

The rhetoric of disenchantment through symbolism

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Abstract

The symbolism of *flowers* has always been a significant part of cultures around the world due to their functional meaning in daily life. From their decorative to their aromatic role, flowers and their symbolic meaning trigger emotions, convey wishes and represent thoughts that can not be explicitly expressed. In this regard, an elaborate language based on flower symbolism was developed in many societies, to convey clear messages to the recipient. However, in some cultural contexts, although the flower symbolism has social connotations, it is mainly associated with economic references. As flowers are an essential precursor to fruits, they are inevitably a source of expectations and hence foster a set of hopes and dreams, which can ultimately lead to excitement or disappointment. Through a discourse analysis based on fictional narratives, this article explores the parameters through which the symbolism of bifaceted meaning of flowers fictionalises a space that refers to the social reality. This association between the fictional world and social reference has highlighted that writing can profoundly be a means of representing social events through the rhetoric of symbolism. Through a sociological reading approach, this paper aims to analyse how the symbolism of *flowers* informs the rhetoric of disenchantment that can foster a content-based pedagogy in language learning where silencing practices engender imagery to exercise the freedom of expression.

Keywords: disenchantment, discourse analysis, representation, sociological reading, symbolism

Symbolism in literature has always been used as a practice of representation that provides the reader with the meaning that goes beyond what is obviously signified. Since symbolism can convey a significant range of meanings, it can therefore turn written words into a very powerful medium of communication. In critical analysis context and classroom settings, symbolism has traditionally been perceived as one of the techniques used to dissimulate meanings, aiming to make texts complex products that make critical thinking a literary exercise. In this way, linguistic signs could convey symbolism within the paradigm of implicatures, which are confined within and shaped by the concept of genre. Pedagogically speaking, language learning based on the study of representation narratives would therefore seek to unveil the symbolic message conveyed by text by establishing direct correlations between creative writing and critical reading. If language learners' attempts to understand symbolism of fictional narratives have always been informed by the idea of genre, it is interesting to see how in some cases literature can be used in teaching factual content, especially when the edges of borders between social realities and fictional representations are blurring in the texts.

In fact, many African novelists have used symbolism to fictionalise a space that refers to the social reality, in order to express postcolonial disillusionment. By associating the fictional world with social reference through symbolism, the rhetoric of disenchantment has highlighted that writing is an eloquent means by which to represent social events. It is in this regard that the representation of disillusionment in postcolonial literature remains the hallmark of socially and politically engaged discourse. Many African writers and literary critics recognise that post-independence fictional texts reflect the realities of a continent embroiled in political and economic turmoil. In this regard, these texts turn into voices of the voiceless people to express disappointment and despair, the agony of watching powerlessly the collapse of hopes and dreams of independence. They denounce the greed, corruption and violence of the African political elite. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, (Armah, 1968) reinforces the message of *Les Soleils des indépendances* (Kourouma, 1970). Henceforth, the expression of disenchantment highlights the social responsibilities of African writers to their societies.

The extent to which these writers respond to the social injustice and economic deprivation of their fellow citizens underlines perceptions of fatalism. In the context of dictatorial repressive measures adopted to silence emerging voices, writers borrowed imagery to portray a realistic picture of the failed elite as culprit of the nightmare of neo-colonialism. However, as the silencing strategies lost their mystique through literature of exile, a mosaic of onomastic references narrowed the gap between fiction and social realities. Until the end of the 1980s, the main

focus for this intergeneric modulation remained the challenging of dictatorial tyranny and neo-colonial manipulation. It represented configurations of independence as fraud, betrayal, robbed hopes and unfulfilled promises.

In the 1990s, new themes came to light: Democracy and good governance imposed on the continent by the West, such as François Mitterrand's politics of conditionality through the call for multiparty democracy during the France-Afrique summit that took place in La Baule on 20th of June 1990.¹ This call coincided with the Bretton Woods' institutions conditional policy of structural adjustment programmes.² This new wave of renewed hopes promised peace, political stability, sustainable development and the end of nepotism engendered by tribalism. But as with the dawn of independence, promises of democracy were quickly transformed into disappointment and despair.

