

Colonial Power and the Production of Subalternity in Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*

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Abstract

Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (*Une vie de boy*) represents colonialism through the experiences of Toundi Ondoua, an African youth whose movement from a Catholic mission into the household of a French Commandant exposes the intimate mechanisms of colonial domination. Existing criticism has examined the novel through colonial power, the colonial gaze, domestic labour, translation, multilingualism, and cultural alienation. This article extends that scholarship by examining how these mechanisms converge to produce Toundi as a subaltern subject. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of subalternity, Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power, Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial racialisation and psychology, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorisation of subaltern representation, the study argues that subalternity in *Houseboy* is not simply the consequence of colonial oppression but an identity continuously produced through institutional, racial, domestic, disciplinary, and ideological practices. Close readings of Toundi's movement into colonial service, his observation of the segregated church and colonial town, his changing perception of the Commandant, the racialised humiliation he encounters, and the violence of the colonial prison demonstrate how colonial power operates upon both body and consciousness. At the same time, Toundi's diary transforms him from an object of colonial observation into an observer of colonial society. His writing therefore constitutes a limited but significant form of counter-knowledge. The article concludes that Oyono presents colonial power as pervasive but unstable: it produces subordinate identities and disciplines bodies, yet the same structures of proximity, literacy, and observation create conditions through which the colonised subject can expose the contradictions of colonial authority.

Keywords: Ferdinand Oyono; *Houseboy*; Colonialism; Subalternity; Toundi Ondoua; Disciplinary Power; Colonial Gaze; Postcolonial Literature; Colonial Violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* occupies an important place in African anti-colonial literature because it exposes colonial domination through the everyday experiences of an African domestic servant. Originally published in French as *Une vie de boy* in 1956 and translated into English by John Reed in 1966, the novel takes the form of the diary of Toundi Ondoua, a young Cameroonian who enters European colonial society first through the Catholic mission and subsequently through domestic service in the household of the district Commandant (Oyono, 1956, 1966). The narrative is therefore organised around an apparently modest figure whose social position gives him unusual access to the institutions and private spaces of colonial authority.

The importance of *Houseboy* lies partly in this narrative perspective. Toundi is not a political leader, nationalist intellectual, or colonial administrator. He is a servant. Yet his position enables him to observe the people who possess political and social power. The domestic servant becomes an unexpected witness to the contradictions of colonial rule. He encounters Christianity alongside violence, civilisation alongside humiliation, European authority alongside moral corruption, and colonial claims of racial superiority alongside the physical vulnerability of the colonisers themselves.

This article argues that Oyono's representation of Toundi is best understood through the concept of subalternity. The term, originating in Gramsci's (1971) analysis of subordinate social groups and subsequently transformed by postcolonial theory, refers to subjects whose access to institutional authority, social recognition, and dominant forms of representation is structurally restricted. Spivak (1988) later complicated the concept by emphasising the difficulty of distinguishing between the ability to speak and the ability to be recognised within dominant structures of representation.

Toundi exemplifies this contradiction. He is close to colonial power but excluded from it. He serves Europeans but cannot become their equal. He enters European spaces but does not belong to them. He acquires literacy and Christian education but remains a racialized African subject. His position therefore illustrates a central paradox of colonial subject formation: incorporation does not necessarily produce equality.

The argument developed here is more specific than the general claim that colonialism oppresses Africans. Colonialism certainly oppresses Toundi, but *Houseboy* also reveals the processes through which that oppression becomes a social identity. Toundi becomes a houseboy through labour, discipline, racial classification, institutional incorporation, spatial segregation, and ideological conditioning. Subalternity is consequently not simply something that happens to him; it is something colonial society repeatedly produces and reproduces.

Foucault's (1977) theory of disciplinary power is useful for explaining this process because it shifts attention from power as an exclusively repressive force to power as a system that organises bodies, spaces, conduct, knowledge, and social identities. Fanon (1963, 1967) complements this perspective by demonstrating the racial and psychological dimensions of colonial domination. Gramsci (1971) provides the structural concept of subalternity, while Spivak (1988) complicates the relationship between marginality and representation.

