



Unsubmissive Self: Identity Quest and African Feminine Resilience

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Abstract

The postcolonial African literary landscape offers fertile ground for examining the intricate interplay between identity formation and resistance, particularly regarding the multifaceted experiences of women. This exegesis scrutinizes the nuanced portrayals of female subjectivity in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) and Léonora Miano's *Season of the Shadow* (2018), focusing on the protagonists' journeys toward self-discovery amidst contemporary socio-economic pressures and ancestral historical legacies. While existing scholarship explores displacement and gender, a focused comparative analysis that elucidates the specific phenomenological and material strategies of resistance employed by female protagonists, to forge unsubmissive selves, remains underexplored. This investigation posits that both novelists offer profound insights into how African women negotiate and subvert externally imposed identities, actively constructing personal narratives of selfhood

against the colonality of power. The central research question interrogates how these protagonists articulate their quests for identity through resistance against prescribed notions of womanhood, shaped by colonial and postcolonial forces. Utilizing a comparative methodology, this study examines narrative structures and character development to highlight divergent and convergent approaches to agency. Furthermore, this endeavor navigates the precarious tension between the particular and the universal, maintaining a vigilant critical consciousness to avoid flattening historical textures in favor of reductive universalism. The study proceeds in two stages: “Deconstructing Imposed Identities and Dominant Narratives,” which examines the navigation of patriarchal and capitalist structures, and “Narratives of Agency and Resistance,” which analyzes resilience, self-determination, and the ontological acts of rebellion against dominant powers.

Keywords

Subjectivity, agency, involvement, subversion, narrative

Introduction

The labyrinthine corridors of contemporary African and diasporic literature serve as crucial arenas for the articulation and contestation of identity, particularly for women grappling with the enduring legacies of colonialism and the pervasive forces of patriarchy. This exegesis embarks on a meticulous comparative inquiry into two seminal novels: Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) and Léonora Miano’s *Season of the Shadow* (2018).¹ Though distinct in their temporal and geographical specificities, these narratives coalesce in their profound engagement with imposed identities and the audacious assertion of female agency. Such an examination transcends mere academic exercise; it is an imperative intellectual endeavor that resonates with pressing contemporary concerns surrounding migration, racial justice, and gender

¹ For any other references to the novels under investigation (*Behold the Dreamers* and *Season of the Shadow*), we will respectively use *BTD* and *SOTS*.

equity, offering vital insights into how individual subjectivities are forged amidst global sociopolitical currents.

The resonance of these works is particularly relevant in the current global climate. In *BTD*, Neni, a Cameroonian immigrant, navigates the treacherous landscape of the American Dream during the 2008 financial crisis. Her struggle mirrors the vulnerabilities of countless individuals displaced by economic instability. As Mary Linda Vivian Onuoha (2019) contends, the process of acculturation in Mbue's narrative is inextricably linked to the preservation of an African identity that must constantly negotiate the predatory lure of Western materialism. During this period, the collapse of major financial institutions led to a staggering loss of household wealth that disproportionately influenced immigrant communities and families of color, exacerbating the precariousness Neni faces as she attempts to secure a foothold in a crumbling economy. Her struggle with cultural assimilation and the insidious pressures of Western consumerism illuminate the intricate ways in which postcolonial subjects negotiate their identities within a globalized yet profoundly unequal world.

Concurrently, Miano's *SOTS* excavates the harrowing experiences of women abducted during the transatlantic slave trade, a catastrophe involving the forced displacement of millions. This novel provides a chilling reminder that the wounds of historical exploitation ripple through generations, shaping contemporary understandings of race, gender, and belonging. As Abib Sène and Fatoumata Keïta (2021) demonstrate in their excavation of Miano's memory-work, the narrative functions as a traumatic site where the trope of capture is revisited to illuminate the persistent echoes of slavery in the modern psyche. Miano's portrayal of the brutal negation of identity offers a critical lens through which to interpret ongoing discussions about reparations, ancestral trauma, and the quest for mnemonic justice. Both texts underscore the lived realities of women whose identities are perpetually contested by external forces, urging a reflection on the mechanisms of subjection and the resilience of the human spirit.

This research is anchored in a theoretical framework drawn from critical race theory, postcolonial studies, and feminist thought. Central to this inquiry is Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), which theorizes the psychological impact of racial subjugation, and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which discloses how dominant Western discourses construct and impose identities upon the Other. Homi

K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) provides the essential concept of hybridity and the third space, allowing us to see Neni and Eyabe not as static victims, but as subjects negotiating the liminal spaces between tradition and catastrophe. Furthermore, the intersectional insights of Kimberlé Crenshaw are vital for addressing how race, gender, and class converge to shape unique experiences of oppression. Complementing this, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) facilitates the deconstruction of essentialist notions of gender by recognizing identity as performative and subject to constant re-constitution through subversive acts. The scholarship of bell hooks (1984) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) further enriches this study by centering marginalized voices and challenging universalizing notions of sisterhood. Finally, Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001) and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) provide the necessary context for understanding enduring patriarchal structures and the subtle ways subjects assert their humanity amidst extreme violence.

