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Gender Relations and Relational Histories in Léonora Miano's Novels *Tels des astres éteints* and *Ces âmes chagrines*

Abstract

This article tackles gender and intergenerational relations in the novels *Tels des astres éteints* [*Like Estinguished Stars*, 2008] and *Ces âmes chagrines* [*These Troubled Souls*, 2011] by Léonora Miano, currently the most successful francophone female author of Cameroonian origin. Both texts are characterized by a nuanced engagement with migrant masculinities that are situated differently in relation to male-dominated white majority society. These position(ing)s are unpacked using concepts developed by the sociologist R. W. Connell, who differentiates between subordinated and hegemonic forms of masculinity. Furthermore, the article shows how, in the two novels, transatlantic and colonial histories are symbolized through family relations – notably mother-son relationships – and how Miano's use of the trope resembles and differs from manifestations in male-authored African literature and female-authored African American and Caribbean literature. Contrary to interpretations by other researchers, it does not fully endorse a view of Miano as a gender-progressive or 'queer' author.

Léonora Miano is presently one of the best-known and most prolific female authors of African origin on the French literary scene. She has published ten novels as well as a range of publications in other literary genres and has received almost a dozen literary prizes, among them the prestigious *Prix Femina* and the *Goncourt des Lycéens*. Inspired by US American Africana Studies, she is also a theorist of the African diaspora. She adopted the term "Afropéa" to create a transnational space of belonging for Europeans of African descent, who equally define themselves by their European and African or Caribbean heritage (Miano

2012: 84). In her fictional and non-fictional works, she bridges the gap between Africans living on the continent and people of African descent scattered in North America, Europe and the Caribbean.

My article focuses on two of the lesser-known of Miano's novels, *Tels des astres éteints* [*Like Extinguished Stars*] and *Ces âmes chagrines* [*These Troubled Souls*], published in 2008 and 2011. *Ces âmes chagrines* was actually the first novel that Miano handed in for publication, but it was only published eight years later because, at the time, her editor believed that books by African authors would only sell if set in Africa (Miano 2016b: 117-118). Whereas the plots of the most prized of Miano's novels such as *Contours du jour qui vient* [*Contours of the Coming Day*, 2006] or *La Saison de l'ombre* [*Season of the Shadow*, 2013] are exclusively played out in Africa, the characters of the novels under study here have immigrated to France and move between Europe and Africa and, in one case, the South American continent. After publishing her "African" trilogy,[1] Miano completed another trilogy by following up on the characters of *Tels des astres éteints* in *Crépuscule du tourment 1 & 2* [*Dusk of the Torment*, 2016a and 2017a], the latter of which are also entirely set in Africa. By contrast, *Ces âmes chagrines* is a self-contained work, and its characters do not reappear in any other works by Miano.

Gender relations have been examined in a number of articles/books on Miano's œuvre (Coly 2014; Jean Charles 2014; Kistnareddy 2019; Laurent 2011; Tang 2014; Unter Ecker 2016), with an entire dossier in the journal *Études littéraires africaines* dedicated to the subject in 2019. The studies highlight the struggle and emancipation of female characters in Africa and the African diaspora, the relationship between mothers and daughters and, more recently, the author's treatment of masculinity. Some of the articles refer to the novel *Tels des astres éteints*, but none take into consideration *Ces âmes chagrines*. Sylvie Laurent's article on Miano and the "third space" (2011) traces African American and Caribbean influences in the author's work and was a productive starting point for my analysis.

[1] Consisting of *L'Intérieur de la nuit* [*Dark Heart of the Night*, 2005], *Contours du jour qui vient* (2006) and *Les Aubes écarlates* [*Dawns of Scarlet*, 2009], see Collini 2012.

My article will draw on Raewyn Connell's study *Masculinities* (2005 [1995]) to examine the gendered character construction and the engagement with masculinity and femininity in the two novels. These findings will be deepened by criticism of the "Mother Africa Trope" (Stratton 1994) and of the gendered representation of (national) history as a "family drama" (Boehmer 2005: 28) or a "feminist family romance" (Rody 2001: 6), as elaborated by Elleke Boehmer (2005) for African literature and by Caroline Rody (2001) for African American and Caribbean literature.

1. Introducing the two novels

Tels des astres éteints focalizes on three different characters, all in their early thirties, who meet (again) in the city of Paris: Amandla,[2] a woman from French Guiana; Amok, one of the offspring of a bourgeois family in an unspecified sub-Saharan country and Shrapnel, a school friend of Amok's, who, in contrast to Amok, has a rural background and is deeply rooted in local culture. Amandla suffers from the emotional distance of her mother who was abandoned by Amandla's father and since then immersed herself in Afrocentric Rastafari philosophy. Shrapnel never had a mother – he was raised by his grandmother who passes away shortly before the eviction of their village community from their ancestral land. Whereas Amandla and Shrapnel respond to their losses by getting involved in a Pan-African political movement – Shrapnel dreaming of building a cultural center for the African diaspora; Amandla dreaming of "returning" to Africa – Amok feels illegitimate among Black[3] activists because he descends from a collaborator with colonial rule: His

[2] "Amandla" was a rallying cry of the South African anti-apartheid movement and means "power". For a detailed discussion of names and naming in Miano's novel see Etoke (2009).

