

## **Journeys Across Time, Space, Memory, and Life: Ekomo as A Feminist Travel Narrative**

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**Abstract:** *María Nsüé Angüe's Ekomo (1985) has attracted critical attention as the first Equatoguinean novel to be written by a female author and also for contesting established traditional patriarchal paradigms. It tells the story of a young female protagonist, Nnanga, whose husband (Ekomo), having travelled to the city and lived an adulterous life while there, returns home (to the village) very sick. She travels with him from place to place in search of a cure and when he eventually dies, she has to see to his burial all by herself. While the ground-breaking role the novel ascribes to Nnanga in Equatoguinean letters cannot be denied, there remains a crucial element of the protagonist's development that remains unexplored. We refer to the effect traveling with her husband had on her physical, psychical, and linguistic development. The journey in search of a cure for her husband also turns out to be a journey through time and space, memory and experiences, thoughts and speech, and across contexts and barriers. These "journeys" have a transformative effect on Nnanga which warrants critical attention. Drawing from the conceptual frameworks of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and African Feminism, we submit that Nnanga's is a journey of formation and self-discovery that ultimately cements her place as a bona fide figure for conceptualizations of feminism within an African context.*

**Keywords:** Travel Narratives, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, African Feminism, Ekomo, Polygamy

### **Introduction**

The interface between literature and reality, fiction and non-fiction, is often questioned. Yet, there is no doubt that literary works are often the result of the experiences, observations, as well as the intuitions and creativity of writers. Travel narratives, in particular, are of interest to readers and researchers who seek to analyse the world around them through the lenses of literary works. They are prose forms that are written from the personal experiences of the

traveller/writer. Roy Bridges describes them as “a discourse designed to describe and interpret for its readers a geographical area together with its natural attributes and its human society and culture” (2002, 53). Going beyond the interpretation of the geographical, Casey Blanton (2002) goes further to underscore the interplay between the geographical surroundings of travellers and their inner selves. According to her, “whether fiction or nonfiction, there exists in the journey pattern the possibility of a kind of narrative where inner and outer worlds collide. But, as a survey of the development of the genre will show, the balance of that dialogue between the mind of the traveller and the observable world has not remained constant” (p.3). As Blanton further submits with respect to travel narratives: “social and psychological issues are more important than facts about places and events. Sights and vistas may not be as central to the narrative as issues of religion, politics, and social behaviour” (2002, 4). This idea captures eloquently the situation in Nsue’s *Ekomo*, where the places the narrator journeys through fade into the background in favour of her reflections on the social lives of the people and her own internal monologue. We argue that although the novel is a fictional narrative, it displays characteristics of a travel narrative. This is because it describes the human society and culture of Equatorial Guinea, i.e., social, and psychological issues, with a focus on gender relations.

Indeed, literary works such as Maria Nsue’s *Ekomo* (1985) offer a bird’s eye view of human experiences through individual accounts. The fictional narrative can be conceived as a travel narrative due to certain features the novel exhibits. First, it is presented from the protagonist’s point of view and in the first-person narrative. It tells the story of a woman, Nnanga, who undertakes many journeys in the course of her life—as a dancer who travels from village to village to perform in her youth, as a married woman when she moves to live in her husband’s village, and as a widow when she has to travel to different villages and to “la otra parte de la frontera [the other side of the border]”<sup>\*</sup> together with her husband who has returned from the city after a bout of adultery. Nnanga travels both physically and psychologically while accompanying her husband, Ekomo, in search of a cure for a strange ailment he has contracted while in the city. Additionally, the intersection and intriguing balance between the objective and subjective, the exterior and the interior, the impersonal and the personal in Nnanga’s account of events makes the novel an exemplary travel narrative. Furthermore, it displays elements of postcolonial literary works, for, as Odartey-Wellington observes, it navigates “un espacio fronterizo de culturas y tradiciones enfrentadas [a borderline space of conflicting cultures and traditions]” (2007, 165). It presents the strange and exotic in ways that both familiarize and distance the unnamed African village where the novel unfolds, as well as its people, and carries thematic concerns that go beyond descriptions of the people and places visited.

The themes that can be identified in *Ekomo* constitute a complex array of experiences that can be analysed from a feminist perspective: female agency

and male supremacy, marriage and polygamy, motherhood and family; and its interconnection with other personal attributes and social institutions such as age, race, religion, and tradition. Our aim in this article is to do a literary as well as a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) of the novel with a view to highlighting the protagonist's journey as one of formation and self-discovery that ultimately cements her place as a bona fide figure for conceptualizations on feminist thought. In the discussion to follow, we set out to examine the above-mentioned themes through the ideological frameworks of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and African feminist theory, to reflect on the peculiar circumstances of African women and to mitigate the cultural imperialism of Western feminism. We dissect the inner thoughts, discourse, and experiences of Nnanga who, in this story, can be described as a representative figure of feminist ideals— ideals which seek to destabilize entrenched patriarchal systems and promote the fair treatment of women. We also examine these themes through the experiences of other characters in the novel, such as Nchama, the adulteress, and Oyono, the polygamist, whose stories are presented by Nnanga, the protagonist from whose perspective events are narrated. Our aim is to embark on a feminist analytical resistance (see the following section) by presenting a commentary on these diverse experiences which form the core themes of the novel *Ekomo*.

