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## The Voice of the Marginal in *Les Honneurs perdus* by Calixthe Beyala: Subalternity, Resistance, and the Rewriting of African Femininity

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### Abstract

The article investigates how *Les Honneurs perdus* (1996) constructs and articulates marginal voices through its narrative strategies. Drawing on postcolonial theory and feminist criticism—particularly the subalternity framework of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha—the study demonstrates that Beyala’s protagonist, Saïda, embodies a multiply displaced subject whose trajectory exposes both patriarchal and neo-colonial systems while simultaneously asserting forms of personal agency. Through close textual analysis of language, spatial configurations, and narrative techniques, the article shows how Beyala transforms socially silenced women into active speaking subjects who produce counter-narratives. This results in an aesthetics of marginality that challenges dominant epistemologies and reclaims agency for those subjected to intersecting forms of oppression. Engaging recent scholarship, including Claire Ducournau’s institutional critique of Francophone canon formation, Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier’s reappraisal of African women’s writing, and Dominic Thomas’s analysis of migrant femininity, the article situates the novel at the intersection of postcolonial feminist theory and contemporary world-literary debates.

**Keywords:** Calixthe Beyala, *Les Honneurs perdus*, subalternity, Francophone African literature, African feminism, postcolonialism, voice, resistance, marginality

### Introduction

The publication of *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée* in 1987 established Calixthe Beyala as a controversial and polarizing figure in Francophone African literature. From the outset of her career, Beyala’s work has provoked critical debate for its bold thematic choices, stylistic experimentation, and unapologetic engagement with taboo

subjects. Her fiction consistently foregrounds marginalized subjects—impoverished women, migrants, sex workers, and social outcasts—within postcolonial African and diasporic urban contexts, thereby challenging dominant literary representations that often exclude or sanitize such experiences.

Within this corpus, *Les Honneurs perdus* (1996) stands as one of her most significant works, particularly in its sustained articulation of marginal voice and its interrogation of the socio-political structures that produce silence. The novel follows Saïda, a young woman from the Quartier Général in Douala, Cameroon, whose migration to Paris exposes her to new forms of exclusion, precarity, and exploitation. Her trajectory is emblematic of a broader postcolonial condition in which mobility does not necessarily translate into emancipation but rather reconfigures existing hierarchies in new spatial and cultural contexts.

Saïda's journey reveals how intersecting forces—race, gender, class, and colonial history—produce layered conditions of marginalization and silencing. The transition from the Quartier Général to the Parisian banlieue does not mark a rupture but rather a transformation of exclusionary structures, underscoring the continuity between postcolonial and metropolitan forms of domination. Yet, through its narrative strategies, the text does not merely document oppression; it actively reclaims voice as a site of resistance. The novel's emphasis on speech, storytelling, and linguistic experimentation foregrounds the capacity of marginalized subjects to articulate alternative forms of knowledge and selfhood, even within restrictive systems.

This article examines how Beyala constructs, validates, and complicates marginal speech through specific textual strategies. Drawing on subaltern theory, colonial ambivalence, and African feminist thought—notably the works of Obioma Nnaemeka and Nicki Hitchcott—the study explores how voice becomes central to identity formation under conditions of systemic oppression. It argues that *Les Honneurs perdus* does not simply “give voice” to the marginalized but rather stages the complex processes through which voice is negotiated, fragmented, and reconstituted.

In doing so, the article situates Beyala's work within broader debates in postcolonial and world literature concerning representation, agency, and the politics of speaking. It further contends that the novel's aesthetic strategies—its use of orality, heteroglossia, spatial symbolism, and corporeal inscription—constitute a deliberate reconfiguration of literary form, one that challenges both Eurocentric narrative conventions and reductive readings of African women's writing. Ultimately, this study positions *Les Honneurs perdus* as a critical intervention in the ongoing project of rethinking African femininity, not as a fixed identity, but as a dynamic and contested space of negotiation, resistance, and creative expression.

### Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Beyala's work since the 1990s has developed along three major axes: contextual and biographical studies, linguistic-stylistic analysis, and feminist/postcolonial criticism. More recently, a fourth strand has emerged, focusing on institutional dynamics and world-literary frameworks, thereby significantly reshaping critical perspectives on her writing.

