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# Rape, Repression, and Narrative Form in *Le Devoir de violence* and *La Vie et demie*

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The depiction of sexual violence in recent African fiction contrasts markedly with fiction in English and French before the late sixties, where rape and sexual violence are uncommon—a noticeable absence, given the pillaging of African resources, human and otherwise, under the slave trade and colonialism. And yet an understandable one, perhaps, when we consider the keen sense of decorum in indigenous and Islamic cultures, the conservative values imparted in colonial and missionary schools, and the politics of publication and reception. *Le Devoir de violence*, by Malian writer Yambo Ouologuem (Paris: Seuil, 1968), and *La Vie et demie*, by Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi (Paris: Seuil, 1979), are formally innovative novels of the postcolonial period that expose the brutality of autocratic and totalitarian regimes. They mark turning points in recent literary history, and they practice the representation of sexual violence.<sup>1</sup>

Such violence is, of course, not the central issue of either *Le Devoir de violence* or *La Vie et demie* but is rather a measure of the

sickness of social and political relations. This particular use of image may seem to ignore the particularity of female sexuality: sexual violence and rape become near transparent signs of something else. Yet sexual violence in these texts is elucidated, if we read carefully, by the context of political violence. Rape, these texts suggest, is not an aberration, not a singularly sick act, nor an individual problem in an otherwise healthy society. Rape is represented, then, not as an isolated, gratuitous instance of violence that can be read *metaphorically*—that is, as an *abstracted* image of human disorder, ugliness, and disenfranchisement. It is portrayed rather, as the French term *viol* makes clear, *metonymically*, as a *quintessential* act of violence in a context of rampant abuse, both political and sexual.

In this regard, Mary Douglas' study of the concepts of pollution and taboo offers a pertinent insight. She notes that "rituals enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society. The rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body."<sup>2</sup> While the rapes that Ouologuem and Tansi depict may not be said to constitute *ritual* in the strictest sense, they nonetheless perform the same role in these texts: they enable characters and readers to know—not through simple analogy (metaphor) but because rape is a related manifestation (metonymy)—the society in which rape takes place.

With regard to sexual violence, *Le Devoir de violence* and *La Vie et demie* are especially interesting, then, because they contextualize rape: power, taken to its logical end, becomes brutality and asserts itself simultaneously in the political-military arena and in the realm of sexuality. For these writers, public life and private life are not separate domains. Yet the exposition or intimation of this dynamic in a text does not constitute in and of itself a challenge to it, for the very premises and form of each narrative express attitudes toward power, which in the case of Ouologuem's novel reinscribe it and in that of Tansi dispute it.

Yambo Ouologuem was born in 1940 in the Mopti region of Mali. His father was a school inspector and member of a traditional Dogon ruling-class family. Ouologuem is multilingual and, as his writing attests, he is widely read in literature, philosophy, and sociology. *Le Devoir de violence* is the first of Ouologuem's three books, all of which are characterized by a certain unorthodoxy. In 1969, one year after the publication of *Le Devoir*, Ouologuem published under a

pseudonym a pornographic novel: *Les Mille et une bibles du sexe* (Paris: Editions du Dauphin) and in 1971 his angry *Lettre à la France nègre* (Paris: Edmond Nalis).<sup>3</sup>

*Le Devoir* can be viewed as a fictional response to the romanticized vision of "original" Africa, most often associated with L. S. Senghor, other négritude writers, and the European ethnologists who inspired them.<sup>4</sup> Their creed is summed up in *Le Devoir* by Shrobénus (caricature of the German anthropologist Frobenius) as follows: "African life was pure art, awesomely religious symbolism, a formerly glorious civilization—alas victim of the vagaries of the white man" (p. 102).<sup>5</sup>

An alternative reading and reconstruction of African history, *Le Devoir* is a compelling chronicle of the savagery and brutality of the fictional dynasty of the Saïfs in precolonial and turn-of-the-century West Africa: "But the colonizing powers were too late, even on arrival, since the colonizer long in place—along with the honorable aristocracy—was none other than the Saïf, whose game the European conqueror unwittingly played! Technical assistance, even then! So be it. Lord, may your handiwork be blessed. And exalted" (p. 31).

Colonization, Ouologuem posits, is not simply the victimization of a "good," helpless society by one that is technologically superior and morally inferior. Two partners elaborated colonialism and its structures: the Europeans and the African aristocracy who responded in an effort to maintain the privileges of their class. Although the latter obviously could not be held equally responsible, each had a hand in shaping colonial policy and practices to suit, as much as possible, its own needs. Thus Ouologuem's novel challenges time-honored essentialist views of Africa and Africans; he constructs a precolonial Africa that is not a garden of Eden, that contains its share of pitiable slaves and serfs, on the one hand, vicious nobles and rulers, on the other. Class divisions and interests are as integral to Ouologuem's precolonial and colonial Africa as they are in fictions of postcolonial Africa.

In its challenge to the myth of original innocence, the primitivism that often has dominated thinking about precolonial Africa, *Le Devoir* is not only violent but also sordid: there are gruesome murders and torture, and virtually all sexual relations are tainted by evil. The text itself is sadistic to the extent that Ouologuem makes of his readers the voyeurs of the Saïfs' cruelty and murders. Does this violence, one wonders, derive purely from political violence or also in large measure from Ouologuem's pyrotechnical *textual* violence, his intent to shock and outrage? Parodying the stylized language of

oral historians and praise-singers, typical of West Africa, the narrator continually punctuates his tale (as in the passage above) with interjections of sorrow or pity, with Islamic terms of praise and allusions to Allah—all of which become, given the nature of the Saïfs' reign, not merely irreverential of Islam but cynical and grotesque.