Indeed, *Ekomo* has attracted a lot of attention as a classical piece within the African feminist literary tradition. Some of the existing literature which discusses feminism in the Afro-Hispanic context through an analysis of Nsue's novel are Odartey-Wellington (2007), Celaya-Carrillo (2011), Persico (2012), Borrego (2016), and Mcburney (2016). While the last three authors investigate the articulation of the black female voice and how the protagonist subverts the silent, subordinate role women are traditionally assigned within African societies, the first two authors focus their analysis on the cultural friction in the narrative work and the contributions of the African woman in the search for a black African identity. We aim to contribute to existing literature on feminism in the Afro-Hispanic context through an African feminist and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis approach, and by extension expand existing scholarship on African feminist ideology as a whole. We do so by examining not only the techniques the protagonist uses in subverting the passive role assigned to women, but, additionally, by critically analysing the discourse of the protagonist and the other characters. This will be done using FCDA, which provides a series of questions and concerns (as explained in the following section) that guide our analysis. In sum, we seek to promote equal possibilities for both women and men through analytical activism (Lazar 2005).

Using the principles of FCDA as the categories for our analysis, we 1) discuss gender as an ideological structure in the third section 2) analyse the complexity of gender and power relations in the fourth section 3) examine the role of discourse in the (de) construction of gender in the fifth section 4) focus on the social and psychological effects of gender discrimination in the sixth

section and 5) provide a synthesizing analysis of Nnanga's journeys in section seven before concluding in the final section. Our analysis shows that gendered cultural norms are constructed and maintained through discourse. The study also highlights the peculiar circumstances of African women in relation to issues such as female agency, marriage, and family.

### **Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and African Feminist Theory**

FCDA is interested in the construction of diverse identities in discourse (some conforming to, and others challenging/subverting existing gender norms). It "critiques from a feminist perspective hierarchically ordered gender structures sustained in/through language and other forms of communication, as part of a radical emancipatory project" (Lazar 2008, 90). FCDA is based on five key principles, namely, feminist analytical resistance, 'gender' as ideological structure, the complexity of gender and power relations, discourse in the (de)construction of gender and critical reflexivity as praxis. These key principles afford a linguistic analysis and critique of the problem of patriarchy in Africa and around the world. Moreover, its principles can be applied to the analyses of the sociocultural factors that sustain these discourses. In this paper, we selectively apply the following FCDA's conceptual categories due to their direct relevance to this paper, as outlined by Lazar (2005, 5-19):

1. **Feminist Analytical Resistance:** FCDA is a radical emancipatory discourse politics that critiques the existing gender structure with the aim of promoting equal possibilities for both sexes through analytical activism. In other words, through the analysis and critique of discourse, it seeks to bring about political or social change in gender issues.
2. **'Gender' as ideological structure:** Gender is an ideologically constructed system of power and privilege that promotes an asymmetrical relationship of domination and subordination between men and women respectively.
3. **Complexity of gender and power relations:** FCDA recognises that women worldwide experience peculiar constraints of gender and sexism. This is because of factors such as differences in local situations and times, as well as the interconnection between gender structures and other structures of power (e.g., those defined by age, social class, sexuality, ethnicity, geography etc.).
4. **Discourse in the (de)construction of gender:** Lazar explains this by stating that "gender ideology and gendered relations of power are (re)produced, negotiated, and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and in people's social and personal identities in texts and talk" (2005, 11).

Certainly, given the often taken-for-granted nature of language, the role of discourse in the sustenance of patriarchy often goes unnoticed. Although often taken for granted as a mere tool for communication, discourse, intertwined with other factors like ideology and power, significantly influences the social gender order. Wodak, for her part, notes that Critical Discourse Analysis (which forms the basis of FCDA) is “interested in not only analyzing opaque but also transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (2002, 11). The employment of FCDA will enable us to examine the complexity of gender and power relations throughout the novel. A close analysis of the narrative from a FCDA perspective will reveal how the intersecting factors of race, gender, age, social class and sexuality contribute to the hierarchical dynamics of power. It is an appropriate analytical tool for this study because sexism is a characteristic example of hegemony (van Dijk, 2001), which may remain unperceived in communities where tradition and culture are used to legitimize unequal treatments of women and men. It helps to unearth both the linguistic as well as the sociocultural factors that sustain sexism.

