

**Language as Form of Oppression and Liberation in  
"La Bastarda" by Trifonia Melibea Obono**

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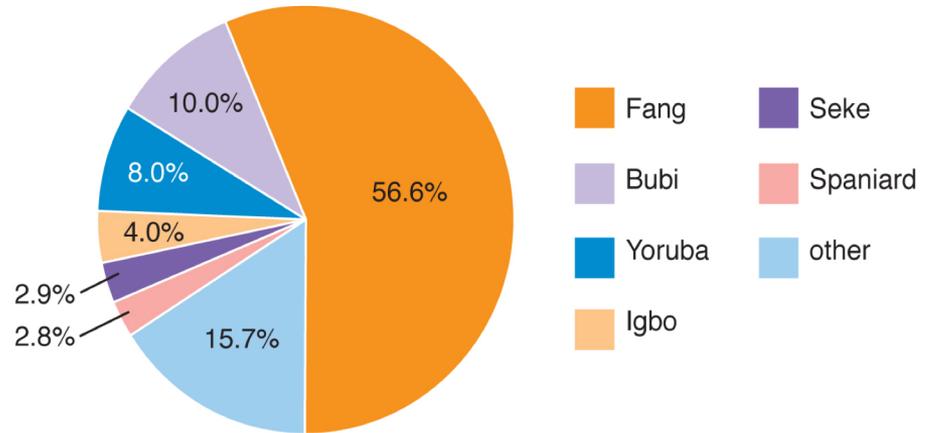
## **Abstract:**

Language is a powerful tool that can reveal hidden attitudes and biases of a society. In *La Bastarda*, author Trifonia Melibea Obono uses language to represent both the oppression and liberation of the LGBTQ+ community within Equatorial Guinea. In this project, I analyzed Obono's use of character dialogue and written description to better understand the culture of Equatorial Guinea, specifically within the indigenous Fang tribe. I specifically focused on how the existence, or lack of, sufficient vocabulary to represent the LGBTQ+ community can both marginalize a group and represent its liberation.

# Context: Equatorial Guinea



Ethnic composition (2000)



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## *La Bastarda* by Trifonia Melibea Obono



Author Trifonia Melibea Obono with  
translator Lawrence Schimel

- Trifonia Melibea Obono: writer and LGBTQ+ activist from Equatorial Guinea
- Not biographical, though setting is based on her childhood
- *La Bastarda* is banned in Equatorial Guinea
- Translated to English by Lawrence Schimel in 2016
- 116 pages and seven chapters

# *La Bastarda* by Trifonia Melibea Obono

- Protagonist: Okomo, young girl of Fang indigenous tribe in Equatorial Guinea.
- Plot: Okomo attempts to find her father, spends time with family, experiments sexually with other girls in the village, is eventually outed and escapes to the forest.
- Titled *La Bastarda* because of Okomo's illegitimate parents



# Structure of book

Ch. 1: *Osá el Descalzo*

*Osá the barefoot*

Ch. 2: *El hombre-mujer*

*The man-woman*

Ch. 3: *El club de la indecencia*

*The indecency club*

Ch. 4: *Camino a Ebian*

*Journey to Ebian*

Ch. 5: *Fiesta*

*Party*

Ch. 6: *Castigo*

*Punishment*

Ch. 7: *El bosque*

*The forest*

## Enforcing femininity through dialogue:

*“¿Por qué no hablas de trenzas y peinados, del cuidado del hogar y de otras tonterías?” (34)*

*“Why don't you speak of braids and hairstyles, of housekeeping and other foolishness?” (34)*

*“Como mujer debía estar siempre guapa. Y prohibido preguntar.” (39)*

*“As a woman should always be beautiful. And forbidden to question.” (39)*

*“Mi abuela pasaba la mayor parte del tiempo contándome las prohibiciones que la tribu establecía para las mujeres.” (46)*