The aim of this study is to examine the novelists' representation of disillusionment vis-à-vis independence and democratic promises through a sociological reading of two novels: Tchichellé Tchivéla's *Les Fleurs des Lantanas* (1997) and Alain Patrice Ngagnang's *La Promesse des Fleurs* (1998). The study seeks to explore the way the symbolism of flowers has been used to unveil a set of post-colonial hopes and dreams that led to ephemeral excitement and deep disappointment. It unveils the manner in which the symbolism of flowers informs the rhetoric of disenchantment, where silencing practices may engender imagery to exercise the freedom of expression. It demonstrates how flower symbolism strengthens the focus and structure of political stance through African literature of engagement. In both texts, the rhetoric of disenchantment informed by symbolism renews the contract between the writer and his society, and unveils the parameters, tensions and absurdities of African failure and misfortune.

¹ During the France-Afrique summit that took place in June 1990 in La Baule (France), French President told Sub-Saharan African leaders that multiparty democracy was, with immediate effect, a condition for any new French aid. Good governance as an instrument for achieving political and economic reforms that contribute to political and social stability became the performance indicator to secure aid and maintain cooperation between France and its African traditional partners.

² By Bretton Woods institutions we refer to International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Their structural adjustment programme was about the implementation of free market policy that fosters sustainable production and trade opportunities, which are informed by clear economic reforms and fiscal discipline. This policy, which primarily aimed to reduce borrowing, also sought the implementation of democratic and good governance initiatives and was imposed upon developing countries as a precondition for any new loans.

The Corpus

With the new wave of multiparty democracy in Africa of the 1990s, which was imposed as the politics of conditionality, the continent was faced with political repressive measures due to the resistance to changes. In a continent with traditional perceptions of political power as the main source of economic wealth, the new multiparty system exacerbated divisions based on tribal and regional identities. Thus, nepotism became the norm of governance. During this decade, the escalation of violence perpetrated by dictatorial regimes reflected a miscarriage of hopes and dreams for those who were waiting for the benefits of democratic ideals through the multiparty system. In a muzzled society, the expression of this disenchantment took the path of the symbolic representation of African ills in narratives. Tchichellé Tchivéla's *Les Fleurs des Lantanas* (1997) and Alain Patrice Ngagnang's *La Promesse des Fleurs* (1998) are inspired by this bitter taste of disillusionment.

Born in Pointe-Noire, Tchichellé Tchivéla served his native country Congo at different senior positions. As medical doctor and army officer with the rank of colonel, he was director of the Military Hospital of Brazzaville. After a brief political career as minister of tourism and environment between 1992 and 1995, Tchivéla became governor of Kouilou Region (Pointe-Noire). *Les Fleurs des Lantanas* is his first novel where the very caring medical doctors face powerlessly the repressive forces of ministers, military officers and regional governors who enjoy being feared rather than being loved by people under their rules. Tchivéla's narrative is informed by intergeneric modulation, which establishes blurring similarities between experiences he witnessed in his different roles and those of his characters in this novel.

Under a dictatorial regime in African imaginary Congo, Bukadjo, a medical doctor in *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*, is put in jail for refusing to help a dignitary's mistress to cheat and pass the nursing examination. Despite his lack of interest in politics that he displayed by refusing to join the ruling party, his courageous action to defend his values of professional integrity brought him false accusations of being the activist of an opposition political party. He languished in prison over many years.

After his release from prison, doctor Bukadjo was transferred to a rural area hospital where his popularity among his patients and within the local community represented a threat to Motungisi, a powerful regional governor. In a hunting party organised as means of eliminating and hence silencing permanently any potential political opponents, doctor Bukadjo was unlawfully killed.

Through the description of the despots' opulent life and the representation of their violent actions to keep power unchallenged, Tchichellé Tchivéla

used the symbolism of the flowers of lantanas to highlight the misfortunes that the multiparty democracy of the 1990s generated for many African nations.

The concept of disillusionment through which the Latin phrase *homo homini lupus*³ seems to be attested is also reflected by Alain Patrice Nganang's narratives. Writer, poet and academic, Alain Patrice Nganang was born in 1970 in Cameroon. Educated in both Cameroon and Germany, Nganang is one of the young African writers who embraced and cherished the western democratic ideals, expressed the disappointment in the African leaders whose governance failed to foster those universal values. In Nganang's writings,⁴ there is a clear narrative of witness in which subjectivities that are embodied in the protagonists have meaningful symbolism in the real Cameroon.

In *La Promesse des Fleurs*, young men seeking to fulfil their democratic aspirations passively watched their fate of living an endless vegetative life being shaped by a country which was falling into chaos. Despite having an officially recognised multiparty system, political leaders continued to be the forces of darkness that kept the youth's expectations of democratic governance as a mirage. Nganang's narrative depicts the sad experience of frustration of young African democrats who found themselves having to face a sad reality of enduring mistreatments by oligarchic regimes of a fictitious Cameroon.

