FROM LIBERAL-HUMAN ORIENTATION TO EXISTENTIALIST HUMAN CONDUCT: THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE WOMAN’S SELF

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Theorists believe that the new world order is an effort towards globalism which, imperatively, requires the regeneration of lenses that acquaint one with different praising human philosophies, and existential questions. The question of the self is one of the existential questions asked about the “one self” and the “other self”. It is based on the differences between human’s perceptions of himself. It does not require forcibly a fundamental adhesion to a liberal-humanist belief. Yet, to authenticate the human constellation and make credible individual claims, it is important to overtake obstruction which reinforces the dialectical confusion between one’s perception of the actual self and of the expected self. Developing a debate over the question of the self from existentialist and liberal-humanist orientations is important to put an accent on the very possible substitution of horizontality for verticality, and the transcendence of the human value at the expense of all other considerations.

Keywords: Self, Actual self, Expected self, Transcendence.

Introduction

Individuals are confronted with issues of race, ethnicity and gender inequality where thinkers’ challenge lies essentially in enhancing questions of human values, equality and justice. Therefore, writers, during the last decade of the 20th and 21st centuries, have endeavored to operate with new assumptions that are judged appropriate to face the traditional system of understanding. The new world order which is, in fact, the result of one’s common efforts towards globalization, imperatively requires the regeneration of lenses that acquaint him/her with new praising human philosophies, and existential questions. The question of the self is among many other questions asked about the “one self” and the “other self”; it is based up on differences in man’s and woman’s perception of the one but unshared social reality. The dialectical view that exists, actually, is between the actual self and the expected self. The synthesis, the feminist thinkers and writers are making, is based on what a woman was, or what she is and what she will be or wishes to become.

To consider the postmodern thoughts and philosophies, one would underline the view which challenged the liberal humanist notion of Man- the idealized eternal creature- by forcing one to think about the gender of a so-called “universal” humanity. Both physical and mental endeavor (works and social preoccupations) of some women writers, such as the Cameroonian Calixthe Beyala’s, consist in showing that the predominant, traditional, verbal and visual representations of woman’s self (the female self) in some ethnic cultures, as the African one, are not mere reflections or representations of a biologically-given “female” or “feminine” nature- that is natural and unchangeable. These female authors try to argue that a woman is not supposed to adapt to the socially determined notions of femininity she
was taught, and which are themselves the product of those representations. Concretely, they aim at the
development of a discourse which solidifies women’s question over the notion of ‘oneness’ and
‘sameness’, in a world where the new social and world orders have become very debatable subjects.

The Question of Discourse and the Self

The new set global discourse is likely to be framed as to advocate a peculiar universalism which is an
unusual articulated feminist discourse. Some writers are no longer interested in what differentiates the
local from the global for the simple reason that they are developing a thinking mode that is more vertical
or paradigmatic than horizontal or syntagmatic. The writers’ belief of liberal humanism consists in
underlying that human nature is constant and unchanging, and that people’s individuality or personality
should be praised highly and transcended to enhance human life positively. Writers, generally, believe in
absolute truth and in hierarchy which sets a sort of control over human’s conduct in order to reach an
undeviating, linear progress of a given community.

Michael Kalton interprets most art as expressing vertical transcendence; he says: “I view much of
our experience of nature as emphasizing vertical transcendence as well because these sorts of experiences
emphasize a dimension beyond the real, the ordinary” (Philip Clayton, 2007: 101); Feminist women
writers, during the last decade of the 20th and the 21st centuries, endeavored to operate with new
assumptions that are judged appropriate; they align themselves to some degree along this vertical axis;
their vertical thinking strategy is usually concerned in how to solve the problem of the woman, for they
already know everything about themselves as women; they do not need to make a diagnosis to understand
why such a particular problem occurs; they know almost everything, if not everything, related to their
living situation. In reality, the experience of going beyond specific experiences (vertical paradigm) (Ibid:
100) is the most accessible one, because along the horizontal axis, things are taken in the way they are
without imposing on them levels or degrees of reality. (Op.cit)

Commonly, when women meet on the global ground, they do not appear as equals, yet their
sameness as well as their difference are essentially linked. The importance beyond their link is that they
are socially conscious of their oppression as second level citizens representing the one self, while the first
level citizen or the other self is man.

