



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The unseen labour of mothering: Maternal reproductive work, bodily knowledge, and the violence of the border-state in Faith Ben-Daniels' *Blue Ixora* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a Marxist-feminist reading of Faith Ben-Daniels' *Blue Ixora* (2018). Existing feminist criticism has tended to read maternal experience in contemporary African women's fiction as an alternative epistemology, foregrounding women's intuitive knowledge while leaving its material and economic conditions unexamined. Against this tendency, the study argues that maternal care and knowledge are most adequately understood as forms of devalued labour, and that the destruction of life at the postcolonial border is best read as the destruction of socially reproduced labour-power by a predatory state. The analysis draws on the Marxist theory of labour and value, on social reproduction theory and the feminist scholarship of Silvia Federici, and on Louis Althusser's account of the repressive state apparatus. Adopting a qualitative, interpretive design, it proceeds through close reading and thematic analysis organised around five concerns: the devaluation of reproductive labour, the silencing of women's knowledge, the commodification of the body and human mobility, state violence and impunity, and grief as resistance. The study concludes that the work offers not merely a narrative of personal loss but a structural critique of postcolonial capitalist patriarchy, and that a materialist feminist approach yields insights that a purely gynocritical reading cannot.

KEYWORDS: border violence, commodification, maternal labour, Marxist-feminism, social reproduction

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1. Introduction

Feminist literary criticism has long been concerned with how literature represents the lives, labour and knowledge of women, but the question of how that labour is valued, or refused value, is sharpened when feminist analysis is joined to a materialist one. Marxist-feminism emerged precisely from this conjunction. It holds that the subordination of women cannot be explained by patriarchy alone, nor by class alone, but by the way the two are interwoven in a social order that depends upon women's work while declining to recognise it as work (Hartmann, 1979). For literary study, this conjunction offers a way of reading beyond the individual psychology of female characters towards the economic and ideological structures that shape their suffering.

Three concerns have proved especially generative for this kind of reading. The first is reproductive labour: the feeding, nurturing and sustaining of human life, performed largely by women without wages, which social reproduction theory has shown to be the hidden foundation of all other production (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012). The second is the body and human mobility, and the ways in which bodies, and movement across borders, are commodified and rendered disposable under capitalism, a concern of particular weight in postcolonial African settings where borders function as sites of both regulation and extraction. The third is the state, understood not as a neutral arbiter but as an apparatus that ultimately secures dominant interests through coercion (Althusser, 1971). Taken together, these concerns allow the literary critic to ask not only what happens to women and the vulnerable in a given text, but what social system makes those happenings intelligible.

It is within this critical conversation that the present study is situated. The study undertakes a Marxist-feminist reading of Faith Ben-Daniels' *Blue Ixora* (2018), a contemporary Ghanaian novel that has so far received only a single, gynocritical, critical treatment. It seeks, first, to show how the novel represents maternal care and knowledge as labour, and how that labour is devalued; second, to examine how the novel depicts the border as a site of class violence and the commodification of human mobility; and third, to analyse how the repressive apparatus of the state works to erase the value of a life and a loss, and how maternal grief comes to function as a form of resistance. In pursuing these aims, the study is guided by the following questions:

1. How does the novel represent maternal care and knowledge as labour, and by what means is that labour devalued?
2. How does the novel depict the border as a site of class violence and the commodification of human mobility?
3. How do the repressive apparatuses of the state work to erase the value of the migrant's life and the mother's loss, and how does maternal grief come to function as a form of resistance?

2. Literature Review

Scholarship in the Marxist-feminist tradition begins from the proposition that the oppression of women is bound up with the organisation of labour under capitalism. Early statements of this position, in the domestic-labour debates of the 1970s, argued that the unpaid work performed by women in the home is not a private or natural activity but a contribution to the economy as a whole, since it produces and maintains the workers upon whom waged production depends (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 1975). Marx's (1867/1990) analysis of labour as the source of value, and Engels' (1884/2010) account of the family as the site where labour-power is reproduced, provided the foundations on which these arguments were built. What distinguished the feminist intervention was its insistence that reproductive labour, precisely because it is unwaged and naturalised as love, is rendered invisible and without recognised value.

