
Gender-Based Violence in Cameroon's Digital Cinema

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In recent decades, Cameroon has witnessed a remarkable “video boom,” marked by the flourishing of locally produced digital films that circulate widely through urban neighborhoods, social media, and informal markets. What is striking about this cinematic effervescence is that it has emerged largely outside established institutions and formal training programs. For many aspiring filmmakers, access to professional education remains limited or entirely out of reach. Yet this has not deterred them. Instead, a new generation of young creators has embraced a self-taught, do-it-yourself ethos—learning by experimenting, by collaborating with peers, and by making use of whatever tools are available. As Carmela Garritano notes, “video filmmakers in Africa have often learned their craft outside formal institutions, drawing instead on peer learning, experimentation, and the accessibility of digital technologies” (152). This dynamic points to a broader democratization of media production on the continent, where digital innovation intersects with grassroots creativity to redefine who gets to tell stories, and how those stories reach the public.

Blaise Ntedju, a Cameroonian digital filmmaker and creator of on-line streaming platforms, produced *12 Cas* (2024), a series of 12 cases, each representing a different instance of rape of women. While *12 Cas* features distinct characters and relationships, they all center on the dynamics of the nuclear family. One could argue that each case is thematically linked through actions, but they are also linked through the exploration of family relationships. The last case, *Secret mortel, Cas 12*, [*Deadly Secret, Case 12*], a ten-episode series, highlights the intersection of power and gender oppression in an urban setting, providing a rich exploration of how Cameroonian video makers address the critical issue of gender-based violence through their creative works.

This article focuses on gender-based violence, a critical issue in popular cinema across Francophone Africa, and examines how societal norms contribute to the perpetuation of gender violence and how it impacts women. By analyzing the portrayal of gendered violence—including sexual, physical, psychological, and verbal abuse inflicted upon women—I explore how digital filmmakers position women within narratives of violence, portraying them as victims, survivors, agents, critics, and theorists of violence. This research centers on *Secret mortel*, by Blaise Ntedju, who integrates elements of

daily life into his storytelling.

To support my argument, I deploy a historical and sociological perspective that places *Secret mortel* within its cultural and social context, analyzing how it has been received in relation to evolving theories of gender violence. The analysis is based on the theoretical frameworks of Pierre Bourdieu's insights on gender violence (2001) and Gayatri Spivak's concept of women's subalternity (2015). The discussion is structured around three key points: the first examines the power dynamics portrayed in *Secret mortel*, the second explores the symbolic silence of women as a consequence of their objectification, and the third investigates the impact of digital technology and women's roles in the ongoing struggle for equality and justice.

Power Dynamics: from Male Domination to Female Objectification

Bourdieu's ideas on gendered violence are thoroughly examined in his book *Masculine Domination* (2001), where he introduces the concept of symbolic violence—forms of subtle coercion embedded in societal norms and structures that enforce and perpetuate domination. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through purely symbolic channels of communication and recognition (more precisely mis-recognition), and even feeling” (1-2). He argues that individuals within society, often unknowingly, accept and perpetuate their own subjugation, a phenomenon particularly evident in gender dynamics. For Bourdieu, masculine domination “is perceived as acceptable or even natural” (1). This highlights the deeply ingrained nature of gendered power relations, which are so normalized that they appear invisible or “natural” to those living within the system. Bourdieu uses masculine domination as a prime example of symbolic violence, illustrating how everyday practices and societal institutions—the family, education, religion, and government—transform historical power structures into seemingly natural and enduring realities (1).

By critically examining these mechanisms, Bourdieu opens the door to challenging and deconstructing systems that normalize and sustain gendered power dynamics. He emphasizes how society amplifies biological differences through cultural constructs, positioning women as the “other” and thereby justifying hierarchical structures that often perpetuate violence. Similarly, Raewyn Connell asserts that “[a]rguments about gender are plagued by an assumption that what is biological or ‘natural’ is somehow more real than what is social” (x). Ntedju reflects this social construction in *Secret mortel* by illustrating how male characters are situated in roles of power and authority, often upheld by family hierarchies or societal status.

Ntedju's portrayal of male characters aligns with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. Through their dominance in decision-making and con-

trol over others—particularly women—these characters embody the cultural reinforcement of masculine authority. In many societies, men often hold positions of power—whether as heads of households, community leaders, or authority figures—that both reflect and reinforce longstanding norms favoring male dominance while limiting women’s roles. Pauline Bart and Eileen Moran explain that these gender hierarchies do not arise by chance; rather, they are maintained through intertwined forms of violence. They state, “all forms of violence against women are interrelated, coalescing like a girdle to keep women in our place, which is subordinate to men” (Bart and Moran 79). This systemic subordination is supported not only by cultural expectations but also by structural forces. They further emphasize that “abuse of women is systematic . . . receiving cultural and structural support. Women’s subordination is accomplished and maintained by patterns of interpersonal interaction prescribed by culture and social structures” (Bart and Moran 79). Ntedju’s storytelling brings these dynamics to light, encouraging viewers to question the gendered power imbalances deeply rooted in African societies.

