study to highlight the significant role of gendered power dynamics in the literary framing of mistresses, offering a profound and nuanced understanding of their representations and the broader societal implications they reflect.

Representation of ambivalent and precarious positions of mistresses: structural and cyclical dimensions

The colonial era in Africa brought profound transformations in social structures, economic systems, and political hierarchies. Colonial powers imposed new frameworks that often did not value local cultures and traditions. Within this context, women faced commodification of their bodies and emotions to achieve financial independence. In literature, they were frequently portrayed as tools of colonial exploitation and control.

This section examines the colonial legacy and its continued influence on the existence and portrayal of mistresses in postcolonial francophone African literature, using two novels as the primary discourse for analysis. By analysing these literary works, we can understand the enduring impact of colonialism on the portrayal of mistresses and their significance in the socio-political fabric of post-independent Africa.

Colonial legacy in exploitation and control of women passive victims

The perception of women as commodities, established during the colonial era, persisted into post-independence times, reflecting deeply ingrained patriarchal values and societal structures. This view is vividly portrayed in the novel *Les fleurs des Lantanas* by Tchivéla (1997), where the regional prefect, Motungisi, embodies the extreme abuse of power. Motungisi's conversation with a medical doctor reveals his belief that his official position endows him with quasi-divine authority, allowing him to manipulate and control women's lives at his whim. He boasts about his ability to pick and discard mistresses as he pleases, underscoring a systemic objectification and exploitation of women:

Tu as vu ces deux gosses ? demande le préfet au médecin. Eh bien leur mère était mon deuxième bureau. Elle a voulu me quitter, je l'ai jetée en prison. Et elle y restera aussi longtemps qu'elle n'aura pas changé d'avis. [...] Sachez que dans nos régions, le préfet assume aussi la fonction de Président du tribunal, de juge, d'avocat et de tout ce que vous voulez. De la sorte, on évite de discuter et la justice passe vite (*Fleurs*, 163).

[Did you see those two kids? the prefect asks the doctor. Well, their mother was my mistress. She wanted to leave me, so I threw her in prison. And she will stay there until she changes her mind. [...] You must know that in our regions, the prefect also assumes the roles of President of the court, judge, lawyer, and whatever else you want. That way, there is no arguing and justice is swift].

The prefect's statement that any woman who dares to reject him can face dire consequences, including imprisonment, highlights the pervasive and brutal enforcement of gender subjugation. This narrative illustrates the continuity of oppressive practices from colonial to post-colonial periods, where women remain vulnerable to severe repercussions for asserting their autonomy. Through Motungisi's character, Tchivéla critiques the lingering colonial mentality that perpetuates the dehumanisation of women.

In another encounter, the reader is confronted with a chilling story involving Mrs Baminda, a mistress of the prefect Motungisi. When she was wrongly accused of being in another relationship with another man, Motungisi murdered her by hanging:

Il s'agit de la fin tragique de madame Baminda, une veuve commerçante dont personne n'ignorait qu'elle était la deuxième bureau de Motungisi. Celui-ci, un jour, l'accusa d'infidélité. La femme le nia avec la sérénité d'une personne sûre de son innocence et par-là même indémontable. Alors le préfet le jeta dans sa suzuki et gagna à vive allure la forêt de Mafwabika. Le lendemain, devant des chasseurs aussi étonnés que consternés, le corps de la veuve Baminda se balançait légèrement à un arbre (*Fleurs*, pp.151-152).

[It is about the tragic end of Mrs. Baminda, a widow and merchant whom everyone knew to be Motungisi's mistress. One day, he accused her of infidelity. She strongly denied it as someone

sure of her innocence, making her unassailable. And yet the prefect threw her into his Suzuki and drove off at high speed to the Mafwabika forest. The next day, the body of the widow Baminda was gently swaying from a tree in front of hunters who were as astonished as they were dismayed].

This horrifying act underscores the immense and unchecked power Motungisi wields, a power that allows him to determine who lives and who dies without facing any consequences. In the colonial context, the dehumanisation and commodification of individuals were rampant, with colonisers exerting total control over the enslaved population. This absolute power dynamic is mirrored in Motungisi's actions and his treatment of women, particularly mistresses. By brutally punishing those who defy him, Motungisi perpetuates a cycle of fear and subjugation, reminiscent of the oppressive systems established during colonial rule.

Tchivéla's novel, *Les fleurs des Lantanas*, uses these narratives portraying mistresses to highlight the lingering effects of colonialism on contemporary society, particularly regarding gender and power. The story of Mrs Baminda serves as a stark reminder of the ongoing struggle for justice and human rights in post-colonial regions, where the legacies of past oppressions continue to shape present realities. This brutal reality echoes the historical atrocities committed during the colonial era, where the lives of enslaved people were completely at the mercy of their masters.