The article does not claim that these theoretical perspectives have not previously been applied to *Houseboy*. Murundu (2017), for example, has examined the novel through Foucault's theory of power, while Vaucher (2014) has analysed the relationship between the gaze and power in

Une vie de boy. Sampedro Vizcaya (2022) demonstrates the importance of domestic labour to colonial household structures, and Moore (2013), Langbehn (2013), and Waliaula (2013) place the novel within broader discussions of translation, world literature, and transnational circulation. Garoiu (2024) further explores multilingualism and cultural diversity in the novel.

The contribution of the present study is therefore synthetic rather than simply identificatory. It brings these concerns together through the concept of subaltern subject formation and asks how colonial institutions, domestic labour, racialisation, discipline, violence, and representation collectively construct Toundi as a subordinate subject while simultaneously creating the conditions for his emergence as a critical witness.

The article addresses three questions:

1. How does colonial power produce Toundi's subaltern position?
2. Through what institutional, racial, domestic, ideological, and disciplinary mechanisms is that position maintained?
3. How does Toundi's diary complicate his subalternity by converting observation into narrative agency?

Rather than treating these questions in separate theoretical compartments, the analysis integrates theory directly into close readings of the novel. This approach responds to the need to understand not merely what colonialism means in *Houseboy* but how Oyono's prose, imagery, narrative perspective, spatial arrangements, and characterisation make colonial power visible.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical approaches to *Houseboy* have consistently recognised its importance as an anti-colonial text, but scholarship has increasingly moved beyond a simple opposition between Europeans and Africans. The novel has been read through power, surveillance, the colonial gaze, domestic labour, translation, cultural hybridity, and psychological trauma.

Murundu (2017) offers one of the most directly relevant studies by applying Foucault's theory of power to the novel. Her analysis demonstrates how colonial authority operates through exploitation, punishment, imprisonment, and the regulation of African bodies. This Foucauldian perspective is important to the present study, but the emphasis here is different. Rather than asking only how power disciplines Toundi, the article asks how disciplinary practices produce him as a particular kind of subject.

Vaucher (2014) similarly provides an important account of the gaze. His analysis demonstrates that observation is central to the relationship between coloniser and colonised and that Toundi's diary transforms observation into a potentially subversive practice. This argument is extended here by treating Toundi's gaze as an aspect of his emerging epistemic agency. His capacity to see does not remove his subordination, but it disrupts the colonial monopoly over observation.

The figure of the houseboy also demands attention beyond the immediate fictional narrative. Sampedro Vizcaya (2022) demonstrates that domestic workers occupied an important position in colonial household structures and that domestic labour reproduced relations of race, gender, and servitude. This historical perspective helps explain why Oyono's choice of a houseboy as

narrator is politically significant. Toundi's apparent marginality places him at the centre of the colonial household.

The novel's circulation across languages and literary systems has generated another important body of scholarship. Moore (2013) places *Une vie de boy* within the world-literary field, while Langbehn (2013) explores the novel's relationship to the wider history of European colonialism in Cameroon. Waliaula (2013) examines the afterlife of the English novel in the Swahili educational context. These studies demonstrate that *Houseboy* is not confined to a single national or linguistic framework.

Translation is particularly relevant to the present study because the article uses John Reed's English translation. Scholarship on Reed's translation has drawn attention to the treatment of African linguistic and folkloric elements and to the relationship between the French original and the English text. The use of the 1966 translation therefore requires awareness that the textual voice encountered by an Anglophone reader is mediated through translation.

Garoiu (2024) adds another dimension by examining multilingualism and cultural diversity in *Une vie de boy*. Her analysis demonstrates that the coexistence of European and African linguistic registers complicates a simple binary between coloniser and colonised.

Recent work has also addressed the psychological consequences of colonial violence. Musimire et al. (2024) examine trauma aesthetics in *Houseboy*, particularly the effects of violence and humiliation upon the characters. This scholarship reinforces the importance of treating colonial domination as a process that affects both the body and the psyche.

Taken together, these studies establish a substantial critical foundation. The gap addressed by this article is therefore not an absence of scholarship on colonial power in *Houseboy*. Rather, it is the lack of a sustained synthesis showing how institutional incorporation, domestic service, racial classification, spatial segregation, discipline, violence, and narrative observation interact in the production of Toundi's subaltern identity.

