

**Article No. 2**

**THE UNDERPRIVILEGED WOMAN AS THE VICTIM OF GLOBAL EXPLOITATION:  
A STUDY OF THE PERFORMANCE OF SÉVERIN CÉCIL ABEGA' S LE SEIN  
T'EST PRIS**

**by Anne Tanyi-Tang (Cameroon)**

**Abstract**

Séverin Cécil Abega 's *Le Sein T'est Pris* holds the view that it is not only men who exploit underprivileged African women. Deprived African women are also exploited and dominated by patriarchal societies, tradition, privileged women, neo-colonialism and globalisation. The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyse the reactions of the audience when the play was performed in March 1991.

**Extrait**

*Le Sein T'est Pris* de Severin Cecil Abega suit la vue que les hommes ne sont pas les seuls à exploiter des femmes africaines défavorisées. Les femmes africaines défavorisées sont aussi exploitées et dominées par des sociétés patriarcales, la tradition, les femmes privilégiées, le néo-colonialisme et la mondialisation. L'ambition de mon article est de décrire et analyser les réactions de l'audience quand la pièce fut jouée en mars 1991.

**Resumen**

La obra *Le Sein T'est Pris* de Severin Cecil Abega's presenta el punto de vista que no solo los hombres explotan a las mujeres africanas menos privilegiadas. Las mujeres africanas desprotegidas también son explotadas y dominadas por las sociedades patriarcales, la tradición, las mujeres privilegiadas, el neocolonialismo y la globalización. Mi ambición en este documento es describir y analizar las reacciones de la audiencia cuando la obra se presentó en marzo de 1991.

**Author's biography**

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# THE UNDERPRIVILEGED WOMAN AS THE VICTIM OF GLOBAL EXPLOITATION: A STUDY OF THE PERFORMANCE OF SÉVERIN CÉCIL ABEGA'S *LE SEIN T'EST PRIS*

## Introduction

This paper describes and analyses the performance of Séverin Cécil Abega's *Le Sein t'est Pris*. The paper also analyses the reactions of the audience to the performance. One of the main themes of the play is the portrayal of the deprived women as the source of life and material wealth, while at the same time she is exploited by men, tradition, neo-colonialism, globalisation and privileged women. This theme of exploitation is my main concern in this paper. The paper is divided into three parts: the first describes the background of the performance, the second analyses the performance, and the third is the conclusion.

## The background to the performance

Séverin Cécil Abega's *Le Sein t'est Pris* is centred on the problems of an unemployed nuclear family. The main characters in the play are Koum (the husband), Nam (the wife) and the voice of their baby, who is never seen. The husband blames the country's economic crisis for the family's unemployment. He is disgusted with everything: the wife, the baby and the people around him. Surrounded by financial problems, he decides to live on his wife's breast milk, and to sell some of the milk to a rich woman who does not want to breastfeed her own baby. In order to achieve his aim, he prevents the wife from feeding their baby with her breast milk.

*Le Sein t'est Pris* is segmented into three main episodes. The first episode introduces the audience to the family's dispute. The family starves, but the unemployed husband, Koum, exacerbates the situation by asserting that the wife is lazy. This accusation kindles a dispute between the husband and the wife.

The second episode depicts Koum's solution to their economic crisis. The wife, Nam, is big-breasted, so the husband decides to sell some of the wife's breast milk to a rich mother who does not want to breastfeed her child because she wants her breasts to remain firm. Koum decides also to drink some of the breast milk, and to prevent the wife from breastfeeding their child. In order to prevent his wife from breastfeeding their baby, he tethers the wife and fits containers on to her breasts. Thus Nam is tethered like a sheep and cannot reach her baby.

The third episode describes how Koum uses the income he makes from the sales of the wife's breast milk to purchase a suit made in France and tickets from Air France to enable him and his mistress to spend a weekend in France.