The question asked about the “two selves” is undoubtedly based upon divergent perceptions of the
“oneself”, and concerned with the shared social matters. Sociologically speaking, the notion of an inner or
essential oneself (woman’s), examines and shows how the self is shaped and developed by significant
other selves (other women’s). This is very important to familiarize one with the notion of socialization.
Yet one has not to deny the fact that, nowadays, women are seen to have very decentered selves, i.e., they
have no stable ‘basic’ or ‘core’ identity.

This very situation keeps feminist women writers ask, constantly, themselves whether this issue
deserves being dealt with dialectically as an essentially lopsided issue. This is legitimate, for symmetry is
something that is imposed on the world in that it is the construction of human civilization. This is
undoubtedly why some feminist women writers engage in meaningful debatable subject matters over the
female self: the actual self and the expected self or the idealized self.

The question that could be asked about the relationship which exists between the two facets of the
same self (the African woman’s self) is substantially philosophical. Carl Rogers, who accounted for the
importance of the self, explains that it is the central ingredient in human personality and personal
adjustment; for him the self is a social product, developing out of interpersonal relationships and striving
for consistency (1947). This joins the conception that the individual self has individual rights such as:
self-fulfillment, self-realization, the right to self-expression and the pursuit of happiness. This is
undoubtedly a step towards the full development of individual personality. Yet one has, first, to hyphen
self-conception with human reason, therefore, Kant explains that the definitive characteristic of the
human self was its capacity for reason. Reason allowed the self to understand and order the world with
certainty. According to Kant, "Reason is the faculty which supplies the principles of a priori knowledge," (Martin Heidegger, 1997: 28)

Like many other modern writers, Calixthe Beyala, through different forms of representation, regardless of their confessional and ideological orientations, develops a positive halo over women in general. In her novelistic world, a woman appears, mostly, as the epitome of change; she stands between two worlds: her world as an African woman in so far as it is infused with stiff and unchangeable predominant, traditional, visual representations, and the world she aspires to. This world, in her view, should be based on equal opportunities, mutual understanding and respect, void of vehement animosity of sexual discrimination and self-stigmatization. In Beyala’s society identity is determined by social role, and “the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his or her roles” (Alasdair MacIntyre, 1985: 160). Therefore, “the individual discovers his true identity in his roles, and to turn away from these roles is to turn away from himself” (Berger, 1984: 154)

**Beyala’s Transcendental Horizontal Conception of the Self**

Both Beyala’s role and process of thinking lead to a new identification within a space which may help her feeling no compulsion to conform to extreme traditional forms of femininity or to abide to males’ superior captivity. She could foresee a new position, or at least, could aspire to adhere to different visions of the world. It is, in fact, an attempt to go beyond the predefined set category of norms and rules, for the self-concept is not *instinctive*, but rather a *social product* developed through experience, and thus a woman can perceive herself in a way likely to be different from the way others may see her. The change at the level of the perceptive self is the supremacy of the new feminine identity over the socio-cultural barriers and geographical frontiers which have long been established by the *other*. The ego development and self-interpretation (Anna Freud, 1946)¹ are, certainly, what preoccupy Beyala. This is, undoubtedly, why one finds, in Beyala’s works, the germs of very strong ambitions and will as well as very earnest intentions to destroy all what could be based on vertical views and determined in terms of confessional ideologies. On the other hand she seems to have already put forward a social theory which is based on her own experience and her identity, as Afro-French woman, and which she gave to her literary forms of representation (literary characters) in her novels. In reality, she aims at the destruction of all those schemata based on differences and the construction of order substitutive ones inspired of humanity, and which could be simply called “Social schemata”. This which pushes one to account for the common self or the shared identity from a Beyalean perspective

**The Shared Identity or Self-Conception**

To study Beyala’s fictitious world is to put an emphasis on African women’s issues in a world where women are, almost, denied. Considering world’s women as one single unit of analysis is certainly to provide new orientations and perspectives of analysis in the present study. The question of the self as being an important notion in the pronunciation of a given feminist discourse creates distinct opportunity of looking at the world’s women in its regions and sub-regions in their particularity. The particularity of women’s experiences, relations and thus complicity is especially relevant if the argument that notion of self-conception is socially constructed. Unsurprisingly, such construction must be understood as emerging out of the particularity of women’s situation and history. It ought to stand to reason, therefore that constructions of women react to social realities from which they are drawn.