In shedding light on the ongoing struggle for gender inequality through the concept of mistresses, the novel portrays the solidified roles and status of mistresses within their survival mechanisms vis-à-vis oppressive structures mirroring colonial powers. Men with power are portrayed as having unlimited access to women. In *Les fleurs des lantanas*, Marshal Sokinga's abrupt arrival at the hospital where his mistress, Nwéliza, works and his subsequent demand to take her to a hotel room, completely disregarding her professional commitments, exemplifies how the colonial legacy perpetuates women's subjugation. Despite Nwéliza's resistance, Marshal Sokinga forcibly took her to the hotel, accompanied by his bodyguards, and attempted to rape her:

Bientôt, les soldats qui s'ennuyaient devant la chambre entendirent Nwéliza appeler au secours, il me viole eeh, cette brute me viole, mais ils se bornèrent à échanger, en souriant, des clins d'œil entendus (*Fleurs*, p.18).

[Soon, the soldiers who were bored outside the room heard Nwéliza calling for help, 'hey, he is raping me, this brute is raping me', but they kept chatting, winking, smiling].

This harrowing incident underscores the persistent objectification and exploitation of mistresses, revealing how those in positions of power often abuse their authority to exert control and dominance over others. The scene vividly portrays the vulnerability of mistresses in the face of such abuse.

Through Nwéliza's ordeal, the novel critiques the lingering colonial mentality that continues to undermine women's autonomy. It shows that the colonial legacy has persisted in postcolonial

literature, where mistresses are frequently associated with corrupt political and military figures, seek job opportunities, career advancement, and income security in societies characterised by stark social inequalities. The lack of social justice in the distribution of wealth and resources perpetuates these dynamics, making concubinage a part of the social and political norms.

Through literature, one can see how the colonial past continues to cast a long shadow over contemporary representations of women. Their commodification as mistresses during colonial times laid the groundwork for the continued marginalisation and exploitation of women in literature and society. The portrayal of mistresses in these novels highlights the ongoing struggle of women to assert their agency and navigate a world still influenced by colonial legacies.

The conceptualisation of mistresses within social structures, economic systems, and political hierarchies.

In societies marked by stark social inequalities, concubinage becomes a normative practice that reflects broader socio-economic dynamics. The lack of social justice in the distribution of wealth and resources creates an environment where mistresses play a crucial role in navigating and negotiating these inequalities. Their relationships with powerful men provide them with access to opportunities and resources that are otherwise inaccessible, highlighting their integral role in the socio-economic fabric of society.

In francophone African literature, the dynamics of concubinage are frequently portrayed, showcasing mistresses adeptly manoeuvring through complex social structures to attain economic and political benefits. This theme is particularly evident in *Les fleurs des lantanas*, where Marshal Sokinga, in response to Nwéliza's decision to leave him, ominously asserts that mistresses do not have the agency to leave alive their philandering partners. This statement underscores the power imbalance inherent in such relationships, likening them to master-slave dynamics where men hold dominion over mistresses:

Mets-toi bien ceci dans la tête : les femmes, c'est moi qui les quitte, jamais le contraire. Donc si tu désires me quitter, non seulement il te faudra me restituer tout ce que je t'ai offert, jusqu'à présent, mais encore tu devras... il se dirigea vers son uniforme accroché au mur, en extirpa un petit revolver, l'arma et le lança à Nwéliza... tu devras me tuer. Allez, vas-y, tire, qu'est-ce que tu attends ? Tire. Imbécile (*Fleurs*, p.16).

[Keep this firmly into your head: it is me who leaves mistresses, never the other way around. So, if you wish to leave me, not only will you have to hand back everything I have offered you until now, but also you will have to...he went to his uniform hanging on the wall, took out a small revolver, cocked it, and threw it to Nwéliza... you will have to kill me. Come on, go ahead, shoot, what are you waiting for? Shoot. Idiot].

The narrative implies that while men may choose to end these liaisons at will, mistresses are often ensnared in a cycle of dependence and subjugation, unable to extricate themselves without dire consequences. Through such depictions, francophone African literature sheds light on the complexities of gender, power, and agency within societies where traditional norms and patriarchy intersect, offering poignant insights into the lived experiences of women navigating these oppressive structures.