Séverin Cécil Abega's *Le Sein t'est Pris* was performed by Les Perles Noires at l'Amphi de Ecole Normale Supérieure Yaounde on 28 March 1991, during the Cameroon Theatre Festival. The play was performed while I was carrying out fieldwork in Cameroon, so I watched the performance. It was the last play performed during the festival week. The stage props consisted of planks made in the form of a bench and a cupboard.

## Description of the performance

The play opens with Koum returning to the family's one-bedroom flat. He attacks people who talk of generosity, humanism, solidarity, progress, hospitality and so on when he is starving. He is disgusted with his misery in an opulent world, and thus finds faults in everything around him. He soliloquises his problems:

*KOUM: Ah, bandits, les infâmes canailles, les ingrats, me faire cela à moi, moi qui les ai nourris à ma table ... l'hospitalité, la générosité ... je ne peux plus rien pour toi ... Même le trésorier de notre association tribale a eu le front de me chanter le même couplet ... N'ont-ils pas appris la crise régnait? D'ailleurs, je vais donner des consignes très strictes à ma femme à ce sujet...je suis chez moi, bien que je ne reconnaisse plus ma maison depuis quelque temps! Je peux crier, hurler, mourir de froid, de faim ... Il y a longtemps qu'aucune marmite n'a bouilli dans cette maison. Et comme je n'ai rien donné pour qu'on fasse le marché ... Je n'ai plus vu la couleur de l'argent voilà ... Je n'ai pas de salaire, moi pas de rente, rien, rien. (Abega 1993: 9–12)*

After his soliloquy, Koum asks whether there is anyone in the house. Nam comes out, but she says she thought there was someone. In her opinion, a man who cannot feed his family is 'manless', to use Chaucer's phrase:

*KOUM: Qu'y a-t-il?*

*NAM: Ah, c'est toi? Tu m'as fait peur. J'ai cru qu'il y avait quelqu'un.*

*KOUM: Mais il y a quelqu'un!*

NAM : ... *Mon Dieu, où est-il?*

KOUM: ... *Et moi, ne suis-je pas quelqu'un?.* (Abega 1993: 13)

Koun accuses his wife of laziness, especially as she cannot offer him food. The woman rejects his accusation and defends herself by pointing out that she has not had enough sleep lately because the child cries all night. The man is angry and shouts at the top of his voice, telling her that whether or not she has had a sound sleep is irrelevant. He adds that he hates the piercing screams of the baby. The woman makes a heartfelt appeal to the man to stop shouting, since the noise might awaken the baby. In spite of this plea, her husband shouts even louder. He has suddenly realised that, since the birth of the child, the wife had become more attached to the baby than to him. This causes him to hate their child. The wife notices that her husband hates their baby and ignores him. The husband notices that the wife looks down on him and he beats her severely until she vows to carry out his slightest instruction. Koun has a belief in the myth of female submissiveness and subservience (Olabisi 1998: 83).

After the wife's submission, the husband gives her careful instructions on how she should use her breast milk. Koum is a follower of Aristotle, who considered marriage to be a relationship based on asymmetry where the husband naturally dominates while the woman remains submissive. In Aristotle's view, the female is by nature inferior, born to obey and without any virtue or ability to think (Bluestone, 1987: 27). Koun could also be compared with Yanomamo men, who inflict violence such as rape and severe beatings on women, and treat them as slaves in order to assert men's superiority (Sandy, 1981: 46).

Although Koun uses male aggression to subdue his wife, she is like Mundurucu women, who do not believe in men's domination and women's subordination. Some of the women fight the men who attempt to dominate them (Sandy 1987: 164–65).