Although the young characters in this novel were trying hard to turn their democratic dreams into tangible achievements, they realised that in the end their wishes for a better and fairer Cameroon were chimerical thoughts in a world of fantasies. The pessimistic view of this narrative over the uncertain future of African democracy has mirrored the political governance in the real world of African despots, which seems to turn the novel into a voice of voiceless.

The African Writer and Social Responsibility

Perhaps before talking about the concept of engagement in writing, it is appropriate to ask one question: Does readership shape the scope of writing? Jean Paul Sartre (1968, p. 170), in *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature?* states that there is a cause and effect relationship between writer and reader. Whilst the writer aims to unveil the object by displaying emotions or ideas on paper, the reader attempts to appropriate them into his or her own perceptions of the

³ The literal translation of the Latin phrase *homo homini lupus* is 'man is a wolf to [his fellow] man.' This phrase is also sometimes translated as 'man is man's wolf.' It means that man preys upon man, which is used to refer to bad things that people do against each other.

⁴ Apart from *La Promesse des Fleurs*, there is also Nganang's (2001) *Temps de Chien*.

world. Sartre supports the idea that the origin of the writer's engagement is concomitant with the act of writing:

Il n'est donc pas vrai qu'on écrive pour soi-même; ce serait le pire échec . . . L'acte créateur n'est qu'un moment incomplet et abstrait de la production d'une œuvre . . . L'opération d'écrire implique celle de lire comme son corrélatif dialectique et ces deux actes connexes nécessitent deux agents distincts. C'est l'effort conjugué de l'auteur et du lecteur qui fera surgir cet objet concret et imaginaire qu'est l'ouvrage de l'esprit. (Sartre, 1968, pp. 49-50).

[It is not true that one can write for himself. That would be the worst failure . . . The creative act is an abstract idea and an incomplete task . . . Writing enterprise involves reading as its correlative dialectic and both connective acts require the two distinct agents. It is the concerted effort of the author and the reader which will make the masterpiece emerge from imaginary and reality.]

Given the nature of the individual's relation to the reality of everyday existence, the writer's attitude to daily life in his community always displays a set of influences whilst attempting to codify the literary work. In this regard, it seems true that engaged writing fulfils a mission. Vassily Novikov asserts that for the engaged writer,

the world appears exactly as he has depicted it in his work. The author calls on the reader to see the world and judge events within his own frame of reference, in terms of his own truth. In his work, the writer impresses the reader with the emotional quality of his thoughts and imagery and seeks to influence his thoughts and feelings, subjecting them to his own will and to his own ideals. (Novikov, 1982, p. 12)

In *Les Testaments de Sartre* by Michel-Antoine Burnier, Sartre defines the writer's mission of engagement in these terms:

L'écrivain «engagé» sait que la parole est action: il sait que dévoiler, c'est changer et qu'on ne peut dévoiler qu'en projetant de changer encore. Et encore, il sait que les mots, comme dit Brice Parain sont des « pistolets chargés». S'il parle, il a choisi de tirer, il faut que ce soit comme un homme, en visant des cibles et non pas comme un enfant au hasard, en fermant les yeux et pour le seul plaisir d'entendre des detonations. (Burnier, 1982, p. 15)

[The engaged writer knows the power of the words. He knows that unveiling generates change that one can only reveal by seeking further changes. He also knows that words, as Brice Parain says, are loaded pistols. Whenever he speaks, he aims to shoot. This should be like an adult shooter who steadily hits his target instead of acting like a child who shoots with closed eyes for the sole purpose of listening to detonations.]

Sartre rejects the idea of literature being created for its own sake. For him, literature remains a social product and therefore cannot resist committing itself, at least implicitly, to social issues. If there is a wide recognition of the writer's engagement, this is even more significant among African writers who have a deep susceptibility for social and political commitment through their texts that depict socio-political issues in their societies. Despite claiming the status of artists and apolitical intellectuals who invest energy in fictional creative writing, writers are members of their societies, and hence, are sensitive to observable experiences of their communities. Writing about Chinua Achebe's engagement in his texts as a self-assigned mission to respond to the realities of his society, Ademola Omobewaji Dasylyva argues that the merit of Nigerian writings is their relevance, explicitly and implicitly, to the social context in which they are set. For Achebe,

any African who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames. (Dasylyva, 2003, p. 209)

In *Les Damnés de la Terre*, Frantz Fanon (1984) goes further to say that it is very obvious that the African writer is politically engaged because he is the voice of his community in their struggle for freedom. By dichotomising the space of literature and the political world, many literary critics recognise that the aesthetic of representation and interpretation that shapes the interconnection between the fictional and real world in African writings is vividly present in all literature of engagement.