In a much gentler tone in portrayal, the notion of philanderers retaining the privilege of ending relationships is depicted in Mbailao's novel *Le prostitué politique* (2021). In this novel, the main protagonist Jean-Jacques Bahi visits his mistress Yolande to declare his intention to leave her, yet still anticipates enjoying her services:

Venir me troubler de si bon matin, me dire que je ne suis plus ta douce Yolande comme tu aimes m'appeler et me demander de te servir un café. Si monsieur ne le sait pas, j'ai un cœur dans la poitrine comme tout humain. Et ce cœur, tu viens de le briser. (*Prostitué*, p.120).

[Coming to disturb me so early in the morning, telling me that I am no longer your sweet Yolande as you like to call me, and asking me to serve you coffee. Mister, if you did not know, I also have a heart in my chest like any human. And you have just broken that heart].

This scenario illustrates the power dynamics at play within such relationships, where men assert control over the terms of separation while still expecting continued benefits. Mbailao's narrative highlights the complexities of intimacy and power imbalance, shedding light on the nuances of human interaction within the context of societal expectations and gender roles. Through this lens, the novel explores themes of dependency, agency, and manipulation, inviting readers to contemplate the complexities of interpersonal relationships and the ways in which they are shaped by broader societal constructs.

Nevertheless, while the relationships between powerful men and their mistresses are often characterised by the oppressive nature of master-slave interactions and transactions, they also serve as a means of accessing wealth, jobs, and other opportunities. This duality reflects broader societal dynamics where mistresses can, at times, leverage their relationships to gain agency and resist oppressive structures. In *Les fleurs des Lantanas*, Nwéliza's relationship with Marshal Sokinga has secured her a first-place admission at the Nursing School of Mabaya without the need to pass the competitive entrance examination:

C'est au cours de mon errance que Soki [Sokinga] m'a annoncé la nouvelle: 'Nwéliza, mon amour, tu es reçue à ton concours de l'E.P.C.M. Tu es même classée première. Félicitations' (*Fleurs*, p.115).

[It was during my wandering that Soki told me the news: 'Nwéliza, my love, you have passed your E.P.C.M. exam. You were even ranked first. Congratulations'].

This encounter illustrates how, despite the unequal power dynamics inherent in such relationships, mistresses can strategically navigate their circumstances to their advantage. The ability of mistresses to access resources and opportunities through these relationships underscores their agency within a patriarchal society where avenues for advancement are often limited for women. For Nwéliza, her association with Marshal Sokinga offers a pathway to advancement and opportunity, even at the cost of her autonomy and emotional well-being. This paradox highlights the complex interplay between power, agency, and exploitation within the context of concubinage.

While the transactional nature of these arrangements may perpetuate gender inequality, it also serves as a testament to the resistance, resilience and resourcefulness of women who navigate oppressive systems to secure their own futures.

From subjugating conformity and survival mode duality to resistance

Contrary to the representation of colonial legacy as the sole driver of gender inequalities, francophone African literature also portrays concubinage as a normalised aspect of society. Instead of depicting mistresses solely as passive agents subject to subjugation, this literature presents their role as a deliberate choice, driven by the pursuit of opportunities that afford them independence and agency. In navigating the complexities of their circumstances, mistresses strategically leverage their relationships to resist the forced commodification of their bodies and emotions.

Moving away from subjugating conformity, mistresses confront a duality of survival modes: they can passively accept their fate or actively choose to become mistresses, thereby engaging in a form of resistance against patriarchy from within. This portrayal highlights the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate oppressive systems, showcasing the agency and resilience of mistresses as they assert control over their destinies.

Normalisation of adulterous concubinage vis-à-vis alternative relationships

The normalisation of concubinage in francophone African literature serves as a foundation for future acts of resistance. By depicting concubinage as a societal norm rather than an aberration, these narratives challenge conventional notions of power and gender dynamics, paving the way for further exploration of agency, autonomy, and liberation within the context of colonial legacies and patriarchal structures.

In *Les fleurs*, for example, Nwéliza's response to Doctor Ngwandi's advances underscores this theme. She confidently asserts:

Je vous informe, puisque vous semblez l'ignorer, que j'appartiens au maréchal Sokinga, et que je ne l'ai jamais trompé » (Fleurs, p.62)

[I would like to inform you, since you seem to be unaware, that I belong to Marshal Sokinga, and that I have never deceived him].

This declaration reflects Nwéliza's pride in her status as a mistress, highlighting how the societal normalisation of such relationships grants women a degree of autonomy and agency within patriarchal structures.