Nam pinpoints Koun's faults, points them out to him and also advises him. Koun believes that she is largely responsible for his problems. He adds that Nam is solely preoccupied with cuddling her baby and expects him to provide for the family's needs. He expected her to contribute to the family's basic needs, but instead she opted to have a baby, who has brought additional costs to the family. In many African traditional societies, women are responsible for feeding their respective families. Thus Koun expects Nam to feed the family. Modupe Kolawole (1997) maintains that:

Women in fact played dominant roles in the economy of the society ... Grains constituted the main food and women were in charge and were respected for feeding the community in addition to being mothers and wives. (Kolawole, 1997)

Nam retorts sharply, reminding her husband of the fact that she is uneducated, and thus unable to get a job in the civil service. Besides, Koum is too poor to establish a business for her. She asks how she could contribute to household expenses given the circumstances. Nam and her baby are the victims of external forces which they cannot control. Olabisi (1998: 71) remarks that, 'as the continent of Africa is ravaged by war, drought, poverty, disease, illiteracy, and ignorance, women and children have been known to be its most defenceless victims'. McFadden (quoted in Olabisi, 1998: 71) adds that 'women remain the poorest of the poor, the least literate, the most exploited, and the most marginalized of all the social groups in those countries [African countries]'.

To return to our play, Nam advises her husband to stop watching the child with jealousy and to think of a solution to their financial problems. She also criticises him for preferring to live in the city when he fully understood that he could not get a job there. She adds that he detested the village because he could not work on the farm. She sums up the argument by asking Koum where he belongs, since he detests farming and cannot get a job in the city.

Nam is implicitly advising each person to acquire a skill which might enable them to identify with a particular place — be it a city or a village. In the woman's view, it is frustrating for an unqualified, unemployed, poor person to live in a city, because they might not find a job and cannot establish a business.

In spite of Nam's advice, Koum insists that Nam should give him food, and adds that wives should assist their husbands by providing for the family's needs. In frustration, Nam enumerates the merits of village life and the frustrations of living in the city. Nam advises Koum that they should return to the village where life is less costly:

KOUM: ... *Donne-moi à manger!*

NAM : ... *Tu sais bien qu'il n'y a rien à manger!*

KOUM: ... *Dans la plupart des ménages, la femme n'attend pas que le mari ramène de l'argent à la maison. Elle travaille elle aussi.*

NAM : ... *Travailler, travailler, travailler quoi? ... Voilà des lustres que je crie que nous devrions dans notre village cultiver la terre. Mais, toi, tu as d'autres idées en tête. Ici, nous achetons tout. La maison, nous la louons, l'eau, nous la*

*payons, la nourriture aussi. Finalement, nous travaillons pour d'autres. Nous pourrions si aisément produire ce que nous consommons. Tu prétends chaque jour que tu un rang à tenir, un honneur, une image de marque à présenter. Rang, honneur, image de marque, notions sans substance, qui nous ruinent cependant! (Abega 1993: 25– 28)*

Nam has an extremely negative impression of city life. Emrys Jones (1967: 1) maintains that:

the city was a consumer of mankind ... it fed on those who lived beyond it ... it offered disease and misery, poverty and want to millions; at its worst it made human life cheap and human values worthless ... to Rousseau, 'cities are the final pit of the human spirit' (Jones 1967: 1).

Koum finds a solution to his financial problems, however. He decides to sell some of the wife's breast milk to a rich mother who does not want to breastfeed her own baby.

At this point in the performance, male spectators jeered while female spectators remained mute. Only sighs were heard here and there — a signal of disapproval. They disapproved of the rich woman's behaviour. Nevertheless, only the middle class and students watch theatre. The underprivileged women do not have enough time or money to engage in activities which they consider luxuries. Thus the less privileged women were not in the hall. I wondered what would have happened if the play had been performed in the middle of a market.

This rich woman's attitude is similar to the attitude of white women who allow black women to breastfeed their children. (Bih 1986). Here we see one of the means through which privileged women exploit deprived women. The rich woman knows the importance of firm breasts. Also, she is fully aware of the fact that breast milk is very important to a baby. She wants to have firm breasts, but at the same time she does not want to deprive her baby of breast milk. So she buys breast milk from an employed husband whose wife has just given birth. She has not bothered to seek Nam's opinion. She disregards the feeling of the woman who has produced the breast milk.