Secret mortel tells the tragic story of rape and its devastating consequences. The plot centers on seventeen-year-old Nancy, who is raped by her grandfather while staying at her grandparents’ house. Unaware of the assault due to being drugged, Nancy later experiences abdominal pain and discovers that she is pregnant. Her stepmother, Gladys, bribes a doctor to lie to Nancy, but her symptoms persist. Eventually, Nancy undergoes an abortion, which results in complications that lead to her death. Nancy’s death forces Gladys to confess the truth to her husband, Eugene, who reacts with intense rage. In a confrontation, Eugene (Nancy’s father) fatally stabs Gladys’s father, the perpetrator of the abuse. To protect the family, Gladys’s mother takes responsibility for the crime and goes to jail, believing that she is to blame for the series of events that she kept secret. This heart-breaking tale underscores the destructive effects of secrecy and incestual rape, highlighting the crushing impact that they have within a family.

Secret mortel explores power dynamics as it focuses on lies and the protection of predators. Throughout the film, manipulation and male domination reveal the destructive impact these societal constructs have on individuals and relationships. A significant example of male domination occurs when Eugene discovers Gladys’s infidelity and demands that she leave the house: “Tu as une semaine pour libérer” [You have a week to leave] (*Episode 1* 00:32:05-6). Instead of acknowledging his own long-standing infidelity, Eugene lashes out and manipulates her, placing all the blame on her and making her feel guilty for a mistake he, too, has committed. This moment could have been an opportunity for mutual forgiveness and personal growth. However, Eugene’s actions exemplify the “symbolic dimension of male domina-

tion” (Bourdieu 3), where women are disproportionately held accountable for moral failings, even when men engage in the same behavior. This double standard perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes, where women are expected to uphold moral purity while men manipulate and escape without consequence. Bourdieu also discusses how “a woman cannot have authority over men” (94) and how societal structures and education foster the belief in male superiority, justifying gendered violence or domination as a natural outcome.

This analysis also examines how manipulation and lying become survival mechanisms for women in a society where their security and status are linked to male power and wealth. Gladys exemplifies this survival tactic, choosing to lie and manipulate to protect her marriage and preserve her status, even at the expense of Nancy’s safety and well-being. After Nancy experiences sexual abuse and begins suffering from nightmares and physical symptoms related to the trauma, Gladys dismisses her struggles, labeling the nightmares as harmless instead of confronting the truth: “Je suis sûre que c’est rien de grave. Ce sont des choses qui arrivent fréquemment” [I’m sure it’s nothing serious. These are things that happen frequently]. (*Episode 5* 00:08:12-16). Gladys’s primary focus remains on safeguarding the family’s reputation and stability, rather than addressing the trauma Nancy has endured: “Imagine un peu ton père, comment il va agir s’il apprend ça. Rien ne sera plus comme avant à la maison. Notre famille sera détruite” [Just imagine your father, how he will react if he finds out. Nothing will ever be the same at home. Our family will be destroyed] (*Episode 6* 00:25:08-25). This decision ultimately contributes to Nancy’s tragic death, highlighting how women’s dependence on male support and societal pressures to maintain class and status can lead to destructive choices. Gladys’s actions demonstrate the devastating consequences of a system that ties women’s worth to their relationships with men, showing how fear and dependency perpetuate deceit and inequality. These dynamics result in the exploitation of vulnerable individuals and reinforce systemic harm, emphasizing the urgent need to challenge and reform such oppressive societal structures.

In *Secret mortel*, deceit emerges as a recurring theme, with characters turning to lies as a means of maintaining control, often at great personal and relational cost. When Pélagie catches Joseph in Nancy’s bedroom after his horrific act, Joseph persuades her to conceal the truth: “S’il te plaît, on n’est pas obligé d’en parler. On peut garder ça entre toi et moi” [Please, they don’t need to know what’s happening . . . we don’t have to talk about it. We can keep this between you and me] (*Episode 3* 00:26:42-47). Pélagie herself later argues for secrecy, claiming, “Le plus important c’est de protéger l’enfant” [The most important thing is to protect the child] (*Episode 4* 00:05:56-58).

This collective choice to prioritize silence reflects the pervasive culture of denial.

Gladys, however, stands out as a central figure in this web of deception. She fabricates lies about situations that could have been resolved through honesty, as she confesses: “Je ne peux pas prendre le risque de lui dire la vérité . . . s’il apprend ce que papa a fait, ce sera la fin de mon mariage” [I can’t take the risk of telling him the truth . . . if he finds out what Dad did, it will be the end of my marriage] (*Episode 4* 00:28:49-57). Her persistent dishonesty, intended to preserve her marriage and family stability, ultimately backfires, leading to Nancy’s tragic death. Gladys’s manipulation not only destroys Nancy, but also strains her relationships with her husband and younger children, underscoring the long-term consequences of her choices.