*“My grandmother spent the majority of the time telling me the limitations that the tribe established for its women.” (46)*

## Enforcing masculinity through dialogue:

*“No eres un hombre! Un varón de verdad se acuesta con mujeres y se reproduce.” (40)*

*“You are not a man! A real man lies with women and reproduces.” (40)*

*“El hombre perfecto sería el que se reproduce?...¿sería varón la persona que lograba someter a las personas?” (37)*

*“The perfect man is that which reproduces? Will he be considered a man the person who is able to subdue the most people?” (37)*

*“Sabes que tengo razón. Tú perteneces a mi tribu. No tienes nada que ver con el hombre que... -- tartamudeo un rato buscando las palabras -- Con el desgraciado ese...” (31)*

*“You know that I’m right. You belong to my tribe. You don’t have anything to do with that man, that -- he stuttered a bit searching for words -- with that disgraceful..” (31)*

## Enforcing heterosexuality through dialogue:

*“No te hagas amiga de estas niñas, son indecentes y misteriosas.” (62)*

*“Don’t become friends with those girls, they are indecent and mysterious.” (62)*

*“--¿Y eso es grave, abuela? ¿No tener novia es grave?*

*--¿Has dicho novia o he escuchado mal?*

*--Perdón, tú nunca escuchas mal abuela, me he equivocado. Novio quería decir.*

*--¡Menos mal! --suspiró--. Menos mal que te has equivocado.” (68)*

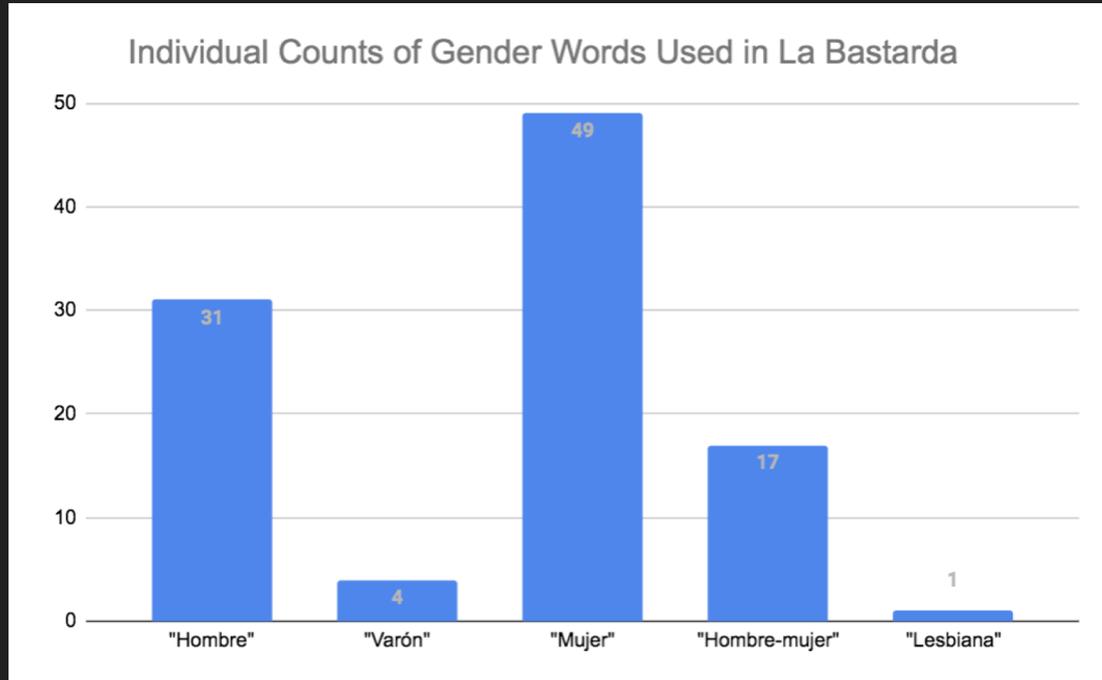
*“--And is this terrible, Grandma? Not having a girlfriend is terrible?*