Hence, in a society where different groups of women belong to different classes, the socially advantaged women derive satisfaction from exploiting the underprivileged women. In this respect, it is difficult to talk of African feminism. This explains why Nnaemeka (1998: 71) points out that, 'in Africa, most women at the grassroots have yet to identify with the aims and caprices of modern day feminism. They see feminism as elitist and illusory.' For her part, Oyewume (2003: 3) points out that, in spite of the equality of women that is preached worldwide, the truth is that women belong to different classes. Hence the peasant woman remains the victim of exploitation in all its forms.

Turning again to our performance, while the husband is away, the wife carefully packs her suitcase with the intention of returning to her parents who live in the village. She believes that life in the village will be fair to her and her baby since she will no longer starve and there will be no husband to deprive her baby of its breast milk. She has learnt that the city is not a place for poor unemployed people. She also knows that she will be able to participate in the economic world if she returns to the village:

*NAM : ... Je ne sais pas comment j ' ai réussi à supporter cette histoire jusqu ' à présent ... Alors, je préfère rentrer au village cultiver la terre ... Je finis de faire cette valise et je disparaiss ... Si je passe encore une nuit dans cette situation, j ' y perdrai sûrement la vie ... (Abega 1993: 32–34)*

The audience at the performance was silent. There were several unemployed people — graduates, redundant people, people who had graduated from professional schools and so on — in the hall. The performance portrayed reality. Like the couple in the performance, these unemployed people faced similar problems but were also undecided. Should they return to their respective villages or remain in the city which had reduced them to beggars? It was a moment of profound reflection. As a researcher, I was very keen on watching the spectators. Thus, when I saw some spectators shaking their heads, others gazing steadily on the floor, some shedding tears and some sighing, I knew it was a moment of profound reflection. It was as though the performers on stage noticed the audience's reaction; thus they walked slowly on the stage for a while — waiting for the audience to assimilate the message. Theatre has overwhelming power over spectators if the message is powerful and if it is transmitted by seasoned performers.

The husband returns to find his wife's suitcase in the centre of the sitting-room, and becomes furious when he discovers that she intended to run away. He cannot understand why Nam was refusing to realise that the world was changing and people must also change. In spite of the problems the family faced in the city, the husband strongly believes that salvation lies there and not in the village:

*KOUM: Qu'est ceci? Madame fait ses valises! Elle s'apprête à me quitter! En voilà des manières ... (Abega 1993: 35)*

Koum, like Johnson, believes that when a man is tired of the city, he is tired of the world (Jones 1967: 1). In order to prevent his wife from returning to the village, he uses a big padlock on the door that leads to the room where the baby is lying. He is fully aware of the fact that the wife will not leave without her baby. Nam is determined to return to the village, so she pleads with Koum to remove the padlock from the door; however, he refuses to listen. Rather, he wants to ensure that she will obey his slightest instructions before he removes the padlock. He gives her the twine rope and the containers and orders her to fit the containers on to her breasts and put the rope around her neck. Thus she cannot reach her baby. Koum does not want to lose even a drop of his wife's breast milk. Initially the wife refuses to be treated like an animal, but when her baby starts screaming and she cannot reach him, she submits to the husband's demands. The husband carefully fits the containers on to her breasts, then ties one end of the rope around her neck and chest, and the other to the wall. Thus Nam is tethered like a goat.

Koum therefore carries out his plans of using the wife's breast milk both as a means of finance and as a source of food. Koum is no different from Pearl Cleage's Frank, who physically tortures his wife even though he is fully aware that she is pregnant. (Cleage 1996: 79–90). Again, article three of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights clearly states: 'You [women] have the right to live, and to live in freedom and safety'. (Quoted by Hollohan 2002). Unfortunately, Koum does not believe in these words.

The audience, which had been as quiet as a lake, started to murmur. Some spectators actually said Koum's behaviour should act as a deterrent to young village girls who looked down on potential suitors in villages but preferred city dwellers. The popular belief is that young girls in villages prefer to marry city dwellers rather than local village boys. The girls believe that life in the city is more attractive than life in the village. However, some of these girls are disappointed when they move to the cities and realise that their husbands live in ghettos. Quite often, the girls are ashamed to return to their villages.