For many readers, Ouologuem's ugly portrayal of precolonial Africa seems gratuitous and just as exaggerated as the extreme claims for "grandiose" Africa. It was, at the very least, the wrong story to tell in the late sixties, when most African nations had just become independent and others were still waging a battle for independence. Eurocentric reaction to the novel was favorable: *Le Devoir* was an exciting experiment in narrative, a parody of oral epic—ironic, satiric, compelling. Given the still vigorous ideology of colonialism, the shifting of the burden of responsibility in African discourse from European colonialism to African abuses of power was surely a welcome development. The novel was awarded the Prix Renaudot in 1972. This period of grace came to an end when Ouologuem's innovative novel was discovered to contain a number of unacknowledged excerpts from European, American, and African writers. His work was repudiated, of course, but its originality and brilliance are indisputable—evident in the very reworking and assembly of other sources and texts.<sup>6</sup>

### *Women, the Ultimate Pawns of Political Strategy*

*Le Devoir* postulates brutality as an inherent dimension of the human condition. The leaders of the indigenous ruling class, the Saïfs (now Muslim but purportedly of black Jewish origin), are barbarous—and this seems to be Ouologuem's point—long before the arrival of the French. In time of war, as conquerors, they exploit violence, especially rape and sexual violence to men and women, as part of their military strategy; the subjugated masses, brutalized themselves, derive pleasure in brutalizing their conquered enemies: it is a self-perpetuating process.

In the superficially less turbulent colonial period, sexuality is still governed by the political and, in particular, the geopolitical struggles that ensue between Saïf and the French colonial administrators. The plight of the lower-class slaves and serfs and especially of women is tied to the workings of this political universe. Thus when the French arrive and create a colonial policy that requires African children to attend French schools, Saïf considers his and the children of noble

caste to be above such instruction and decides that slave children only will be subjected to colonial schools, Catholic masses, and baptism. Saïf, precursor of the future American slaveholder, thus promotes marriage and reproduction among his subjects to serve these political objectives:

That month, one thousand six hundred twenty-three marriages took place from province to province, from canton to canton. The aristocracy's campaign was under way.

The people stupidly rejoiced; in reality, however, the aristocracy were making way for the future. From all these new, legitimate couples, children would soon be born. The aristocracy would send them—in place of their own children—to the French missionary schools. (p.64)

Still more important, Saïf maintains the support of his male followers by institutionalizing male power over women. By sharpening the ideology of masculinity, he offers to his potential opponents sexual rather than political power. Masculinity (the control of female sexuality) is a distraction, a sop that depoliticizes:

Saïf had rallied aristocrats, servants, even the soldiers and interpreters of the "Fwench," by decreeing a customary law that definitively made women a tool of men. So that women would not be unfaithful, the practice of infibulation (fastening the genitals)—extremely rare until then—became law; so that, once married, she would not seek vengeance by betraying her husband, excision of the clitoris, the dreaded punishment for all acts of adultery, greatly cooled the hotheaded negresses who consequently behaved themselves. (p.62)

It is thus in the contest of political wills between the French and the indigenous chief that female powerlessness and male power are not only encoded but extended.<sup>7</sup> Women become legitimate, recognized possessions of men, objects to be manipulated and mutilated at will. The double standard that Saïf promotes with regard to adultery further confirms this configuration of power: the betrayal of a husband is a public offense, and betrayal of a wife is no offense whatsoever. Adultery thus has little to do with either infidelity or religious principle but—like other sexual activities of procreation and female circumcision—serves Saïf's political ends, assuring him a loyal male following. In this society, designed by male political ambition and power, women, marriage, and kinship rules do indeed

provide, as Lévi-Strauss has argued, "the means of binding men together."<sup>8</sup>

*Le Devoir* thus challenges the view of Africa as defenseless and unresponsive victim in the colonial and precolonial world. Its portrait of the hardiness and resourcefulness of the aristocracy is very convincing, but the narrative nonetheless promotes the categories of *the powerful* and *the powerless* in its pathetic image of the African populace and in its still more disabling treatment of African women. If *Le Devoir* demonstrates very clearly that class and male interests are conflated in the control of marriage and reproduction and in the institutionalizing of female circumcision and infibulation, it fails utterly in close-ups of female characters to accord them any but the most meager stature. Is the author merely "recording"—albeit scathingly—the view of the culture he constructs, or is he himself exhibiting a cultural or personal view? Women are everywhere pure victims, tools of men's objectives, testimonials to male conquest and prowess, and silent objects of the narrator's prying eyes. The uniform stature of women is apparent both in the "private" sphere of the home, where "nigger" women (*la négresse*) are instruments (wombs) of Saïf's reproductive policy, and in the public sphere of political intrigue, where women such as Awa are pawns in Saïf's game of rivalry with the French. Indeed, Awa's "public" role is quite private: she is enlisted to spy on (*seducer*) the French administrator Chevalier. The sex act is everywhere subsumed in a political system and is therefore expressive of it. Thus rape under the repressive regime of Saïf is neither an exceptional nor an accidental occurrence, for it epitomizes the dynamic of dominance and submission, voice and silence, agent and object that governs all aspects of life. The most gripping and revealing expression of this dynamic is the long, torturous rape of Tambira, the wife of Kassoumi, a slave of Saïf.