Although it has to be noted that the most significant feature of meaning construction in writings of engagement is the reference to aesthetic interpretation and artistic modulation of social environment as a mode of transmission to yield the correlation between fiction and reality, the fullness of portrayal is sometimes so accurate that it becomes obvious that social experience is the dominant source of African literature.

Given that post-independence Africa has been characterised by painful experiences of dictatorship, social injustices, frustration and disillusionment, it is quite understandable to see a proliferation of African texts in which writers attempt to mobilise their society into consciousness of democratic values. In this way, novelists seem to confirm that the literary work cannot keep its distance from the world it reflects. It is in this context of socially and politically portrayed disillusionment that we can fit the two novels *La Promesse des Fleurs* and *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*, which use the symbolism of flowers to represent the Africa's ride into democratic governance at the dawn of 21st century as a mirage.

Social and Political Engagement/Disenchantment in Fictional Africa

The most basic boundary line between non-fictional studies and fictional writings determines the fundamental opposition between the two concepts. In attempts to designate what is literary and what is not, conflicting perspectives extend to every level, from the real and the factual (non-fictional) to unreal, literary, invented and imaginary narratives (fictional). The traditional reliance of novelists on imaginary raw materials out of which they create their writings had made novels pure fictional genres. However, beyond the first step of the imaginative process, writers apply their creative skills in many ways.

Despite the fact that a close correlation between the political engagement of the protagonists and their creator has always marked criticism of the literature of disenchantment after the independence period, attitudes of creating an imaginative world, inherited from the fictional writing tradition, have never ceased to weigh upon postcolonial literature in francophone Africa. From engaged writer to implied reader, dialogism was latent where the reader encountered a range of complex perspectives rather than a single viewpoint shaped by the author. Direct discourse between author and reader was mediated by the threat of political censorship and fictional representation took precedence over social reality in narratives.

However, during the last decade of the 20th century, criticism of African literature has been undergoing significant changes. Novelists living in exile and those belonging to the blooming new era of multiparty democracy of the 1990s, and their subsequent quest for freedom of expression, have brought new mechanisms of narration, where the representation of political and social ideologies weighed upon fictional narratives. This problematic representation of social practice in the novel made it difficult to draw a line between fiction and reality.

In the overall meaning of the text, the narrative is often matched with the context, where the author uses biographical and historical information in parts of his writings. National or quasi-national boundaries play a role in structuring the framework within which literary narratives are organised. In their quest for democratic institutions and desire to reach an audience of people irritated by African dictatorship, these novelists write in ways designed to capture the attention of potential readers. The spatial limits of the novel coincide almost exactly with the areas that the authors themselves know best, usually confined to Africa in general, and to their own society in particular. In this regard, it is that tendency towards representing the contemporaneity of fiction and social practice in a novel that reflects the idea of the political commitment of African novelists. However, the assumption of over-reliance on social and

political material raises important questions concerning the place or status of these African writings within literary genres, and their long-term evolution.

By analysing some of the texts of the 1990s in the sub-Saharan African, one can observe how the fusion between the literary topography and the real social and spatio-temporal boundaries are represented. This allows the illumination of tensions which frequently characterise the fictional narrative and social practice in African literature. Although these texts engendered by the literature of engagement cannot be read as a transparent African portrait, they seek, however, to reflect a coherent sense of the political ideology of authors in a fictional Africa. Beyond the problematic definition of these novels within the domain of literary genres, where the high rating of reality in fictional writings generates controversial views, the place of literary merit of these texts that still use symbolism as a rhetorical feature of communication can be illustrated and can prevail over thematic perspectives.