Beyala’s endeavor consists in putting an accent on women’s situation through a mode of writing which transcends largely the frame of exploration of the feminine condition, as she categorizes a

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¹ Anna Freud (Freud’s daughter) gave central importance to ego development and self-interpretation, while Freud (1900), who provided new understanding of the importance of internal mental processes, and many other of his followers hesitated to make self–concept a primary psychological unit in their theories.
“Universal Feminism” which does not, in any case, incite women to destroy the patriarchal system, but, simply, to urge them to define themselves and to make significant their very identity. Therefore, this mode of writing is very important because Barthes argues that:

“A language and a style are blind forces; a mode of writing is an act of historical solidarity. A language and a style are objects; a mode of writing is a function; it is the relationship between creation and society, the literary language transformed by its social finality, form considered as a human intention and thus linked to the great crises of History.” (Ronald Barthes, 1972-1980: 14)

For Barthes a mode of writing has a specific relationship of form to content, embodied in the conventions of writing and operating within ethical and political values as a moral act and as a social fact; writing, Barthes asserted, “is always rooted in something beyond language, but develops like a seed, not like a line, it manifests an essence and holds the threat of a secret, it is an anti-communication, it is intimidating.” (Ibid)

One may ask, therefore, a question whether, he/she could learn through the process of Beyala’s writing. Undoubtedly, the wide audience her literary works have so far gained have enhanced her reputation and have made of her novels great achievements owing to the subjects whereby she engaged a knowhow of writing a feminist discourse based on new thoughts which does not, compulsorily, favor a given gender at the expense of another, but which praises highly all what is essentially human. In this sense, it would be significant to underline the importance of constructed meaning during the reading process. Therefore, “Feminist reading, then, would be the perception and processing of texts by a reader who is conceived of not only as possible female, but also as conscious of the tradition of women’s oppression in patriarchal culture. The feminist reader—whether in fact male or female is committed to breaking the pattern of that pattern of that oppression by calling attention to the ways some texts can perpetuate it” (Robin R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl- 1991: 489)

It is assumed that Beyala’s feminist conviction tends towards the decentralization of leadership and the increase of openness on the multiplicity and diversity of perspectives; for her, a constant redefinition of women’s issues is prerequisite and a priority. As an activist writer, Beyala tries to unite women cross ethnic, racial, and whenever possible, class divisions, for Andrea Benton Rushing shows that activists manage to promote a greater transnational and cross-cultural sisterhood among women from various races, classes, religions, socio-political backgrounds, sexual orientations and so on (1983:134). Yet, what it is conspicuous is that Beyala’s sense of effort tends towards the emphasis of such sort of practical application of theory while her orientation, as an Afro-French feminist, barely includes feminist social movements’ percepts. While American feminism included a concern with practical and radical feminist social movements, French feminist theorists did not lay emphasis on such practical application of theories. This is why Beyala does not put concretely abstract thoughts and ideologies into practice.

The author’s choice of various and distinctly different characters is not haphazard; she aims at the enhancement of her theory which deals with man and woman, the White and the Blacks, and the Muslim, the Christian and the Jewish complementarily. The Jewish character Anna Claude, in her novel tu t’appelleras Tanga (Your Name shall be Tanga), provides a certain power to the author’s ideological convictions that there is no particular dominant ideology. In reality, the ideological stance cannot be disregarded in the reading and study of literature. Hence, Beyala’s novels are mainly based on an ardently believable ideas which involves, feminist, philosophical and religious debates. Therefore, ideology, in African literature, represents a central avenue of critical attention. It is considered as a consensus of the ideas, values and feelings by which a human being experiences his societies at various times. The French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, in "Letter on art in reply to Andre Daspre", in Lenin and Philosophy (1971), argues that:

“Art cannot be reduced to ideology: it has, rather, a particular relationship to it. Ideology signifies the imaginary ways in which men experience the real world, which is, of course, the kind of experience literature gives us too — what it feels like to live in
particular conditions, rather than conceptual analysis of those conditions. However art does more than just passively reflect that experience. It is held within ideology, but also manages to distance itself from it, to the point where it permits us to “feel” and “perceive” the ideology from which it springs.” (K. Narayana Chandran, 2005: 113)

Beyala does not seem to have gone beyond the feminist framework in that her task, as feminist critic, consists in developing more fully her understanding of what a female perspective or vision includes. Her exposition to the state of some of her female characters such as Tanga and Anna Claude, in tu T’appelleras Tanga (Your Name shall be Tanga), means in fact nothing but her eager belief in the gradual falling together of truth and probabilities about women, to tell their common experience of women, their history as being ethnic individuals, their wisdom as mature ladies despite Tanga’s age, as well as their culture as being a means of censorship; this constellation provides the basis of feminine aesthetics. However, one has to admit the fact of constituting the female identity and society as well as culture, for it gives a start to a new type of postmodern feminist African literature: the Universal Humanist Feminist literature rather than simply Black African feminist literature.

In her essay entitled lettre d’une Africaine à ses Soeur Occidentales, Beyala insists again on this community that unites both white and black women:

“…nous ne pouvons gagner qu’en faisant front commun face à l’anti-féminisme. La souffrance des femmes quelles que soit leurs origines, leurs nature et leurs extraction sociale, est notre affaire à nous toutes! Nous devons, toutes au autant que nous sommes, ne jamais oublier que le mot ‘aïe’ que exprime la souffrance, se dit dans toutes les langues et de la même façon… Nous sommes dans le même bateau nous coulons ensemble ou ensemble nous dressons un barrage.” (Op.cit: 104-106)

We cannot win, but only when taking common position against anti-feminism. The suffering of the women whatever their origins, their nature and their social extraction, is their nature and their social extraction, is our business and responsibility! We should, all in so much that we are, never forget that the word ‘aïe’ which the suffering expresses, is, however, said in the same way in all the languages... We are in the same boat sink together or together we raise a dam (My translation)

The author insists on the unity of women and thus of women writers, no matter what their origin, race or their religious ideology are. Her objective, beyond putting on equal footing racially and ideologically different female characters, is to underline, undoubtedly, her conception of an identification which consists in studying the relationship of women, in general. I do not propose the forms in which African culture and civilization constructed gender to study them at the moment or in periods of change, for these forms consist of social norms embodied in social roles and laws. These forms represent historical artefacts. Therefore, I believe, women have to think in terms of the chain of individuals, or as “Women-as-a-group” as Gerder Lerner underlines (1986). This double vision of feminist scholarship is well illustrated by Joan Kelly in her brilliant article published in 1979:

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2 Beyala’s position tends more to encapsulate an area of common agreement between the different ideologies, and that she praises all sort of agreements between different systems of thought. Beyala’s universal humanist feminism is free from the abstract postulations that may characterize individual ideologies such as preconceived ideas. In reality, Beyala believes that sexually different human beings (males and females) and racially different women, as well as ideologically-oriented people should agree to set aside their differences, and attempt to forge some common rules of conduct and behavior which, undoubtedly, enable them to live in communion as human beings.

3 I refer to religious ideology because Beyala makes no clear cut and difference between her characters (Tanga/Anna Claude) in Tu T’appelleras Tanga, although the two characters belong to different religious faiths, respectively Christian and Jewish. This shows that Beyala praises ideological differences. Yes indeed, it is not directly or even clearly stated, but it appears through the characters’ complicity, and it is obvious in literature since the writer should not be ideologically oriented, while ideology can never be overlooked or avoided
“Woman’s place is not a separate sphere or domain of existence but a position within social existence generally... Feminist thought is moving beyond the split of social reality it inherited from the recent past. Our actual vantage point has shifted, giving rise to a new consciousness of woman’s “place” in family and society... What we see are not two spheres of social reality (home and work, private and public), but two (or three) sets of social relations” (1979: 221-22)

Through Beyala, one tries to offer a rich approach to understanding the process by which women construct their identities within an actual social context; the fictional world she creates is a disturbing yet perceptive echo of nowadays ‘real world’ - that is, the one where an individual is deprived of his/her right of living as a human being owing to social calamities and shoddiness. This sort of image could be well noticed through, for instance, her character Tanga who is deprived of her childhood through poverty, prostitution, corruption, and violence. Tanga, Beyala argues, suffers most in this environment where unbearable social and political pressures are combined with patriarchal values and self-doubt. The decaying situation, Beyala wants to show, pushes this girl into womanhood before her time, usually through a chain of traumatic experiences. One can notice that Beyala controls her initial presentation of the self by means of written discourse.