Eugene, the central male figure, escapes significant accountability, highlighting systemic gender inequities. Despite his own lies and infidelity, the consequences disproportionately fall on the women in the story. Eugene himself trivializes his actions, stating, “L’infidélité ne devient un problème que lorsqu’on l’attrape” [Infidelity only becomes a problem when one gets caught] (*Episode 2* 00:07:26-28). This flippant remark underscores his evasion of responsibility and reinforces the double standards within the family’s dynamics.

The grandfather’s heinous abuse of Nancy and of his daughter Anabelle similarly goes largely unpunished. His death at Eugene’s hands, while dramatic, feels like a convenient resolution rather than true justice. By avoiding imprisonment or facing his crimes, the grandfather’s attempt to ease his guilt through monetary compensation for Nancy comes across as insincere and hollow, offering no real amends for the harm he caused.

Nancy’s tragic death stands as the ultimate indictment of the family’s cycle of abuse and dishonesty, illustrating the profound consequences of betrayal and manipulation. The narrative exposes the destructive power of lies, self-interest, and systemic inequities, shedding light on how these dynamics perpetuate harm and erode trust. It serves as a poignant commentary on the devastating impact of betrayal, particularly on the innocent, and a call to confront the societal and familial structures that enable such tragedies.

In this narrative, secrecy and deceit are tools to uphold social hierarchies and protect masculine pride, but they ultimately lead to tragedy, culminating in the daughter’s death. The actions of the male characters, particularly the husband and grandfather, are motivated by a desire to maintain control, while women are either objectified or forced into self-sacrifice for the benefit of men. The grandmother and stepmother notably act as enablers of male wrongdoing, further entrenching these dynamics. The series reveals how

women often sacrifice their well-being for men without receiving reciprocal support, complicating any depiction of female empowerment. It criticizes a system that upholds male dominance at the expense of women's autonomy and agency. Bourdieu argues that the body functions as a site of gendered socialization, reinforcing women's sense of inferiority and perpetuating male dominance. He asserts that, "The body is thus an indisputable reality which both expresses the domination of men over women and helps to ensure the continuation of this domination" (21). Thus, *Secret mortel* exposes how traditional structures prioritize male dominance and family unity over justice, silencing victims in the process. Spivak's concept of epistemic violence aligns with these narratives, illustrating how dominant power structures erase or delegitimize marginalized forms of violence while preserving hegemonic discourses (76–82). Nancy Hartsock similarly links power to gender, asserting in "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" that "power is associated firmly with the male and masculinity" (157).

Marcelle Kuetché's series *La nouvelle épouse* (2021) offers another depiction of gender roles and societal expectations placed on women. The series explores how betrayal and manipulation arise from traditional gender norms, ultimately questioning notions of loyalty and justice. Beko, Mwana's best friend, struggles with infertility—a reality that highlights how, even in contemporary contexts, a woman's worth remains closely tied to her ability to procreate. To meet societal expectations, Beko pretends that her niece is her own child, hoping to make herself more desirable to her boyfriend, Steve. This act underscores the immense pressure women face to conform to traditional roles of motherhood and marriage. Guiso, Beko's ex-boyfriend, reinforces these norms when he insults her inability to conceive, cruelly suggesting that Steve would never marry an infertile woman.

In many Francophone African societies, a woman's identity is still largely defined by her ability to become a wife and mother. These roles are not merely social expectations; they are woven into the very structure of everyday life, reinforced by familial pressures, religious teachings, and state policies. This codification of womanhood, often portrayed as natural or traditional, is in fact deeply political. As Bourdieu explains, systems of symbolic power work to render domination invisible, embedding gender hierarchies within cultural common sense (23). Oyeronke Oyěwùmí offers a powerful critique of how colonial and Western feminist frameworks imposed rigid gender binaries that were often foreign to many African contexts. In the Yoruba world, for instance, social identity was organized less around gender and more around seniority and lineage (Oyěwùmí 31–34). The way societies formalize relationships between men and women—through laws, kinship norms, and everyday practices—therefore plays a crucial role in maintaining

unequal power dynamics. Ifi Amadiume similarly observes that while motherhood may be a source of respect, it also serves as a tool of control, confining women to roles that limit their autonomy and silence their resistance (82).

Together, these films offer a critical lens through which to explore gender dynamics, particularly how “masculinity is always constructed in relation to femininity, and often in opposition to it” (Connell 58). By examining these interactions, the narrative exposes the societal structures that sustain gendered power imbalances and reinforce expectations of women.