Existing scholarship has significantly enhanced the foundational comprehension of these works. Critical reception of Mbue's fiction, such as the work of Ferusheya J. Jaffin and A. Linda Primlyn (2022) or Komla M. Avono (2023), has largely focused on the sociopolitical critique of the American Dream and the narrative shift from utopia to dystopia. Regarding Miano, critics like Thierry Boudjekeu Kamgang (2024) identify her project as an engagement with ancestral psychic wounds, while Susanne Goumegou and Louis Nana (2023) explore the collective's role in communal healing. Stéphane Yro (2025) further refines this by analyzing the identity labyrinth and the quest for meaning in Miano's prose, characterizing her aesthetic as a poetics of wandering that facilitates the reconstruction of the self. Recently, Latifa Boutazat (2025) highlighted the vital shift from dehumanization to resilience. However, a significant limitation remains: a discernible gap in comprehensive comparative analyses that trace the specific literary strategies through which female characters in both texts challenge dominant narratives to define their own identities. This comparative lacuna, therefore, underscores a critical intellectual opportunity to enhance the richness and intertextual elucidation of those narratives, making a comparative study not just relevant, but imperative for a more complete and insightful contribution to the field.

Accordingly, this exegesis posits that a comparative analysis of selected novels by Mbue and Miano proffers unparalleled insight into the multifaceted nature of

female identity formation and resistance in the face of colonial and patriarchal impositions. This leads to the following research question: How do the selected novels by Mbue and Miano use distinct yet convergent literary devices to portray female characters, challenging dominant narratives, and asserting their agency in defining their identities, amidst diverse manifestations of colonial legacies and patriarchal structures? The primary objective of this research is to identify and critically analyze the literary strategies, including narrative structures, character development, and thematic representations through which the female protagonists in *BTD* and *SOTS* deconstruct externally imposed notions of African womanhood and articulate compelling narratives of self-determination and subversion.

To achieve this, a comparative literary methodology, as posited by Susan Bassnett (1993), serves as an indispensable hermeneutic tool. By juxtaposing Mbue's contemporary realism with Miano's historical-poetic narrative, this analysis orchestrates a dialectical encounter between distinct aesthetic modes, thereby mapping structural parallels in the configurations of female subjugation and the shared quest for an authentic dignity. However, this endeavor must navigate the precarious tension between the particular and the universal; the risk of anachronistic conflation requires a vigilant critical consciousness that avoids flattening historical textures in favor of a reductive universalism.

Organized around the dialectics of disruption and reclamation, the current investigation is composed of two interconnected analytical axes. The first axis, "Deconstructing Imposed Identities and Dominant Narratives," demonstrates how female characters navigate externally defined notions of African womanhood, encompassing the impacts of colonial legacies and patriarchal confinement. The second axis, "Narratives of Agency and Resistance," investigates the diverse strategies of resilience, self-determination, and subversion employed by these protagonists. By focusing on their acts of rebellion, ranging from Neni's negotiation of her future amidst economic collapse to the reclamation of ancestral memory in Miano's novel. This analytical critical stage illuminates the tenacious human spirit's capacity to assert its own narrative against dominant powers.

Deconstructing Imposed Identities and Dominant Narrative(s)

Both Mbue and Miano foreground how forces beyond individual control shape women's subjectivities, whether these are the remnants of historical trauma or the

pressures of contemporary socio-economic realities. However, their approaches significantly diverge in terms of historical scope and specific manifestations of those impositions. In Mbue's novel, the deconstruction of female identities predominantly unfolds through the lens of immigration and the confrontation with the American Dream, which, far from being a space of liberation, often mirrors and even exacerbates pre-existing alienations. Neni, the Cameroonian protagonist, embodies this struggle against dominant narratives. Her aspiration for respectability and a better life is consistently undermined by the realities of immigrant status and by cultural dictates, both Cameroonian and American. This existential impasse is poignantly distilled in the following passage, where the protagonist's loss of agency is rendered through the agonizing filter of somatic distress:

She wanted to be in control of her own life, and now, clearly, she wasn't, and simply thinking about the fact that someone else was going to decide the direction of her future was enough to intensify her headache, leave her feeling as if a thousand hammers were banging on her skull. This helplessness crushed her, the fact that she had traveled to America only to be reminded of how powerless she was, how unfair life could be. (Mbue, 2016, pp. 62-63)

This excerpt serves as a definitive testament to the somatization of structural violence, where the "thousand hammers" represent the rhythmic, relentless pressure of a bureaucratic and socio-economic machine that denies the subject's humanity. The *migraine* is not merely a biological symptom but a phenomenological response to the loss of self-authorship. By moving to the West, Neni sought a landscape of agency, yet she finds herself ensnared in a crushing helplessness that is arguably more agonizing than the traditional constraints she fled. Because faceless entities such as immigration court and the volatile American market, now dictate her future, her very consciousness becomes a site of colonial-like occupation, where the dream of liberty is replaced by the reality of a new, administrative subjugation.