Within the institutional strand, Claire Ducournau's *La Fabrique des classiques africains* (2017) provides a foundational critique of the mechanisms through which Francophone African literary canons are constructed. Ducournau demonstrates how prize systems, publishing networks, and academic institutions play a decisive role in determining which African texts achieve visibility and legitimacy (112–39). This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding Beyala's reception within metropolitan literary spaces, where recognition is often mediated by external criteria that may not fully align with the socio-political contexts of production.

Similarly, Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier (2020) situate Beyala within a broader cohort of African women writers who engage in what they term “writing against erasure,” a mode of literary production that resists marginalization by foregrounding lived experiences often excluded from dominant narratives (18–39). Their work underscores the political dimension of narrative voice, particularly in relation to gendered forms of silencing.

The second major axis of scholarship focuses on linguistic and stylistic innovation. Romuald Fonkoua highlights Beyala's heteroglossic style, which blends standard French with pidgin, oral expressions, and popular idioms, thereby contributing to the emergence of "littératures-mondes" that challenge the linguistic authority of the metropolitan center (67–84). This linguistic hybridity not only reflects sociocultural realities but also functions as a deliberate strategy of resistance, destabilizing normative expectations of literary language.

Feminist and postcolonial scholarship further deepens this discourse by interrogating the ideological frameworks through which African women's writing is interpreted. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí critiques the universalization of Western gender categories, advocating instead for epistemologies grounded in African social and cultural contexts (1–30). In parallel, Achille Mbembe reexamines postcolonial power structures within contemporary neoliberal conditions, offering insights into the persistence of marginalization in both local and global contexts (38–57).

Recent scholarship has expanded the scope of analysis by situating Beyala's work within diasporic and Afropolitan literary frameworks. Magnier and Gehrmann (2022) connect her writing to broader transnational dynamics of identity formation, emphasizing the fluid and hybrid nature of postcolonial subjectivity. Likewise, Dominic Thomas highlights the enduring inequalities embedded in Franco-African relations, particularly as they manifest in narratives of migration and exclusion (44–61). These perspectives underscore the relevance of Beyala's work within contemporary global literary debates.

Despite this extensive and evolving body of scholarship, several critical gaps remain. First, there is insufficient attention to *Les Honneurs perdus* as a systematic aesthetic project centered on the construction of marginal voice. While existing studies acknowledge Beyala's thematic engagement with marginality, they often do not examine in detail the formal mechanisms through which voice is produced and sustained within the text.

Second, there is limited exploration of how voice operates simultaneously as a literary technique and a political intervention. Much of the scholarship tends to privilege either thematic analysis or theoretical abstraction, without fully integrating the two dimensions.

Third, there is a lack of comprehensive frameworks that bring together space, language, body, and memory as interconnected sites of subaltern resistance. Existing studies frequently isolate these elements rather than analyzing their dynamic interaction within the narrative structure.

This article addresses these gaps by offering a holistic and integrative analysis of Beyala's aesthetics of marginality. By foregrounding the interplay between textual form and socio-political context, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how marginalized voices are not only represented but actively constituted within Francophone African literature.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study draws on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, and spatial theory in order to provide a multi-layered understanding of marginality, voice, and resistance in *Les Honneurs perdus*. This triangulated approach allows for a nuanced reading of how structures of power operate across discourse, gender, and space, and how these structures are negotiated, subverted, or reconfigured within the text.

At the core of the analysis is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), which provides a foundational framework for understanding the epistemic violence and silencing mechanisms affecting colonized and gendered subjects (271–313). Spivak's argument that the subaltern woman is doubly effaced—by both colonial discourse and indigenous patriarchy—offers a critical lens through which Saïda's narrative voice can be interrogated. However, rather than adopting Spivak's position as a definitive closure on subaltern speech, this study engages her work as a diagnostic tool that reveals the structural constraints within which voice is produced. In this regard, the framework is further complemented by Achille Mbembe's

contemporary extension of postcolonial critique, particularly his rearticulation of power, subjectivity, and exclusion in the postcolony, which underscores the persistence of silencing mechanisms within neoliberal and transnational contexts.

The second pillar of the framework is Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry, which elucidates Saïda's performative identity strategies (85–92). Bhabha's notion that mimicry produces a "difference that is almost the same but not quite" enables an understanding of how Saïda navigates dominant cultural expectations through ironic imitation. Her shifting linguistic registers and social performances do not simply reproduce hegemonic norms; rather, they destabilize them by exposing their inherent contradictions. Mimicry thus becomes a site of ambivalence where compliance and resistance coexist, allowing marginal subjects to negotiate agency within oppressive structures.