The Rhetoric of Disillusionment Through the Symbolism of Flowers

Explaining how symbolism provides meaning to writing, Alfred North Whitehead states:

The human mind is functioning symbolically when some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions, and usages, respecting other components of experience. The former set of components are 'the symbols', and the latter set constitute the 'meaning' of the symbols. The organic functioning whereby there is transition from the symbol to the meaning will be called 'symbolic references'. (Whitehead, 1985, pp. 7-8)

From rhetoric as a process of social influence that constructs discursive meaning through a structured mode of communication in language, it is possible to integrate other communication media that include linguistically or socially built symbols to inform systems of meaning construction. As John Dewey writes:

Meaning does not belong to the word and signboard of its own intrinsic right. They have meaning in the sense in which an algebraic formula or a cipher code has it. But there are other meanings that present themselves directly as possessions of objects which are experienced. Here there is no need for a code or convention of interpretation; the meaning is as inherent in immediate experience as is that of a flower garden. (Dewey, 1934, p. 83)

The rhetorical functions of symbolism can be interpreted within its cultural perspective. In this regard, it is widely recognised that flowers have been and are

still used to convey meanings and feelings in many cultures. Some florists provide customers with information on the language of flowers to help those who give flowers as gifts to romantically express their feeling and “say it with flowers.” The beauty and feminine quality of flowers have influenced the tradition of naming girls after flowers in many cultures throughout history and continues today.

In *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees*, Ernst Lehner states that the construction of meaning in the symbolism of flowers is often informed by traditions and social beliefs. For instance, the flower symbolism associated with the cherry blossom is education, but in China, the cherry blossom is a symbol of feminine beauty and also represents the feminine principle and love. In Japan, cherry blossoms symbolize the transience of life because of their short blooming times. Falling cherry blossoms are metaphors for fallen warriors who died bravely in battle (Lehner, 1960).

In an African context, flower symbolism has mainly social and economic references. As flowers have a decorative function and are an essential precursor to fruits, they are inevitably a source of expectation. Therefore, they foster a set of hopes and dreams, which can hence lead to excitement or disappointment. In order to express the postcolonial disillusionment in the new formation of independent Africa, novelists have often used imagery and symbolism to fictionalise a space that refers to the social reality. This association between the fictional world and social reference has highlighted that writing is a means by which to represent social events through the rhetoric of disenchantment.

While the plot of fictional narratives of post-independent realities in Africa moves the story along through protagonists who are bogged down in political misadventures, the symbolism of flowers works under the surface to tie the story’s external references to major themes. Whilst the meaning construction informed by written words can lead to the understanding of the signified at one level, the use of symbolism in literature takes the reader’s decoding agility to another level of references. The transition from one reference to another is what makes symbolism an integral part of the writing.

In the African cultural context, lantana flowers primarily play a decorative role and therefore the symbolism of these flowers is associated with beauty. In his novel *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*, Tchivéla represents leaders who mismanage economic and political institutions. Politicians, civil servants and military officers are portrayed in their total lack of humility. They abuse their power by using beautiful women as their main source of entertainment, some kinds of toys that they cherish when they are shining and that they throw away when their beauty fades like flowers. In *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*, Marshall Sokinga tells his mistress Nwéliza, who was planning to leave him: “Mets-toi bien ceci en tête: les femmes, c’est moi qui les quitte, jamais le contraire”

(p. 16) [Get this into your head: I am the one who leaves women, never the other way round]. Tchivéla uses the beauty of flowers to symbolise the everlasting youthful appearance of mistresses.

If the lantana flowers reflect the beauty of young girls who are forced to be mistresses of the most powerful men of the country's leadership, they also symbolise the fact that these objects that serve as ornaments represent the country's elite, who are useless in terms of carrying our sustainable development plans. They are people whose promises were too good to be true, whose message of collective freedom, democracy and good governance did not last long, whose appearance in suits is enviable to many, but whose moral stance on human rights makes them look as ugly as faded lantana flowers.

These unscrupulous leaders live in high opulence, driving Mercedes cars and living in villas fenced with lantanas while the living conditions of their fellow citizens are unbearable. Even the hospital bursar Kita Mbala drives a blue metallic Peugeot 504 ("la 504 bleu metallise" [p. 100]) that he parks in front of his house hedged with lantanas. Thus, the lantana flowers are symbolically presented as a reflection of the luxurious life of African dictators. Using the symbol of flowers of lantana, the author presents clearly the picture of the opulence and political power obsession. It is this perceptive portrayal of an African fictional space full of genuine African absurdities that establishes a strong link between fiction and reality. For some critics, any African literature that ignores such correlation between fictional narrative and social life becomes, as Simon Critchley terms it, "a bacchanal of absolute sovereignty, and writing becomes a solitary masturbation that negates reality and posits a fantasized reality in its place" (Critchley, 1997, p. 52).