The present article contributes to this discussion by shifting the emphasis from colonial oppression as an already existing condition to subalternity as an ongoing process of subject formation. Toundi is produced as subordinate, but his position also generates a form of knowledge from below. The contradiction between subalternity and narrative agency is consequently central to the reading developed here.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The article draws on four mutually complementary perspectives rather than treating each theorist as an independent explanatory system. Gramsci's (1971) concept of subalternity provides the structural foundation. Toundi belongs to a social group that performs necessary labour while remaining excluded from meaningful authority. His importance to the colonial household does not translate into political recognition.

Foucault's (1977) theory of disciplinary power explains how this structural subordination is reproduced through everyday practices. Power is exercised through rules, surveillance, spatial arrangements, bodily regulation, and expectations concerning conduct. Foucault's (1980) relationship between power and knowledge is particularly useful for interpreting Toundi's diary: those who possess institutional power attempt to produce knowledge about the colonised, while Toundi produces knowledge about the colonisers.

Fanon's (1963, 1967) work provides the necessary account of racialisation and colonial psychology. Colonial domination is not only institutional; it establishes a racial hierarchy that can influence the self-perception of the colonised. Toundi's movement from admiration of Europeans to recognition of their contradictions can consequently be understood as a movement in consciousness.

Spivak (1988), finally, prevents an overly simple equation of writing with liberation. Toundi speaks and writes, but he does not thereby acquire institutional power. His diary represents a form of narrative agency within continuing material subordination. These perspectives are therefore combined rather than separately rehearsed: colonial incorporation → disciplinary regulation → racialized subject formation → subalternity → critical observation → counter-knowledge. The following analysis demonstrates how this sequence operates within the novel's specific scenes and language.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

From Missionary Incorporation to Colonial Servitude

Toundi's entry into colonial society begins with the Catholic mission. At first, the mission appears to offer protection from the violence of his family environment and access to a new social world. Father Gilbert provides him with shelter, religious instruction, and literacy. Toundi therefore associates European institutions with security and advancement. Yet the very institution that appears to liberate him simultaneously incorporates him into colonial servitude. His education does not move him outside the colonial hierarchy; it prepares him to function within it. Literacy becomes one of the skills through which he can serve European authority. This contradiction is important because it demonstrates the Gramscian dimension of colonial hegemony. Domination does not always begin with physical force. It can begin with the subject's recognition of the dominant institution as desirable.

Toundi's early attraction to the colonial world therefore reflects an ideological process. He does not initially understand himself as a victim of colonial power. He sees proximity to Europeans as an opportunity. His later experiences transform this perception. The transition becomes explicit when he is selected to serve the Commandant. Toundi records his excitement in the phrase, "The dog of the King is the King of dogs" (Oyono, 1966, p. 20). The proverb is crucial because it simultaneously expresses aspiration and subordination. Toundi believes that proximity to the colonial ruler elevates him above other Africans, yet the metaphor remains that of a dog.

The irony is therefore built into the language of Toundi's own self-understanding. He imagines privilege through a metaphor that confirms hierarchy. The closer he comes to the "King," the more prestigious he believes himself to be; yet he remains a dog. The scene demonstrates the production of subalternity at the ideological level. Toundi temporarily accepts the hierarchy that subordinates him because he imagines that proximity to European power can provide personal advancement. The irony of the proverb becomes clearer retrospectively. The houseboy's apparent elevation does not abolish the hierarchy between master and servant; it merely gives him a privileged position within the subordinate class. This is precisely the form of conditional incorporation through which colonial subalternity is reproduced.

The Colonial Household and the Production of the Servant

The Commandant's residence transforms Toundi's ideological incorporation into an everyday labour relationship. The household is not merely a setting but a disciplinary institution. Toundi's duties organise his daily existence. He must remain available, perform domestic tasks, respond to instructions, and understand the rhythms of European life. His labour becomes the basis of his social identity. Foucault's (1977) theory of discipline helps explain why these ordinary activities matter. Discipline produces bodies that are useful, obedient, and predictable. Toundi's service therefore does not merely benefit the Commandant; it continually reinforces Toundi's position as a subordinate subject.