Although the promise of American modernity is predicated on the myth of the self-made individual, Mbue's imagery reveals the unfairness of a system that extracts labor while refusing to grant security. This reminder of powerlessness acts as a cruel irony; the geographical displacement meant to catalyze liberation instead precipitates a profound ontological shrinkage. The physical pain Neni endures

underscores the truth that for the subaltern, the American Dream is not an ethereal ideal but a heavy, material burden that demands the surrender of one's psychic peace. Therefore, her identity remains trapped in a state of unravelment. Neni's experience proves that the transition from a traditional patriarchy to a Western capitalist structure is often a lateral move from one form of silence to another, mediated by the agonizing realization that her autonomy was always a conditional grant rather than an inherent right. This erosion of agency is further complicated by the moral compromises the system requires for survival. As Laura Roldán-Sevillano (2026) argues, Neni's cruel attachment to the American Dream forces her into a predatory stance that contradicts her initial quest for respectability:

Additionally, the novel depicts in detail how, despite such a dramatic situation at the mercy of economic agents, Jende and Neni's deep (and cruel) attachment to the American Dream makes them seek any opportunity to stay in the States. [...] Neni, who is extremely worried about the end of her studies [...] resorts to extortion when she visits Clark's wife, Cindy [...] and blackmails her. Such demeanor bending legal and moral boundaries could be understood as a manifestation of Neni's profound desperation at her family's financial instability. (Roldán-Sevillano, 2026, pp. 187-188)

This shift from passive suffering to active extortion underscores the brutal realities of a meritocracy that fails to deliver on its promises, transforming the subject into a mirror of the very greedy and exploitative system Neni seeks to enter. Nevertheless, her identity is caught in a double bind: she has to maintain the cohesion of her household according to Cameroonian standards while simultaneously pursuing social upward mobility according to American expectations. This tension destabilizes her adapted identity, as she realizes that her autonomy in the West is conditional, if not illusory. As long as she and Jende serve the interests of the system, they are tolerated; yet as soon as the economic gears grind to a halt, Neni is relegated back to her status as a subaltern. Apparently, Western modernity does not offer her a blank slate, but rather a new script where her voice remains stifled by the imperatives of material survival. Accordingly, this modern subjugation invites a deeper genealogical inquiry into how similar mechanisms of

displacement and erasure operate within the historical voids excavated in Miano's work.

From a philosophical perspective, Neni's experience evokes a Heideggerian state of "Thrownness," but one intensified by the postcolonial condition. She is thrown into a world where her "Being-toward-the-future" is effectively amputated by the State. In other words, when an external power decides one's direction, the subject undergoes a metaphysical death before the physical or legal one. This ontological displacement is rooted in a crisis of spatiality. As Martin Heidegger (1962) contends, "If we attribute spatiality to Dasein, then this 'Being in space' must manifestly be conceived in terms of the kind of Being which that entity possesses. [...] its spatiality shows the characters of de-severance and directionality" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 105).

In Mbue's narrative, Neni's "de-severance," the ability to bring the world and her future closer, is systematically blocked. Her spatiality is no longer a "concernful familiarity" but a bureaucratic estrangement. The "thousand hammers" are the somatic sound of the collapse of the Cogito; Neni can no longer say, "I think, therefore I am," but rather "I am thought by the system; therefore, I suffer." This suggests that Western modernity operates as a Panopticon of labor, where the immigrants' freedom is merely the choice of the instrument of their own exploitation. As Achille Mbembe argues in *On the Postcolony* (2001), uprooting leads to a multiplication of fronts of struggle where individuals must negotiate fragmented identities. This fragmentation is captured in the Kafkaesque dialogue regarding legal status:

'Listen, my brother,' Bubakar said. 'These things take time, eh? Immigration courts are backlogged these days like nothing I've ever seen before – there's just too many people the government wants to deport and not enough judges eager to deport them. You should have received your Notice to Appear long ago, but the way your asylum case has been going, I don't even know when you're going to get it because I'm calling the asylum office and nobody is telling me anything useful. So you may not even have to stand in front of a judge for up to six months, maybe even one year. And then after the judge sees you, he's going to want to see you again, and the next court date may not be for Allah alone knows how long. And even the judge denies your

asylum case, my brother, we can still appeal the decision. We can even do more than one appeal. (Mbue, 2016, p. 72)