The double meaning of the symbolism of flowers that coalesces around the dichotomy of fiction/reality implies that the reader can enjoy a meaningful dialogue with the text through the enterprise of interpretation. Standing in the full glare of the new colonial masters, despots who rule by nepotism appear to be far more tyrannical than colonialists. They accuse people who express different opinions of treason and threatening national security; their governance is characterised by excessive arbitrariness, and prison has become a weapon to silence opponents. It is in this context that in *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*, doctor Bukadjo before his arrest and imprisonment in solitary confinement for his refusal of joining the ruling party, was repeatedly warned, "il vous est interdit d'adresser la parole à qui que ce soit, de lire des livres, d'écouter la radio" (p. 126) [you are not allowed to talk to anybody and you can neither read books nor listen to the radio]. Thus, the drifting away of the nation from the fundamentals and ideals of independence becomes the socio-political reality, which the writer's imaginative enterprise portrays as a vehicle of political discourse.

Apart from the decorative and aromatic role of the flowers, the lantanas are tropical plants, which are considered poisonous to cattle and sheep. The suggestion in the novel is that this poisonous plant represents power and anyone who attempts to lay hands on it will die pitifully in jail like doctor Bukadjo, the main protagonist of *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*.

Furthermore, these plants are also used for fencing. Therefore, within the context of corruption, nepotism, embezzlement and dictatorial politics, the lantanas reflect a territorial defence mechanism with the symbolism of building an autarchic space within a wider physical and social environment. These practices can only lead to the disillusionment of those who previously believed in post-independence good governance. In *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*, even Tom who, like his fellow members of parliament, used to applaud and blindly approve all governmental projects, indicates his disappointment:

Notre pays était mal gouverné, notre parlement ligoté, notre presse bâillonnée, notre peuple exploité, notre jeunesse terrorisée et il qu'était insupportable de vivre dans un pays où l'on n'avait pas besoin de preuves pour emprisonner, ni de procès pour condamner. (p. 173)

[Our country was badly governed, our parliament was handcuffed, our press gagged, our people were exploited, our young people were terrorised, and it was unbearable to live in a country where there was no need of evidence to be incriminated and no trial to be found guilty.]

Despite the apparent fatality generated by the endless series of painful experiences of exclusion and violence, when the lantanas hedges are trimmed, they quickly rise again. In this regard, in *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*, after doctor Bukadjo's death, his wife finds she is pregnant:

Lorsqu'ils s'aperçurent qu'elle était enceinte, les Ntangu explosèrent de joie . . . Elle accoucha d'un garçon dans une clinique privée de Mabaya; l'enfant reçut, ainsi qu'avait souhaité son père, le nom de Dumuka que portait le grand-père maternel du docteur Bukajo. Quand ils le virent au premier anniversaire de la mort du médecin, les Ntangu admirèrent que le petit Dumuka était « la photo de son père », le docteur n'est pas mort, non, il est encore vivant parmi nous. (pp. 198-99)

[When they realised she was pregnant, all Ntangu went wild with joy . . . She gave birth to a baby boy in the private clinic of Mabaya. To fulfil his father's wish, the child was given doctor Bukadjo's maternal grand-father's name of Dumuka. As he was born on the first anniversary of doctor Bukadjo's death, all Ntangu believed that he was the true image of his father. The doctor is not dead; no, he is still alive among us.]

The symbolism of rebirth of lantana flowers is used to suggest that, despite the evil triumphal narrative of the novel that unveils all drifts of unethical regime, this

rhetoric of disillusionment through the symbolism of flowers is, to some extent, a way of witnessing and revitalising consciousness to fight for good over wickedness.

In *La Promesse de Fleurs*, Nganang creates a narrative world that closes itself to Africans in general and to the Cameroonians in particular. Although at the beginning of his novel Nganang asserts that “bien sûr, toute ressemblance avec des personnes, des quartiers, des villes, ou même des pays ne peut être que fortuite” (p. 7) [of course, any resemblance with real persons, places, cities, or even countries can only be accidental]. He immediately and explicitly names his country as a source of inspiration: “Lancinante, mais vraiment lancinante est cette voix qui, en de nombreuses questions dans notre dos, nous rappelle notre mauvaise conscience d’être l’arrière-train de la vie, d’être les papiers hygiéniques du Cameroun” (p. 14) [Nagging, but truly languishing is this voice which, in response to the series of questions weighting upon our shoulders, reminds us the bad conscience of being on the worst side of life, being the toilet paper of this Cameroon]. From the narrator’s mouth, he goes on to laugh at some African writers who only criticise dictatorial regimes from exile:

“Il y en a qui sont prêts à s’exiler pour que leurs héros vivent! Regarde Ngugi! Regarde Soyinka! Regarde Beti! Ça, ce n’étaient pas des écrivains pour talk show! Peut-on se dire écrivain e avoir peur de la mort?” (p. 83) [There are some who are ready to go into exile so that their hero can survive. Look at Ngugi! Look at Soyinka! Look at Beti! These where not talk show writers! Can somebody call himself writer and be scared of death?].