Furthermore, Tombaga, a member of parliament attempts to seduce Djaminga after knowing that her marriage was experiencing difficult times. In his opinion, it is normal for philanderers to profit from concubinage through the woman's vulnerability:

Il déplora que ces deux êtres, dont l'amour mutuel, du temps de leurs fiançailles, comme au début de leur mariage, était passé en proverbe (on disait alors : s'aimer follement comme Djaminga et Bukadjo), aient fini par cohabiter dans le silence, se croisant sous un me toit, mangeant à la même table, dormant dans un même lit, mais détachés l'un de l'autre comme deux prisonniers réunis par le hasard dans une même cellule (*Fleurs*, p.72).

[He pondered over how these two people, whose mutual love during their engagement and early marriage had even become proverbial (it was said then: to love each other passionately like Djaminga and Bukadjo), had ended up living together in silence, staying under the same roof, eating at the same table, sleeping in the same bed, and yet detached from each other like two prisoners brought together in the same cell by chance]

Djaminga's refusal shows that within the context of concubinage, mistresses often find themselves navigating through complex social challenges, leveraging their relationships. While these relationships may initially appear to reinforce traditional gender roles, they also provide mistresses with a platform for resistance and self-determination.

Through their actions and choices, mistresses challenge the monolithic portrayal of women as passive victims of patriarchy, instead asserting their agency and reshaping societal norms. By depicting concubinage as a multifaceted phenomenon -where mistresses can simultaneously experience oppression and empowerment -francophone African literature opens new avenues for understanding the complexities of gender, power, and resistance.

Ultimately, the normalisation of concubinage in these narratives not only sheds light on the lived experiences of mistresses within patriarchal contexts but also serves as a catalyst for broader dimension of their agency, autonomy, and liberation.

Mistresses as symbols of subversion within the francophone African literary representation

The portrayal of mistresses' resistance is not limited to their ability to reject socio-cultural structures that foster gendered inequalities. Indeed, mistresses are also represented as destructive forces in francophone African literary representation. Mistresses are portrayed not merely as passive figures but as active infiltrators with clear, calculated strategies to undermine oppressive practices from within.

In the *Le prostitué politique* by Mbailao (2021), Jean-Jacques Bahi's mistress, Yolande exemplifies, this representation. Officially, Yolande holds a seemingly ordinary job as a police officer working in the national identity cards department. However, beneath this façade lies a far more complex and covert role. Yolande acts as an intelligence officer tasked with the

collection of critical information on individuals. This information is meticulously gathered to build a comprehensive database, which is subsequently used for surveillance purposes. Her dual roles enable her to navigate both the public and clandestine spheres, showcasing her as a strategic figure:

Yolande est donc en réalité un agent de renseignements, en plus de son travail principal. Il a tenté de comprendre. En délivrant des cartes d'identité, on prend forcément les renseignements sur les personnes concernées. De là, à passer de la délivrance de cartes aux renseignements, il ne faut qu'un seul pas. Il a eu le souffle presque coupé. Il vit donc avec une dangereuse femme. Il n'a jamais imaginé qu'il vivait avec le diable. Il mange et dort presque tous les jours à côté du danger. Il a subitement peur (*Prostitué*, p.116).

[Yolande is thus, in reality, an intelligence agent in addition to her primary job. He tried to understand. When issuing identity cards, one can inevitably gather information about the specific individuals. From there, it is just a small step from issuing cards to intelligence gathering. He was almost breathless. So, he lives with a dangerous woman. He never imagined that he was living with the devil. He eats and sleeps almost every day next to a danger. He is suddenly struck with fear].

The revelation of Yolande's true occupation has profound implications for her personal relationships, particularly with Jean-Jacques. Upon discovering that his mistress is, in fact, an intelligence officer, Jean-Jacques is struck with fear and paranoia. The realisation that he has been living with a spy disrupts his sense of security and trust. This narrative twist underscores the potential for mistresses to destabilise existing power structures and relationships. Yolande's position as both a police officer and an intelligence agent exemplifies how mistresses can embody dualities that challenge societal norms and expectations.

Furthermore, Yolande's character can be seen as a metaphor for the broader resistance against patriarchal and oppressive systems. Her ability to operate within and against these systems simultaneously highlights the nuanced ways in which mistresses can wield powers:

Tu vois, je connais le mode opératoire du régime, conseil de ministres extraordinaire, compte-rendu lu par le ministre de la Communication, déclaration du chef de l'État à la nation au journal de vingt heures (*Prostitué*, p. 141).

[You can see that I know the modus operandi of the regime: extraordinary council of ministers, report read by the Minister of Communication, statement by the head of state to the nation on the eight o'clock evening news].

By infiltrating these structures, mistresses like Yolande can expose the inherent vulnerabilities and contradictions within them. This literary representation thus offers a profound commentary

on the potential for subversion and change, emphasising that resistance can come from within the very systems that seek to oppress.