The domestic setting also produces an important contradiction. Toundi is socially marginal but spatially close to power. He enters rooms, hears conversations, observes private conduct, and witnesses relationships that remain hidden from most Africans. His proximity is therefore both the basis of his exploitation and the source of his knowledge. The colonial household can consequently be understood as a microcosm of the colonial state. Its structure reproduces the broader political hierarchy: Europeans command, Africans serve; Europeans possess mobility, Africans provide labour; Europeans establish rules, Africans are expected to obey them.

Sampedro Vizcaya's (2022) study of colonial domestic labour helps establish that such household relations were historically significant rather than incidental. Domestic service formed part of the infrastructure of colonial life. Oyono's innovation is to make the domestic servant the narrator of that world. Toundi's social invisibility consequently becomes narratively productive. Because Europeans do not regard the houseboy as an equal intellectual observer, they become comparatively careless in his presence. Their assumption of his inferiority provides him with access to knowledge. The colonial household therefore contains the beginnings of its own counter-surveillance.

Seeing the Commandant: The Collapse of Colonial Mystique

One of the novel's most important moments occurs when Toundi sees the Commandant naked. Before this moment, the Commandant's physical presence has been associated with fear and authority. Toundi's perception of him changes when he discovers the ordinary vulnerability of the European body. Toundi records the transformation in the striking sentence: "His eyes had once struck panic into me" (Oyono, 1966, p. 28). The significance of the sentence lies in its tense. "Had once" indicates that fear belongs to an earlier state of consciousness. The sentence is therefore not simply about the Commandant; it is about Toundi's changing perception. The colonial ruler has not necessarily changed. Toundi has.

The naked body undermines the symbolic distance that had made the Commandant appear almost superhuman. The colonial mystique depends partly upon the subject's belief in the extraordinary power of the ruler. When Toundi encounters the Commandant's ordinary physical body, that mystique weakens. This scene is therefore a particularly effective example of Fanon's (1967) concern with racialized perception and psychological hierarchy. Colonial authority is partly sustained through the colonised subject's perception of European superiority. Once that perception becomes unstable, the psychological foundation of domination begins to weaken.

The episode also illustrates Foucault's (1980) relationship between knowledge and power. Toundi acquires knowledge of the Commandant that is unavailable through official representations of colonial authority. Knowledge changes the relationship between observer

and observed. Toundi remains a servant after the encounter. But he is no longer the same servant. His critical consciousness has begun to develop.

Christian Space and the Materialisation of Racial Hierarchy

The novel's treatment of the Catholic church reveals that colonial hierarchy is reproduced even within an institution that theoretically preaches spiritual equality. Toundi observes the arrangement of Saint Peter's Church in Dangan. Europeans occupy privileged seating close to the altar, while Africans occupy the nave and sit on less comfortable tree trunks. The spatial arrangement transforms racial ideology into physical experience. The distinction is important because the church claims universal Christian fellowship while materially separating worshippers according to race.

The contrast can be read through Foucault's (1977) account of the political organisation of space. Space determines who can occupy privileged positions, who can observe, who must remain visible, and who is physically subordinated. It also exposes the ideological contradiction identified by Fanon (1963). Colonial Christianity claims moral universality while operating within a racial hierarchy. Toundi's position as an educated Christian makes the contradiction especially significant. The religion through which he has been taught European moral values becomes the institution through which he witnesses European racial discrimination. Christianity consequently becomes both an instrument of colonial incorporation and a resource for its critique.

This ambivalence prevents the novel from offering a simplistic account of religion. The problem is not Christianity as abstract doctrine but the manner in which colonial institutions selectively apply its principles. The church therefore becomes a miniature representation of the colonial social order.

Race and the Dehumanisation of the African Body

The production of subalternity becomes more explicit when racial difference is represented through disgust. After an encounter with a European who is angered by Toundi's proximity to Sophie, Toundi describes the man's gesture as “as if he had touched something unclean” (Oyono, 1966, p. 42). The phrase is powerful because it converts racial difference into the language of contamination. The African body is not merely described as different. It is treated as something from which the European body should recoil.