This insight has since been developed into social reproduction theory, which treats the production of goods and the reproduction of life as two moments of a single system rather than as separate spheres (Bhattacharya, 2017; Vogel, 1983/2013). Within this body of work, care, nurture and the raising of children are understood as labour that is indispensable yet systematically devalued, a contradiction that Hartmann (1979) captured in her account of the unhappy marriage of class and patriarchy. For the literary critic, this tradition supplies a vocabulary for naming what female characters in fiction so often do, and what is so often overlooked: the daily, repetitive work of sustaining others.

Closely related is a second strand of scholarship concerned with the body. Federici (2004), in her historical study of the origins of capitalism, argued that the devaluation and disciplining of women's bodies and reproductive capacities was integral to capitalist accumulation itself. This concern with the body extends naturally to the question of how bodies are commodified, priced and rendered disposable, and, in postcolonial contexts, to how movement across borders becomes an occasion for both regulation and extraction. Where mobility is monetised, those who cannot pay are exposed to violence, and the body becomes the site on which economic contradiction is resolved.

A third strand concerns women's knowledge. Feminist epistemology has long argued that ways of knowing associated with women, including embodied and intuitive knowledge, are routinely discounted as irrational or merely emotional (Mama, 2011). In African contexts in particular, scholars have examined how women's experiential knowledge is at once central to communal life and denied authority within patriarchal structures. A materialist reading extends this argument by asking why such knowledge is devalued, locating the answer not in an abstract rationalism but in the same political economy of gender that devalues women's labour.

A fourth strand turns to the state. In the Marxist tradition, the state is understood not as a neutral guarantor of justice but as an apparatus that ultimately defends dominant interests, functioning, in Althusser's (1971) formulation, through both ideological persuasion and, at its limit, repressive force. Scholarship on the postcolonial state has shown how this coercive dimension operates with particular intensity at borders and checkpoints, where state power is most concentrated and least accountable. Literature that depicts such violence invites a reading attentive to impunity: to the mechanisms by which the deaths of the poor are concealed and rendered without consequence.

These general concerns acquire a specific inflection in African women's writing, where the figure of the mother has been a persistent and contested presence. Critics have read motherhood in African literature both as a source of authority and as a site of oppression, and have theorised distinctively African framings of the maternal (Acholonu, 1995; Nnaemeka, 1997; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Much of this scholarship, however, has approached the maternal through the lens of identity, culture or spirituality, with comparatively little attention to the maternal as labour in the materialist sense, or to the economic structures within which mothering takes place. It is worth noting, moreover, that African women writers have themselves explored how women forge bonds of solidarity and mutual support within and against patriarchal structures which is a concern that Tay and Ben-Daniels (2023) pursue in their analysis of female friendship and sisterhood in African literature, showing how women's collective relations can constitute a resource against oppression even as patriarchal culture seeks to undermine them.

It is against this background that the work of the Ghanaian novelist Faith Ben-Daniels invites attention. To date, the only sustained critical treatment of her novel *Blue Ixora* (2018) is Tontoh's (2026) gynocritical reading, which interprets the mother's premonition as a form of maternal vision and an alternative epistemology resistant to patriarchal rationalism. Valuable as this account is in foregrounding women's knowledge, it abstracts that knowledge from the material conditions the novel depicts, and leaves unexamined the economic origins of the catastrophe it narrates, the commodification of mobility, and the impunity of the state. No Marxist or Marxist-feminist reading of the novel exists. The present study addresses this gap by bringing the themes reviewed above, namely the devaluation of reproductive labour, the silencing of women's knowledge, the commodification of the body and mobility, and state violence and impunity, to bear on the novel.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Marxist-feminism, supplemented by the Marxist theory of the state and of literature. The framework may be summarised in a set of core tenets, which together guide the analysis.