Women, Subalternity and Symbolic Silence

In *Femmes Aux Yeux Ouverts* (1994), the opening lines state: “La femme africaine, ce n’est pas une femme qui avait le choix. C’est une femme qui était donnée d’une famille amie à une autre famille amie. Donc, cette femme ne dispose de rien. Elle est l’objet donné, elle est l’objet de soumission, elle est l’objet d’obéissance pour ses parents aussi bien que pour son mari, aussi bien que pour la famille de son mari” [An African woman has no choice; she is given away in marriage—that is her status. She has nothing of her own. She is submissive. She must obey her parents, her husband, and her husband’s family] (00:01:12–39). These words shed light on the harsh realities faced by African women. A woman’s existence is often defined in relation to a man and her role as a subordinate. Even when a woman is intelligent and enterprising, her achievements and possessions are not truly regarded as her own. This reflects a deeply entrenched patriarchal system where a woman’s identity is considered secondary to that of a man. While this film was produced in 1994, many of its themes remain relevant today, as seen in more recent works such as *Secret mortel* (2024) or *La nouvelle épouse* (2021).

Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) offers a compelling framework for analyzing the intersections of race, gender, and economic exploitation. Fanon explores the alienation of Black men in a world shaped by white supremacy, emphasizing how external perceptions mold their identities. A parallel can be drawn with the experiences of Black women, whose identities are frequently reduced to roles of service to others. This service-oriented identity often extends beyond familial obligations, encompassing caregiving, domestic labor, and participation in revolutionary movements. For Black women, their worth is too often measured by their utility to others rather than by their intrinsic value. This dynamic illustrates how patriarchy and modernity converge to commodify marginalized individuals, perpetuating systemic inequalities and confining them to roles that uphold oppressive structures.

Spivak’s work, particularly in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, also explores the complex intersections of subalternity, gender, and violence, emphasizing the compounded marginalization faced by subaltern women.

Through a postcolonial feminist lens, Spivak critiques both colonial and patriarchal systems for silencing these women and for intellectual frameworks that fail to authentically represent them. She argues that women in subaltern positions are doubly marginalized—oppressed, both as colonized subjects and as women within patriarchal structures: “It is not just the subaltern who is silenced, but also women, who are doubly marginalized under colonialism and patriarchy” (106). Their voices are often erased or distorted within male-dominated narratives. Spivak concludes that “[t]here is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (103), not to imply that subaltern women are silent, but to emphasize how their voices are systematically excluded or delegitimized. Even when subaltern women attempt to express their realities, dominant power structures—language, legal frameworks, and academic discourse—mediate and often invalidate their articulations. This highlights the pervasive barriers that prevent these women from being heard on their own terms, further entrenching their invisibility within oppressive hierarchies.

Spivak’s work offers crucial insight into how societal systems like male domination silence and marginalize women. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” she helps readers understand how the women in *Secret mortel* are systematically silenced and forced into harmful roles by societal structures that prioritize male power and control. Spivak defines the “subaltern” as those who are marginalized and excluded—a concept that mirrors the experiences of the women in this series. Like the subaltern, these women struggle to have their voices recognized and to assert their agency in male-dominated spaces, underscoring the oppressive forces that prevent them from speaking on their own terms.

In this series, gender violence serves as a means of control, preventing women from freely participating in society. The trauma inflicted by gender-based violence often leaves women in a state of enforced silence, making it difficult for them to claim visibility or articulate their experiences within dominant narratives. This silence is not merely the aftermath of pain; it operates as a mechanism of control that sustains and legitimizes further abuse. As bell hooks poignantly writes, “silence is often the condition of trauma” (6), underscoring how unspoken suffering becomes embedded in the very structures that reproduce oppression. When such trauma is not acknowledged, it contributes to a culture of erasure, where the absence of women’s voices is mistaken for consent or passivity. Spivak’s concept of epistemic violence further clarifies how systems of knowledge production systematically exclude subaltern voices, particularly those of women, by denying them access to platforms of representation within hegemonic discourses (82). In this context, silence functions both as a symptom of violence and as a tool of

its perpetuation—an insidious force that normalizes gendered subjugation while rendering resistance inaudible.

Through his portrayal of these women, Ntedju highlights the profound impact of gender violence on their agency, autonomy, and their ability to be heard, aligning with Spivak's view on the structural silencing of marginalized individuals. In Spivak's framework, the concept that the subaltern is denied the ability to speak directly applies to Nancy's experience in *Secret mortel*. Gladys, in her effort to protect the family's image and preserve her social status, conceals the truth of Nancy's trauma. When she takes Nancy to the doctor for the first time, she insists, "Je pense que nous devons garder cette visite chez le gynécologue entre toi et moi, ton père n'a pas besoin d'être au courant" [I think we should keep this visit to the gynecologist between you and me; your father doesn't need to know] (*Episode 5* 00:10:05-10). As a result, Nancy becomes a clear example of the subaltern, with her pain and experiences dismissed by those around her, including her stepmother. This situation reflects Spivak's argument that marginalized voices are frequently erased or ignored.