### *The Art of Dominance and Submission: Silence, Metaphor, and Narrative Time*

Tambira is raped one day, first by Dougouli the sorcerer and then by Kratongo and Wampoulo, two henchmen of Saïf, who have witnessed the dirty business and who blackmail her as she returns home from the sorcerer's.<sup>9</sup> *Le Devoir* suggests the dynamic of dominance and submission both by the very act of rape (and Tambira's failure to assert herself) and the textual representation of the act, which also disempowers the female victim.

Tambira goes to the sorcerer in her capacity as mother, seeking a blessing for the success of her sons' exams. She finds herself in these circumstances, then, not only for reasons of gender but also for those of class (Saïf's policy of sending "slave" youth to French schools). Having few means to pay the sorcerer, Tambira will be asked to pay with her body.<sup>10</sup>

The respective strength and vulnerability of Dougouli and Tambira are revealed, first of all, in the quantity and types of sentences accorded to each. Dougouli speaks to Tambira fifteen times in all. Regardless of his mode of speech, his is the voice of power. He leads the conversation from first to last. Catching her unawares, Dougouli begins with a disarming hello and then proceeds to flatter and flirt with Tambira. From this rather seductive mode of speech he shifts to the imperative during the divination ritual and finally ends with curses and threats to Tambira and her children when she hesitates to gratify him sexually.

To the sorcerer's fifteen statements, then, Tambira makes only four replies. Her feminine modesty, her tenuousness before Dougouli's voice and power are manifest in the conditional tenses she uses and in the interrogative mode of her answers: "How could I not be distressed? My sons are taking their exams, which will bring me great happiness, and it is beyond my power to help them. . . . Why wouldn't I be nice, once my sons pass their exams?" (p. 149.) She fails to interpret Dougouli's condition that she "be nice" and an earlier remark as the veiled sexual advances that the reader grasps almost immediately ("By God, Tambira, I know what brings you. Come to me, persuade Dougouli, do good by him"). Dougouli's terms are ambiguous in the early moments of this encounter, but the author would have Tambira be either complicitous or utterly naive.

Her single emphatic statement is ironically a declaration of helplessness. Asked to take an active part in the divination, she says simply, "I'm too afraid." Once the divination ritual has ended and the sorcerer is stating the terms of payment ("a cock and two sheep, and your sons will pass. Unless . . ."), she echoes (naively, one presumes again): "Unless?" It is that casual, hypothetical conjunction that allows Dougouli to crystallize and voice his intention to violate her. The language (or nonlanguage) of Ouologuem's Tambira reveals a victim who is femininely simple, docile, fearful, and naive.

Tambira's four responses to Dougouli throughout this ordeal reveal weakness, but weakness is evident as well in what she does not say. In response to Dougouli's first abrupt remark, for example, the narrator notes: "Tambira's mouth twisted into a numb, humble

smile; as if this sign of weakness had given the sorcerer complete license, he began to rant, that is, to make undisguised sexual innuendoes (p. 149). Tambira's inarticulateness, indeed, her lack of voice, corresponds presumably to her "inherent" powerlessness as female victim. But her silence renders her still weaker *textually*, for it becomes the occasion and justification for the narrator's intervention, an example of which we shall see further on. Thus while the sorcerer speaks his own thoughts, Tambira's mind is inhabited and voiced by the narrator. Almost all her thoughts and feelings are interpreted and uttered by this other, obviously male, voice in "free indirect" speech. Dougouli controls Tambira with his eyes and his spoken words, while the author does so—is it effectiveness or collusion?—through his mode of narration.

If a pathetic victimhood is suggested through a certain voicelessness, it is symbolized still more powerfully in the divination that also foreshadows the violence to ensue. The sorcerer, making sexual advances toward Tambira, commands her to stoop down, nude, over a puddle of water, to facilitate the divination:

"Hey! Hey! Look! Sit straight. Hold your pubis still. See! Red as a cock's comb, it's opening, gaping, dancing around, quivering, see! What can you make out?"

Tambira was fascinated by the puddle which danced before her; furiously, it enticed, gripped her drunken eyes; shapes were whirling around, laced in violence and lust in which her own degradation was insignificant. Suddenly a white cock rose from the puddle, then two white sheep with black heads. The cock cackled and the sheep bleated, then a whirlpool seized the puddle, whipping it around, licking it, filling its waters with hundreds of feathers from the cock's bleeding throat, from the necks of the slaughtered sheep. And then, nothingness. Nothing more but the reflection of Tambira's genitals, gaping above the puddle. Then the puddle itself disappeared, soaked up by the floor of compacted earth. (pp. 148–149)

In a ritual which clearly "enact[s] the form of social relations" (Douglas 1980:128), it is through the bloody cavity of Tambira's vagina that the vision of the future comes. Riveted by this vision and helpless to control it, she watches the blurred image of her own immolation. The sacrificial animals, superimposed on Tambira's reflection, are far more symbolic of Tambira herself than they are extraneous surrogates. Thus, as we saw above, the sorcerer at first asks for the rooster and two sheep; in a second, alternative request



he proposes Tambira herself as their equivalent; finally, reconsidering, he asks all three. In this whirlwind of violence and lust, Tambira's loss of dignity is merely one insignificant sacrifice, insignificant because, unbeknownst to her, the hope for an individual success is belied by the structural problem of Saïf's tyranny (her sons will pass their exams only to play their part as Saïf's pawns), insignificant also—and this she may realize—because rape (and humiliation) is just one of countless sacrifices, all of which shall be forgotten, consumed by the earth.