Labour is the source of value. Following Marx (1867/1990), value in a capitalist economy arises from human labour, and the worker's capacity to labour, or labour-power, is itself a commodity that is bought, used and discarded. Labour-power must be reproduced. Following Engels (1884/2010) and social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017), the workforce does not renew itself automatically; it must be produced and maintained, daily and across generations, through feeding, nurture and care.

Reproductive labour is gendered, unwaged and devalued. This reproductive work is performed overwhelmingly by women, outside the wage, and is naturalised as an expression of love or duty, so that it is rendered invisible and denied recognised value (Dalla Costa & James, 1972; Federici, 1975).

Class and patriarchy form a single, interlocking system. Women's oppression cannot be reduced either to class or to patriarchy taken separately; the two operate together, such that the devaluation of women's labour and the extraction of surplus are aspects of one order (Hartmann, 1979).

The body is a site of accumulation and discipline. The control, devaluation and disposability of bodies, especially women's bodies and the bodies of the poor, is integral to capitalist accumulation (Federici, 2004); under this logic, human life and mobility may themselves be commodified and rendered disposable.

The state is a repressive apparatus serving dominant interests. The state is not a neutral arbiter of justice but an apparatus that secures the prevailing order, functioning through ideology and, at its limit, through coercive force (Althusser, 1971).

Literature encodes material and ideological contradictions. Literary form and content register the

economic and ideological tensions of their moment, so that close reading can disclose the social structures that a text both represents and responds to (Eagleton, 1976; Williams, 1977).

Applied to a literary text, these tenets direct attention away from the individual psychology of characters and towards the social order that shapes their fates: to the labour that sustains life, the value denied to it, the bodies rendered disposable, and the apparatus that conceals their destruction. Because the present text is set in a postcolonial African border economy, the framework is held in dialogue with African feminist scholarship on the situatedness of women's knowledge (Mama, 2011), so that its categories are adapted to, rather than imposed upon, the context under study.

4. Methodology

This is a qualitative, interpretive, library-based literary study. Its primary text is Ben-Daniels' *Blue Ixora* (2018), and its method is close reading combined with thematic analysis conducted through a Marxist-feminist lens. Close reading is treated here not as an informal exercise but as a research method in its own right, namely the systematic attention to narrative voice, characterisation, symbolism, structure and figurative language through which a literary argument is evidenced. The analysis is organised thematically, around the concerns established in the literature review, so that the reading of the novel proceeds in step with the scholarship it draws upon. Passages were selected where the text foregrounds labour, money, the body, state power or maternal knowledge, and were then interpreted against the theoretical framework. Because the analysis is interpretive, its claims are advanced as a reading, internally coherent and grounded in textual evidence, rather than as empirical generalisation.

5. Discussion

The discussion proceeds through the themes established in the literature review, reading the novel in their light and returning, at each point, to the scholarship from which the themes are drawn.

5.1 The Devaluation of Maternal Reproductive Labour

To begin with, the literature reviewed above identifies reproductive labour, the unwaged work of sustaining life, as indispensable yet systematically devalued (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 1975). *Blue Ixora* bears this argument out from its opening pages. Indeed, before any of its violence, the novel presents Maame Manu at work in the domestic sphere, rising at dawn, arranging her kitchen and preparing breakfast (Ben-Daniels, 2018, pp. 4–5). On the morning of her son's departure, moreover, the narrative is given over almost entirely to her labour on his behalf, as she discovers that he has not packed, re-packs his bag, folds the clothes he has left behind and retrieves his Bible (pp. 6–7). This is the daily, repetitive work of social reproduction, and the novel presents it as so ordinary as to be unremarkable, which is precisely the mechanism by which, as Federici (1975) argues, such work is naturalised as love rather than recognised as labour.