This discourse reveals a form of temporal colonization. For the Jongas, the future is no longer a private possession but an administrative byproduct of a system that is “backlogged like nothing ever seen before.” Perceptibly, this suspension constitutes an ontological violence, stripping individuals of the ability to project themselves into a stable horizon. Uncertainty reduces their existence to a state of pure contingency, a metaphysical void where identity cannot be constructed because the foundation of one’s legal being remains unverified and under constant threat of erasure. Granting that the rhetoric of modernity emphasizes merit, Bubakar’s advice highlights a reality where survival depends on the eagerness of judges. The Jongas are transformed from human subjects seeking asylum into cases, proving that the freedom promised by the West is often the freedom to endure a prolonged state of social invisibility. This systemic stasis is further compounded by a broader macroeconomic collapse, as Jende perceives the parallels between the Global South and the sudden instability of the West:

He thought about the state of the city and the state of the country. He thought about how strange and sad and scary it was that Americans were talking about an ‘economic crisis,’ a phrase Cameroonians heard on the radio and TV virtually every day in the late eighties, when the country entered a prolonged financial downturn. Few people in Limbe understood the origin of the slump, what the government was going to get out of it [to] prevent a recurrence, but everyone knew that it made buying food and other necessities beyond difficult, thanks to the evaporation of large amounts of money. Now it was happening in America. (Mbue, 2016, pp. 183-184)

The above quotation operates as a deconstruction of Western exceptionalism; it illuminates the cyclic nature of capitalist trauma. Jende’s realization that the economic crisis has manifested in the heart of the metropole signals a profound disruption of the immigrant’s teleology. In this vein, Mbue’s text aligns with Françoise Vergès’s *Decolonial Feminism* (2021), which discloses how racialized subjects negotiate colonial legacies in modern contexts. The “evaporation of money” in New

York echoes a state of global precarity, where the vulnerability of the subaltern is a fundamental feature of a global machine. Notably, Mbue's novel uses the words "strange," "sad," and "scary," to underscore the ontological shock of the protagonist. Neni's experience proves that migrant women carry the identical burdens of their origins, to which are added specific racialized constraints. Hence, the American Dream is unmasked as a fragile construct offering no true sanctuary from the volatility of global capital.

In stark contrast, Miano's *SOTS* undertakes a radical deconstruction of African female identities by delving into the roots of the slave trade as an active wound. Miano's text directly challenges the narrative that has erased women's experiences, as evidenced by the spatial management of maternal grief:

[The old woman] had the Council's ear. She was the one who suggested that the women whose children were missing be housed under the same roof. In that way, she declared, their pain will be contained in a clearly defined place and will not spread throughout the village. We have much to do to understand what has happened to us, [and] then begin rebuilding. Careful not to be remiss, Mukano the chief, approving with a nod of his head the confinement of the grieving women, gave orders for the most valiant men to inspect the surrounding bush. (Miano, 2018, p. 2)

This excerpt unveils a spatialization of trauma, where the community attempts to confine the disruptive power of grief. This reflects a biopolitical management of the female subject, where the mother's existence is permitted only within a regulated zone of mourning. Although the notables perceive this as a pragmatic necessity, it serves to further marginalize female agency. To "understand what has happened" requires a confrontation with the void, yet the physical relocation of the mothers suggests a desire to look away from the source of the rupture. Consequently, this spatial exclusion mirrors the social invisibility of modern immigrant narratives, proving that the female subject is frequently the first to be sequestered to preserve the official narrative of resilience.

Moreover, Miano's characters employ mnemonic resistance as a foundational strategy to reassert a spiritual lineage that has been targeted for administrative and physical liquidation. Within the stifling atmosphere of *SOTS*, the songs, incantations,

and ritualized gestures are far more than mere cultural remnants or nostalgic echoes; they function as ontological anchors, dynamic, non-linear repositories of a selfhood that refuses to be thought by the captor. In this sense, the imposition of a colonial-like identity, one predicated on the reduction of the human to the status of chattel, is systematically subverted through the fluid mechanics of oral transmission:

They stammer: Mwititi... – Woman, what have you to say about the shadow? Nine out of the ten women reply: Mwititi is deceitful. She came to me speaking in the voice of my eldest son. The one who is missing. I know it was not him. Then, they fall silent. They have said too much. [...] One alone replies: The shadow is all we have left. It is what the days have become. Eyabe is the one who speaks these words. (Miano, 2018, pp. 15-16)

Clearly, despite the appearance of psychological fragmentation, this quotation delineates a sophisticated epistemological refusal. By naming the “Mwititi” and identifying its mimicry, the women perform a radical act of discernment. They refuse to be seduced by a hollowed-out memory. This stammering is a linguistic survival strategy; through which they operate at the limits of the sayable. Their recognition that “it was not him” signifies the preservation of a core truth against a reality that seeks to gaslight them. By choosing to “fall silent,” they reclaim silence as a sanctuary where the captors’ power is finally halted. As Anaïs Metoukson (2023) argues, the oblivion of spirituality ironically creates a vacuum where new forms of social status can be negotiated. Women who remain faithful to the principles of belief transform spiritual fidelity into clandestine power. This aligns with Orlando Patterson’s (1982) identification of the “mask” as a vital instrument of survival; his theory of social death provides a vital lens for this behavioral dualism. The outward compliance of these women is a strategic performance, a tactical layering that preserves internal integrity. Thus, Patterson’s sociological observation underscores that the social death of the oppressed is never absolute; there remains a vibrant subjectivity waiting to manifest as self-determination.