*--Have you said girlfriend or did I hear you wrong?*

*--Sorry, you never hear wrong, Grandma, I was mistaken. Boyfriend I meant to say.*

*-- That’s better! -- she inhaled --. Better that you have been mistaken.” (68)*

# Language by the numbers



**Figure 1.** A numerical analysis of the frequency of gendered language used in *La Bastarda* shows mentions of heterosexual women greatly outnumber that of heterosexual men, but mentions of homosexual women are much less common than mentions of homosexual men.

**Hombre = man**

Includes “hombre,”  
“hombres”

**Varón = man**

Includes “varón,” “varones”

**Mujer = woman**

Includes “mujer,”  
“mujeres”

**Hombre-mujer = gay man**

Includes “hombres-mujer,”  
“hombre mujer,” “mujer-hombre,”  
“hom-bre-mujer”

**Lesbiana = lesbian**

Includes “lesbiana”

# Language by the numbers

“The invisibility of women loving women is so great that it doesn’t exist in the linguistics. The protagonist have never conceived her own identity because a word for her does not exist. She is searching for a way to identity or understand herself.”

“It represents the misogyny of associated the feminine with the bad. This is the most despicable thing within the society.”

- Lawrence Schimel, translator of *La Bastarda*

## Subverting the patriarchal/heteronormative society through language:

*“Pero encontré un tema de conversación: odiaba las trenzas. ¡Como las odiaba! También detestaba el pintalabios, el pintacejas, el pintarrostro y todo lo pintable. Resultó que yo no era la única.” (63)*

*“But I found a topic of conversation: I hated braids. How I hated them! I also detested lipstick, mascara, concealer, and all makeup. It turned out I was not the only one.” (63)*

*“Ella me besó en la boca violando una de las normas del cuarteto. Me gustó. Sonreí.” (72)*

*“She kissed me on the mouth, violating one of the rules of the quartet. I liked it. I smiled.” (72)*

*“Estás en el bosque: el bosque fang es un entorno libre. Ahora eres libre.” (65)*

*“You are in the forest: the Fang forest is an eternal freedom. Now you are free.” (65)*

# Subverting the patriarchal/heteronormative society through language:

**Chapter 7, El Bosque:** It has been a long six chapters of Okomo learning about Fang societal norms and grappling with her own sexuality. Okomo finally reaches the house of her father, a man she has been searching for throughout the novel. He rejects her, wanting nothing to do with her, and Okomo declares...

climax



*“Bastarda yo, una mujer fang; bastarda yo, la hija de una soltera fang; bastarda yo, lesbiana.” (116)*

*“Bastard, I, a Fang woman, bastard, I, the daughter of a single Fang mother, bastard, I, a lesbian.” (116)*

## The effect of translation on *La Bastarda*

- Translating between two languages can reveal linguistic differences that signal underlying cultural differences
  - Existence of the words “lesbian” and “gay women” in English but not in Equatorial Guinean Spanish
- Even the quotes in this presentation have been translated, which could skew their meaning
- Lawrence Schimel on translation: *“The Spanish used in Equatorial Guinea sounds a bit outdated... In this translation, I avoided using contractions...instead of Okomo’s mother, it’s the mother of Okomo. I wanted to give the translation the same effect as reading the original.”*

## A quote from the author

*“La sexualidad de la mujer fang no existe. Ni siquiera la mujer heterosexual tiene el derecho de su sexualidad, la única cosa esperada de ella es su reproducción, nada más. Mi libro propone este derecho para las mujeres: el derecho de tener una sexualidad.”*

*“The sexuality of the Fang woman does not exist. Neither does the straight woman have a right to her sexuality, the only thing expected of her is her reproduction, nothing more. My book promotes this right for women: the right to have a sexuality.”*

*- Trifonia Melibea Obono*

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