When Gladys urges Nancy not to disclose the abuse to her father because of her desire to maintain stability in her marriage, it illustrates Spivak's concept that those in power—especially within patriarchal structures—silence the voices of the vulnerable. Gladys argues, "On peut dire la vérité. Mais ça va engendrer d'autres problèmes dont on peut se passer pour le moment" [We can tell the truth. But it will lead to other problems that we can avoid for now] (*Episode 6* 00:25:00-05). Spivak's claim, "For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from Representation" (80), underscores how the father's dismissal of Nancy's abuse silences her, reinforcing the patriarchal system and prioritizing his voice over hers. This dynamic perpetuates the marginalization of women's voices, especially when their suffering contradicts the need to protect male power and social standing.

Furthermore, the stepmother and grandmother both play pivotal roles in silencing Nancy's voice, reflecting societal structures that prioritize preserving family "peace" over the well-being of the victim. The stepmother actively prevents Nancy from telling her father, and the grandmother, who is also aware of the secret, encourages her to remain silent. She confesses, "Ta mère voulait partir à la police. C'est moi qui l'ai convaincue de ne pas y aller. Je ne voulais pas que tu saches ce qui s'est passé. On dit souvent que ce que tu ne sais pas ne peut pas te faire du mal" [Your mother wanted to go to the police. I convinced her not to go. I didn't want you to know what happened. It's often said that what you don't know can't hurt you] (*Episode 6* 00:24:02-15). This reflects the traditional mindset of "Si je dis la vérité à mon

père il va vouloir la quitter, du coup mes frères et moi, on va se retrouver dans une guerre de divorce” [If I tell the truth to my father, he will want to leave her, and then my brothers and I will end up in the middle of a divorce battle] (*Episode 6* 00:28:50 -57), a phrase that perpetuates a cycle of silence and protection for the abuser rather than the victim. This reasoning functions less as a genuine effort to protect vulnerable victims, such as children or survivors of sexual violence, and more as a mechanism that shields the abuser while silencing those harmed. In familial contexts, this silencing often manifests through the prioritization of family reputation and male authority over the needs and voices of vulnerable individuals. Consequently, the silence surrounding Nancy’s trauma becomes a symptom as well as a mechanism of ongoing violence, perpetuating cycles of abuse under the guise of preserving family unity.

The secrecy surrounding traumatic experiences often causes that pain to reverberate across generations, fracturing family bonds and perpetuating ongoing cycles of emotional distress and mistrust. As Judith Herman highlights, unspoken trauma can continue to influence individuals and their relationships long after the initial event (Herman 37). In *Secret mortel*, the family’s refusal to confront past injustices exemplifies a pattern that fosters tension, alienation, and dysfunction within the household. This avoidance does more than cause immediate conflict—it perpetuates trauma across generations. Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of the psychological and emotional effects of trauma from one generation to the next. It occurs when unresolved traumatic experiences, such as violence or abuse, indirectly influence the descendants of those who originally endured them, shaping their behaviors, relationships, and emotional wellbeing. By neglecting to acknowledge and address these historical wounds, families risk sustaining cycles of pain and dysfunction that echo far beyond the initial trauma. A striking example of this is Nancy’s poignant confession to Gladys: “Qu’est ce qui se passe ma chérie? - Je, je ne sais pas. Je ne comprends pas ce qui se passe. Ça fait deux fois que je vois du sang sur mon caleçon depuis hier, et je ressens une petite douleur . . . - Pour le moment, il ne faut pas t’imaginer des choses, ne panique pas pour rien. Demain je t’emmène voir le gynécologue” [“What’s going on, my darling?” “I . . . I don’t know. I don’t understand what’s happening. It’s the second time since yesterday that I’ve seen blood on my underwear, and I feel a slight pain. . . .” “For now, don’t start imagining things. Don’t panic over nothing. Tomorrow, I’ll take you to see the gynecologist”] (*Episode 5* 00:07:26 - 08:08). This exchange captures both Nancy’s vulnerability and Gladys’s attempt to provide reassurance, though it also reflects the tendency to avoid deeper engagement with distressing realities. It illustrates how trauma can manifest through emotional avoidance and an inability to

openly address sensitive issues. This exchange reflects not only the physical manifestation of Nancy's distress but also the emotional barriers and silences that characterize the family's struggle to confront and process their collective trauma.

Pélagie's advice to Nancy shows that she also fails to confront the core issue—the silencing of her granddaughter's voice in order to preserve the family's reputation. She says, “Mais ce que nous te demandons actuellement c'est un sacrifice. On te demande de te sacrifier pour protéger tes petits frères, pour protéger ton père” [But what we're asking of you right now is a sacrifice. We're asking you to sacrifice yourself to protect your little brothers, to protect your father] (*Episode 6* 00:26:44-52). This patriarchal society, in which the abuser is protected over the victim, underscores the societal expectation that women should sacrifice their well-being for others. The grandfather's position as the “man” of the household and financial provider reinforces the power dynamics, making him untouchable in the eyes of the family, regardless of his actions. Nancy's voice is repeatedly silenced, especially when Gladys persuades her not to speak out to protect her younger siblings and her marriage. This cultural norm of selflessness in women, which demands they prioritize others' needs even to the detriment of their own well-being, is a powerful element of patriarchy. It reflects the expectation that African women endure suffering and remain silent, perpetuating harmful cycles of abuse and inequality that are “perceived as acceptable and even natural” (Bourdieu 1).