I believe her specific self-view cannot be measured except when associated with others’ specific self-views. This explains, certainly, Tanga’s and Anna Claude’s complicity. Tanga’s story allowed Anna-Claude to share her sufferings and integrate her as a new constructive element of her identity. Therefore, they have constructed the “Oneself”, and this is due to the fusion of the two identities as Beyala demonstrates at the end of the novel: “Elle (Anna Claude) se couche contre elle (Tanga). Elle sait que, pour mourir Tanga l’attendait, ouverte, offerte, pour lui donner à parler avant de passer les frontières et de s’étendre dans la nature morte” (TTT : 176), and also in “t’a rien à craindre. J’existe, donc tu seras” (Ibid: 177).

Focusing chiefly on interaction involving Beyala’s characters, one hopes to better understand the relation between women, and hence their self-conception. When Tanga died after bequeathing her name, identity and history to Anna-Claude; this is what the title of the story reveals essentially: Your Name shall be Tanga; here, Tanga is talking to Anna Claude. Moreover, the dying girl-child woman could have constructed a new identity through her reincarnation in her cell companion Anna Claude. The fusion of the two identities does not come about straightaway. For by the very beginning of the story, the author shows the absence of communication between the two characters Anna Claude and Tanga owing to their cultural differences, and to keep abreast of their situations and stories; the white Anna Claude was obliged to abandon her to a white society: “Alors, entre en moi. Mon secret s’illuminera. Mais auparavant, il faut que la blanche en toi meure. Donne-moi ta main, désormais tu seras moi. Tu auras dix-sept saisons, tu seras noire, tu t’appelleras Tanga” (Ibid : 14).

In doing so, one tries to answer some preliminary questions about the structure of women’s self, or the different facets of females’ self. If woman’s own view of herself as well as her belief in the way others may perceive her is seen as the actual self, then the attributes that someone believes a woman possesses, the attributes that someone would like the person to possess, and ought believe the person should possess, are considered therefore as the expected self or the idealized self. Beyala’s characters, in tu t’appelleras Tanga, for instance, are always worried and uncomfortable; the protagonists Tanga and Anna Claude describe and account for their conflict in terms of the unfortunate females and the males; although they are shadowed by Hassan and Ousman who are, in reality, illusory persons, they remain nevertheless insecure. In fact, female’s self is like the one who “may have gnawing feeling of being a bluff, a fraud, a freak- a feeling for which he cannot account. His inside knowledge of himself shows unmistakably in his

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4 For academic and scientific honesty, I kept the texts extracted from Tu t’appelleras Tanga and C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée in French without my personal translation because the translation of the texts does exist, respectively, as: Your name shall be Tanga and The Sun Hath Looked Upon, by Marjolijn De Jager
dreams, when he is close to the reality of himself […] usually, the reality of himself intrudes painfully and unmistakably” (Horney Karen, 1950: 111)

The characters’ complicity demonstrates Beyala’s efforts to deal with the notion of self-awareness, and to victimize woman’s actual self. One can understand from the portrait which Beyala provides that the question of self-awareness is not a matter of assumption that attention may be focused on the self or on the environment, but not on both at the same time as it is explained by Shelley Duval, Robert A. Wicklund in, A theory of objective self-awareness (1972)

Beyala’s characters are self-focused; they focus attention inward. The continuum of their stories makes of them the mirrors of each other or one another, for self-focusing situations, sometimes, include gazing into a mirror (significant other woman). I think the attention is paid more to the Tanga’s and Anna Claude’s selves or their self-identification, in that the shared woman voice and the common feminine instinct made of them oneself. And since they are conscious of their situations and convinced of their interlaced story, they are considered in a state of objective self-awareness.