Furthermore, although written in Spanish, *Ekomo*'s link to the African novelistic tradition cannot be denied because it belongs to Equatoguinean literature. Written by an Equatoguinean writer who lives in Spain, it captures the traditional and everyday life of Equatorial Guinea at the onset of colonial influence. Consequently, the ideological framework of African feminist theory is pertinent for a salient examination of the traditional African context within which the novel is set. It is appropriate for this study because, as Arndt puts it, “African feminism aims at upsetting the existing matrix of domination and overcoming it, thus transforming gender relationships and conceptions in African societies and improving the situation of African women” (2002, 32). In general, African feminism seeks to improve African women's lives while at the same time, laying emphasis on 1) the importance of cooperation with men, 2) the need to resist the denigration of culture 3) the need to underscore the agency of the African woman and 4) the importance of female bonding and collaboration.

### **Gender as an Ideological Structure**

As Lazar notes, FCDA conceives gender as “an ideological structure that divides people into two classes, men and women, based on a hierarchical relation of domination and subordination, respectively” (Lazar 2005, 7). The ideological structure of gender “privileges men as a social group, giving them what Connell (1995) terms a ‘patriarchal dividend’, in terms of access to symbolic, social, political, and economic capital” (Lazar 2007, 146). This “patriarchal dividend” is perceived in many instances in the novel *Ekomo*. To start with, Equatorial Guinea and Africa as a whole are depicted as patriarchal societies. In Odartey-Wellington's analysis of the novel (*Ekomo*) she notes that,

the salvation (or otherwise) of the African continent is personified in its male citizens (Odartey-Wellington, 2007). Maria Nsue does this by fusing the themes of colonisation and identity. She writes:

Nfumbá'a, el africano de hoy, hombre del mañana, tras estar dos lluvias en Europa dejó su tradición encerrada entre los libros; dejó allí su personalidad y sus creencias africanas, y el ser sin continente regresó a su pueblo con un disfraz de europeo, pero sin el europeo dentro: con una máscara de Europa, pero sin su rostro en ella. Medio blanco, medio negro [Nfumbaa, the African of today, man of tomorrow, after being two rains in Europe left his tradition enclosed in books; he left his African personality and beliefs there, and then the man without a continent returned to his village with a European disguise but without the European inside: with a mask of Europe but without his face in it. Half white, half black]. (Nsué Angüe 1985, 107)

This “patriarchal dividend” is juxtaposed with the female experience through gender polarization, which Sandra Lipsitz Bem defines as the “subtle and insidious use” of the perceived difference between women and men “as an organizing principle for the social life of the culture” (1993, 2). The ‘*matriarchal dividend*’ (i.e., privileges and dignity due women) is presented as shadowed by the masculine (patriarchal dividend) in Nnanga’s description of her position as follows:

Yo no soy más que un perfil recortado contra el entorno que me rodea, que es la selva. Mi presencia, poco advertida, no es sino una presencia-ausencia cuya importancia nada tiene que ver con el proceso normal de los acontecimientos. Vivo y respiro con la conciencia de mi propia impotencia [I am nothing more than a profile cut against the contour that surrounds me, which is that of the jungle. My presence, unnoticed, is nothing but a presence-absence whose importance has nothing to do with the normal process of events. I live and breathe with the awareness of my own helplessness]. (Nsué Angüe 1985, 23-24)

The author laments not only her own position but, through the discourse of other characters, she also reveals the gender social order of the Fangs, the largest ethnic group in Equatorial Guinea, and, by extension, many other African societies as well. For example, Nchama, the adulteress, is to receive a lesser punishment than her adulterous partner because, as the village judge pronounces,

la mujer es como un niño. No tiene conciencia de fidelidad. Y su culpa por tanto es menor [...] Ella es como las hojas de los árboles: ama según la dirección en la que le viene el viento. Pero el hombre es consciente de su propio mal en este sentido [The woman is like a child, she has no consciousness of fidelity. And her fault therefore is less [...] She is like the leaves of the trees: she loves according to the direction the wind blows. But the man is conscious of his own wrongdoing in this sense]. (Nsué Angüe 1985, 18)

This judgement, which appears to favour the adulteress, is a classic example of what Glick and Fiske (1996) term “benevolent sexism.” That is, the “set of



interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver)” (Glick and Fiske 1996, 491). Although the lesser punishment may be seen to favour Nchama, the justification for it is based on infantilizing her. This is done through the use of simile (the woman is *like* a child). Nchama is portrayed as one who cannot think for herself or one who cannot be disciplined enough to understand the concept of fidelity. Her mental acuity is summarily discounted. The similarity that is drawn between Nchama and a child is made even more significant when we consider the roles and attributes given to the different groups that constitute the society, repeated several times in the following words or its variation in the novel—“los hombres hablan, las mujeres callan, los jóvenes escuchan y los niños juegan [the men talk, the women keep quiet, the youth listen and the children play]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 20). Women are classified with and equated to children. By this logic, Nchama’s actions cannot be taken for anything more than child’s play. Women and children are portrayed as belonging to two distinct categories that share common attributes – namely, naivety, gullibility, and dependence on others.