In a parallel trajectory of ontological crisis, Neni’s disillusionment in *BTD* is not merely with the American Dream, but with the realization that the patriarchal contract she negotiated, loyalty in exchange for endurance, is insufficient to shield her from systemic erasure. Both authors ultimately affirm that subjectivity is not a

passive recipient of external definitions, but an active, dynamic force capable of subverting dominant narratives and forging new pathways to self-determination. This ontological decay is most poignantly articulated in the scene where Neni confronts the final dissolution of her carefully constructed stability during her conversation with Natasha regarding a former professor she hopes can intervene in their deportation:

‘What are you willing to give in exchange for what you want? [...] How much have you been in touch?’ [...] ‘We email each other a few times, nothing too special. [...] He included me in his email list when he sent pictures of his fortieth birthday celebration [...] I included him in my email also, when I emailed everyone to say that Timba had been born. [...] Things like that. (Mbue, 2016, pp. 326-327)

This dialogue unmasks the precariousness of the immigrant’s social cartography. Indeed, overwhelmed by maternal sacrifice and Jende’s impending deportation, Neni attempts to transmute a casual academic acquaintance into a lifeline for survival. The “nothing too special” nature of her connection reveals the limits of her agency; her Kantian “I think” is no longer the architect of a coherent world but is reduced to latching onto the subjectivity of a Westerner for whom she is merely a line on an email list. This scene highlights how Neni’s identity is inextricably interwoven with the challenges of raising a family within a host country that offers only conditional belonging, a digital shadow that provides no true sanctuary.

Conversely, Miano’s text delves into the violent erasure inherent in the slave trade, where deconstruction is a visceral experience of being rebranded as chattel. However, Miano foregrounds the internal resistance to the total annihilation of the self. This aligns with the “coloniality of power,” as both authors illustrate how dominant narratives seek to impose totalizing identities. Yet, their female protagonists, through the complex act of suffering and collective embrace, dismantle these impositions. Significantly, the convergence of *BTD* and *SOTS* reveals how both novelists expose the fragility of externally defined female roles. Deconstruction is achieved through the intricate narration of the tensions engendered by these impositions. While Miano excavates the deep historical wounds of colonial violence, Mbue scrutinizes the contemporary forces that continue to confine women in

diasporic contexts. This critical dissection of imposed identities is not an endpoint, but a necessary foundation for the strategies of agency that follow.

Asserting Agency and Resistance:

Ebullition of Subjectivity

This inquiry probes beyond mere survival to illuminate the active processes of resilience, subversion, and self-determination, unveiling how Mbue's and Miano's female characters transform their lived experiences of oppression into potent wellsprings of identity. The philosophical underpinning of this exploration lies in comprehending agency not merely as individual will, but as a complex negotiation within structures of power, echoing Judith Butler's notion of performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), where identity is continuously constituted through reiterative acts of resistance. To further scrutinize this negotiation, Neni's agency should not be conceptualized as a monolithic explosion of rebellion, but as a multi-layered, strategic stratigraphy of the self. For Neni, as a subaltern female subject, agency operates as a subterranean movement, a series of tactical shifts deployed when the grand narratives of the American Dream fail to provide sanctuary.

This internal negotiation begins with internal refusal, a psychological boundary where she maintains a private "I am" in spite of being "thought by the system" as a mere instrument of domestic labor. In *BTD*, this agency is often subtle, emerging from the daily existential precarity of the immigrant experience. While grand narratives of political rebellion are absent, Neni's resistance is a profound subversion of imposed silence, rooted in an initial refusal to fully acquiesce to the disillusionment of the American Dream. This cognitive boundary is poignantly articulated in her reflection on maternal sacrifice:

A lot of mothers where I come from ... they send their children to live with other people. They want them to be raised by relatives who have more money. Sometimes these mothers and fathers are poor, and other times they are married and living together and have enough to feed their children, but they want their children to grow up in the house of rich people. (Mbue, 2016, p. 330)

Notably, Neni's anxiety functions as a visceral manifestation of her maternal commitment. For her, the prospect of returning to Cameroon is not initially a

restorative homecoming but a regression, a retreat from the socioeconomic threshold she has struggled to cross. Unlike archetypal maternal figures who might surrender children to extended family, Neni asserts her role as an active architect of their upbringing. Insofar as Neni's initial optimism matures into a resilient resolve, her agency is catalyzed by her burgeoning awareness of the Edwards family's hypocrisy. She begins to perceive the American Dream not as a meritocratic promise, but as a gilded *façade* for structural inequity. This shift from passive hope to critical awareness is poignantly reflected in her dialogue with Jende, whose despair signals a total rupture of his "being-toward-the-future":