Similarly, the destructive role of mistresses can also reflect a deeper sense of revenge against their oppressors. This is often manifested through the formation of vengeful alliances or the orchestration of sham marriages. These strategic moves serve as powerful tools for mistresses to undermine those in power who have wronged them or their loved ones.

In the narrative, Gazi Yana's response to Mété's inquiry about her relationship with the interior minister, Motungisi, exemplifies this notion of revenge. Motungisi, who is responsible for imprisoning Gazi Yana's husband, becomes the target of her vengeful plan. By entering a marriage with him, Gazi Yana is not seeking a conventional relationship but is instead plotting a lethal retribution. Her ultimate goal is to avenge her husband's unjust imprisonment by killing Motungisi:

Je l'épouserais pour honorer ma parole, mais avec l'intention de l'empoisonner, après avoir assuré ma fortune: ainsi j'aurais vengé Buks [Bukadjo] (*Fleurs*, p.211).

[I will marry him to keep my word, but with the real intention of poisoning him after securing my fortune: that way, I will have avenged Buks].

This storyline underscores the cunning and resilience of mistresses in the face of oppression. Gazi Yana's actions are not born out of mere malice but are a calculated response to the injustices inflicted upon her and her family. Her ability to navigate the dangerous political landscape and use her position to exact revenge highlights the multifaceted roles that mistresses can play. They are not simply passive victims but active agents capable of orchestrating significant and disruptive acts of vengeance.

Such portrayals of mistresses in the francophone African literary representation as symbols of subversion (Butler, 1990) challenge the traditional perceptions, presenting them as complex characters who can wield considerable power and influence. Through alliances and marriages, they infiltrate the ranks of their oppressors, using their relationships as weapons to fight back and reclaim their agency. Gazi Yana's story is a testament to the potential for mistresses to turn the tables on those who seek to control them, illustrating the broader themes of resistance and retribution within these narratives.

Mistresses' weaponisation of soft skills to balance powers

The representation of mistresses as strategic actors who scrutinise power structures to their advantage fundamentally challenges traditional notions of women as passive victims. This perspective highlights the agency and the impact that mistresses can have, turning societal expectations on their head.

Yolande exemplifies this dynamic role through her intelligence work. She leverages her position to earn the trust of those around her, using her keen intelligence skills to identify individuals deemed by the State as negative forces. In Bahi's assessment, Yolande

est utilisée pour attirer les hommes suspectés d'être ennemis du régime de Hassal. Il n'y a pas de noms à consonance féminine sur sa liste. C'est sûr, un homme ou des hommes sont aussi utilisés pour cette sale besogne à l'endroit des femmes (*Prostitué*, p.118).

[is used to lure men suspected of being enemies of the Hassal regime. There are no female-sounding names on her list. Obviously, a man or men are equally used for this dirty work against women].

This ability to infiltrate and gather critical information is not unique to Yolande. It appears to be a common practice wherein individuals, both men and women, with adept communication skills, are recruited to engage in intelligence work through relationships, including concubinage. This method allows them to blend into different social circles, gather essential information, and report back to the State. By utilising their social skills and charm, these individuals can access privileged information that might otherwise be unattainable.

Yolande's character perfectly illustrates this portrayal. Her dual role as a police officer and an intelligence agent showcases her strategic use of her position to navigate and manipulate power structures. Her ability to maintain her cover while effectively performing her duties as an intelligence officer underscores the complexity and depth of her character.

This portrayal challenges the traditional narrative by presenting mistresses not as mere pawns in a male-dominated world but as influential players with their own agency and objectives. Yolande's story serves as a powerful reminder of the multifaceted roles women as gender inequality victims can occupy, using their intelligence and strategic thinking to achieve their goals and challenge oppressive systems. By doing so, such narratives offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of mistresses' roles in socio-political contexts, highlighting their capacity for resistance and subversion.

Furthermore, this representation highlights mistress' resilience and resourcefulness in the face of societal constraints. Yolande repeatedly reminds Bahi her role of police officer whenever she is asked the source of information. She uses her access to useful information as a powerful tool harnessing her soft skills. Such skills are used to identify the weakest spots among the opponents or oppressors:

N'oublie pas que je suis policière. Certains objets et certains écrits qui traînent chez toi ont attiré mon attention (*Prostitué*, p. 119).

[Do not forget that I am a policewoman. Some objects and writings lying around your place caught my attention].