Similarly, in order to prevent breaking her town’s taboo that forbids the dead from being left unburied, Nnanga is forced to break another taboo that forbids women from touching the bodies of their dead husbands. For doing this, she is described as having committed a “great sin” against her town “por su condición de mujer, y mujer africana [for her condition as a woman, and an African woman]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 192). The description of her gender status as a “condition”, a word which is often used in association with ailments, highlights the hierarchical relation of domination and subordination between men and women. Women are perceived as lacking valuable attributes (courage, strength, wisdom, and the right to act) as opposed to men. This also reflects what Glick and Fiske define as “Competitive Gender Differentiation”: the vision of women as the inferior group while men are “perceived as having the traits necessary to govern important social institutions,” leading to “a social justification for male structural power” (1996, 493). The male/female dichotomy is therefore enacted based on the ideological structure of gender which endows the masculine with positive attributes which the feminine supposedly lacks, thus, creating a hierarchical relation of dominance and subservience.

On the other hand, when considered from an African feminist point of view, Nnanga is forced to perform a duty – a rite of passage no less – that is usually carried out by men. More significantly, she breaks a taboo in the process of adhering to one, because it is equally a taboo to leave the dead unburied. As the medicine man to whom they had gone for a cure informs Nnanga, “Es necesario enterrarlo, hija [It is necessary to bury him, daughter]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 163). Nnanga must break the taboo because her husband dies while the two are on a journey and there is no one to bury him if she does

not. Thus, to a large extent, she is forced into that position. She does not do it because of a wanton desire to contravene the norms of her people. Consequently, her journey in search of a cure, and subsequently, a place to bury her husband becomes crucial in determining Nnanga's actions and the repercussions that follow as a result. Contrary to the often-repeated words that run throughout the novel, that "las mujeres callan [women are quiet]", which implies inaction, while on the journey Nnanga acquires agency to act in response to the circumstances. The journey affords her the opportunity, and she proves to have the courage and ability to take on and perform a role that traditionally is strictly the preserve of men. The act is doubly transgressive, as she not only assumes the position of men but also contravenes a longstanding tradition. Granted, she eventually suffers because of this transgressive act. Nevertheless, its empowering significance cannot be overlooked. While Nnanga's ability to bury her husband serves to question the validity of the society's assignment of gender roles, it also proves the capability of women.

### **Complexity of Gender and Power Relations**

As stipulated by the third principle of FCDA, women in different local situations and at different historical moments experience different constraints of gender and sexism. In line with this, *Ekomo* reveals the complexity of gender and power relations by recounting the Equatorial Guinean experience of gender arrangements across different sectors of society. By having to travel from their village, identified only as "el pueblo [the village]" across the river and through the forest to "el otro lado de la frontera [the other side of the border]" with her husband, the novel offers us a panoramic view of events in different parts of Equatorial Guinea.

On the one hand, African readers would probably observe the similarities with other African countries and cultures. For example, the traits of motherhood, polygamy, widowhood rites and marriage rites are similar to those practiced in Ghana and, although Ghana does not feature in the novel, a Ghanaian reader would have a sense of undeniable familiarity with the rites and other events which occur in the context of *Ekomo*. Similarly, the ideological force which sustains polygamy is akin to that of the mistresses and sister-wives concept of the Western World and the concubines of Asia. On the other hand, one observes the different degrees of discrimination and subordination experienced by women according to time and place. There is an interplay between gender structures and other structures of power, such as those defined by age, social class, sexuality, ethnicity, geography, etc. This is demonstrated in the novel through the experience of Oyono, who was formerly a polygamist but decides to convert to Christianity and, for that reason, has been mandated by the priest to "let go" of some of his wives in order to have a monogamous marriage before being baptized into Christianity. To this, the judge declares before allowing Oyono to make his decision:



¿Cómo sabéis que podréis entrar en el terreno sagrado de los blancos si aquí en la tierra no os dejan entrar en sus casas? Además, en el supuesto de que os dejen entrar ¿puedo saber para qué queréis ir a vivir donde no os entienden ni el idioma ni las costumbres? Ni aún el color de vuestra piel se parece a la de ellos[...] ¡Estúpidos! ¡Más que estúpidos porque si os dejan entrar en el cielo será para ser sus criados o sus esclavos [How do you guarantee that you can enter the sacred ground of white people if they do not allow you into their homes here on earth? Also, in the event that they let you in, can I know why you want to go and live at a place where they understand neither your language nor your customs, and not even the color of your skin resembles theirs? [...] Stupid people! More than stupid because if they let you into heaven, it will be for you to be their servants or slaves]. (Nsué Angüe 1985,126)

The above quotation illustrates the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and gender and is crucial to the interpretation of the novel. It shows the complexity of gender and power relations. As the third principle of FCDA argues, gender is complex, as it is interwoven with other factors such as ethnicity and religion. Consequently, to solve the problem of the hierarchical gender status quo and eliminate gender discrimination, the other interrelating factors must also be unravelled to identify their roles in sustaining power relations between women and men. It is only when the other complex interwoven factors involved are identified and resolved that we can truly arrive at solutions for combating gender inequality.