Tambira is allowed one moment of rebellion in the face of this humiliation. Her resistance does not take the shape of a life and death struggle:

The sorcerer's eyes flashed and, despite herself, the servant woman felt hypnotized. The man desired her. She hated him, this sorcerer, with his snake-like expression, his heavy lips, his crooked legs, his head shaking like a mule, his odor of blood and amulets made of badly tanned leather. Resolutely, she closed her eyes. All fascination then disappeared. And so it was as long as she avoided the sorcerer's glare. (p. 149)

The very first sentence pinpoints the dynamics of Dougouli's and Tambira's relationship ("Les yeux du sorcier lancèrent des éclairs, et malgré elle, la servante se sentit hypnotisée"). Dougouli's force does not derive primarily from the threat of immediate physical harm; rather, his power is authorial, assimilated to that of God or Zeus in his heaven (*lancèrent des éclairs*). Tambira is appropriately referred to, then, as *servante*: she is both Saïf's lower-class maid and the handmaiden of the Lord/Dougouli. Characteristically helpless and despite her repugnance for Dougouli and his "unnatural" body (*malgré elle*), she experiences herself as object (*se sentit*) of his charm (*hypnotisée*). Dougouli's two vehicles of power are thus his incantatory voice and his hypnotic eyes. It is surely not by chance that the architect of this rape is a spiritual medium, practiced in the manipulation of words and the use of gesture and staring to create an aura of power.

It is worth noting once again that Tambira is not allowed to say, "I hate him," an *affirmative* statement, in the strict sense of the term—suggesting a new or full realization that presumably might enable her to act. Rather, her hatred is expressed *for her* ("She hated him" [Elle le détestait]) in a sentence that suggests an ongoing, passive condition (the French *imparfait*) and prepares the reader for resignation on her part. Significantly, before the moment of ultimate

acquiescence Ouologuem imagines for Tambira one moment's respite from this diabolic charm when she closes her eyes. The retreat within herself, the refusal to be the object of another's sight and to be the inarticulate, lesser partner in this dialogue briefly restore her integrity, and she musters the courage to slap the sorcerer before he has uttered his final threat and curse. Yet Tambira's resistance can be only momentary, for in this chronicle whose form and content assume the triumph of power, the will to resist exists only to demonstrate the ultimate superiority of force: "So, full of anger, but fearing murder, supernatural revenge as much as the sorcerer's black magic, the woman sobbed softly like a faithful dog and, lying down on the ground, undid her cloth" (p. 149). Tambira's stifled feelings and thoughts, her inarticulateness find their symbolic equivalent in the text's assimilation of the woman's behavior to that of helpless animals continually evoked in the rape sequence.

While the narrator has "fondled" the first rape of Tambira, by Dougouli, in more than three pages, the second rape, by Wampoulo and Kratonga, is told with all dispatch in three paragraphs:

When she came out, her head down, her shoulders square, Kratonga and Wampoulo, who had followed her, were there. Facing her. Threatening to tell the entire story to her husband, they, too, had their revenge; long ago, the murderer Sankolo, their friend, had been squealed on by Kassoumi.

They ordered Tambira to follow them, and the woman complied. She experienced a cowardly, shameful fear. Fear of her husband, especially—he who was so good, betrayed by her—fear for him, as well—they would have killed him—and for herself also perhaps.

Wampoulo and Kratonga led her away behind the Yamé river waterfalls to a dense grassy spot. They took her, both of them. They took her and took her again all they wanted that day, frightening her. (p. 150)

The diminution in narrative time participates in forging this world in which masculinity and power are at the center, for it suggests that the subsequent rapes have less importance, they are but a footnote. Rapists and victim have become inherently less interesting: the rapists are less powerful men than Dougouli, and Tambira has already been exploited sexually and textually. Because Tambira can lose nothing more (from this point of view), there is no more seduction and thus nothing more to tell. Accordingly, Ouologuem's Tambira puts up no struggle whatsoever this time. As if to confirm this

state of disgrace and the relationship of rape to violence, *Le Devoir* reduces Tambira to silence and effaces her completely with an ignominious death:

Two mornings later, Kassoumi shuddered when Wampoulo and Kratonga came to get him.

Tambira's body had been found. In the yard beyond the communal grave of Saïf's servants, above the serfs' excrement, a wide rectangular hole had been set up. Teeming with caterpillars and worms of all shapes and colors, it had been covered over with boards. The servants satisfied their needs there. It was in this hole that the body was discovered.

It lay there, in a corner, all dressed and orderly, with worms crawling into the nostrils; the head rose above the excrement, held by a slipknot attached to one of the boards. (p. 150)

Tambira's life ends in a hole of life's wastes, like that of her vision at the sorcerer's. Her remains are taken back into the earth. She has existed all along in this text as a victim of her sex and as a sexual victim, the most pathetic martyr of violence. It is the Saïf's nefarious authority that dictates this end for her victimization.

### *Subject as Object*

Both rapes of Tambira are acts in which men assert their power vis-à-vis the less powerful woman. She is an essential partner in the elaboration of that achievement—there can be no dominance without submission. Tambira is thus "collaborator" and addressee of each rape, but she is not represented as subject. Indeed in the rare moments when Ouologuem's Tambira sees herself at all, it is especially as a possession of or an appendage to her husband. When we read her thoughts, as they occasionally are spoken for her, it becomes clear that Tambira's sense of self (subjectivity) is shaped by a consciousness—that of the society in which she lives or that of the author—that perceives and constructs the world through male eyes.