Fanon's (1967) analysis of colonial racialisation helps illuminate the psychological significance of this moment. Colonial racism operates not only through laws and institutions but also through gestures, looks, bodily reactions, and symbolic associations. The word “unclean” is particularly significant because it carries both physical and moral meanings. It associates blackness with contamination and simultaneously suggests moral inferiority. This is how racial ideology becomes embodied. The colonial subject learns that his body is being evaluated before his individual character is considered.

Said's (1978) concept of othering further clarifies the process. The African becomes the opposite against which European identity defines itself. The European is civilisation; the African becomes its supposed lack. Yet Oyono's irony exposes the instability of this hierarchy. The novel repeatedly shows that European characters who claim moral and racial superiority behave in ways that undermine those claims. The supposed civiliser becomes morally

compromised. The supposedly inferior subject becomes the narrator capable of recognising the contradiction.

Segregated Space and the Reversal of the Colonial Gaze

The geographical organisation of Dangan provides another material expression of racial hierarchy. European and African residential areas are separated, creating distinct spaces associated with different standards of living, mobility, and social status. The significance of this separation, however, lies in the way Oyono reverses its intended effect. The Europeans believe that segregation protects their privacy and superiority. Yet Toundi observes that knowledge crosses the spatial boundary. The African quarter knows what happens in European houses.

This reversal is central to Vaucher's (2014) account of the gaze in *Une vie de boy*. Colonialism attempts to organise visibility: Europeans watch Africans, while Africans are expected to remain objects of observation. Oyono reverses the arrangement. Toundi's diary turns the European quarter into an object of African observation. The colonial household is therefore not invisible. It is watched.

This reversal can also be understood through Foucault's relationship between surveillance and knowledge. The colonial order depends upon making Africans visible to authorities, but Toundi's position enables him to make colonial authority visible to the reader. The apparent invisibility of the servant consequently becomes an advantage. He is present without being taken seriously as an observer. That is precisely why he sees so much.

Violence and the Colonial Body

The prison scenes provide the strongest evidence that colonial power ultimately depends upon violence. When two African prisoners are accused of theft, they are stripped, restrained, beaten, and subjected to escalating physical punishment. The violence is performed publicly and systematically. The prison director and other colonial officials participate in the scene, transforming punishment into a collective demonstration of authority. The available text of the Reed translation places the scene around pp. 76–77. The significance of the episode lies in its institutional character. This is not simply one European behaving cruelly toward one African. It is a system. The police, prison authorities, colonial administrators, and instruments of punishment converge around the African body.

Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power explains the institutional dimension, but Fanon (1963) is necessary to understand the racial structure of the violence. The body being disciplined is a colonised body. Toundi's response is equally important. He does not simply record the violence as an external event. He experiences it emotionally and psychologically. The sight of the prisoners' suffering produces fear, distress, and moral questioning. The scene therefore marks an important transition in his consciousness. He begins to compare colonial violence with Christian teachings about love and morality. His observation becomes judgment. His diary becomes testimony. And testimony becomes a form of counter-knowledge. The violence intended to reinforce colonial authority therefore produces an unintended consequence: it enables Toundi to recognise the contradiction between colonial ideology and colonial practice.

Christianity and the Crisis of Colonial Legitimacy

The prison violence also transforms Toundi's relationship to Christianity. Colonial missionaries claim to save African souls and teach Christian morality. Yet Toundi witnesses Africans being brutalised by representatives of the same colonial order that claims moral authority. The contradiction is so severe that religious legitimacy begins to collapse. This is important because Gramsci's (1971) conception of hegemony reminds us that domination depends partly upon legitimacy. A colonial order cannot rely exclusively upon force if it wishes to maintain stable consent. Oyono's narrative therefore exposes the cracks in colonial hegemony.

Christianity promises love. Colonial authority produces violence. The church preaches equality before God. Colonial space produces racial segregation. The colonial administration claims civilisation. Its prison produces brutality. The contradiction becomes increasingly impossible for Toundi to ignore. The colonial system thus undermines its own ideological claims.