At the court hearing, this intersection between gender and other factors (age, ethnicity, religion etc.) is observed as it becomes evident that the co-wives of Oyono are placed on different levels. In other words, it is not a simple case of masculinity versus femininity, with the husband on one side and the wives on the other side. Rather, some of the wives enjoy certain privileges due to factors such as age and fertility. The first wife of Oyono wields some form of “power” over her other co-wives, as she indirectly influences Oyono’s final decision and helps him to select the chosen one using her seemingly “prestigious position” as the eldest wife. One could argue that she is accorded some degree of agency and eminence, since it is her recommendation that is ‘accepted’ at such a crucial moment in the life of the family. Similarly, her earlier consent/permission for her husband to marry the three co-wives after her, according to traditional law, is further reiterated when she directs that her husband marries Ayekaba, the fourth wife, by Christian ordinance.

As explained above, this scene is an exemplary moment that underscores the intersection between gender, religion, age, and ethnicity. Women experience different constraints of gender and sexism according to their different local situations and time. This is due to the interplay between gender, religious, cultural, and social tensions. We become privy to these experiences and situations from Nnanga’s point of view as she journeys through life and space. As the narrator, not only does Nnanga recount her own experiences, but she also presents the reader with stories of the people in the community within

which she finds herself. To this end, it is important to note that Nnanga is not “native” to the community she lives in. She has journeyed from her village to live in her husband’s village and serves as the agent through whose eyes key issues related to marriage are communicated.

As Nnanga effectively communicates, fast forward, the home of Oyono is struck by a familial conflict due to the differences in conceptions of gender according to religion and geographical location. The acceptance of Christianity in the Fang society results in tension, as the two religions (the traditional religion of the Fangs and Christianity) coexist in the same geographical space and culture. As is made evident, the conflict between African and European conceptualizations of marriage (polygamy versus monogamy) only serves to reinforce the gender order, as men make a choice for divorce just as they do before marriage. In both situations, agency is a masculine prerogative. Anderson (2012) notes that, “choice on the marriage market is important because it entails a hierarchical structure where the position as chooser is hierarchically superior to the one who is chosen: the chooser has the power to influence and control the development of the marriage market” (p.15). Consequently, Oyono has to re-enact the masculine practice of choosing, albeit from the opposite end of the scale (i.e., marriage versus divorce). There is tension between the conversion to Christianity and Oyono’s decision to get divorced because the Christian religion which he (Oyono) seeks to convert to does not allow polygamous marriages. Here, the complex intersection between culture, religion and gender issues reinforces the image of women as passive, given that, as Anderson observes, “to be passive and to be chosen is described as a characteristic of femininity” (2012, 15). This tension is lamented by Nnanga, as follows:

Yo maldije en mi interior a todos los hombres y especialmente a aquel hombre de Dios que se proponía sin ningún remordimiento de conciencia incordiar en una familia pacífica y feliz. Maldije a aquel hombre blanco porque hacía desgraciada a una familia y hacía desgraciados a unos niños, exponiéndolos a quedar sin madre [I cursed within me all those men and especially that man of God who set out without any qualms to inconvenience a peaceful and happy family. I cursed that white man because he made a family miserable and made some children miserable, forcing them to remain without a mother]. (Nsué Angüe 1985, 118)

In the above quotation, Nnanga laments the negative effects of gender imbalance, religion, and culture on the family structure. The strong act of “cursing within her all those *men* and especially *that man of God*” highlights her lamentation, disapproval, and criticism of the situation.

Here, Nsue also highlights the intersection between race and gender. One observes the clash of two variations of the patriarchal system: that of the African and the European. Female subjugation is a consequence of colonial norms, just as it is a result of indigenous African customs. The African patriarchal system is embodied in the “*abaha*” also known as the “Casa de la

Palabra [House of the Word]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 10); i.e., the communal house of the village where men hold discussions on serious issues and women listen quietly (when they are allowed to be present). The *abaha* functions as a space where decisions are taken, and pronouncements are discursively made before being implemented. The hierarchical system operative in this space is clearly illustrated in the following quotation: “en el abaha, los hombres discuten. Todos hablan de Nchama, la pícara zalamera que ayer en el bosque cometi6 adulterio. Los hombres hablan, las mujeres callan. Escuchan los jóvenes y los niños juegan [in the *abaha*, the men are debating. Everybody is talking about Nchama, the sweet-talking scamp who committed adultery yesterday in the forest. The men are talking, the women are quiet. The youth are listening, and the children are playing]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 18). From the different roles attributed to the different groups of the community, women’s passivity could not be more pronounced, even when considered in relation to the role assigned children. Not only are women equated to the youth in their inaction, but they are also rendered voiceless whereas men are attributed agency and leadership roles often associated with masculinity.