This portrayal underscores the importance of recognising the agency and resilience of mistresses. Through their relationships with influential men, mistresses often attain professional and political leverage, a recurring theme in francophone African literature. These narratives frequently depict mistresses as adept at utilising their connections to powerful individuals to access opportunities and advance their own interests. In *Les fleurs des lantanas*, Nwéliza exemplifies this dynamic by boldly presenting her conditions to Marshal Sokinga in exchange for admission to the School of Nursing. Her willingness to assert her demands, even at the risk of jeopardising their relationship, underscores the agency and strategic thinking commonly attributed to mistresses in these narratives. This negotiation tactic highlights the soft skills wielded by mistresses as tools for power leverage:

Nwéliza se rassit dans le fauteuil et, d'un ton qui frappa le Maréchal autant par sa liberté que par sa fermeté, raconta son cœur. Oui, elle avait décidé de mettre un terme à leur liaison, puisque tout compte fait, elle n'en tirait aucun profit palpable. Certes, il lui avait offert des cadeaux sans nombre et des voyages en Europe et aux États-Unis, mais, réponds-moi, t'es-tu jamais soucie de mon avenir ? Tu as tellement de femmes que je ne suis pour toi qu'un robinet de plaisir : Tu arrives, tu étanches, ta soif, puis tu disparais ... Jusqu'à la prochaine séance (*Fleurs*, p.17).

[Nwéliza settled back into the armchair and, with a tone that struck the Marshal as much for its freedom as for its firmness, poured out her heart. Yes, she had decided to end their affair, since all things considered, she gained nothing tangible from it. Certainly, he had showered her with countless gifts and trips to Europe and the United States, but tell me, have you ever cared about my future? You have so many women that I am nothing more to you than a tap as a source of pleasure: You come, you quench your thirst, then you disappear... Until the next session].

The portrayal of mistresses as shrewd negotiators challenges traditional stereotypes of mistresses as passive or subservient. Instead, they are represented as active agents. By leveraging their intimate relationships with powerful men, mistresses gain access to spheres of influence traditionally closed to women, thereby challenging established hierarchies and norms.

Furthermore, these narratives illuminate the complexities of power dynamics within relationships, where affection and desire are often intertwined with manipulation and negotiation. Mistresses like Nwéliza navigate this terrain with finesse, using their intimate connections to secure tangible benefits and opportunities.

Overall, the depiction of mistresses as adept at leveraging their relationships for personal gain offers a nuanced exploration of gender, power, and agency in Francophone African literature. It underscores the multifaceted roles that women can play in challenging and reshaping societal norms, highlighting their capacity for strategic action and self-advancement.

Mistresses' agency and influence

In contrast to the traditional portrayal of mistresses as dependent figures, francophone African literature often reimagines these roles, presenting mistresses as active and strategic individuals. This reinterpretation resonates with Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of the borderlands, a space where identities are fluid, and boundaries are constantly negotiated. Within this framework, mistresses in Francophone African literature frequently navigate the complex terrain between dependence and agency, as well as subjugation and empowerment.

One illustrative example can be found in Tchivéla's *Les fleurs des lantanas*. The story features Doctor Ngwandi, the director of the General Hospital of Mabaya, who attempts to coerce the young Nwéliza into becoming his mistress. He threatens her, implying that her refusal to comply would result in her failing the entrance examination for the School of Nursing. However, Nwéliza responds emphatically, reminding Doctor Ngwandi that any such attempt to sabotage her would fail and ultimately send him to prison, just like the way it happened to his former colleague Doctor Bukadjo:

Que croyez-vous pouvoir faire contre moi, monsieur le directeur ?
Après ce qui vient d'arriver au docteur Bukadjo, douteriez-vous encore
de ma puissance ? (*Fleurs*, p.77).

[What do you think you can do against me, mr director? After what just happened to Doctor Bukadjo, do you still doubt my power?].

Instead of being portrayed as helpless and dependent on the whims of powerful men, Nwéliza embodies agency and power. Her ability to confront and challenge Doctor Ngwandi's abuse of power situates mistresses within the concept of the borderlands, through which literature acknowledges the fluidity and complexity of their identities. Mistresses are not simply victims or passive recipients of male authority. Instead, they are active participants in shaping their destinies, often adopting strategic measures to assert their autonomy and authority, and resist subjugation.

Nwéliza's resolute stance against Doctor Ngwandi exemplifies this shift. Her confrontation is not merely an act of defiance but a demonstration of her intrinsic power and agency. By reminding Doctor Ngwandi of her own influence, she disrupts the traditional power dynamics that position men as dominant and their mistresses as submissive.

The dialogue in the text further reinforces Nwéliza's power. Questioning Doctor Ngwandi's actual power is itself a powerful assertion of her authority. It highlights her confidence and control, suggesting that her influence extends beyond the immediate interaction with Ngwandi. This encounter reveals that in such contexts, individuals in significant societal positions, like Doctor Ngwandi, may believe they hold ultimate power over their mistresses. However, as Nwéliza demonstrates, mistresses can possess their own forms of power and influence, effectively pulling the strings to shape decisions and actions within their spheres.