In the prelude to the rape by Dougouli, as we saw above, the sorcerer requires Tambira to remove her *pagne* as part of the ritual of divination. The narrator explains:

A horrible mixture of repulsion and fear strangled Tambira. The mindless prey of maternal love, she remembered the love

and poverty of her husband, ignored the excitement of the sorcerer's kisses against her neck, the softness of his caresses, the fire of his lips, the saliva of his mouth, the warmth of his chest, his hips, his underarms, his stomach, the fullness[?] of his penis [*satiété du sexe*], the desire, the quivering of his legs: she took off her cloth and crouched down over the puddle of water on the ground. (p. 148)

Tambira is initially the victim of visceral feelings (repulsion and fear) that "strangle" her. Next—given the apposition of "mindless prey" (*bête, bête éreintée*)—she is *in her essence* consumed stupidly and instinctually, like an animal, by her motherhood. She has no ability to make a self-interested judgment, much less a moral decision. Finally, Tambira is granted the role of subject-actor in this passage, and her response is, of course, neither self-affirming anger nor the will to walk out of Dougouli's hut: "She remembered the love and poverty of her husband." Because she is mother, because she is wife, she has little consciousness of herself apart from these roles and is pure self-sacrifice. She consequently will proceed to let the sorcerer have his way and will close off her senses to his excitement. Thus at the same time that the text deprives Tambira of a will of her own, it also seems to make her all too present to the sorcerer's sensuality. The fact that she must "ignore" the excitement of Dougouli's body, that the textual description, regardless of its hyperbole, is detailed and seductive, suggests a depth of physiological response on the part of the perceiver (presumably despite herself). Indeed, *where* is the excitement of Dougouli's kisses—in the kisses or in the reception? This foul play on the part of the narrator compromises Tambira's integrity once again; she is a tabula rasa for the narrator's script as she is for that of the sorcerer.<sup>11</sup>

During the second rape by Wampoulo and Kratonga, her indifference toward her own being and her sense of guilt vis-à-vis her husband (that is, her sense of her value in relationship to him) are made explicit. The narrator, of course, stands between her thoughts and the reader, and it is unclear why Tambira's fear should be characterized as cowardly and shameful: "She experienced a cowardly, shameful fear. Fear of her husband, especially—he who was so good, betrayed by her—fear for him, as well—they would have killed him—and for herself also perhaps."

Tambira's fear of her husband is motivated both by her misplaced sense of responsibility for the transgression and her sense of having

become a soiled and unworthy token, in contrast to his enduring virtue. Thus she responds to the violation of *her* person as though it were first and foremost an affront to *her husband* and she blames herself for this act that violates him.

Of course, in this cultural universe, Tambira is not alone in perceiving herself as an extension of Kassoumi. Kratonga and Wampoulo rape Tambira not only to affirm their power over her but also to punish her husband: "They, too, had their revenge: long ago, the murderer Sankolo, their friend, had been squealed on by Kassoumi" (p. 150). Once again, as in Saïf's control of marriage and reproduction, women are "signs . . . to be communicated between men" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:496). The second rape of Tambira, then, like Saïf's first night right to all brides, is a demonstration to Kassoumi of the pecking order, a masculine language whose words are women.

Tambira's fear for her husband during the second rape is a further index of her self-effacement. Having failed to be pure enough for Kassoumi, she then measures her self-worth by her capacity to protect him. Thus she fears for herself last of all and only "perhaps." Several meanings suggest themselves in the text's "perhaps": Is the narrator unsure of Tambira's fear for herself? Or is the doubt Tambira's: she too *might* be killed? Still another meaning that may be present in this narrative hesitation is that rape is itself a near-death, that Tambira has been exhausted, has become indifferent to her fate. She matters less and less, is effaced more and more, until she finally disappears.

*Le Devoir* thus presents facets of the experience of rape and femaleness perceived, as it were, in a specific ideology of masculinity: silence, immolation, and an absence of subjectivity. The novel replicates this victimhood unquestioningly and even with complacency. Just as sexuality and women are conditioned by the political struggle within the narrative, they are similarly governed by the rules of the narrative itself, which tells the triumph of power. *Le Devoir* is as bound to an admiration of force as is Saïf to violence. The novel would critique what it portrays, but it nonetheless respects the intelligence and cunning of Saïf, disdains the ignorance and naiveté of lower-class men, and is, finally, indifferent to women of those classes—seemingly beneath contempt. Thus Ouologuem succeeds in dismantling the myth of African powerlessness, but only to replace that myth, with another, equally insidious, powerlessness and depravity of the African populace. Nowhere is this more obvious than in his construction of women.<sup>12</sup>

### Object as Subject

*La Vie et demie* is, like *Le Devoir*, the chronicle of a fictional African country, neocolonial Katamalanasia, its savage dictators, and, this time, its insurgents, in particular Chaïdana, the beautiful daughter of the rebel leader Martial. *La Vie et demie* and *L'Etat honteux* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), a kindred work, are the first of several novels by Sony Labou Tansi, who also directs and writes for the Rocado Zulu Theatre troupe of Congo-Brazzaville. Born in 1947 in Zaïre, Tansi is, perhaps, the most visible of the "new generation" of African writers of French expression, who abandon both the naturalistic mode of first-generation writers and the nearly ubiquitous theme of earlier fiction, the crises of colonial domination. Tansi writes of contemporary neocolonial life, and his active involvement in live and popular cultural productions clearly affects his style and vision as a novelist.<sup>13</sup>