*Ekomo* therefore offers an excellent opportunity to analyse the complexity of gender and power relations. Factors such as age, class/ social status and gender all influence how women experience patriarchy and the order of the hierarchical system. Whereas the male/female dichotomy reflects the relationship of domination and subordination respectively, women as a group experience different constraints of gender and sexism in line with the aforementioned factors. As Odarthey-Wellington (2007) notes, in the polygamous marriage of Oyono, power diminishes progressively, from the husband to the youngest wife. This is a system which creates rivalry and mistrust rather than solidarity. Indeed, in most marriages it is generally the other way around as the younger wife enjoys greater power due to her youth and sexuality; often causing the “dethroned wife” much bitterness and pain.

Similarly, during widowhood rites, women are subdued by fellow women (often the elderly) who enact the far from pleasant practices and subdue (often younger) widows to the rituals. This is evidenced in *Ekomo* as the protagonist, Nnanga, describes the rites and how she is made to sit in ashes without food or water, although weak and at the point of death. This ritual can actually be described as a form of torture which is rationalized, justified and legitimised under the guise of culture. Sadly, such acts are easily accepted through the propagation of gender ideologies. Nnanga’s narrative perspective makes an important emphasis. It brings to the fore the fact that, while men are keen to maintain their privileged position, it is both women and men who perpetuate the maintenance of the gender status quo. The physical and psychological torture and maltreatment Nnanga suffers at the hands of her fellow women amply exemplifies this. Moreover, the acceptance of norms such as widowhood rites on the part of some women demonstrates that women are accomplices who contribute to the sustenance of the gender status quo. As

Cockburn (1991) observes the acceptance of the “masculine sway exerted over women and men alike” is “not by legal coercion or economic compulsion but by cultural means, by force of ideas” (p. 168). This is what African feminism seeks to criticize and bring to the fore, i.e., the need for women to realize the role they sometimes play in subjugating their fellow women and the importance for sisterhood in the quest to obtain gender equity. Authors such as Hogan (1999) and Mutunda (2007) have emphasized this in their works *How Sisters Should Behave to Sisters* and *Women Subjugating Women* respectively.

### **Discourse in the (De)construction of Gender**

Gender ideologies that sustain the gender order can be (de)constructed through the production of discourses that challenge or reinforce them. In *Ekomo*, examples are seen in instances such as the trial scene of the adulterous couple. The metaphoric pronouncement by the village judge ‘*women are children*’ is a classic illustration of how ideologies about the sexes are handed down from generation to generation, thus, ensuring that the image of women as “half-grown” adults is sustained. Interestingly, this imagery is reflected in the aforementioned scene that demonstrates how this stereotype influences the hierarchically arranged classification of the gender order: “Los hombres hablan, las mujeres callan. Escuchan los jóvenes y los niños juegan [Men talk, women keep quiet. The youth listen and the children play]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 18).

The perception of women as the “deficient group” is also reflected in the scene of the widowhood rites. When Nnanga’s father refers to her “*condition as a woman*” in an attempt to plead that her grave offence be pardoned, he is actually reinforcing, through discourse, the image of women as an inferior group. His speech is a characteristic example of benevolent sexism (Glick and Fiske 1996). Thus, what seeks to be an explanation of her innocence and a justification for requesting that she be pardoned, becomes another way of (inadvertently) justifying the same ideologies that limit and exclude women in society.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the apparent deeply entrenched ideologies that seek to keep women under subjugation, there is also a constant move on the part of Nnanga to “rebel” against the established order. This trait is evident from her youth when, as a dancer, she takes on the persona of *Paloma de Fuego* [Dove of Fire] and, through dance, pays homage to Mba, contrary to the order not to mourn him. From her marriage to Ekomo, to her eventual widowhood, Nnanga evolves towards the assertion of her individuality and self-realization even in the face of the hierarchical, restraining order of her society. As Silvia Castro Borrego (2016) affirms, “Ekomo is a novel of intense personal growth with the protagonist undergoing a process of identity construction that projects towards assertiveness, ideological independence, and spiritual wholeness” (p. 156). As we present in the upcoming section on Nnanga’s

journeys, a key contributing element to this process of Nnanga's identity construction and rebelliousness is travel.

### **Effects of Gender Discrimination**

The principles of FCDA outlined above shed a theoretical light on the diverse factors that make Nsue's *Ekomo* a classic example of a travel narrative. The trajectory of her life consists of a series of physical journeys through space that mark defining points in her life. These include her journeys to other towns to perform her dance routines, her kidnapping by Ekomo on the day she was scheduled to marry the Catechist's son selected by her parents for her, and her journey with Ekomo in search of a cure for his strange disease. In all of these instances, not only does Nnanga travel physically, but additionally, she goes on a psychological journey in a bid to find some personal relief from the pain she experiences due to her situation. The author employs a splendid array of literary devices to effectively illustrate the deeply noxious effects of gender discrimination as she gives us a first-hand view of Nnanga's physical and emotional turmoil.

