

Redefining Womanhood Through Archetypes in The Novels of Calixthe Beyala

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of archetypal female characters in the novels of Calixthe Beyala, focusing particularly on the representations of the mother archetype, the Barren Woman and the Surrogate Mother. By drawing upon Jungian psychoanalysis, mythological interpretations and the study of these archetypes within an African context, this paper investigates how Beyala redefines traditional female archetypes to critique and subvert established models of womanhood within patriarchal societies.

Central to this study, is the exploration of the mother archetype, often portrayed through the dual lens of the Great Mother and the Terrible Mother. The maternal figures in Beyala's novels reflect nurturing and protective qualities, whilst also portraying destructive qualities, demonstrating the profound psychological and social impacts of mother-daughter relationships. Several of Beyala's protagonists confront emotionally unavailable and abusive mother figures, and this often results in the development of negative mother-complexes. These dynamics propel the young protagonists of Beyala's works into a process of individuation whereby they can redefine their identities outside the oppressive structures inherited by the maternal lineage. The paper further examines the archetype of the Barren Woman, a figure who is historically and mythically associated with notions of failure, and often socially marginalized. In Beyala's novels, barrenness is reconceptualized as a catalyst for alternative forms of identity and agency that exists outside of the patriarchal models of womanhood. Beyala's barren characters thus redefine their sense of purpose and challenge the traditional association between femininity and fertility.

Surrogacy also emerges as an important archetype used by Beyala to rewrite the narrative of the woman's body and to reconstruct the idea of what it means to be a mother. This paper demonstrates that in Beyala's novels, surrogacy serves as a site of spiritual transformation which draws on mythical and Biblical associations with miraculous births and divine intervention. Maternity is thus positioned within a broader framework of psychological and spiritual fulfillment, outside of biological reproduction.



3rd World Conference on Gender and Women's Studies

26 – 28 September 2025

London, United Kingdom

Beyala's use of these archetypes allows her protagonists to embark on a journey towards individuation, enabling them to discover their true 'Self'. It is thus through the rejection of restrictive gender roles, the adoption of surrogacy and the reimagining of the female identity, that a radical reconsideration of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal African world is made in Beyala's novels. A new vision of womanhood is thus embraced which is rooted in autonomy, strength, psychological wholeness and spiritual advancement.

Keywords: archetype, mother, barren woman, surrogacy, patriarchy, mother-daughter relationships, Self