In the foreword to the novel, Tansi refers to his story as a fable, and indeed it has an allegorical character. The opening sequences consist of Chaïdana's memories; her story is interwoven with that of the general civil revolt outside the palace walls. The story begins as the head of state, the "Providential Guide," murders Martial before the latter's children and wife and forces them to eat Martial's remains. To the consternation of the Guide, Martial—stabbed, shot, and poisoned—stubbornly refuses to die and, on the contrary, returns frequently to haunt the Guide as he sleeps. The Guide's fortune-teller recommends marriage to Chaïdana, with whom the Guide must abstain from sexual relations, however. Chaïdana later flees the "excellential" palace with the help of the presidential physician; before going off in seclusion to the countryside, she takes advantage of her nearly perpetual youth to assume 243 identities, seduce and poison dozens of cabinet ministers, and take a great many husbands, including the Guide himself. On one occasion she is nursed back to health by her father and subsequently raped by him—presumably because she is preparing to seduce (and poison) the Guide. As she makes her way to the countryside, she is again raped by 333 soldiers on the side of the road.

The liberation struggle will be taken up by her daughter, Chaïdana, who, as beautiful as her mother, will find herself also the wife of a future dictator, Jean Coeur de Père. Exiled to Darmellia first by her husband and later by her son, Jean Coeur de Pierre, Chaïdana the younger will be joined by her grandsons, Jean Canon, Jean Coriace

(Tough), Jean Calcium, Jean Camera, Jean Caoutchouc (Rubber), and so on (all conceived in the first annual week of Virgins and thus members of the C series of Jeans). Bright, savvy, inventive, the Jeans will secede from Katamalanasia and wage war against their father and his successors (their half-brothers) and later against the super-powers.

Tansi's fable evokes any number of traditions, all of which care little for the supposed boundaries of reality. The motif of the dead who will not die, for example, is basic to many traditional African stories. *La Vie et demie* is reminiscent also of Rabelais, in its textual love of plenty (Chaïdana is pregnant for eighteen months and six days) and its wordplay: in addition to the fifty Jeans of series C, for example, there are those of series V—Jean Vérole (Syphilis), Jean Vautour (Vulture), Jean Vocabulaire, Jean Vide-Cave (Wine Guzzler)—as of all the alphabet. The mixture of fantasy and "reality" recalls Gabriel García Márquez, and the greedy, pouting, and tantrum-prone dictators resemble Jarry's voracious, childish Père Ubu. There is also a certain similarity to *Candide* in the peripatetic and perilous journey of innocence in a callous world of evil and in the narrator's understated response to it. Finally, Tansi's story evokes the cartoon and comic strip, in which extremes and exaggeration are the rule and finality and disaster are most often taken with a grain of salt. Through hyperbole and absurdity, then, Tansi pushes his tale beyond the limits of the rational, provoking laughter and ridiculing power. Related to the suppleness of plot is his incessant play on words, evident, for example, in the last names of the countless grandsons, cited above. *La Vie et demie* is as much about language in a time of tyranny as about tyranny itself. Tansi both reveals the ploy of dictatorship to impose and censor language and subverts that language through the discourse of the novel, which highlights the jingles and jargon of government-approved speech.<sup>14</sup>

In *La Vie et demie*, sexual abuse is in metonymical rapport with politics as it is in *Le Devoir*. Not only does it symbolically enact the political order of domination and submission, but it clearly derives from that order and plays a role in maintaining it. The most obvious instances are Chaïdana's rape by the militiamen and her first marriage to the Providential Guide. In the first instance, Tansi records the rape journalistically, even statistically:

That evening, as she hadn't budged [from the side of the road], a group of fifteen militiamen came and soothed themselves with her. As a result, she passed out. At the first crow of the

cock, another group of militiamen arrived. They left her for dead, and in the wee hours there came a final group who were more impetuous because time was short. She lay there inanimate for three nights and during three nights she lasted through thirteen rounds of militiamen, for a total of three hundred thirty-three men. (p. 72)

The boxing jargon ("she lasted through thirteen rounds" [*en-caissa*]) and the improbably numerical count banalize rape and thus convey that arrogant view of the world in which this rape is one of many routine military acts. As in *Le Devoir*, rape is the assertion, the prerogative, of power.

A still more important index of the ties between the sexual and political is Chaïdana's marriage to the Guide, which presumably ratifies the political power of one man (the Guide) by another (Martial). In an absurd adaptation of literary and mythological traditions, the warring factions (dictators and insurgents) are united in marriage but—given the fortune-teller's prohibition—are unable to consummate their union. Thus marriage rites are represented once again and mocked as a form of man-to-man communication. Inasmuch as this is a marriage "forced" by the other side, Martial has not given up his stake in his daughter, and so the marriage is form without substance. It becomes a hollow institution like so many others in this autocratic state.

Martial's subsequent rape of Chaïdana makes sense in light of the struggle for power between himself and the dictator. Political struggle is displaced in the battle for sexual union with Chaïdana. Chaïdana is punished by Martial, first of all, for her postmarriage attempt to seduce and murder the Guide. Martial has the habit of slapping Chaïdana whenever she engages in such sexual vigilantism, and on this occasion "Martial had such a fit of anger that he beat his daughter like an animal and had sex with her, undoubtedly so as to slap her internally" (p. 69). Even were Martial's rape read as a mere "corrective," it does not, for that reason, cease being the enactment of male domination and female submission, a lesson Chaïdana understands all too well. Simultaneously, the rape of Chaïdana is read by the reader (if not by the Guide himself) as Martial's symbolic attempt to wrest power from the dictatorship, as his declaration that he has not surrendered.