Beyond these opening scenes, the text supplies a telling emblem of this economy in the mug that Yoofi once bought his mother with the first wages he earned weeding a neighbour's garden (Ben-Daniels, 2018, p. 21). The object condenses the whole circuit of social reproduction, for years of unwaged maternal care produce a son who, with his first earnings, returns that care in a small token of recognition. Yoofi is himself, therefore, the product of this labour. As an exchange student carrying the family's hopes of advancement, he is the educated young worker whose labour-power his mother's reproductive work has produced and sustained. The gendered division of the narrative reinforces the point, since it is the mother who feeds, packs and worries, and who will later recover and tend the body, whereas the men move through the public sphere of officials, drivers and police, a distribution that confirms the gendering of reproductive labour described in the literature (Hartmann, 1979).

5.2 The Silencing of Women's Knowledge

Building on the question of labour, the literature also identifies the devaluation of women's knowledge, especially embodied and intuitive knowledge, as a feature of patriarchal orders (Mama, 2011). In *Blue Ixora*, this knowledge is rendered, strikingly, as a form of bodily labour. As her son's taxi departs, for instance, Maame Manu is seized by a sharp pain in her abdomen, as though a knife had been driven into her (Ben-Daniels, 2018, p. 9); at the moment of his death, similarly, the symbolic blue Ixora blooms within her chest, her heart turning cold and releasing blue petals and blood until she collapses (pp. 22–23). The maternal bond is thus not described but enacted upon the body, so that the mother performs, painfully and involuntarily, the work of knowing what is happening to her child.

What the novel then dramatises, however, is the systematic discounting of this knowledge. The neighbours

and Auntie Araba re-describe her certainty as mere worry, explaining her son's silence through road delays and a forgotten telephone (Ben-Daniels, 2018, pp. 30–36), and when she recounts her dream the response is to cancel it through prayer (p. 42). Consequently, her knowledge is treated as though it had no use, as superstition or a mother's nerves, in exactly the operation by which, as Federici (2004) argues, patriarchal capitalism naturalises and devalues women's faculties. Yet the narrative vindicates her, for she is right and those who reassure her are wrong. In confirming the truth of what the social order dismisses, the novel asserts the value of the very knowledge that is denied recognition. It is at this point, therefore, that the present reading parts company with Tontoh (2026), since, where the gynocritical account is content to name an alternative epistemology, the materialist reading asks why that epistemology is devalued, and locates the answer in the political economy of gender rather than in patriarchal rationalism alone.

5.3 The Commodification of the Body and Human Mobility

Turning to a third theme, the literature draws attention to the commodification of the body and of mobility, and to the exposure of those who cannot pay to violence (Federici, 2004). In *Blue Ixora*, accordingly, the son's death originates in money. At the border, the immigration officer Jean demands an unofficial payment from those who wish to pass (Ben-Daniels, 2018, p. 13). Yoofi, however, a student entitled under regional free-movement rules to cross without hindrance (p. 13), refuses to pay without a receipt, and it is this assertion of his rights against the system of extraction that provokes the beating, in which six officers fall upon one unarmed young man (pp. 14–16). The narrative later names the cause with flat precision, observing that the confrontation was over money (p. 40).

Furthermore, the same predation structures the whole of the mother's journey to recover her son, so that the system that killed him is revealed as a pervasive condition rather than an aberration. At checkpoint after checkpoint, officials demand bribes; a customs officer extorts the driver over pieces of kente cloth; and an immigration officer sneers that the money pressed into his hand is too small to buy bread (Ben-Daniels, 2018, pp. 60–63). The driver, indeed, states the logic plainly, that one must pay everyone, and that to insist on one's rights is to be detained on invented charges (pp. 62–63). In this way, the legal superstructure of regional integration is hollowed out by the material practice of extraction, in which the poor pay continuously in cash and, when they will not, in their bodies. Human mobility has thus been commodified, its price set arbitrarily by officials who have converted public power into private rent. The deepest irony, moreover, is structural, for the border-state destroys the educated labour-power that the regional economy claims to need, over a trivial sum, an image of a system so compulsively extractive that it consumes the very labour-power that reproduction so painstakingly produces.