Through the use of flashback, Nnanga recounts the past events. The experiences of the different phases of her life which transpired over different places are relayed to the reader. One observes a stark difference between her youth and her adult years. As a young girl, she alternately takes on the persona of *Paloma de Fuego* [Dove of Fire] and experiences bouts of joy, power, and independence. However, as the wife and widow of Ekomo she experiences a life filled with sorrow, victimization, and limitation. Nsue uses the thoughts and speech of Nnanga to reveal the intricacies of patriarchy and its negative effects on society. The novel is full of soliloquies and monologues as Nnanga journeys through the present and the past, her inner being and the events that occur around her, lamenting her sorrows and worries, and wallowing in loneliness. It is striking that most of the revealing memories she has are those she recalls to herself, in her thoughts. Her emotional turmoil is brought to bear through the use of antithesis: "mientras mastico sin masticar, comiendo no sé qué ... [while I chew without chewing, eating I don't know what]" (Nsue Angüe 1985, 90). This highlights the forlornness, the confusion, the pain, and the emptiness she feels.

Nnanga's deep sense of loneliness is emphasised through the highly descriptive qualities of the novel. She seems to have more of a discourse with nature than the people around her and this relationship between herself and nature is highlighted through the employment of pathetic fallacy: "La noche estaba febril; Caen de los arboles lágrimas pesadas; Lloraban las nubes, y sus lágrimas y sudores, una a una, caían blandas sobre la tierra; Volvió a salir el sol, pero está triste tras las nubes [The night was a flurry; heavy tears fall off the trees; the clouds were crying, and their tears and sweats, one by one, were falling softly on the ground; the sun came out again but it is sad behind the

clouds]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 107). The use of transferred epithets (*noche febril*, *sol triste*, and *nubes lloronas*) clearly illustrate the colossal nature of the physical and psychological effects of patriarchy. That nature itself was thus affected, or could thus reflect these negative consequences, shows the extent of the graveness of the situation. This point is expertly driven home through the use of repetition: “*cielo azul-ceniciento*, *niebla blanco-cenicenta*, *los árboles verdes-cenicientos*, *cabanas grises de paredes grises*. Es la mañana *gris* de mi pequeño pueblo [greyish-blue sky, ashen-white fog, greenish-grey trees, grey cabins with grey walls. It is the grey morning of my small village]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 19). The constant mention of these somber imageries creates a rhythm of continuity which gives an impression of the “unstoppable” nature of the adverse effects of these negative traditional and sociocultural practices that sustain patriarchy.

Additionally, the confluence of time (the past and the present) cannot be overlooked in the above quotation. The narrator’s indiscriminate alternation between the past and the present reveals the severity of her traumatic experience and the resultant state of listlessness she finds herself in. One would expect that the logical continuation to “*la noche estaba febril*” would be “*caían de los árboles lágrimas pesadas*”, and that that of “*volvió a salir el sol*”, would be “*pero estaba triste tras las nubes*”. Consequently, the continuation of these sentences—“*caen de los árboles lágrimas pesadas*” and “*pero está triste tras las nubes*”—respectively, shows how seamlessly the past merges into the present for Nnanga as she travels through time in an obviously confused state.

### **Nnanga’s Journeys**

Throughout the novel, Nnanga is shown to be constantly on the move from one space to another and for one reason or the other. As a young girl she frequently travels to other villages to dance. She is kidnapped before she gets married to her betrothed and also, she moves to live in her husband’s village after her marriage. Finally, she has to accompany Ekomo, her husband, on a journey in search of a cure for his strange ailment and eventually returns home after his demise.

These journeys afford her the opportunity to shed the traditional role of “*las mujeres callan*” assigned to women in her community. This is clearly exemplified when she uses her dance to mourn the death of Mba, the dwarf, contrary to directives from the village authorities forbidding anyone to mourn him. This is presented in one of Nnanga’s recollections (an example of a mental journey through memory and time) and as she recalls, she and her group had to travel (physical journey) to another village to perform. In her performance she was able to transport herself through the beat of the drum and music into a state of ecstasy and into the world of the deceased Mba to offer him her gift of mourning. As we see, the journeys accord her a form of freedom and liberation from the shackles of restriction and passivity. While her dance performances transport her into a realm of mobility and liberation, they are also empowering and serve as a means by which she can captivate her audience. Consequently,



she is able to affirm that “Yo, Paloma de Fuego, conocía perfectamente cuál era el poder que había adquirido...[I, *Paloma de Fuego*, fully understood the power that I had acquired...]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 94).