Sony Labou Tansi suggests yet another relationship between political order and sexuality. When Chaïdana devises her vigilante strategy of poison-laced "champagne receptions" for government of-



ficials, she begins her secret campaign with a visit to the Minister of Internal Security. The minister has offered a commission to his secretary for every beautiful young woman ushered in and is already beside himself with anticipation as Chaïdana enters:

—I saw you on television, said Chaïdana, and your physique gave me ideas.

... His Excellency had never thought that his poses on television, the masculine fervor with which he extolled the Providential Guide, his everyday words, his national gestures, his artificial conviction, and his battering of words had any effect whatsoever on that mysterious landscape, the opposite sex. He vaguely recalled his last appearance on Télé-Yourma; it was after the last arrests. He'd spoken as though they were at war. Maybe it wasn't that time. He thought of the other times, and the thought almost made him unhappy because now that he dared take a look at himself for the first time, he saw only the sad profile of a man of hate, a man whose heart was fueled by schemes, he saw something resembling human refuse, a figure whose core was ultimately low and inhuman. He thought of all the times, not one of them ... Unless women, with their particular eyes that don't see what everyone else's eyes see, with their particular ears that don't hear what everyone else's ears hear ... (p. 47)

Chaïdana thus makes her first conquest easily, appealing to and flattering an already finely developed sense of masculinity, reinforced by power and the purse. This masculinity, as the minister begins to grasp, however, is nationalistic and bellicose in character; it is ultimately hateful and inhuman. Thus the feminine becomes a necessary complement to the masculine: it is the mirror in which the masculine looks at itself, both for affirmation of visible, superficial prowess and for hidden, deeper humanity. As with Estelle and Garcin in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis-Clos*, the minister hopes that Chaïdana will see beyond a certain exterior—in this instance, a masculinity forged of aggression and hatred—to a core of goodness and lovability. Feminine submission thus can affirm and sustain the ideology of masculinity, reassuring men that they may be both beauty and the beast. *La Vie et demie* thus intimates that sexuality and love—in certain forms, at least—may fuel a political order of domination and brutality.

It is not surprising that *La Vie et demie* does not represent the rapes and attempted rapes of Chaïdana but rather recounts them in

brief sentences. Given its departure from realism, the lurid details, the horror and fear are not of primary importance. Rape is not an occasion for voyeuristic pleasure, anger, or anguish. But more especially, rape is not paralysis, the end of life. To the extent that rape itself is absent, Tansi makes space for and privileges Chaïdana's response to rape as to abuses of political and male power.

Curiously, there are two methods of subversion possible for Chaïdana: writing and sexual intercourse. Chaïdana's revolt in its first phase consists of arming bands of young boys with spray guns and black paint:

She bought black paint for three million [African francs<sup>15</sup>]. ... She recruited three thousand boys who, on Christmas night, were to write on all the doors in Yourma her father's famous saying: "I don't want to die this death." The handsome battalion of pistolwriters worked marvelously: they'd managed to write the saying even on the third set of gates in the wall of the excellential palace. A few of them, the boldest undoubtedly, had succeeded in writing the sentence on the body of several military officers such as General Yang, Colonel Obaltana, Lieutenant-Colonel Fursia and quite a few others. Amedandio said he'd written the saying on one thousand-ninety uniforms.

On Christmas while the city drank and danced, the pistolwriters did their all to put Martial's saying everywhere. And Amedandio vaguely proclaimed "there'd be fire the next time," promising he'd write the saying on the Providential Guide's ass. (pp. 44–45)

In this comic episode, the form of Chaïdana's revolt is male, phallic, aggressive—a kind of reverse rape. In order to "speak" in the public forum, Chaïdana assumes male form by hiring young boys, whom she arms with *pistols*, to *spray* the entrances to the sanctuary that is the male palace. Chaïdana herself will write memoirs, poems, and fiction later on in life when she has retired from her career in the city. Few of her works, of course, will survive censorship; they will be burned. Thus language and writing in this context are the site of a constant struggle for power. When Chaïdana writes, writing becomes especially subversive because writing is male. Chaïdana's experience echoes that of other heroines in African literature, Buchi Emecheta's heroine in *Second Class Citizen*, for example.

Of course, writing is not sufficient. And Chaïdana turns to more active participation in the power struggle, as we saw above. Her actions clearly are directed toward dismantling the political struc-

ture of Katamalanasia, but they must also be read, given the antagonism with her father, as an attempt to undo simultaneously the subjugation that she knows as the experience of femaleness. If Chaïdana's rage is in part the rage of a female object of exchange between two rival men, Martial and the Guide, then her acts of vengeance are not only a bid to wrest power from the villainous dictators, but also an attempt to inveigh against the system of domination that also reduces women to signs between men. Her anger is directed, then, against the state whose domination and hierarchy brutalize all, against the system that makes of her a token of communication and against her father, of whom she says, "You've won the first round. . . . Let's see if you'll win the second" (p. 69). Chaïdana challenges power in its dual manifestations, political dictatorship and masculine domination of women.

### *The Lens of Narrative Form*

If *Le Devoir* exposes the workings and abuses of power, the novel nonetheless pays homage to them, for Ouologuem's premise—the implacable destiny of violence—requires it. The novel thus takes tyranny, barbarity, and, more important, hierarchy as given, as simple facts to which we all must submit. Women are the most abject expression of that stuck, "natural" state of affairs. In this system, which Ouologuem shows to be brutal, the only issue is *which* tyrant will prevail—not *whether any tyrant should*. The game of chess with which the novel ends is therefore an appropriate metaphor for this chronicle of undefeatable rank and power. The dominion of the king over the pawns is never in doubt. The only question is which king will dominate. The "reality" of hierarchy and domination is the very assumption on which the narrative is built.