Although Nam has accepted being treated like a beast for the sake of her child, she cannot reach her baby because she is tethered. In this respect, she is not rewarded for submissiveness. Although both the husband and the wife live in extreme poverty, they are two different characters. Whereas the wife is loving, humanistic, rich in ideas and philosophical in her views, the husband is very cruel, inhuman and materialistic. This is shown by their different attitudes, particularly their behaviours towards their baby. Here we agree with Chinua Achebe (1958), who says in *Things Fall Apart* that mother is gold, mother is supreme.

At one stage, the husband realises that the wife's breast milk has dried up. He accuses her of drinking all the milk, but she responds that it was the husband who drank all the milk, and because she has been starving, the milk has dried up:

*KOUM: Alors, explique moi que ton lait ait tari.*

*NAM: C'est simple!*

*KOUM: Qu'est-ce que je vais entendre?*

*NAM: Cela fait si longtemps que je crie famine!*

*KOUM: Famine? Mais tu têtes à satiété!*

*NAM: Tu sucas tout! Quand arrive mon tour, il n'y a plus rien, et, pendant les deux maigres minutes que tu m'accordes, je m'époumone en vain et ne réussis qu'à avaler ma propre salive et à m'écorcher le bout du téton... C'est toi qui bois tout le lait, rend-toi l'évidence. (Abega 1993: 46–47)*

Koum rushes to the shop and purchases French loaves. His intention is to feed the wife so that the breast milk can flow and he can sell it and continue to receive money. He is not feeding her for humanitarian reasons. He returns to the flat, unties Nam and throws the bread on the floor. After Nam has eaten, she goes to the bedroom and finds her baby dead. She laments over the corpse and accuses the husband, who was the sole cause of her baby's death. The baby was her only hope and the only thing to bring her happiness. The child's death represents a great loss to her.

*NAM: Qu'il a-t-il? Est-il mort? Mon Dieu, je le savais! ... Tu l'as tué, tu l'as tué! Tu as bu son lait et tu m'as empêchée de m'occuper de lui pendant tout ce temps! Assas s in, meurtrier! (Abega 1993: 64)*

Koum uses the revenue from the sales of his wife's breast milk to purchase an expensive French suit and air tickets from a French airline. Some Africans, particularly Cameroonians, have an overwhelming appetite for Western goods. Nnaemeka (1998: 71) aptly says:

For both men and women, the general mentality changed with the introduction of western education ... a new mode of thought emerged, which assumed that all that is 'Western' is better than what is 'African'... The change in mentality brought about changes in widely different aspects of life — language, dressing

Some members of the audience jeered at Koum, while others remained silent. I was not surprised, because most of the men in the audience were wearing suits made in France. Most of the upper-middle-class French-speaking Cameroonians consider France to be their home, thus they prefer to spend their annual holidays in France rather than in their villages.

The wife is astonished at seeing the beautiful suit. She touches it in total amazement. Nam secretly opens Koum's suitcase and finds two air tickets for Madame et Monsieur.

*NAM: Qu'elle est belle! Elle est vraiment du meilleur goût. Le tissu en est précieux, la coupe impeccable. Où a-t-il pu acquérir un article d'une telle qualité, et surtout, comment a-t-il pu? ... Il n'y a toujours rien à manger à la maison et le lait de mes seins est vendu pour, dit-il, nous permettre de vivre. Quelle vie? Je n'en sais rien*  
*... Tiens! Deux billets d'avion! Deux! Il y a du voyage en l'air, et surtout, il y a de l'argent beaucoup d'argent. (Abega 1993: 77–78)*

Abega is criticising Westernised Cameroonians. Koum is a product of neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism has gripped him to the point that he has lost his sense of judgment. Koum cannot reflect on those factors that have stolen his self-esteem, such as the rich who are exploiting the poor, the West which has neo-colonised him, globalisation that created unemployment and so on.

Instead of joining his wife to rebel against these exploiters as Arndt (2002: 71–79) suggests, Koum strongly believes in patriarchy, so he joins the forces of exploitation to exploit Nam. Instead of investing the money he made from the sale of the wife's breast milk, he prefers to make a pleasure trip to France. He is acting without thought because, after squandering all the money, he will be penniless, since the wife's breast milk has dried up.