In Nganang’s novel, symbolism is not as subtle as in *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*. From the very title, it is obvious that the symbolism of expectations from flowers implies either excitement or disappointment. Flowers potentially bear fruits and are thus unequivocally a source of expectations. They foster a set of hopes and dreams, which can lead to excitement or disappointment. Nganang’s fictional world is ridden with questions about expectations from multiparty democracy. The symbolism of flowers in *La Promesse des Fleurs* seems to present democratic ideals and good governance as the line of sight whilst fighting the corrupt elite of independent Africa. In *La Promesse des Fleurs*, one of the protagonists Beauregard,

disait que la dé-mo-cra-tie nous sortirait de la pauvreté, qu’elle ferait bouger des montagnes, passer notre quartier de vallée en amont, et même ressusciterait nos morts. Il disait que la dé-mo-cra-tie était la solution à tous nos problèmes, qu’elle nous guérirait de toutes nos maladies, et même du sida; il disait qu’elle nous guérirait de toutes plaies, de toutes nos souffrances et qu’il suffisait de se battre pour elle pou aller au paradis. (p. 163)

[was saying that de-mo-cra-cy would end our poverty, would shake mountains, would change our village of valleys into hills, and would even resuscitate the dead.

He was saying that de-mo-cra-cy was the solution to all our problems; would cure all our diseases, even AIDS; he was saying that it would heal all our wounds, all our sufferings and fighting for it would lead us to paradise.]

In *La Promesse des Fleurs*, nothing has an obvious correlation with its internal reference; one thing seems to stand for something else. The names of protagonists convey symbolic meaning, which reflect the beauty of flowers, as in the case of Beauregard whose name could mean *good looking* as a symbol of blossoming flowers or a man with skills of attention to details. His name does not necessarily represent his own character. It has instead been used a symbolism to depict the absurdity of the social and political environment in which the character lives. This is a world where people with good potential and core skills are nevertheless condemned to the failure.

Nganang's fictional representation of social and political elements presents ideals of equal opportunity and good governance as objects of contemplation or core values to fight for. Apart from Beauregard the political activist, people in general have the same hopes and dreams of reaping the fruits of the flowers of democracy:

Mon père voulait que je devienne juge pour punir tous ceux qui lui causaient des ennuis; il voulait que Sandra devienne médecin pour s'occuper de lui quand il tomberait malade; il voulait que Mami devienne plus tard également quelqu'un d'important dans ce Cameroun de malheur, par exemple architecte, pour lui construire une belle maison de retraite. Il avait des rêves de grandeur pour nous. (p. 99)

[My father wanted me to be a judge so that I could punish those who had given him grieves; he wanted Sandra to be a doctor to take care of him whenever he would feel sick; he also wanted Mami to become an important person in misfortunate Cameroon, such as an architect, in order to build him a nice retirement house. He had great dreams of our success.]

However, these expectations from multiparty democracy never materialise. The narrator describes how his father

voyait Mirabelle qui, après une licence de lettres, vendait de l'huile de palme à côté de notre mère et n'avait même pas pu se trouver un mari; il voyait Gustave-le-magistrat qui était devenu sauveteur avec une maîtrise en droit dans la poche . . . , il voyait le Docteur Roger qui avait certes pu avoir un travail dans un ministère, mais qui n'était jamais payé et devait vivre d'espoir et de dettes: Mon père voyait tous ces diplômés de notre quartier se promener dans leur misère qui ne se distingue point de la sienne et comprit que nous avions été jetés dans un monde dans lequel nous étions d'emblée les perdants du combat que nous n'avions même pas commencé. (p. 100)

[saw Mirabelle, who holds a Bachelors degree in Arts, selling palm oil next to our mother and who has not even found a husband; he saw Gustave, who aspired to be

a magistrate judge, working as a lifeguard with a Masters degree in Law in his pocket; . . . eventually, he saw doctor Roger who managed to get a job in a ministry, but had never been paid and had to live on hopes and debts; my father saw all these graduates from our compound hanging around in a vegetative state like him and understood that we were confined in a world where we definitely were losers of a fight that we had not even started.]