5.4 State Violence and Impunity

Following from this, the literature directs attention to the state as a repressive apparatus that defends dominant interests and conceals the violence done to the poor (Althusser, 1971). After the killing, accordingly, the machinery of the state in *Blue Ixora* converts a murder into an administrative inconvenience. The cell is scrubbed until it is hard to tell it was ever used (Ben-Daniels, 2018, pp. 26–27); potential witnesses refuse to speak, the coffee vendor reciting the creed of the border town, that they see, hear and say nothing (p. 41); the doctor who first alerted the police falls silent under evident pressure (pp. 27, 50); and the national-security bureau finally removes the case from the investigating inspector in order to bury it (pp. 58–59).

In Althusserian terms, therefore, the border guards, the police and the security bureau function as a single repressive apparatus, closing ranks not to deliver justice but to protect the state and its relations with its neighbour. The death of a poor student, consequently, is reframed as a delicate matter that might create an international problem between two countries (Ben-Daniels, 2018, p. 44), so that the human being is reduced to a diplomatic externality. The novel's most explicit statement of this condition comes from within the apparatus itself, when the inspector arrives at the bitter recognition that there is no justice, and that his task is not to fight for it but to obey (p. 72), echoing his superior's resignation that they lack the power to resist (p. 59). Justice, in this order, has no value, since it is simply not among the things the system exists to produce. The catalogue of the young man's injuries (p. 44), in turn, documents in clinical detail the violence done to a body that the state then works to render invisible, so that the life the mother's labour produced is treated, by the apparatus, as waste to be disposed of quietly.

5.5 Grief as Resistance

Finally, the literature's attention to women's devalued labour and knowledge allows the ending of the novel to

be read as more than mourning. Against the state's erasure of her son, Maame Manu's grief refuses the valuation the system has imposed. She does not weep, for her pain is beyond tears, and what fills the place of grief is anger (Ben-Daniels, 2018, pp. 70–71). Instead, she performs one final labour of care, combing her son's hair as she did in his childhood, dressing him, forbidding the attendants to tear his clothes, and humming the lullaby of his infancy (pp. 66–71). This reproductive labour over the body, the insistence that he be made decent and carried home with dignity, asserts the value the state has denied. Where the apparatus treats him as waste to be concealed, by contrast, his mother treats him as beyond price.

Indeed, the governing symbol of the novel closes the argument. The recurring vision of a garden of blue Ixora, whose petals bleed and whose blue waters threaten to drown her, resolves in the final line into a terrible calm, as she reflects that the petals would now cease to fall (Ben-Daniels, 2018, p. 74). The maternal labour of foreknowing and grieving is thus complete, its long and unrecognised suffering having reached its terminus in the worst of outcomes. The blue Ixora, in the end, names a maternal economy of love and loss that runs counter to, and silently judges, the cash economy of the border. The novel offers no redress, for none is available within the system it depicts; what it offers instead is re-valuation, restoring through the mother the worth of the life and the labour that the border-state discarded. In a world where justice has been foreclosed, therefore, grief becomes the form that resistance takes.

6. Conclusion

Read through Marxist-feminism, *Blue Ixora* emerges as an indictment of a postcolonial capitalist and patriarchal order that extracts and discards on two fronts at once. On the one hand, it naturalises and devalues women's reproductive labour and embodied knowledge, treating the mother's years of care and her painful foreknowledge as love or superstition rather than as work. On the other, it commodifies human mobility so violently that it destroys the very labour-power that reproduction produces, killing an educated young migrant over a refused payment and then erasing the loss through the repressive apparatus of the state. Maame Manu stands at the intersection of these processes, for her unwaged care produces the son, the border-state consumes him for rent, the apparatus conceals the crime, and her grief re-asserts the value the system denies.

This reading extends and corrects the existing gynocritical account (Tontoh, 2026). The mother's vision is not only an alternative way of knowing but devalued labour, and the catastrophe that befalls her is not only a personal tragedy but a structural one, rooted in the political economy of gender, class and the postcolonial border. Further research might pursue this materialist line comparatively, reading *Blue Ixora* alongside other African narratives of borders and migration, or might examine how the spiritual-realist mode, in which intuition is rendered as bodily event, becomes a vehicle for materialist critique rather than an escape from it.

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