African feminist thought further enriches the analysis, particularly through Obioma Nnaemeka's concept of nego-feminism, which emphasizes negotiation, complementarity, and collective agency (31–67). Unlike Western feminist paradigms that often foreground individual autonomy, nego-feminism situates resistance within relational and communal contexts, making it particularly relevant for interpreting Saïda's interactions within both African and diasporic settings. This perspective is implicitly reinforced by broader African feminist epistemologies, which challenge universalist assumptions about gender and foreground culturally specific modes of resistance and subject formation.

Spatial theory constitutes the third dimension of the framework. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's conceptualization of space as socially produced, the study interprets the Quartier Général and the Parisian banlieue as dynamic sites where power relations are inscribed and contested. Lefebvre's distinction between conceived space and lived space is particularly useful in understanding how marginalized communities appropriate and redefine imposed spatial structures. Complementing this, Michel de Certeau's notion of "tactics" highlights the everyday practices through which individuals navigate and resist dominant spatial orders, offering a framework for analyzing Saïda's survival strategies within constrained environments.

Finally, Pascale Casanova's theory of the "world republic of letters" situates Beyala's work within global literary hierarchies, emphasizing the unequal distribution of symbolic capital across cultural spaces. This perspective enables the study to connect textual strategies of marginal voice to broader questions of literary recognition, legitimacy, and circulation within the global literary field.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive analytical lens through which the novel's representation of marginality can be understood not as a fixed condition, but as a dynamic process shaped by intersecting forces of power, resistance, and creative expression.

### **Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded primarily in close reading, a method that remains central to literary analysis within the humanities. This approach enables an in-depth engagement with the text, allowing for the identification and interpretation of subtle linguistic, stylistic, and narrative features that contribute to the construction of marginal voice.

The analytical process focuses on multiple textual dimensions, including linguistic patterns, narrative strategies, spatial representations, and character development. At the linguistic level, attention is given to Beyala's use of heteroglossia—her blending of standard French with pidgin, slang, and oral forms—as a strategy for disrupting linguistic hierarchies and asserting alternative modes of expression. At the narrative level, the study examines voice, focalization, and rhetorical strategies, particularly the ways in which the narrator negotiates authority and engages the reader.

Spatial analysis forms another key component of the methodology, drawing on theoretical insights from Lefebvre and de Certeau to examine how physical and symbolic spaces structure experiences of exclusion and

resistance. The study also considers the representation of the body and memory as narrative sites through which identity and agency are articulated.

In addition to close reading, the research employs a comparative and contextual approach, situating *Les Honneurs perdus* within the broader corpus of Francophone African women's writing. This includes comparative references to works by Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall, and Ken Bugul, whose texts similarly engage themes of gender, marginality, and social transformation. This comparative dimension allows the study to identify both convergences and divergences in the representation of female subjectivity across different cultural and narrative contexts.

Furthermore, the methodology incorporates contextual analysis by engaging relevant historical, cultural, and institutional frameworks that shape the production and reception of Beyala's work. This includes attention to postcolonial migration, urban marginality, and the dynamics of Francophone literary institutions.

The interpretive nature of the methodology aligns with the study's focus on voice, subjectivity, and resistance, as these phenomena require nuanced, context-sensitive analysis rather than quantifiable measurement. At the same time, the study maintains methodological rigor through careful textual evidence, theoretical coherence, and critical engagement with existing scholarship.

Ethically, the research ensures fidelity to the primary text and avoids reductive readings that instrumentalize literature solely as an illustration of theory. Instead, the study treats the novel as an autonomous aesthetic object while recognizing its embeddedness within broader socio-political and intellectual contexts.

## Analysis and Discussion

### 1 Spaces of Exclusion: The Quartier Général and the Banlieue

The Quartier Général and the Parisian banlieue function as two separate spaces that demonstrate how people face social exclusion. The narration of *The Quartier Général* begins with a voice that combines personal closeness with grotesque elements to show how the neighborhood functions as a vibrant community space which includes solidarity and gossip and laughter and shared memories. The women of the Quartier create a space which exists beyond public boundaries to share their unique knowledge and values because they create a space which people inhabit according to their daily lives which differs from the space that urban planners and authorities design (Lefebvre 39). Thomas's recent work reinforces this reading, noting that Beyala's representation of African urban space consistently refuses both the romanticization of poverty and the dehumanizing abstraction of sociological analysis, insisting instead on the dense particularity of lived experience as a form of literary and political resistance (Thomas 44-61).