In *La Promesse de Fleurs*, the narrator, who plays the omniscient role of the novelist, says regrettably that living in Cameroon requires fighting for your prey: “nous savions que notre Cameroun est une jungle; nous savions que tout se joue dans des chambres closes, derrière des chemises fermées, sur des tables emplies de dossiers, en notre absence” (p. 162) [we knew that our Cameroon is a jungle; we knew that all deals are made behind closed doors, inside closed files placed on tables at which we do not have seats]. Through the symbolism of the promises of flowers that have never materialised, the author highlights challenges that African writers have engaged with to denounce the inability of the postcolonial African leadership to give people the necessary energy and opportunities to move forward.

To avoid creating fictional narrative, which represents the real social and political context of African countries, the African novelists of engaged literature often borrow the symbolist aesthetics that use the suggestive representation of images that offer their readers a reference to various experiences of reality that goes beyond the texts in their hands. Although the promises of flowers have not been fulfilled, Nganang’s text does not end on a pessimistic note as the title might imply. The determination of the protagonists to fight for their prey and revitalize their hopes that new flowers might lead to fruits is a symbol of rebirth. Through recourse to symbolism, the rhetoric of disenchantment unveils African ills in order to highlight the fact that the poetic of denunciation does not intend to lull the oppressed Africans into fatalism. It advocates complacency to give up the fight due to the vicious cycle that seems confirm that the fatalism of African history is reaping itself. From the situation of unscrupulous corruption and exacerbated embezzlement, the rhetoric of disillusionment becomes a credo with which to reject violence and exclusion, the quest for a more inclusive social policies and political stability where each and every one can benefit from the worth of national resources.

Conclusion

The search for purposeful and democratic governance has not been a success. It was *Waiting for Godot* that Samuel Beckett created; it was like watching the beauty of flowers fading away, dissipating any hope for bearing fruits. The writers whose work I have explored here denounce the institutions of post-independent Africa, which drifted and lost a sense of values they had fought for.

This is a very interesting point that raises one major issue: Reading fictional narratives in this particular context mirrors retrieving some realities of African history. In this way, it seems that some fictional texts of African literature that reflect the representation of disillusionment could become pedagogical tools for teaching history. Such a shift from fiction to reality in reading literature poses genuine concerns in relation to the definition of genres. How could language learners understand the meaning of fictional narratives in a social and political environment where the understanding of symbolism is no longer part of critical reading but rather the simple association between twin worlds? If the content of novels can be the source of factual elements of social and political context, teaching and learning the functional meaning of symbolism in literature needs to be redefined so that the concept of genre can embrace its geographical identities. To this end, the African novel that reflects the literature of political engagement would lose its traditional identity of fictional narrative and hence become another type of communication that novelists use to fulfil their social roles in their communities.

Since the literature of disillusionment reflects the failure of flowers to bear fruits in most of African countries, it is with no surprise that the novels of the 1990s depict the disappointment in the results of the new wave of multi-party democracy. The texts present democratic values as a cure for the pains and frustration that have damaged the African social fabric.

This rhetoric of disenchantment diachronically portrays the post-colonial or post-independence abuse of power entertained by neocolonialism. Flower symbolism allows the novelist to create a fictional space in which he could fulfill the African writer's tacit social mission of realistically depicting historical events in order to denounce the false promises of democracy. They try to objectively reveal all absurdities that reflect cynicism, depression due to deprivation and fatalism that characterised the unethical governance driven by a dirty complicity between dictators and former colonial masters. Knowing the needs, hopes and dreams of their society allows the writers to use the symbolism of flowers to fully and realistically portray the misfortune that their fellow countrymen endured.

Since the fictional narratives of these novels offer very few challenges in identifying themes due to the simplistic manner of interpretation that the narrative flow offers, the use of symbolism of flowers limits the reader's linear approach in his or her perceptions of meaning. The variety of interpretations informed by symbolism renders the texts plural. In this case the symbolic input can move from one social reference to another, depending on the degree of reflection that the reader possesses. Consequently, it is appropriate to conclude that in the heart of the symbolism of flowers in *La Promesse des Fleurs* and *Les Fleurs des Lantanas*, disillusionment dominates the socio-political discourse through the mediation of the narrative of representation.

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