'I don't like what my life has become in this country. I don't know how long I can continue living like this, Neni. The suffering in Limbe was bad, but this one here, right now ... it's more than I can take.' Neni Jonga stared at her husband as if wanting to feel sympathy but capable of feeling only irritation. 'Is it something the doctor said?' she asked. 'Is it because of your back?' 'No ... I mean, it's not only because of my back. It's everything, Neni. Have you not seen how unhappy I've been?' 'Of course, bébé. I've seen how you've been unhappy. But your father died, and you have been in mourning. Anyone who loves their father the way you loved your father would be unhappy.' But it's not only my father's death. It's everything that's happened. I lost my job. My papier situation. This work, work, work, all the time. For what? For a little money? How much suffering can a man take in this world, eh? How much longer ...' His voice broke at the end of his question, but he cleared his throat to push it out. 'You know we can get through anything, Jende,' Neni said, taking his hand. 'We've been through so much. You know we'll be okay, right?' (Mbue, 2016, p. 306)

Perceptibly, Jende's lamentation reflects the absolute exhaustion of the migrant body; the repetitive labor of the *metropole* is unmasked as a soul-crushing treadmill. Although the visceral weight of his suffering is undeniable, Neni's response functions as a calculated counter-narrative. By domesticating his systemic despair into manageable, localized grief, she acts as the family's ontological anchor. Accordingly, this dialogue illuminates the gendered distribution of emotional labor:

while Jende is afforded the vulnerability of a breaking voice, Neni must sublimate her irritation to safeguard the structural integrity of their union.

Furthermore, the assertion of agency in both texts is inextricably linked to the reclamation of language as a tool of decolonization. In *BTD*, Neni's movement between English and her native linguistic sensibilities, even when expressed through the cadence of her thoughts, constitutes a refusal to be fully assimilated into the sterile discourse of American neoliberalism. For her, language is not merely a medium of communication but a repository of a self that exists outside the Edwards' domestic sphere. In Mbue's narrative, Neni uses language to construct a private architecture of meaning, ensuring that her internal subjectivities remain impenetrable to those who seek to govern them. Beyond serving as a ballast, she possesses a sharp gaze that deconstructs the glittering *façade* of prosperity. Her audacity in sitting on Cindy Edwards' sofa represents a physical breach of domestic hierarchy, a spatial reclamation of her humanity:

Deciding she had to be brave if she was to say what she had come to say, Neni walked to the sofa and sat down next to Cindy. Cindy's eyes widened at her former housekeeper's audacity, but she said nothing. 'I came here, madam, to see if you can help my husband,' Neni said. Her head was tilted, her eyes narrowed to implore in ways her words couldn't. 'If you could please help my husband ... if you could help him get his job back with Mr. Edwards.' Cindy turned her face away and looked toward the window. While the thousand different sounds of New York City blended outside, Neni waited for a response. 'You're funny, you know,' Cindy said, turning to face Neni. She was not smiling. 'You're a very funny girl. You're coming to ask me to help your husband?' (Mbue, 2016, p. 264)

Although the confrontation on the sofa exposes the limits of benevolent capitalism, it serves as a pivotal moment of disillusionment that validates Gayatri Spivak's concerns regarding the subaltern's reception. Neni realizes that her bravery is met not with compassion, but with a reinforcement of her Otherness; consequently, the rejection she faces is the final proof that the West remains impenetrable for the racialized migrant. This realization transforms her return to Cameroon from an admission of defeat into a radical act of self-determination.

Within this framework, the body itself serves as a primary site of contestation and subsequent resistance. Neni's physical presence in the spaces of the wealthy, marked by her labor, her pregnancy, and her eventual audacity in occupying Cindy's private domestic sphere, highlights the migrant body as a site of both extreme utility and extreme invisibility. Her agency is reclaimed precisely when she ceases to treat her body as a mere tool for the American capitalist machine and instead re-appropriates it as the sovereign vessel for her family's repatriation.

In powerful contrast, Miano's *SOTS* presents a viscerally charged assertion of agency born from the ontological horrors of the slave trade, where resistance functions as an existential struggle against absolute dehumanization. As Thierry Boudjekeu Kamgang observes, "Miano builds the narrative structure of *La Saison de l'ombre* on the trope of capture, a traumatic event that serves to locate the turning point between precolonial Africa and the advent of a new world" (Kamgang, 2024, p. 260). By anchoring the narrative in this pivotal "turning point," Miano underscores that capture is not merely a physical displacement, but a metaphysical rupture, a violent severance from the ancestral continuum. This "trope of capture" operates as a catalyst for a collective psychosis, stripping the subjects of their foundational certainties and plunging them into an abyss of negation where traditional identities are liquidated by the predatory logic of the trade. Within this void, defined solely by carceral violence, the protagonists are forced into a radical inward retreat to salvage the remnants of their humanity. This psychological withdrawal is poignantly manifested in the clandestine, tactile intimacy shared among the captives; a sensory survival mechanism that transforms the proximity of suffering bodies into a silent, insurgent liturgy of mutual recognition:

Now the only thing that matters is not keeling over. They must keep pace. Truly be with the others. Espouse their movements. Anticipate them. Enter their breath. Breathe in and breathe out as one. Share sweat. The secret recollection of last night. They take their time. Gripping one another, they share at last what words cannot say, since they must not utter these things. They embrace as one would cry. As one would dry a grieving friend's tears in the intimacy of one's home. Eyelids shut, they see one another, know one another, intensely. (Miano, 2013, p. 12)

This quoted passage constitutes a form of embodied resistance where the mind and the sensory body become the primary sites of rebellion against the “trope of capture.” As Saidiya Hartman argues in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), the enslaved do not merely endure; they reinscribe their humanity against the structures of bondage through performative acts of selfhood that occur even in the silence of the “shadow house.” The act of remembering lineage and maintaining tactile connection is a radical refusal to be rendered fungible, a rejection of the predatory logic that views the Black body as a mere commodity. This resonates with the concept of negative freedom: a “freedom-from” total annihilation that nurtures the latent possibility of a future “freedom-to” be. Through this inward retreat into the breath, Miano’s women preserve the vibrant subjectivity necessary to outlast the social death imposed upon them by both the captors and their own unraveling society.

Central to this ebullition of subjectivity is a radical redefinition of the concept of “Home” as a psychological and spiritual construct rather than a purely geographical one. For the women in *SOTS*, the violent severance from their ancestral lands necessitates a pivot toward an internal landscape where they carry their “Home” within their collective memory and clandestine rituals. This reconstruction of identity is a direct subversion of the traditional patriarchal mandate that seeks to fix the female subject in a state of static domesticity; as Miano notes:

Women do not roam the countryside alone. Women embody the permanence of things. They are the pillar that holds up the hut. Today they are talking to each other, speaking of how heavy their hearts felt seeing their friends and sisters pass by on their way to the water source without saying a word. [...] The women whose sons are missing know they will not be supported if they return on their own initiative to their homes. (Miano, 2013, p. 30)

By choosing to tread the paths of memory and spiritual survival, Miano’s protagonists reject the role of the static pillar to become active, mobile architects of their own destiny. Even as they are moved further from their physical origins, their insistence on communal memory-keeping ensures that “Home” survives within the abyss of the unknown. This shared resilience suggests that for the woman in the shadow of the trade, identity is not tethered to a fixed location but is a portable, lived

experience of resistance, a sanctuary reconstructed through the very act of refused erasure.

Moreover, both novels illustrate that agency is interwoven with communal solidarity. In *BTD*, the Jende family's collective struggle to retain cultural distinctiveness is a form of shared resistance. Similarly, in *SOTS*, the agency of the women is profoundly collective: "Let us close our eyes, Eyabe suggests, huddle together, take small steps to cross the threshold. When we are all outside, I will give the signal. We will open our eyes together" (Miano, 2013, p. 12). This collective agency aligns with Africana womanist thought, emphasizing that individual freedom is inseparable from the liberation of the community. The use of the "mask," as identified by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death*, provides a profound lens for both novels:

Jamaican slaves were not alone in seeing through the slaveholder's ideological inversion of reality, yet behaving as if they did not. All slaves, like oppressed peoples everywhere, wore masks in their relations with those who had parasitized them. It is in their statements to one another, whether via folk sayings or-infrequently-in folk literature, that they revealed what they knew and what they were. Occasionally a slave, feeling he had nothing to lose, would remove the mask and make it clear to the slaveholder that he understood perfectly the parasitic nature of their interaction. (Patterson, 1982, p. 338)

Granting that Neni and Miano's female characters appear to conform to the roles imposed by captors or employers, this outward compliance is a tactical layering; a sophisticated performance of submission designed to ensure physical survival while insulating the interior self. The "mask" is not an admission of defeat; rather, it is a tactical shelter for a spirit that remains essentially uncolonized and strategically obscured from the predatory gaze of power. In *BTS*, Neni's performance of the "grateful, industrious immigrant" helps her navigate the domestic spaces of the elite, yet it simultaneously creates a psychic distance that prevents the Edwards family from truly possessing her subjectivity. Similarly, Miano's women utilize a veneer of silence and obedience to carve out an invisible sanctuary for their ancestral identities.

When Neni eventually “removes the mask” during her searing confrontation with Cindy, the parasitic nature of the hierarchy is laid bare, exposing the reality that the master’s comfort is inextricably tied to the servant’s performance of invisibility. This unmasking is an act of ontological violence against the status quo; it forces the oppressor to confront a sovereign “Other” where they previously saw only a functional tool. Consequently, this shift marks the threshold at which the subaltern subject transcends “social death,” the condition of being a non-person within a dominant social order, to reclaim a sovereign selfhood. By discarding the tactical layering, these women cease to be “objects” within a colonial or capitalist history and instead emerge as subjects of their own radical narratives, asserting that their humanity was never truly surrendered, merely hidden.