[3] Here, "Black" refers to the more or less remote Sub-Saharan African descent of individuals, termed "d'ascendance subsaharienne" by Miano. It includes people born on French soil (Miano: "Afropéens") as well as first-generation immigrants from Africa (Miano: "Subsahariens") or the Caribbean. In this article, I use the term "Black" and "Afrodescendant" synonymously. The topicality of these terms stems from the ongoing and sometimes deadly discrimination suffered by Black people in white majority society.

grandfather had helped France to dismantle an anticolonial independence movement and left an oppressive legacy to his family that articulates itself in the violent misogynous outbursts of Amok's father. Amok retreats to a foreign country because, as his name suggests, he is afraid that the dark force handed down in his family will manifest itself in an act of violence if he sets foot in his home country again.

Ces âmes chagrines tells the conflicted story of a family from a sub-Saharan country named Mboasu (the Douala expression for "at our home") that spans over five generations. The novel focalizes on four characters: the two half-brothers Antoine and Maxime, their mother Thamar, and their grandmother Modi. Antoine and Maxime are constructed as contrasting characters, but they both suffer deeply from maternal neglect. Like Amandla, Thamar was raised by an emotionally reserved mother, who was unable to comfort her daughter after an experience of sexual assault. Consequently, Thamar finds herself in one abusive relationship after another. As for Modi, she never gets over the lost bond with her father, which was broken over her romantic engagement with a freedom fighter whom her father rejected because of his "pagan" background.

The two novels are essentially about the different ways the characters try to come to terms with their painful family history, and, in extension, with the history of their African and Afrodescendant communities. Miano stages family conflict as a means to examine a past that is characterized by violent intrusions and transformations such as slavery and colonization. The author sees African literature ("Littératures" or "Lettres subsahariennes" in her words[4]) as an effort to pay homage to the ancestors that perished in the course of these upheavals and as a way of establishing a lost lineage (Miano 2016a: 25). There are important parallels between Miano's idea of African literature and views of African

[4] In *Habiter la frontière* (2012: 33-57), Miano dismisses the idea of 'African literature' because of its lack of regional specificity, although what she actually deplores is a solely thematic rather than aesthetic critical approach to texts by African authors. She further replaces the designation 'African' by 'sub-Saharan' because 'Africa' was the name given to the continent by European colonizers (Léonora Miano interviewed by Adèle Cailleteau 2020) and because she wants to distinguish the history of sub-Saharan Africa from that of North Africa/the Maghreb. In *L'Impératif transgressif* (2016b), however, the author identifies a mark of style or message of sub-Saharan African literature rooted in the history of slavery and colonization.

American literature, which saw a rise of historical novels, notably about slavery, from the 1990s onwards. Rody says of the latter historical narratives that "'history' thus acquires the function of communal 'talking cure': its characters, author and readers delve into the past, repeating painful stories to work toward the health of fuller awareness" (2001: 26). This therapeutic function is also present in Miano's texts.

What distinguishes *Tels des astres éteints*, its successors *Crépuscule du tourment 1 & 2* (which focus on Amok and his relations to a number of women) and *Ces âmes chagrines* from Miano's other novels is that there she puts male *and* female characters at the center of the texts, and that, on the whole, the perspectives of male characters even outweigh those of female ones; the three novels share an elaborate and nuanced engagement with masculinity. This engagement culminated in Miano's anthology *Marianne et le garçon noir* (2017b), where different writers and artists discuss the Black male experience in France. The focus on masculine identities also distinguishes the novels from the historical novels of African American and Caribbean female writers analyzed by Rody, to which my article will continue to refer. Rody contends that, in this body of literature, "history is reimagined in the form of a romance: the romance of a returning daughter and a figure I call the mother-of-history" (2001: 3). In the novels under study here, it is not only daughters but mainly sons who return to complicated mother-child as well as father-child relationships.

In African literature, the representation of national history often follows a similar pattern: According to Boehmer, in texts by male writers of the 1928 generation, "[t]he nation as a body of people was imagined as a family arrangement in which the leaders had the authority of fathers and, in relation to the maternal national entity, adopted the position of sons" (Boehmer 2005: 34). The metaphorization of the nation as a mother has a long tradition in African literature and has been challenged by female writers and critics (Lee 1987; Stratton 1994; Boehmer 2005). Like their Caribbean and African American counterparts, some female African writers, such as Calixthe Beyala or Tsitsi Dangarembga, object to the invisibility of the daughter figure in the national family arrangement by focusing on her character and perspective (Boehmer 2005: 106-107). The novels by Miano under study here differ from this feminist current by primarily delving into and thus

deconstructing concepts of masculinity. I argue that the occasion for this shift is the destabilization – the crumbling of the façade – of habitual constructions of masculinity in the process of migration.