Tansi is, from this point of view, more subversive. For he not only shows the abuses of tyranny but challenges the very concept of dominance. He questions the very notions of dictatorship and hierarchy by refusing to replicate them in his text, by submitting them to the playfulness and irreverence of fable and cartoon. Thus *La Vie et demie* is able to explode the myth of power as "natural." As Chaïdana says, "a naked ruler is the height of ugliness." The novel, then, like the child in the fairy tale, points its finger at an emperor without clothes and reveals the frailty of authority, once we are no longer blinded by the accoutrements of power. Hierarchy, *La Vie et demie* shows, is a sham, an intolerable absurdity. So it is that Chaï-

dana the elder and Chaïdana the younger are *agents*, not merely victims. Tansi does not posit utopia as the solution, but he nonetheless wrestles with power in his text, as do the heroines in his story.

Some quarrel with the role of women as saviors of one's race, kin, or clan, seeing therein a tired cliché; it is a virtuous role but not innocently assigned. Yet the originality of *La Vie et demie's* vision lies precisely in opposing an *essential* femininity. It is not a privileged femaleness per se that invests women with virtue and strength. It is rather that from their position of marginality they perceive the nakedness of power. And it is that perception that enables them to envision, to challenge. If the women of *La Vie et demie* are once again the voice of imagination, it is surely not as muses to let men sing. Women are the voice of subversion because they see that what passes for the natural order of things is merely, but ever so persuasively, contrived.

### NOTES

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1. Other recent African novels that depict or allude to rape are Jean-Marie Adiaffi's *La Carte d'identité* (Abidjan: CEDA, 1980); Buchi Emecheta's *Rape of Shavi* (1983; reprint, New York: Braziller, 1985); Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* (London: Heinemann, 1970), and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les Soleils des indépendances* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

2. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; reprint, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 128. Further citations appear in text.

3. For further information on Ouologuem, see Hans M. Zell et al., eds., *A New Reader's Guide to African Literature*, pp. 455–457 (New York: Africana, 1983).

4. Stanislas Adotevi dubbed them "négrologues" in his famous invective, *Négritude et négrologues* (Paris: 10/18, 1972).

5. This and all subsequent translations of *Le Devoir de violence* and *La Vie et demie* are mine. *Le Devoir* is available in translation by Ralph Manheim as *Bound to Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971). To my knowledge *La Vie et demie* has not been translated.

6. See, for example, Eric Sellin, "The Unknown Voice of Yambo Ouologuem," *Yale French Studies* (1976), 53:137–162; Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Liter-*

ature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 98–106; Bernard Mouralis, "Un Carrefour d'écritures: *Le Devoir de violence* de Yambo Ouologuem," *Recherches et Travaux* (1984), 27:75–92; Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 216–245.

7. A similar argument is made in Tobe Levin, "Women as Scapegoats of Culture and Cult: An Activist's View of Female Circumcision in Ngugi's *The River Between*," in Carol Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves, eds., pp. 210–211. *Ngambika*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1986).

8. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 480. Further citations appear in text.

9. Prior to this, Tambira has already been raped, of course, by Saïf, who grants himself the right to his subjects' brides. This rape is not seen as such, however. Because it is institutionalized, because sovereigns will be sovereign, the perception of rape is impossible, as is a revolt against sovereign violence. In Dougouli's rape of Tambira, violation is displaced from the political to the medico-religious arena—the two are not without parallels.

10. It should be noted, however, that in the political crossfire between Saïf and the French, women are subject to rape, regardless of their class, race, or nationality. At the dinner the French administrator organizes in order to poison Saïf, the latter "adroitly placed his foot near Mme Vandame's, caressing it; then, quietly—being a little anxious about the quivering he noticed on her part—he stared at her, tenderly, attentively, carefully, because, at that very moment he knew he was raping her slowly, irresistibly and calmly" (p. 75).

11. There are other occasions in the novel in which women welcome sexual violence done to themselves and "love" the perpetrators of that violence. Thus with regard to infibulation "quite a few men, living with women by common law, were happy on their wedding night to have the right to a new, sadistic pleasure, voluptuous and painful, when they deflowered—genitals pricked with thorns, thighs splattered with blood—their mistress, herself in ecstasy and exhausted for the most part from pleasure and fear" (p. 62, emphasis added). Notice once again the ambiguity of the description (*sexe picoté d'épines, flancs éclaboussés de sang*), which may refer to the male or female body.

Similarly, the narrator says of Awa, as she is strangled by her boyfriend, whom she has caught masturbating, "Awa's hands were useless; they/she didn't try [*elles ne tentait pas (sic)*] to return the blows; tortured by the horror and degradation of this physical struggle, she liked it/loved him [*elle l'aimait*]" (p. 108, emphasis added).

12. For an opposing point of view, see *Emitai* (1971), Ousmane Sembène's film on Senegalese village women during the colonial era.

13. For further information on Tansi, see Zell et al., *A New Reader's Guide to African Literature*, pp. 495–497.

14. See Eileen Julien, "Dominance and Discourse in *La Vie et demie* or How to Do Things with Words," *Research in African Literatures* (1989) 20:371–384, and Georges Ngal, "Les Tropicalités de Sony Labou Tansi," *Silex* (1982), 23:134–143.

15. An equivalent of sixty thousand French francs.