It is through her journeys that Nnanga arrives at a point where she is able to reflect on her life and give voice to her experiences and feelings. According to Swanson “through this return to the past she examines her life and begins to discern women’s place in society” (2019, n.p.). At the time of narrating the events, Nnanga had already journeyed through life, time and space—as a young girl, as a married woman and as a widow; from her village to her husband’s village, the villages she accompanies her husband through up to the current place from which she narrates the story. In Swanson’s view, “it’s from this liminal place of crisis—the critical moment of consciousness of her place in society—that Nnanga gathers the courage to express the cry of rebellion with which the novel ends” (Swanson 2019, np). The fact that Nnanga poses the cry of rebellion as a question, though, must not be overlooked “¿Quién dará el grito de esta rebellion? [Who will launch the cry of this rebellion?]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 247). The question posed signals her arrival at a place of uncertainty, a place of doubt where her mind tells her she is dead, and her rebellion tells her she is neither dead nor alive: “¡No estoy muerta ni viva! [I am neither dead nor alive!]” (Nsué Angüe 1985, 248). Furthermore, as a weak voice from within informs her, she has reached the border between life and death. One would have expected that her rebellion would signal life to her rather than feeling ‘neither dead nor alive’. However, although Nnanga’s journeys bring her to a place of realization, she remains in a quandary over the implementation of what needs to be done.

## Conclusion

The objectives of the present paper were to reflect on the peculiar circumstances of African women and mitigate the cultural imperialism of Western feminism. Our study has shown that despite the peculiarities in sexism faced by women in different places and the variations in feminisms, women from all over the world do have one thing in common — the experience of gender discrimination, although it may come in different forms. This has been demonstrated through our application of the ideological framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. Nnanga’s journeys through time, space, and memory is accompanied by changes in her subject position and also in her actions and discourse. Through the use of FCDA, we have shown how culture and gender ideologies are sustained and perpetuated through discourse. Certainly, discourse plays a crucial role in sustaining the ideological underpinnings of ‘gender’ and for that reason should be a focal point in attempts to deconstruct the existing gender status quo. The analysis of the diverse experiences which form the core themes of the novel *Ekomo* have highlighted issues such as the complexity of gender and power relations and

ultimately, serves as an attempt to eliminate gender discrimination through feminist analytical resistance.

The present paper has also shown that, as contended by African feminist theory, women should not be seen solely as victims since there can be instances of female agency. Even though women appear to be subjugated through marriage, family life and some aspects of culture, the novel *Ekomo* shows how African women can and do battle against the odds. Female agency is seen on the part of Oyono's first wife as well as that of Nnanga herself throughout the novel. As narrator of her own story as well as that of her husband and his people, Nnanga's perspectives on events become central in the novel. The agency she wields affords her the opportunity to describe her experiences and those of the members of her community, but, perhaps even more significantly, she is able to bring out her innermost thoughts, sentiments, hopes, and aspirations and she questions the norms and practices of her people.

Finally, as we have argued through the lenses of African feminist theory, women's acceptance of adverse cultural norms makes possible the subjugation of other women and their roles as accomplices in enforcing them. This also underlines the extent to which some aspects of a people's cultural beliefs can be difficult to discard. It is during her travels that Nnanga sheds the shackles of passivity and inaction and can rebel against the established patriarchal order. Her return, though, signals a return to the status quo represented in the widowhood rights she is subjected to. Hence, Nnanga's agency, rebellion and centrality to the events do not absolve her from the long reach of her culture and its traditions and this is complicated by the fact that the chains of patriarchy are anchored not only in the (in)actions of men but in those of women as well. Although her journeys make it possible for her to subvert the established order, once she returns to the village and to the fold, the cultural "establishment" holds sway and she must submit to the force of its demands. Thus, it is telling when Nnanga laments at the end of the novel that "Que lloren todas las mujeres juntas. Por cualquier motivo. ¿Por qué no han de llorar las mujeres, si sus vidas no son sino muertas? [Let all women weep together. Whatever the reason may be. ¿Why must women not weep, if their lives are nothing but deaths?]" (Nsué Angüe 1985, 247). It is on the strength of her experiences and those of the people she talks about (Nchama and Oyono) that Nnanga arrives at this conclusion. Although through her travels Nnanga has the opportunity to assert herself and subvert the gender hierarchy that seeks to maintain the subordination of women, this conclusion *suggests* the futility of going against established cultural norms. It suggests that the condition of women cannot be ameliorated, much in the same way as a cure could not be found for Ekomo's disease. When one considers the fact that women collude in the enforcement of patriarchy and are instrumental in the implementation of cultural norms and practices that are unfavorable to their fellow women, Nnanga seems justified in portending doom for women. Indeed, the attempts to eliminate gender bias will be futile, so long as women are unable to come

together as a sisterhood (“let all women weep together”) since patriarchy is complicated and made even more so by the role of accomplices played by women. Nevertheless, one could argue that by this lamentation, Nnanga seeks to underscore women’s plight and thereby prod them into action.

### Notes

\* All translations ours except otherwise indicated.

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