In *Tels des astres éteints*, the perspectives of the characters Amandla, Amok and Shrapnel are accorded approximately the same amount of narrative time. Apart from a short prologue ("Intro") and a short epilogue ("Outro"), narrated by an unnamed first-person narrator, the novel is told by a third-person subjective and limited narrator, who continually shifts from the perspective of one character to that of another. However, the character the narration momentarily focuses on reflects not only about her- or himself but often about one of the other character's behavior and motives as well. Additionally, a number of situations are (re)told from the perspective of different characters, a technique that Miano continues to exploit in the sequels to *Tels des astres éteints*, *Crépuscule du tourment 1 & 2*. As a result, we get a very balanced picture of the self- and outside perception of each of the characters but without the authoritative air of an omniscient third-person narrator. Simultaneously, however, the novel's ample use of free indirect speech tends to blur the boundaries between a character's thoughts and what another character might think are her or his thoughts. This literary device hints to a certain permeability of the subject, who is never fully distinct from the people around her/him and exists to a large extent in and through the perception of others. Miano's narrative choices reveal a skepticism towards singular authoritative discourses and ideological explanations of the world and, conversely, foreground plurality and the relativity of human experience. In this sense, Miano can be seen as a postmodern author. However, this technique, if not perfectly equilibrated, runs the risk of leaving problematic stances of certain characters as they are. Unless we simply assume that Miano was not sufficiently conscious of gender issues at the time she wrote the novel, we must conclude that the narrative procedure described above leaves certain sexist conceptions in *Tels des astres éteints* unchallenged (see the example referred to below).

As in *Tels des astres éteints*, in *Ces âmes chagrines*, the third-person subjective and limited narrator who switches from the perspective of one character to another prevails. But whereas, in the former novel, the characters' voices are treated equally, the latter features one main

character – Antoine – whose point of view significantly outweighs those of the others. The history and thoughts of Modi and Maxime are dealt with at approximately the same length, while the focal perspective of Thamar takes up the least space in the book. The use of free indirect speech is less frequent, and the perspectives of the different characters are more distinct. At the beginning of the novel, directly after the "Intro", we briefly deal with a narrator who appears as an entity apart from the character, and who analyzes the characters' behaviors and addresses her-/himself to the reader. It is a 'hospitable' voice that draws the reader into the world of Antoine and creates a sympathetic distance to the main character's thoughts and actions. However, this independent narrative voice is soon effaced by a non-interfering narration that closely follows one character's actions and thoughts at a time. On the whole, the rest of the narration is more conventional than that in *Tel des astres éteints*.

2. A focus on masculinities

It is useful to approach Miano's construction of male characters with Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinities, as developed in her book of the same title (2005 [1995]). Connell sees masculinity as a set of social practices that is related to a person's body but not in a fixed or unchangeable way. Men distinguish themselves from one another by performing different types of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the model that has the greatest power and attraction at a certain point in history. In the Global North today, it might be the competitive and goal-oriented masculinity embodied by managers working for big transnational companies, or the "geeky" masculinity acquired by technical expertise. On the other side, we have accomplice and subordinate masculinities. Subordinate, or marginalized masculinities benefit only to a limited extent from what Connell calls the "patriarchal dividend" (ibid.: 79). Given their minority status in European society, the masculinity of Black men can be considered marginalized. In reaction, the members of the Afrocentric brotherhood in *Tels des astres éteints* perform a "protest masculinity" (Connell 2005 [1995]: 109-112) that places itself in constant opposition to European society. As discussed below, however, what appears as protest masculinity in relation to a majority society can

exert power over members of a social sub-group, in this case the Black (migrant) community.

Aggressive forms of masculinity are also at the root of the family conflicts set out in the two novels. In both cases, these are associated with colonial intrusion. Amok's grandfather represents a form of militaristic masculinity molded by the former colonial power. He embodies complete autonomy, often an ideal of masculinity. In Amok's words, "[i]l semblait s'être forgé tout seul" (Miano 2008: 46). Amok's grandfather is revered as the one who had made the family name great, and his phallus in the form of his old rifles is still kept under the parents' bed. In *Ces âmes chagrines*, the rigor of the Protestant pastor Masoma, Modi's father, prevents him from reconciling with his daughter who had previously run away with a member of an anticolonial combat unit. The abusive relationship with a Frenchman in which Thamar gets trapped is a metonymy for the European exploitation of Africa – imagined as a female body – because Pierre is actually involved in criminal commercial activities on the African continent.