The women's desire to preserve tradition and protect the “legacy” of the man of the household ultimately leads to the tragic loss of Nancy's life. As Nancy struggles to process the trauma of being sexually abused, the insistence by her stepmother and grandmother to keep the truth hidden underscores the clash between modern and traditional values. This dynamic aligns with Spivak's view that “subaltern groups” are often denied the opportunity to speak their truth due to powerful societal structures that suppress them. This resonates with Nancy's experience, where, as the victim, she is denied the chance to share her trauma on her own terms. Instead, a generational and cultural silence surrounding abuse is upheld, perpetuating the cycle of marginalization and erasure of the victim's voice.

The same themes of destructive male dominance, manipulation, and greed are powerfully depicted in *La nouvelle épouse*, where women lie and scheme as a means of survival in a society that defines their worth through their relationships with men. Christelle, a prime example, uses manipulation as a desperate attempt to elevate her status from a housemaid—an insecure role within the context of African cultural norms. Driven by ambition and survival, Christelle poisons Kara, eliminating her as a rival and positioning

herself as a potential wife for Ebode, a man she deems worthy of her affections. To cover her tracks, Christelle plants evidence on Mwana, Ebode's new love interest, leading to Mwana's imprisonment. Christelle even goes so far as to murder the doctor who possesses proof of her crimes, ensuring her scheme remains undiscovered.

Through Christelle's actions, *La nouvelle épouse* highlights the extreme measures women may take in societies where their survival, security, and social worth are closely linked to gaining the attention and protection of powerful men. Yet, this common interpretation often overlooks a critical dimension: the underlying economic realities that drive such behavior. Rather than merely seeking attention or validation, women's reliance on male protection frequently stems from structural economic vulnerabilities. As Naila Kabeer argues, gendered economic inequalities shape women's agency and choices, often constraining them within frameworks where dependence on male providers becomes necessary (Kabeer 14). In contexts with limited access to resources and opportunities, the pursuit of protection is as much a strategy for economic survival as a response to social norms.

The younger women's resistance to cultural norms in *Secret mortel* marks a significant departure from tradition, resonating with Spivak's assertion that the subaltern can begin to speak by rejecting imposed systems of oppression. This resilience, characterized by the rejection of oppressive practices, represents a meaningful step toward modernity and self-empowerment. In line with Spivak's concept of the subaltern, the female characters in Ntedju's *Secret mortel*, embody those whose pain and struggles are systematically ignored or dismissed by societal structures. Ntedju's narrative serves as a platform to amplify the voices of women who have been victims of gender violence, portraying their experiences within the cultural framework of Francophone Africa. By addressing these issues in public discourse, Ntedju aligns with Spivak's belief that illuminating marginalization—however imperfectly—is a critical step in challenging and dismantling the systems that silence the subaltern.

Toward Healing and Liberation

The rise of digital technology in Africa has become a valuable tool for raising awareness about various societal issues. Movies and television series are increasingly being used as advocacy “platforms that facilitate independent action” (Simone 14) to highlight these concerns. As Lyntoria Newton explains, “films can lead viewers to extend empathy and compassion to strangers by focusing on impactful moments of the human experience that unite us all” (2022). Television and movies are often more accessible to the public than books or articles. Beyond their accessibility, these forms of media are more engaging, as they compel viewers to interact with the themes being presented.

Jiovanna Santanera's article, "Video-Making the City: Popular Culture and Urban Life in Cameroon," explores the significance of video-making as a cultural phenomenon in Cameroon's urban centers. It examines how local filmmakers use video as a tool to document and interpret the complexities of city life, reflecting the intersection of popular culture, urbanization, and societal change. She argues that "the videos constitute a representational space for confrontation and change, where the identity of Douala is shaped and, at the same time, transformed" (88).

Through *Secret mortel*, Ntedju underscores the crucial importance of breaking silence and confronting systemic injustices in order to overcome trauma. The narrative reveals how rejecting internalized oppression and reclaiming cultural heritage can disrupt cycles of pain, fostering both collective and personal liberation. Gladys, in her protection of male figures, upholds "pleasures of power and domination" (Bourdieu 2) by withholding painful truths, inadvertently teaching her daughter to place male authority above their own well-being. This dynamic reflects the enduring influence of patriarchy, where women were historically conditioned to accept subordination and were "symbolically condemned to resignation" (Bourdieu 32). Such inherited coping mechanisms stifle emotional expression, hindering healing and trapping families in cycles of unresolved pain.