The commitment of Beyala’s characters to their self-conception consists in unveiling the feminine essence. The end of Beyala’s first novel C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée shows the embodiment of Irène in the person of Atéba. It is when the latter kissed the body of her victim, symbolically, as if she were Irène. When Beyala says: “autrefois quand Atéba était femme. Quand elle était des milliers de femmes… Quand elle était Atéba et toutes les femmes étaient elle. Quand elle séduisait la pluie et le vent” (17) In the past when Atéba was a woman. When she was thousands of women … When she was Atéba and all the women were her. When she seduced the rain and the wind (My translation).

The author is certainly associating her character’s name to all women all over the world, and therefore, showing the extent to which a woman can be a representative figure and can speak on the behalf of any other woman. It is important therefore to note that Atéba is, symbolically, the feminine essence. Beyala’s self-focused characters are shown to stick more to their own feminine essence and to become more conscious of their presence as women. For in a given moment, “consciemment ou inconsciemment, la femme a fini par penser qu’elle ne peut pas se passer de l’homme” (Gallimore, 1997: 10) consciously or unconsciously, the woman eventually thought that she cannot do without the man (My translation).

To conceptualize the notion of the female’s self, it is not necessary to ignore or even deny man/woman relationship, and thus needless to push backward man. For women are conscious enough of their problems. To survive, woman has to cease to “coudre sa presence autour de l’homme” (CSQB: 21), and to reach that “état d’esprit attendu” or the expected self, she has to accept the three rules set by Beyala’s protagonist Atéba:

- Rule 1: Find the woman
- Rule 2: Find the woman
- Rule 3: Find the woman and eliminate the chaos (Ibid, 88) (My translation)

The notion of the self from a Beyalean perspective, in the present work, is likely to be complex; especially that it is important to understand the author’s feminist discourse. Beyala seems to have advocated a universal feminism; to praise a universal feminist discourse is to destroy the barriers which divide women among the feminist movement. It is legitimate thereafter to state that Beyala’s intention is to make universal her cause not just as writer but as a woman as well. The obliteration of the ideological as well as the racial differences between women homogenized the women voice and the cause, and created the oneself or the female self. Atéba has never written to a man, but to women through individual singular names: “Elle a écrit aux Jeanne, aux Pauline, aux Carole, aux Nicole, aux Molé, aux Kambiwa, aux Akkono, aux Chantal… A toutes les femmes qui peuplent son imaginaires et lui volent ses nuits” (CSQB, 34) she has written in this way to show that the feminine voice is never a singular voice of peace, but a plural voice.

The self presents one principle with diverse interacting entities, bodies and, mental forces; they act complementarily to perform a certain function tending towards one objective which is the redefinition of Man. To account for both selves (actual self and expected self) in Beyala’s literary context is to set a sort
of dialectical debate about the way the author has dealt with her characters; the complexity of the world they are living in.

Conclusion

Beyala’ universal presupposition of what it means to be a woman, and what feminism is, as well as what it ought to be resides, essentially, in the way she, subtly, deals with the question of female self through the development of glorious idealized image\(^5\). The presumptions of her feminist discourse are to trivialize certain denigrating anti-feminist discourses and to valorize natural multidimensional and anti-racist social realities. The author’s polyphonic feminist discourse entails having a woman with different but complementary idiosyncratic behavior. Beyala fundamentally questions the assumption that woman’s expected or idealized self exists only in her own egocentric desires. She has shown in her novels that the characters’ desire for change, thirst for new experiences in life, recognition, knowledge and love construct a common voice calling for an objective perceptible reality. And it is here that the originality of Beyala’s conception of the expected self or idealized self lies.

An actual woman, from a Beyalean perspective, owes her existence to the reality that she is completed by another woman and that she does not represent only herself. According to Karen Horney, "when an individual shifts his center of gravity to his idealized self, he not only exalts himself but also is bound to look at his actual self from a wrong perspective" (Op. cit: 110). Therefore the expected woman’s self is the one which is translated by other woman’s ideas and knowledge. The expected voices are consequently the ones of those women with new confused, divergent, and limitless ideologies.

References


\(^{5}\) Robert B. Ewen says that the repressed aspects of the neurotic’s personality and the painful inner conflicts, are further concealed through the development of glorious idealized image (2003:119)