As Black men living in France, Miano's male characters are confined to a dominated model of masculinity. As first, and in one case second, generation migrants, they also face cultural expectations from both their adopted country and their country of origin. Miano maps out different ways in which men may react to marginalization and conflicting ideals of masculinity. Some of these masculine identities turn out to be more viable than others. In *Marianne et le garçon noir*, Miano wonders if Black men that are continually exposed to racism can be enabled or enable themselves to adopt new and liberating forms of masculinity (2017b: 27).

The "African" ideal of masculinity that emerges from the characters' voices of the two novels is that of a heterosexual, strong, either aggressive or very self-disciplined man who is able to protect and provide for his family. When Amok is sent to France to study, he seems to "freeze" most elements of his masculine identity. He never returns to his home country and decides not to have a family. He does not work to further his career, only to earn enough to be able to sustain himself, and thus refuses to comply with either European or African norms of masculinity. He is an individualist and could be said to reject the notion of identity altogether. The individualism of European society and the

anonymity of Paris provide good conditions for Amok's strategy of withdrawal. Shrapnel criticizes his friend Amok for being anything but a 'real Black man'. In contrast to Amok, Shrapnel, who is a former *sans-papier*, works hard to restore his manhood. He does not have a degree or a career to boast of, so recognition by the white majority society is unattainable for him. Instead, he seeks recognition by men of the Black community. However, he also depends on recognition by white women. As Susanne Gehrmann points out in relation to Simon Njami's protagonist in *African Gigolo* (1989), Shrapnel needs the white woman as the Other who can affirm his being in the world (Gehrmann 2009: 148). Shrapnel seems trapped: On the one hand, he feels incapable of living up to the demands of Black women, who often look for a male provider. On the other hand, his white girlfriends reproduce racist patterns by asking for little else than his masculine physical presence.

At the end of the novel, Shrapnel dies unexpectedly. For Ayo Coly, Shrapnel's destiny stands for Miano's dismissal of the collective identity politics the character represents:

> That Miano has Shrapnel die unexpectedly and mysteriously (a way of expelling him from the Afropean narrative the novel is crafting and maybe signalling the non-usability of his paradigm of identity), while Amok, who throughout the novel is the object of failed identitarian rescue attempts by Amandla and Shrapnel, lives on, is an important cue. The narrative destinies of Miano's characters reveal her standpoint on identity and projects of collective identity. (Coly 2014: 163)

Other critics agree that Amok's troubled masculine identity is showcased by Miano as a promising site of new beginnings and alternative masculinities (Kistnareddy 2019; Murray 2019; Unter Ecker 2019). However, I disagree that Amok's evasive identity is presented as a viable counterexample. Amok survives, but, as will be explained in more detail below, he suppresses his desires and does not achieve personal happiness.

While the general mood in *Tel des astres éteints* remains rather gloomy, there is a glimpse of hope in *Ces âmes chagrines*. In the latter novel, Miano again juxtaposes two male characters: the half-brothers Maxime and Antoine. Their cultural background is relatively clearly defined as that of the Sawa people of Cameroon, who live in the coastal

regions around Douala. The Sawa or Douala are traditionally characterized by patrilineality and patrilocality, and they functioned as important 'middlemen' during the times of colonial rule (Clignet/Sween 1970; Austen 1999). The explicitness and sometimes affection with which Miano refers to her own cultural background (she was born and raised in Douala) in this early (in terms of attempted, not actual, publication) novel disappears in her later work.

Maxime comes very close to the ideal of African masculinity described above. He is the eldest brother, and as such he is expected to provide for and protect the entire family. He is supposed to accept this role without complaining. He only comes to France to improve his education and moves back to Africa on the first occasion. Maxime embraces the values of his culture of origin and tries to maintain the masculine role assigned to him. However, at the end of the novel it turns out that he lacks the necessary emotional resources to do this.

Maxime's and Antoine's grandmother, Modi, was unable to emotionally commit herself to her daughter Thamar because of her sense of guilt towards her father. Thamar is repeatedly sexually abused and unable to take care of her children. Understandably, she is particularly distant towards her son Maxime who was conceived as the result of rape. When Thamar dies and Maxime's hope for maternal love is finally shattered, he breaks down. He stops speaking and behaves like a small child, thus symbolically returning to the belly of his mother.

> Lorsqu'ils étaient arrivés chez le pasteur Penda, sa grand-mère et lui, Maxime n'était plus capable de dire un mot, son langage se limitant dorénavant à un babil de nouveau-né. Il avait tant régressé en une journée, qu'il n'y avait plus à conjecturer sur l'aboutissement du processus. Max était en train de retourner dans le ventre de sa mère, pour renaître de nouveau, dans une autre dimension […]. (Miano 2011: 260)

In terms of culture and gender, Antoine is a more hybrid character. As opposed to Maxime, Antoine was born and grew up in France. Of his annual summer vacations in Africa, he has only the bleakest memories. His fashion style seems inspired by various local and/or transnational trends: His taste for extravagant clothes can be considered characteristic

of the Douala,[5] or as part of a Paris-based metrosexual lifestyle. It also reminds us of the Congolese subculture *La Sape*, which has historically been oriented towards the colonial metropole (De Jong 2018: 113). The *Sape* (*Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*) has its origins in the beginning of the 20th century, when African employees in Kinshasa and Brazzaville began to imitate their white superiors' style of clothing. Through their sense of fashion, they partook in the colonialists' prestige and distanced themselves from other Africans (Estournel 2018: 571).