By adopting a strategic and assertive approach, Nwéliza and characters like her in francophone African literature challenge the stereotypical depiction of mistresses. They are portrayed not as mere accessories to male power but as individuals with their own agency and capacity for resistance.

In these narratives, mistresses utilise their positions to carve out spaces of autonomy and exert influence, often in subtle yet significant ways. Their strategic actions and decisions demonstrate their resilience and capability to operate within and against the confines of patriarchal systems. This portrayal not only redefines the role of mistresses but also offers a broader commentary on the dynamics of power, gender, and agency in African societies.

In the broader context of francophone African literature, the reimagining of mistresses as active and strategic actors serves as a powerful commentary on gender relations and the struggles for autonomy and empowerment. By challenging traditional stereotypes, these narratives offer a more complex and empowering depiction of women who, despite facing significant obstacles, find ways to navigate and negotiate their identities and positions within society.

Through characters like Nwéliza, francophone African literature not only redefines the role of mistresses but also provides a lens through which to examine the broader themes of power, resistance, and agency. These stories illuminate the ways in which mistresses, often marginalised and oppressed, can assert their autonomy, and challenge the structures that seek to confine them. In doing so, they contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the complexities of gender and power in African societies.

This portrayal of mistresses as active agents within the socio-political landscape in francophone African literature emphasises the multifaceted nature of power dynamics and the capacity of individuals, particularly women, to challenge and transform traditional roles and expectations. Mistresses are often depicted as navigating complex social hierarchies and using their soft skills to maintain relationships with powerful men. This strategic engagement allows them to secure significant economic and political advantages. Contrary to traditional portrayals of mistresses as mere romantic figures, these women are often shown as strategic socio-economic actors, using their positions to mediate between their male partners and the broader society. They facilitate transactions and negotiations that ultimately benefit their own interests. This role becomes particularly evident in contexts marked by rampant social inequalities (Munyangeyo, 2023) and limited access to resources.

In Tchivéla's *Les fleurs des lantanas*, the character of Gazi Yana exemplifies this strategic use of concubinage relationships for economic gain. Her relationship with Minister Motungisi is a prime example of how mistresses can leverage their connections to build substantial business empires:

Oui, le ministre Motungisi renflouait copieusement et sans arrêt le compte bancaire de Gazi Yana. Elle finit par demander la mise en disponibilité et se lança dans les affaires. Elle s'entendit avec une société d'import-export, s'acoquinait avec les douaniers, participait à

des diners compromettants, multipliait les dessous-de-table, et put aussi acquérir de nombreux marchés aussi avantageux les uns que les autres (*Fleurs*, p.213).

[It is true that Minister Motungisi generously and continuously replenished Gazi Yana's bank account. Eventually, she requested a leave of absence and ventured into business. She partnered with an import-export company, cosied up to customs officers, participated in compromising dinners, bribed many influential people, and managed to secure many highly advantageous contracts].

Gazi Yana's ability to transform her personal relationship into a source of economic empowerment highlights the nuanced and complex roles that mistresses play in Francophone African literature. She refuses to be confined by societal structural pressures. She enters a relationship with Minister Motungisi, recognising the potential benefits this connection could bring. Through this relationship, she gains access to financial resources and social networks that enable her to start her own business ventures.

Her transformation from a mistress to a successful businesswoman underscores the strategic acumen required to navigate such relationships. Gazi Yana does not merely rely on her connection to Minister Motungisi; she actively uses it as a steppingstone to build her own independent wealth. Her ability to leverage this relationship for economic gain challenges traditional notions of dependency and subservience associated with mistresses. Instead, she emerges as a powerful figure in her own right, capable of influencing and shaping her destiny. The portrayal of mistresses like Gazi Yana in francophone African literature also sheds light on the broader socio-economic dynamics at play. This role as intermediaries is not without its challenges. Mistresses must constantly balance their personal interests with the demands and expectations of their powerful partners. They need to maintain a delicate equilibrium, ensuring that they remain valuable to their partners while also pursuing their own goals. This requires a high degree of emotional intelligence, strategic thinking, and resilience. Mistresses must be adept at reading social cues, understanding power dynamics, and anticipating potential threats or opportunities.

The strategic use of concubinage relationships for economic gain also speaks to the broader themes of survival and resilience in francophone African literature. In environments where structural inequalities and limited opportunities prevail, individuals, particularly women, must find innovative ways to navigate the socio-economic landscape. Mistresses, through their relationships with powerful men, carve out spaces for themselves within these constraints, demonstrating remarkable ingenuity and adaptability.