The playwright might be informing Cameroonians that a developing country such as Cameroon is in dire need of a new social order. There must be fundamental change in the people's mentality, comportment and management of the economy. Without these initiatives, the country remains in perpetual recession and will not achieve its goals.

Nam thinks that the tickets are for her and her husband, but Koum says they are for him and his mistress:

*NAM: ... J'ai portant bien vu un deuxième billet d'avion.*  
*KOUM: Si tu l'avais examiné plus attentivement ...*  
*NAM: L'un portait ton nom, l'autre le mien.*  
*KOUM: Il n'y a ton nom nulle part ici.*  
*NAM: J'ai bien lu la Madame Koum.*  
*KOUM: C'est ce qui est écrit dessus!*  
*NAM: Donc, c'est le billet de ta femme!*  
*KOUM: ... Bien sur!*  
*NAM: Donc, c'est mon billet.*  
*KOUM: Ha, que tu es naïve ...*  
*NAM: C'est mon lait qui t'a donné cet argent ...*  
*KOUM: Tu sais bien que tu ne peux pas voyager? (Abega 1993: 77–88)*

Nam is dumbfounded. She says that the husband got money from the sale of her breast milk, and should not treat her unfairly. Nevertheless, when she realises that the husband is determined to take another woman to Europe, she regrets the fact that she had not benefited from the sale of her breast milk. Nam is helpless, victimised and powerless. The forces that are exploiting her are too powerful. Thus she submits.

She cannot make her husband understand that they are both exploited by the rich and the West, which has instilled negative ideas in their minds.

The audience sighed. But how was it going to rescue Nam from being exploited? How was the audience going to destroy all the different groups of exploiters? I watched the audience's helplessness. I was helpless too. We were all helpless in the face of the external forces that control our lives.

The wife who represents the deprived women is portrayed as the victim of global economic exploitation in the sense that her breast milk is exploited by her husband for his own benefit, the benefit of the rich.

woman, his mistress and the West.

By portraying a deprived woman as the victim of the global economic system, the playwright supports the view that, although the woman is symbolically a source of life (in the sense that she reproduces children and looks after people), she has remained the victim of men. Nam in this play suffers a similar fate to that of women in other communities. For example, Napoleon Chagnon reports that, among the Yanomamo, men make it known that their wives should deliver sons or suffer the consequences. Thus women kill female infants or allow them to starve to avoid disappointing their husbands. Also, Sanday (1981: 45, 195) reports that, in Papua New Guinea, widows are killed within 24 hours after the death of their husbands in order to avoid over-population.

The playwright is a revolutionary urging deprived women to fight for their rights and asking them to put a halt to the exploitation. However, most women who are subjected to exploitation are those without economic means. Thus, in order for underprivileged women to liberate themselves from men's grip, they should endeavour to acquire economic means. Their financial dependency on men perpetuates their being exploited. This play has a similar message to that of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *I will Marry When I Want* (1982), which depicts the exploitation of peasant women in Kenya. Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation* and *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* also deal with the exploitation of the underprivileged woman.

Abega — like Bate Besong (1990 and 1991) and Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1986) — is suggesting that, through an attainment of their rights, deprived women can actively participate in the country's progress.

## Conclusion

From my description and analysis of the performance of Séverin Cécil Abega's *Le Sein t'est Pris*, it is clear that the less privileged women in Africa are exploited by a patriarchal system, privileged women, neo-colonialism and globalisation. This performance portrayed extreme and extravagant exploitation of an underprivileged woman and her child. In spite of the fact that the deprived woman understands that she is suppressed and exploited by all the different groups of exploiters, she is helpless. She is therefore a symbol of extreme exploitation. Also, the audience that watched the performance was as helpless as Nam in terms of its inability to destroy those external forces that killed Nam's baby and reduced her to nothingness. What can be done to ameliorate the plight of the less privileged women in this society?

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