Like Amok, Antoine does not identify as an African and is skeptical of the idea of fixed identities in general. He has no illusions about the prospects of Black men in French society, and so abandons his career as an architect. Instead, he puts his physical attractiveness and minority status to use and becomes a successful model first, then a star in a television series. Of all the male characters discussed, Antoine is the most successful in adapting to the demands of individualist European society. Antoine puts his personal interests first and is not concerned with family obligations. His pragmatic approach to identity makes it easier for him to struggle along in the Parisian fashion scene. Also, of all the male characters discussed, Antoine is the only one who finds personal happiness. His pragmatism makes it easier for him to forgive himself and others for their mistakes. At the end of the narrated events, he is able to make peace with his painful past.

This pragmatic approach is alien to the character Amandla, who draws her strength from her Rastafari-inspired Pan-African beliefs. In her opinion, in French society Black women are, at least superficially, advantaged over Black men. Whereas Black men are considered a menace to white men's (sexual) potency, Black women are exhibited as evidence of the latter's conquests:

> Ces femmes kémites [Black/Afrodescendant, see footnote 6] qu'on en soupçonnait pas d'en avoir une plus grosse, ne menaçaient en rien le patriarcat nordiste. Au contraire, elles étaient ses trophées. On les avait ravies à leurs hommes, incapables en ce territoire de leur proposer des aires d'épanouissement individuel. Aveuglées par la quête de leur propre réussite,

[5] "Sur ce, il sortit comme un homme, un vrai. Un authentique côtier du Mboasu, pour lequel goujaterie et virilité étaient synonymes" (Miano 2011: 24).

> elles laissaient Babylone jouer un nouveau jeu : la femme kémite contre son homme. Plus elles étaient libres, moins leurs hommes l'étaient. (Miano 2008: 101)

In Amandla's mindset, Black women are able to gain relative freedom only through a white male patron, and only at the expense of Black men. The agency of Black women is thus significantly diminished or marked as illusory. They can either choose to remain a plaything of white supremacy, or work towards the reconstruction of Black male masculinity. It is further suggested that personal fulfilment is something Black women achieve with the help of men rather than by themselves.

Shrapnel has an analogous sexist perception of white women. He sees them as victims of white male oppression and therefore as white men's possession. It follows for him that they are innocent of the crimes white men have committed against humanity, and he makes it a point of honor to 'kidnap' ("kidnapper", ibid.: 116) them from the enemy's camp.

Whereas Shrapnel imagines enslaved Africans as exclusively male ("Ils avaient une terre, une fiancée, des rêves. Ils étaient des hommes", ibid.: 172), Amok empathizes with the enslaved woman, although with limited success:

> Aucune *sœur* [a female member of the Afrocentric brotherhood] n'éprouverait la terreur de la femme ravie aux siens pour satisfaire les caprices du colon. Aucune ne pouvait imaginer le sentiment de souillure après qu'un homme incirconcis vous avait prise. S'il n'était pas circoncis, c'était un enfant. On n'était pas pédophile. C'était un crime. (Ibid.: 208; emphasis in the original)

In a strange reversal of the roles of victim and aggressor, Amok implies that the trauma of raped colonized women derived primarily from the existence of the perpetrator's prepuce rather than the assault itself. Disconcertingly, his sexist stance remains uncontested in the narrative.

On the other side, minor Black women characters, such as Shale, a friend of Amandla's (who also appears in Miano's novel *Blues pour Élise*, 2010), and Ixora, the mother of Shrapnel's son, have an exaggerated and generalizing negative perception of Black men. In their eyes, Black men have become exactly what white racist discourse has always

said them to be: "violents, lâches, insensibles, paresseux, irresponsables […] des étalons, des sapeurs, des voyous, des *ambianceurs* […]" (Miano 2008: 105-6, 321; emphasis in the original).

It accounts for the gloominess of the novel that all characters remain 'imprisoned' in their mental framework. They do not manage to overcome personal grievances and continue to nurture a certain self-hatred that also makes it difficult for them to openly approach others. As migrants or children of migrants, they are caught between gendered expectations of their culture of origin and their culture of adoption. However, these expectations are inflected by racist images and practices that circulate(d) in colonial discourse as well as in contemporary French society. In the postmigrant context evoked by Miano, some characters even claim that racism has the power to reverse gender relations between Black men and women. Because, in the novels discussed here, Miano wishes to do justice to the particular position of Black men in French society, she privileges the negotiation of masculinity over a careful engagement with femininity. Significantly, only the 'Afropean' second-generation migrant Antoine is able to successfully negotiate his personal trauma and masculinity.