The Parisian banlieue which Saïda enters in the novel's second half functions as a structural mirror for the Quartier Général because it represents another area where people live in deep poverty while facing racial discrimination throughout the metropolitan area. Beyala establishes a unique method because she requires her readers to perceive the banlieue through a feminine perspective since Saïda experiences both the general structural barriers which all residents face and the unique risks which sexual violence presents within these areas which pose heightened threats to women. The journey from Douala to Paris occurs because people move between different kinds of social exclusion which exist through overlapping systems of colonial and patriarchal oppression. Mbembe's concept of the postcolony's metropolitan doubles aptly captures this dynamic — the peripheral spaces within the global North that reproduce the conditions of the global South within the heart of the metropole (Mbembe 38-57).

### 2 Linguistic Subversion and the Politics of Voice

The first noticeable element of Beyala's aesthetic approach to marginality appears through her writing style which she uses to express her artistic vision. The linguistic texture of her work results from her combination of standard French with Cameroonian pidgin and street slang and proverbs and oral formulas which create a system of value that challenges the French literary tradition. Fonkoua's recent analysis deepens this reading by situating Beyala's stylistic heteroglossia within the broader contemporary turn toward 'littératures-mondes' — world literatures that refuse the cultural sovereignty of any single metropolitan centre — and demonstrates

how her linguistic practice enacts a politics of linguistic sovereignty that challenges French cultural hegemony at its root (Fonkoua 67-84). Saïda's narrative voice presents social role requirements through an ironic lens which allows her to effortlessly switch between various social identities while she uses Bhabha's theory of mimicry to show how people imitate dominant power yet challenge its supremacy (Bhabha 85-92).

The oral aspect of the novel strengthens the voice political battle which exists in the story. The narrator directly engages her audience by predicting their reactions while she restates important themes through oral performance repeated patterns which link the text to the communal speech traditions used by women. Cazenave and Célérier's recent study situates Beyala's orally inflected prose within a broader tradition of women's counter-narrative, describing it as a practice of literary survival that preserves the texture of marginalized experience by refusing the conventions of bourgeois interiority and psychological realism that dominate the metropolitan novel (Cazenave and Célérier 18-39). Beyala establishes her literary presence through oral tradition which leads her to value expressions that Western educated society has systematically dismissed while she creates a unique artistic style that subverts political systems.

### **3 The Body as Site of Resistance**

Stratton has observed that the female body in much African fiction written by men tends to function as a metaphor for the nation rather than as a site of individual subjectivity (Stratton 39-73). The Beyala writing style establishes her own unique method because she permanently changes traditional artistic practices. Saïda's body rightfully belongs to her because it provides her with pleasure and pain and danger and the ability to control her own existence which goes beyond all symbolic meanings. Her open expression of desire exceeds the boundaries of feminine modesty which her Cameroonian community and French society consider acceptable. She uses humour together with hyperbole to describe her vulnerable moments which prevents people from seeing those times as reasons to feel sorry for her. Through her ongoing focus on observing others' physical forms she creates a counter-gaze which disrupts the way men typically view women. Oyewumi's work on African feminist epistemology provides an important corrective to purely Western frameworks for reading this bodily politics, arguing that the significance of corporeal self-assertion in African women's writing must be understood in relation to specifically African histories of bodily regulation rather than simply through imported Euro-American frameworks of feminist liberation (Oyewumi, 'Visualizing' 1-30).

The novel's primary theme of honor and shame gets expressed through this body-based political system. The title's 'lost honors' describes two things which include social standing and the systems that control female bodies through communal value protection. Saïda rejects all patriarchal definitions of female dignity which she believes should derive from her own bodily freedom rather than social standards. In Beyala's novel the body functions as a space of pain which serves as a tool for expressing personal political beliefs that connect to the novel's larger political movement against oppression.

### **4 Memory, Orality, and the Counter-Archive**

When Saïda moves to Paris, she brings her personal memories along with the shared memories of her community which include its narratives and knowledge systems and core values. Trouillot's concept of the counter-archive serves as a valuable tool because official archives store specific viewpoints while they exclude alternate views and women's oral traditions preserve what official history forgets (Trouillot 26). Beyala's novel can be read as an attempt to translate this counter-archive into literary form, which creates permanent knowledge that can be saved from destruction through the existence of the communities which maintain their existence. Magnier and Gehrman's recent edited volume situates this archival project within the emerging Afropolitan literary framework, which they characterize as a literature of the African diaspora that transforms cultural displacement into a resource for innovative self-inscription rather than a wound to be mourned (Magnier and Gehrman 201-19).