Despite its focus on familial cycle of trauma, *Secret mortel* also suggests the potential for healing through confronting painful histories and reclaiming agency. This idea is conveyed through the act of speaking out about the issue: "C'est la pire des choses qui pourraient arriver. Mais malheureusement c'est là et il faut qu'on agisse. - Cette affaire est allée beaucoup trop loin. Après avoir réfléchi longuement, grand-mère et moi, on pense qu'il faut dire la vérité à ton père. On ne peut lui cacher ce qui se passe" [This is the worst thing that could happen. But unfortunately, it's here, and we need to act. This situation has gone too far. After thinking about it for a long time, grandma and I believe we need to tell your father the truth. We can't hide what's happening from him] (*Episode 08* 00:31:22 - 42). This moment suggests that confronting difficult truths and addressing the painful past are essential steps toward breaking free from trauma and reclaiming control over one's destiny.

Breaking silence and confronting patriarchal structures can cultivate resilience and empowerment. Tragically, the family's prolonged silence leads to devastating consequences, as noted earlier. Nancy's fate underscores the lethal impact of a culture that conditions women—often from childhood—to remain silent and subservient in order to be deemed socially acceptable. This normalization of female silence is not incidental; it is structurally maintained by patriarchal institutions that equate obedience with respectability. As bell hooks asserts, "patriarchy has no gender," and women themselves are

often socialized to internalize and reproduce the very systems that oppress them (18). Sylvia Tamale similarly critiques how African societies, through custom and socialization, teach women to avoid challenging male authority, embedding submission as a marker of femininity (Tamale 50). Nancy's death thus becomes a stark indictment of the broader social order that punishes disclosure, rewards silence and ultimately sacrifices the vulnerable in the name of preserving familial and communal harmony. Her final moments are rendered more tragic by the medical response: "Docteur, comment elle va? – Je suis désolé, madame, nous n'avons pas pu lui sauver la vie. Elle a perdu énormément de sang, nous n'avons pas eu le temps de réagir" [Doctor, how is she? – I'm sorry, madam, we couldn't save her life. She lost an enormous amount of blood, and we didn't have time to act] (*Episode 9* 00:28:13–22). The delayed response—both medical and familial—becomes symbolic of a society that acts too late, if at all, when it comes to protecting girls and women from gender-based violence. Nancy's death is not simply the result of medical failure, but of a complicit silence woven into cultural expectations, institutional neglect, and the internalized fear of disrupting patriarchal norms.

This moment also emphasizes how unaddressed trauma tends to repeat itself. Nancy's rape mirrors her mother's past experiences, perpetuated by silence. The disturbing exchange between Grandma and Joseph emphasizes this pattern: "Joseph, qu'est-ce que tu faisais dans la chambre de . . . Joseph, qu'est-ce que tu as fait?" [Joseph, what were you doing in the bedroom of . . .? Joseph, what did you do?] (*Episode 3* 00:25:53–26:16). Joseph, Gladys's father, had previously raped his own daughter Annabelle, which ultimately contributed to her death. Because these events were never openly confronted or processed, the trauma reemerged in the next generation, manifesting with devastating consequences in Nancy's life. The silence surrounding her mother's own abuse created a painful legacy—an emotional inheritance passed down through avoidance, fear, and unspoken grief. As Herman poignantly observes, "traumatic events produce profound and lasting changes in psychological functioning," and when those events remain unacknowledged, they are often relived "not as memories but as actions or symptoms" in those who follow (41). Yael Danieli similarly underscores how families impacted by trauma may unknowingly transmit it to their children through what she terms a "conspiracy of silence," where unspoken suffering becomes embedded in everyday interactions and relationships (4). In Nancy's case, the weight of her family's unhealed past resurfaces through her own victimization, revealing how the refusal to confront violence can perpetuate cycles of harm across generations.

The ten episodes of *Secret mortel* offer an unconventional way of

learning about important societal issues. Gender violence, in particular, is a topic that requires diverse forms of communication to challenge the “arbitrary construction of the male and female body” (Bourdieu 23). In this context, for Newton, popular digital visual art emerges as a “[p]owerful means of communication for social issues” (2022). The series is not primarily intended to entertain; rather, its main purpose is to educate viewers about the reality of women’s lives in a post-colonial context. Women in this setting are dealing with decades of generational trauma caused by male supremacy, trapped in a system that perpetuates the cycle. Their resilience is often misinterpreted, but these portrayals force us to face uncomfortable truths and reconsider how systems of power and control have shaped their existence. Through digital storytelling, *Secret mortel* presents an opportunity to break these cycles and advocate for meaningful change.

The digital world, particularly through platforms such as YouTube, plays a pivotal role in amplifying underrepresented voices, fostering public discourse, and challenging traditional norms. These platforms allow individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences and address societal issues. They empower communities, enabling global audiences to engage with important matters. Digital visual art emerges as a powerful tool for resistance, healing, and the reclamation of identity. As Matthew Umukoro aptly states, it becomes “the expression and reflection of the totality of the human condition” (5).