3. Relational histories

In her literary works as well as in her lectures on literary theory, Léonora Miano aims to symbolically bridge the gap between the historical experience of Africans and the African diaspora. In her opinion, Africans and Afrodescendants need to revisit the injuries of the past in order to achieve an integrated and appreciative sense of self (Miano 2016b: 9-38). For Miano, the founding trauma in African/Afrodescendant history is the crime of slavery, or 'transatlantic deportation' (ibid.: 141), to use the term that she prefers. Colonization also indelibly destabilized African societies and later caused and still causes many Africans to come to Europe to 'grab their piece of the cake'.

Through the character Amandla, the feelings of loss over a broken African lineage as well as a social hierarchy based on color are addressed as effects of slavery on Caribbean societies. The complicity of Africans in the enslavement and oppression of other Africans is brought

up by the figure of Amok's grandfather, who helped to crush an independence movement, and by the figure of Antoine's and Maxime's great-grandfather, a pastor who despises other Africans for not devoting themselves (solely) to the God of Christianity. Forms of everyday racism and the French Republic's ambivalent attitude towards its black population are discussed throughout the novels.

In many cases, these painful historical experiences are rendered through gendered images and metaphorized through parent-child relationships. Several critics point out the repressive implications of the "Mother Africa Trope", which positions women as objects rather than "subject[s] of literary texts and of national visions" (Stratton 1994: 54; see also Boehmer 2005; Lee 1987). According to these critics, African female authors consciously reject or modify the trope. For the case of Caribbean literature, Rody gives multiple examples of female writers adopting and altering the allegory of the "mother-(is)land" (Rody 2001: 123). Hereafter, I will comment on how Miano merges woman and land to appropriate the male literary tradition.

In the prologue and epilogue to *Tels des astres éteints*, an unnamed narrator addresses 'us', that is 'Mother Africa', 'Terre Mère', in the second person singular. On these ten pages, Miano's thoughts on the signifier that is Africa and what it means to be Black are spread out in a particularly condensed way. The prologue's and epilogue's narrator in fact continues the male tradition that imagines the African continent as a feminine and maternal figure. However, the tradition is revised, not by declaring Africa a fiction, a signifier without a signified, but by posing 'her' as an estranged and misconceived figure:

> […] la terre qui n'existe pas […] le creux dans lequel tous projettent leur néant. Ils te rêvent de loin, se créent en toi un espace à dominer, à sublimer […] à sauver. Aucun ne saisit véritablement ton épaisseur, ta densité. Pas même tes enfants. Ils ne savent plus que tu vis. Que tu as tes propres désirs, tes rêves à toi aussi, inlassablement effacés derrière la figure qu'ils t'ont construite. (Ibid.: 13)

The narrative voice regrets that Africans and Afrodescendants have been trapped in their skin color through their traumatic history. S/he hopes that someday, 'Black' people will be able to overcome their pain, to reinvent themselves and strip themselves of the meaning of the color

of their skin. "Terre Mère" embodies the wish for a matured self-awareness freed from the identitarian constraints imposed by others (skin color) and is vaguely and uncertainly associated with the pre-colonial African continent. This wish is personified in a remote, timidly hopeful mother awaiting the return of her wandering children.

From the male migrant perspective in *Tels des astres éteints*, Africa is imagined as a distant mother as well as a distant lover: "Le pays, c'était comme la femme d'un autre. On pouvait la toucher un peu. Jamais la posséder" (Miano 2008: 44). Both images, that of the waiting mother and the restrictedly available lover, express the emigrants' nostalgic longing for their lost homeland.

In turn, Europe or France are represented both as a young woman – again an object of male desire – and as a father who casts out his illegitimate Black (male) children. Shrapnel's disillusionment with European society is depicted in the following terms: "['Le Nord'/l'Europe] était comme une fille superbe, vêtue d'une robe à paillettes, mais dont les dessous puaient" (ibid.: 146). The Afrocentric brotherhood Amandla and Shrapnel sympathize with is analyzed by Amok as being deeply preoccupied with a hostile 'white father':

> Ces fils-là ne voulaient plus être reconnus de leur géniteur. Ils voulaient seulement hurler leur refus désormais de porter le nom du père […]. Puisqu'on n'hériterait ni de son pouvoir ni de ses biens, on serait pour quelque chose dans ses attaques cardiaques. (Ibid.: 206-7)

Although the *Fraternité atonienne* showcases female activists such as Amandla, its rhetorical rants against powerful white men, interracial relationships and homosexuality reveal a problematic patriarchal and homophobic worldview.