The archival aspect of this research ties into wider discussions about how diaspora communities transmit their cultural heritage in Francophone African and Caribbean literature. The literary tradition investigates how migrants transport their cultural heritage during their journey across borders while their original cultural

identity undergoes changes and losses. Beyala presents her unique viewpoint through her study of women's oral traditions as cultural memory and her choice not to create sentimental portrayals of cultural transmission. Saïda uses memory as her main source of strength because she must keep her community's knowledge about survival dignity and resistance alive throughout her life. Memory functions for Saïda as her main source of power that she must use to protect her community's vital knowledge about survival and dignity and resistance while she fights for her freedom.

The novel shows how people remember their pasts, which affects their personal memories and their shared group memories. Saïda exists in society as an individual who fights against societal barriers while she represents her entire community of women who have gone through the same struggles from past to present. The novel shows how each character exists as their own person while they share a special bond with their group of female friends who all possess knowledge about their shared experiences. Beyala creates her narrative structure through her memory treatment because it demonstrates the social practice which nego-feminist theory describes as collective female subjectivity (Nnaemeka 31-67). The individual voice exists as a communal voice because people who tell their personal stories simultaneously share their own and other people's experiences.

### **5 The Politics of Literary Recognition**

The novel's award of the Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française in 1996 raises important questions about literary recognition. The research conducted by Ducournau in his work *La Fabrique des classiques africains* demonstrates how Francophone award systems favour particular African differences which include the recognizable and the translatable and the non-threateningly exotic while they push away artists who refuse to adopt Western artistic standards. Thomas's recent Franco-African literary history deepens this critique, situating Beyala's metropolitan reception within a longer genealogy of French cultural appropriation of African writing, arguing that her representations of migration and exclusion constitute an ongoing critical commentary on the persistent inequalities of the postcolonial relationship (Thomas 44-61).

The reading shows that Beyala achieved literary success because mainstream culture accepted her work after it was initially considered a minority viewpoint. Beyala uses her public persona which includes combative and provocative elements to show her resistance against the cultural systems that try to absorb her work into mainstream society. As Casanova has argued in her account of the world republic of letters, literary autonomy for writers from dominated cultural spaces is never simply given but must be actively fought for and maintained against the constant pressure of assimilation to dominant aesthetic norms (Casanova 11-25). This system keeps her political message active through her success in metropolitan literary circles.

### **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that *Les Honneurs perdus* constitutes a sophisticated literary intervention in the politics of voice, marginality, and representation. Through a combined postcolonial and feminist analytical framework, the study has revealed how Beyala mobilizes spatial, linguistic, corporeal, and archival strategies to transform conditions of exclusion into sites of narrative agency.

Rather than presenting a simplistic narrative of empowerment, the novel negotiates the tension between structural silencing and expressive resistance. While Saïda's voice does not fully escape the constraints identified by Spivak, it nonetheless generates alternative epistemologies that disrupt hegemonic representations. This ambivalence underscores the complexity of subaltern speech as both constrained and productive.

By engaging recent scholarship—particularly Ducournau's institutional critique, Thomas's historical analysis, and Mbembe's reconfiguration of postcolonial power—the study situates Beyala within a dynamic and evolving critical landscape. Her work emerges not merely as literary expression but as an intervention in global debates on voice, gender, and power.

### Contributions to Knowledge

This study contributes to scholarship in the following ways:

- It advances a **holistic framework** for analyzing marginal voice by integrating space, language, body, and memory
- It repositions Beyala's work within **contemporary world-literary and Afropolitan debates**
- It demonstrates how literature functions as a **counter-discursive space for subaltern articulation**
- It expands African feminist criticism by foregrounding **voice as a relational and collective practice**

### Future Research

Future research should:

- Examine **comparative representations of marginal voice** across Francophone African women writers
- Explore **digital and transnational dimensions of subaltern expression** in contemporary literature
- Investigate **reader reception and institutional mediation** of marginalized narratives
- Extend analysis to **adaptations and interdisciplinary representations** (film, performance, digital media)

Ultimately, Beyala's achievement lies in crafting a language that is both aesthetically innovative and politically resonant—one that insists, against all structural constraints, on the right of the marginalized to speak.

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