As a final point, the convergence of these two narratives underscores a temporal continuity of female resistance that links the historical trauma of slavery to the contemporary precarity of migration. This linkage is essential in countering the sociopolitical tendency to compartmentalize history; as Josildeth Gomes Consorte maintains, “many prefer to see the black question as a thing of the past, a chapter that closed with abolition” (Consorte, 2007, p. 2). By juxtaposing Miano’s historical-poetic excavation with Mbue’s modern realism, the novels refute this perceived closure, demonstrating instead that the “black question” remains an open, bleeding wound. It becomes evident that the “tactical layering” of the mask is a trans-historical necessity for the postcolonial subject. The struggles of Neni and Eyabe are not isolated incidents but part of a long-standing genealogy of African women who have navigated, subverted, and survived global systems of exploitation.

This temporal bridge suggests that the “ebullition of subjectivity” is an enduring legacy; the strategies of spiritual endurance used in the seventeenth century find their echoes in the strategic recalibrations of the twenty-first-century migrant. Both authors demonstrate that agency is an ongoing, multifaceted process. It transforms moments of imposed identity into opportunities for resistance, redefining female subjectivity. Whether through the nuanced complexities of modern migration or the primal struggle against enslavement, Mbue and Miano affirm that subjectivity is an active, dynamic force capable of subverting dominant narratives and forging new pathways to self-determination.

Conclusion

This study embarked on a crucial comparative analysis of Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* and Léonora Miano's *Season of the Shadow*, driven by the objective to examine the literary strategies through which female protagonists challenge dominant narratives and assert agency amidst the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy. This inquiry, navigating the intricate philosophical terrains of both novels, has sought to illuminate the nuanced ways in which female subjectivity is both imposed upon and resiliently reclaimed within African and diasporic contexts. The analytical trajectory unfolded across two interconnected axes: the deconstruction of imposed identities and the narratives of agency, each yielding significant insights into the dynamic interplay of identity formation.

The first axis revealed how these authors dismantle external definitions of African womanhood. In *BTD*, Mbue strategically exposes the illusory nature of the American Dream for immigrant women like Neni Jonga, demonstrating how global capitalist aspirations can impose insidious forms of identity predicated on economic precarity. Neni's eventual decision to return to Cameroon signifies a profound rejection of an externally prescribed notion of success, illustrating a subtle yet powerful deconstruction of the Western hegemonic narrative. Conversely, Miano's *SOTS* excavates the foundational violence of the transatlantic slave trade to exemplify a more absolute form of identity imposition. In this historical-poetic register, Miano portrays the forced displacement of millions not merely as a physical relocation, but as a systematic attempt at ontological erasure.

Through the character of Eyabe, the narrative reconstructs the psychic trauma of a community suddenly severed from its lineage, revealing how names, ancestral bonds, and cultural heritage were violently stripped away to facilitate the commodification of human life. The profound textual attention Miano devotes to the pre-capture lives and spiritual landscapes of these women exposes the magnitude of the void the captors sought to impose. However, by centering the internal lives of those left behind and those stolen, Miano demonstrates that this void is never complete; the inherent dignity and spiritual resilience of her female protagonists serve as a foundational counter-narrative to the brutal dehumanization of the Middle Passage. Thus, while diverging in their mechanisms of imposition, both authors converge in their powerful demonstration of how externally defined identities are fundamentally contested by the inherent dignity of their characters.

The second axis highlighted the diverse strategies used to assert self-determination. Neni's agency manifests as a resolute subversion of expectations, characterized by her astute observations of social hypocrisy and her strategic act of self-repatriation. Her resistance aligns with a nuanced understanding of agency as a negotiation within complex systems, echoing Butler's concept of performativity. In contrast, Miano showcases agency as visceral, collective spiritual resilience against absolute annihilation. Eyabe and the other captured women assert their identities through mnemonic practices and secret rituals, transforming the act of remembering into a profound act of defiance. Their agency resides in an unyielding mental fortitude that resists the dehumanizing logic of slavery.

The efficacy of the comparative methodology used in this exegesis has proven instrumental in disclosing patterns of convergence across disparate aesthetic forms. By juxtaposing a contemporary realistic novel with a historical-poetic one, this study enriches our understanding of the broader African and diasporic landscape. While the comparative tool must always balance structural parallels with socio-historical specificities, this research offers a refined methodological blueprint for future studies. Subsequent inquiries might explore the intergenerational transmission of trauma or the role of multilingualism as a strategy of decolonization. Such studies will continue to further our collective understanding of the dynamic processes of self-making in a world shaped by enduring historical forces.

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