Amandla volunteers in the brotherhood without, however, sharing all their ideas. Whereas the organization's activities and anger focus on France, for her, the only solution for the liberation of people of African ancestry is the physical return to Africa. Conversely, she sees the returnees as an asset for the economic and political liberation of the African continent. Kistnareddy critically comments on Amandla's fixed idea to unite with an authentic "Bantu" man to restore her genealogy. She suggests that, in Amandla's Back-to-Africa vision, "the Black man

becomes a breeder, just as in erstwhile slavery periods where his capacity to procreate was needed along as [*sic*] his physical resilience in the fields" (Kistnareddy 2019: 6). The text makes it clear, however, that the intimate reason for Amandla's wish to emigrate to Africa is to symbolically re-unite with her mother, whose only gift to her daughter was the transmission of her Rastafarian beliefs. Paradoxically, Amandla can imagine a mother-daughter reunion only in a symbolic realm on a continent far away from her country of birth:

> Il y avait longtemps qu'elle n'avait pas mis les pieds sur sa côte natale, parce qu'il était toujours si difficile de quitter sa mère. Si elle y retournait, elle ne verrait pas Kemet,[6] ne toucherait jamais le monde intérieur d'Aligossi. (Miano 2008: 342)

In Amandla's and her mother Aligossi's Pan-African philosophical framework, the wish for harmonized gender relations in the Black community plays a pivotal role. Aligossi believes that patriarchy was imported to Africa by European intruders. In her eyes, Black/African men have been tempted by white men to imitate their patriarchal world view. Instead of criticizing them, Aligossi tells her daughter to show understanding for their mistake and to help them rebuild themselves and regain their manhood. Aligossi's and Amandla's conception assigns different social roles to men and women: women are considered the directing, thinking center of the universe, which men are supposed to serve with their physical strength, but women are also imagined as nurturing companions that 'prepare their wounded male soldiers for battle' (ibid.: 339). The heterosexual family is considered the pillar of the emerging Afrocentric society.

What is interesting here is that the condition of alienation is assigned exclusively to Black men, not to Black women. Whereas Black men get psychologically harmed by their marginalized social position, Black women are supposed to be above such things. They should be able to analyze what is happening and come to the men's rescue, even

[6] 'Kemet' is a term from the ancient Egyptian language designating the fertile land in the Nile delta. Afrocentrists assume a cultural continuity from Ancient Egypt to large parts of contemporary Africa and subsume the African continent under the name 'Kemet' (see Asante 2018).

if these very men do not accept them as equals. Throughout the novel, Black women are portrayed as particularly pragmatic and straightforward. Shrapnel laments that Black women only engage in romantic relations if their partner is financially stable. After his death, Shrapnel's soul lingers somewhere between heaven and earth, in the "Purgatoire des Noirs" (Miano 2008: 379), where he finds only men. He is told that all these men have been unable to let go of their previous lives and unfulfilled tasks, whereas Black women do not hesitate to leave all that behind in order to enter a new dimension. Even though it is revealed that Amandla sometimes resorts to binge eating when feeling lonely, she remains remarkably firm on her convictions and is determined to go through with her plan to resettle in Africa. In my opinion, male characters in *Tels des astres éteints*, especially Amok, are depicted with greater psychological depth than female characters. The female characters remain to a certain extent opaque, and female subjectivity seems in some aspects like a blank space. This blank space also appears in the mysterious figure of "Terre Mère" that I have discussed above, and of which the narrator is not sure if she has been misjudged or simply does not exist.

In *Ces âmes chagrines*, Miano deals with this uneasiness towards female subjectivity by introducing an ambiguously gendered male protagonist. Antoine loves extravagant clothes and spends a significant amount of his time on personal hygiene. He has a penchant for binge eating but does not like sports, and resorts to cosmetic surgery instead. His sexual desire is directed at women with an immature and boyish appearance who display as few maternal attributes as possible. However, Antoine as a character is not altogether convincing: on the one hand his treatment of women is largely instrumental, on the other he is able to accurately detect instances of misogynous behavior. In some ways, Antoine seems like the author's double. His hybridity coincides with Miano's own personal freedom concerning her gender identity, offered to her by her father's unconditional love:

> Je viens de me rendre compte, à plus de 40 ans, que je suis une femme ! Comme mon père était très libéral et que nous étions proches, je savais

> bien que j'étais une fille mais ça n'avait pas plus de signification que ça ! Je ne me sentais pas proche de la féminité classique. (Miano/Tabapsi 2017: 3)

Antoine further thinks about abandoning the art of performing for the art of writing or painting, whereas Miano turned from music to writing.

4. Hostile fathers, alienated mothers and nurturing grandmothers

The representation of parent-child relationships in *Tels des astres éteints* and *Ces âmes chagrines* shares a number of characteristics with the novels by Caribbean women writers analyzed by Rody (2001). The father figures are all aligned with the white European and colonial father, who does not embrace his 'illegitimate' Black children: the military collaborator and his violent son; Amok's father, the Protestant pastor Masoma; Amandla's light-skinned father, who abandons Aligossi and Thamar's bourgeois lover, who abandons her during their holiday in France. It is the mother figures who are associated with the (lost) African homeland and are expected to reconnect their children with the ancestral past. As it is a past filled with traumatic and degrading experiences, it comes as no surprise that the mother figures who embody this past turn out to be highly problematic.