Secret mortel navigates the complexities of African society, inspiring a reevaluation of societal values and norms, and fostering a collective journey toward cultural authenticity and equity. The episodes underscore that dismantling oppressive systems requires both critical reflection and societal commitment in creating a future centered on equity and self-determination. These stories are vital in exposing ongoing struggles between tradition and modernity, as well as the search for identity. The film’s portrayal of women’s sacrifices and emotional manipulation mirrors real-life experiences, highlighting how both tradition and modernity have left a lasting impact on power dynamics and gender roles. In this context, *Secret mortel* advocates for social justice and community development, offering viewers endless opportunities to engage with issues that extend beyond their personal experiences (Newton, 2022).

While *Secret mortel* might appear to be casual storytelling, it accurately reflects the evolving landscape of Francophone Africa, particularly in relation to gender roles. The series vividly demonstrates how patriarchal systems continue to underpin the systemic oppression of women, perpetuating their marginalization and maintaining their subordinate status within society. It is also crucial to acknowledge that women, due to deeply ingrained cultural

norms, often perpetuate these injustices against themselves, creating a cycle of oppression that is difficult to break. The trauma explored in the series highlights how not only victims but also their families and children are affected. In many ways, the series serves as a call for social reform. By exposing systemic imbalances that favor men over women, *Secret mortel* urges viewers to take action for change.

Digital productions, such as *Secret mortel*, provide a potent medium for raising awareness, critiquing societal norms, and advocating for change. The series uncovers issues of gender violence and highlights generational divides, with younger people using digital tools to challenge oppressive norms, while older generations resist change to preserve tradition. The films suggest that, while digital art is a powerful tool for social change, its impact depends on cultural context, availability, and the community's readiness to embrace change. However, it is evident that the film does not focus enough on the victims' emotions or fully explore the consequences they face, neglecting to tell their stories. It is crucial to give victims a voice, since they are often silenced by societal structures. Focusing on their perspectives humanizes their experiences and challenges the dominant narratives that protect abuse. By amplifying these voices, digital platforms can drive social change and empower others in similar situations. The series' choice not to include the victims' side of the story is a critique of the societal norms that silence them. This decision leaves the viewer uncomfortable, emphasizing how victims' narratives are often marginalized in favor of dominant societal voices.

As Santanera argues, video-making in Cameroon transcends mere entertainment; it serves as a vital medium for cultural expression, social critique, and the exploration of urban identity. These videos underline the transformative role of popular culture in both shaping and reflecting the lived experiences of Cameroonian city dwellers (87-88). By providing a platform for critique, Cameroonian video productions address systemic injustices, urban inequalities, and social challenges. They amplify the voices of marginalized groups and challenge existing power structures. Blending traditional storytelling techniques with modern formats, these productions resonate deeply with urban audiences. Video-making in Cameroon captures the daily struggles and aspirations of city residents, shedding light on issues such as poverty, migration, gender roles, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. In this context, the city itself emerges as a central "character," symbolizing both opportunity and hardship.

Art, particularly films and videos, serves as a tool to educate audiences about the realities of gender violence, providing healing spaces for survivors. These media formats bring attention to issues often overlooked in mainstream discourse, while grassroots movements use video to educate

about gender equality. Sharing survivors' stories fosters resilience and solidarity, highlighting the dynamics of male dominance and control, which lead to violence against women. However, popular digital cinema plays a dual role in the postcolonial narrative. On the one hand, it offers a platform to discuss urgent social issues, as demonstrated by the widespread popularity of *Secret mortel*. On the other hand, it can deepen societal divides, excluding those without access to digital resources from crucial conversations. This tension reflects the broader postcolonial struggle for equality and representation, where access to technology can either empower or further marginalize certain groups.

Drawing from the theories of Bourdieu and Spivak, the narratives discussed above emphasize the importance of confronting societal and historical injustices, rejecting internalized oppression, and reclaiming identity as crucial steps toward healing. The impact of the series goes beyond entertainment, raising global awareness of postcolonial challenges. While its digital dissemination democratizes storytelling, limitations remain, such as insufficient focus on systemic solutions and limited gender perspectives. Despite these gaps, Ntedju uses powerful techniques—rich dialogue, cultural symbolism, and moral resolutions—to address themes of gender violence and trauma. The tragic yet redemptive narratives challenge viewers to engage with the lingering effects of patriarchal structures, creating opportunities for broader discussions about justice, identity, and liberation. By engaging with Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", my research investigates how gender-based violence functions not merely as a physical act of harm, but as a systemic mechanism of silencing and subordination within patriarchal structures. The focus is on women, whose lived experiences of suffering are often excluded from dominant discourses, lacking authentic platforms through which to articulate their trauma or contest oppressive norms. This inquiry resonates with Anna Bernard-Hoverstad's analysis in "Framing Perceptions of Violence against Women in Film: *Les Silences du Palais* and *Incendies*" (2013), which explores how cinematic representations of sexual violence reproduce or resist the broader dynamics of female victimization. Both frameworks underscore the ethical and representational challenges of representing marginalized voices authentically and ensuring that their stories are heard.

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