Gazi Yana's journey in *Les fleurs des lantanas* is a testament to this resilience and agency:

Très riche, elle prit des actions dans plusieurs entreprises, investit dans la boulangerie, l'hôtellerie, acheta ou fit construire des villas à Zambaville et à Côte-Kanu, qu'elle louait à des expatriés blancs ou à

des ambassadeurs. C'est alors que lui vint l'idée de bâtir une polyclinique à Ntangu (*Fleurs*, p.213).

[She became very wealthy and bought shares in several companies, invested in bakeries and hotels, and bought or built villas in Zambaville and Côte-Kanu, which she rented to white expatriates or ambassadors. It was then that she got the idea of building a polyclinic in Ntangu]. Her ability to turn a relationship of dependency into a platform for empowerment underscores the transformative potential of such engagements. Gazi Yana has not only secured her economic future but has also built a legacy of success that challenges the traditional gender roles and expectations imposed upon her.

The portrayal of mistresses in Francophone African literature as strategic actors navigating complex social hierarchies is a powerful commentary on gender, power, and socio-economic dynamics. In the broader context of Francophone African literature, the role of mistresses can be seen as part of a larger narrative about survival and resilience in the face of systemic inequalities. These women navigate the complex interplay of power, gender, and socio-economic status, often finding themselves in precarious positions that require careful negotiation and strategic thinking. Through their relationships with powerful men, they gain access to opportunities that would otherwise be denied to them, but they must also contend with the moral and ethical complexities that come with these relationships. This shift in portrayal has significant implications for how gender dynamics in francophone African societies are understood. It underscores the importance of recognising the agency and resilience of women, even in contexts where they may appear to be in subordinate positions.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the representation of mistresses in francophone African literature through critical analysis sheds significant light on the gendered power dynamics that permeate these narratives. This study provides a deeper understanding of how mistresses, traditionally marginalised in both societal and literary contexts, are portrayed with a complexity that underscores their integral roles in the socio-political and economic fabric of their societies. By exploring these representations, this research elucidates the nuanced ways in which mistresses navigate and influence the power structures around them, highlighting their dual role as both subordinates and influential agents.

Mistresses in francophone African literature occupy a unique and often paradoxical position. On one hand, their power is heavily mediated through their relationships with men, echoing traditional gender roles and power hierarchies. On the other hand, these narratives subvert conventional portrayals of women by depicting mistresses as active agents who wield considerable influence. This duality challenges the passive and victimised roles typically assigned to women in literature, offering a more complex and empowering depiction. Mistresses are shown to leverage their intimate connections with powerful men to broker negotiations, facilitate deals, and exert behind-the-scenes influence, thereby navigating the intricate and often corrupt socio-political landscapes of their societies.

Contribution and implication

Firstly, this study contributes to feminist literary criticism by expanding the discourse on women's agency in literature. The depiction of mistresses as active participants rather than mere victims of exploitation reframes the understanding of female characters in francophone African literature. This shift has broader implications for feminist theory, as it highlights the capacity of women to navigate and manipulate power structures, challenging patriarchal norms and stereotypes. By recognising mistresses as influential actors, this study calls for a re-evaluation of the roles that women play in literature and society, urging a move away from simplistic and monolithic portrayals towards more nuanced and diverse representations.

Secondly, this study underscores the socio-economic realities that shape the lives of women in francophone African societies. The portrayal of mistresses reflects the pervasive systems of corruption and patronage that characterise these societies, where personal relationships become crucial avenues for accessing resources and opportunities. This context is essential for understanding the broader socio-political dynamics at play and the ways in which individuals, particularly women, navigate these systems to their advantage. The literature not only mirrors these realities but also critiques them, offering a space for reflection on the moral and ethical complexities of such roles.

Furthermore, while mistresses may achieve significant economic and social gains, these come at the cost of operating within a fraught landscape of power and dependency. The duality of empowerment and vulnerability that mistresses experience highlights the intricate and often contradictory nature of their positions. This aspect of the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of women who occupy similar roles in real life, emphasising the need for a nuanced approach to their portrayal and treatment.

However, the representation of mistresses in literature is not without its criticisms. Some scholars, such as Ogunyemi (1985), caution against the romanticisation of mistresses' agency. They argue that such portrayals can obscure the systemic inequalities that continue to constrain women's lives, potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes about women and their roles in society. This critique is crucial for ensuring that the future discourses around mistresses' representations remain balanced and critical, acknowledging both their agency and the broader structural constraints that women face in patriarchal societies.

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