The mothers of the two novels are all characterized by their absence: either they are emotionally inaccessible or have never been around in the first place. Both Modi's and Shrapnel's mothers have died or were gone for other reasons shortly after their children were born. Amandla's mother leads a reclusive life, has an eating disorder and thus never shares meals with her daughter. Amok's mother silently endures the extreme violence inflicted on her by her husband, forbids her children to cry on her behalf and, for her part, beats her son in order to make him a 'real man'. Kistnareddy comments that "[s]ymbolically, Amok's father could also represent the old French regime and his mother, enduring Africa" (2019: 7). Thamar is raped twice as a girl and is unable to love the children born out of these rapes. For a few years, she manages to care for Antoine, whose father she actually loved, but once in a new relationship, she pushes him away to please her possessive lover.

Modi is unable to show her affection to Thamar, a failure she tries to compensate for by selflessly raising Thamar's rejected children. Additionally, Modi is connected to the resistance fighter Kingué, Thamar's father, and at some point, she refuses to read books and to speak the language of the former colonizer. So at least for her grandchildren, she is a solid and comforting pillar of the family and represents the cultural independence of the subjugated African societies.

In male-authored African literature of the 1950s and 60s, mothers are often represented either as "pillars of tradition" and "guardian[s] of ancestral customs and mores" (Lee 1987: 141) – precolonial 'untainted' Africa –, or as "submissive, betrayed and oppressed" (ibid.: 142) – colonized, 'violated' and compromised Africa. The mother symbolizes the national territory or the African continent that male anticolonial freedom fighters must return to and liberate. In reaction to this Janus-faced mythical mother figure, numerous female authors tend to write about the repercussions of male dominance in the private sphere – the problems of 'real' mothers. Others, such as Calixthe Beyala or Miano in *Contours du jour qui vient* (2006), challenge the imperative to bear children and/or stage mother-daughter instead of mother-son relationships, where 'patriarchal mothers' (Gallimore 1997: 11; see also Asaah 2014; Coste 2019) hamper their daughters' emancipations.

In the Caribbean context, the reclaiming of history by members of the (formerly) oppressed part of the population is an emancipatory, but also highly ambivalent, endeavor because it entails reclaiming "a history of disaster and disempowerment" (Rody 2001: 120). If mothers are equated with the homeland or ancestral communities, they turn out to be very ambivalent figures: On the one hand, they are supposed to be "bearers of culture, connected to the land, idealized objects"; on the other, the mother "has been compromised by colonial history" (ibid.: 120-121). As she depended on complicity with white patriarchy for her survival, she is, in the most derogatory sense, "the white master's whore" (ibid.). Many texts by Caribbean female writers 'solve' this problem by separating the compromised, alienated mother figure from the comforting, authentic mother by one generation: the mothers of the protagonists are represented as bad mothers, whereas their grandmothers embody pure motherliness, and are additionally often associated with mythical figures or resistance fighters (ibid.).

Miano says of herself that she has been influenced by African American and Caribbean, rather than African, literature (Miano 2012: 9-23). Concerning the representation of national history as a family drama/romance, however, the similarities between the different corpora are obvious. In the two novels under study here, we can discern a similar understanding of history to the one set out by Rody for the case of Caribbean women's writing. Whereas women characters from the middle generation such as Aligossi, Thamar and Amok's mother are portrayed as conflicted, emotionally distant and/or complicit in phallocratic authority, Shrapnel's grandmother and Modi share a number of attributes of the 'good' Caribbean mother. Shrapnel's grandmother is symbolically linked to a sacred tree that decays shortly after her own death and the forced relocation of their village. Modi, although far from being an infallible character, is the source of affection and security for her grandsons.

However, in contrast to Caribbean women's writing, the two novels by Miano engage mostly with mother-son rather than mother-daughter relationships. The reason for this might be the lack of identification with female subjectivity I have already mapped out in this article, a result supported by statements of the author herself when she claims that she had not identified as a woman until past the age of 40. However, Miano's approach is also an effort to do justice to the particular position of Black men in European white majority society. The novels by Miano that are set in Africa do not express a comparable sympathetic concern with men's identity struggles because, in the African societies therein described, Black men do not find themselves in a marginal position. It is a paradox of patriarchal societies that boys tend to be nurtured and cared for by feminine figures only, and later learn how to disavow this affectionate, 'feminine' part of themselves. What Miano suggests, or hopes for, is that the experience of (migrant) Black men in white majority societies, i.e., the relative absence of male privilege, has the potential of opening up alternative ways of shaping their masculinities. While in the case of Shrapnel and Amok, we are left to witness their tribulations, Miano gives form to this emancipatory hope by creating the prototypically Afropean figure Antoine, who is the one to improvise most freely his identity and masculinity.

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