The Diary as Counter-Archive

The diary is the formal device through which these contradictions become visible. Toundi records events that official colonial documents would either omit or represent differently. His diary is intimate rather than bureaucratic, observational rather than administrative, and experiential rather than institutional. It therefore functions as a counter-archive. The concept is important because colonial authority depends upon its ability to classify, record, and define African subjects. The colonial administration possesses official knowledge. Toundi produces unofficial knowledge.

Foucault's (1980) relationship between knowledge and power helps explain why this matter. Knowledge is never politically neutral. The authority to record an event is also the authority to define its meaning. Toundi's diary challenges this authority. The colonial official sees an African prisoner. Toundi sees a human being subjected to violence. The colonial official sees a servant. Toundi increasingly sees himself as a person caught within a racial system. The diary therefore does not simply reproduce colonial reality. It reinterprets it.

Subaltern Speech and the Limits of Narrative Agency

Yet the diary should not be romanticised as complete liberation. Spivak's (1988) intervention remains important because the ability to speak does not automatically eliminate structural subordination. Toundi's diary gives him narrative agency, but it does not give him political authority. He remains vulnerable to arrest. He remains dependent upon colonial institutions. He remains exposed to physical violence. His eventual escape is possible only because other people recognise the danger he faces. Narrative agency and material power are therefore distinct.

This distinction strengthens rather than weakens the argument about subalternity. Toundi does not cease to be subaltern simply because he writes. Instead, his writing demonstrates that subalternity can contain forms of agency without ceasing to be a condition of structural vulnerability. The diary therefore occupies a space between silence and power. Toundi speaks. But he speaks from below. He speaks within structures that continue to constrain him. His voice is consequently both resistant and vulnerable.

From Naivety to Critical Consciousness

Toundi's development across the novel can be understood as a movement from naive admiration to critical consciousness. At the beginning, European authority fascinates him. He associates the colonial world with education, Christianity, material prosperity, and social advancement. His decision to become the Commandant's houseboy initially appears to him as a form of upward movement. But each new experience destabilises this perception. The Commandant's physical vulnerability weakens the mystique of European authority. The church exposes racial segregation. Domestic life exposes European hypocrisy. The prison reveals colonial violence. The diary transforms these experiences into reflection. Toundi therefore moves from seeing Europeans as extraordinary to seeing them as historically and socially situated human beings whose authority is constructed and enforced.

Fanon's (1963) account of colonial consciousness helps explain this movement. The colonial hierarchy is not sustained solely through external force; it also operates through perceptions of European superiority. Once those perceptions become unstable, the ideological structure of colonial domination begins to weaken. Toundi's awakening is therefore epistemological as well as psychological. He does not simply experience new events. He learns to interpret them differently.

Domestic Intimacy, Sexuality, and Colonial Surveillance

The domestic household also exposes the intimate contradictions of colonial authority. Toundi becomes aware of the relationship between Madame and Monsieur Moreau, the prison director. His position as servant places him close to conversations, movements, and encounters that would otherwise remain private. This dimension of the novel demonstrates that colonial authority is not confined to official political behaviour. It extends into sexuality, marriage, domestic morality, and the management of reputation.

Stoler (2002) argues that colonial power is deeply implicated in intimate relations because racial hierarchy depends partly upon regulating sexuality, family life, domesticity, and the boundaries between coloniser and colonised. Oyono's treatment of Madame and Moreau exposes the contradiction between the public moral authority of colonial officials and their private conduct. Toundi's access to this intimate world therefore becomes politically significant. The servant's knowledge threatens the master's authority because it reveals the distance between public respectability and private behaviour. Again, the subordinate position becomes a source of knowledge.

The Houseboy as Witness

The different dimensions of Toundi's experience converge in the figure of the witness. He witnesses religious hypocrisy. He witnesses racial segregation. He witnesses domestic exploitation. He witnesses sexual transgression. He witnesses police violence. He witnesses the vulnerability of the European body. And he records what he sees. This transformation is the central narrative achievement of *Houseboy*.

The colonial system attempts to define Toundi as an object: servant, native, African, subordinate. The diary allows him to become a subject of interpretation. He does not control the colonial world. But he can describe it. He does not command the colonial authorities. But he can expose their contradictions. He does not possess institutional power. But he possesses narrative perspective. The houseboy therefore becomes the witness.

The Production of Subalternity: An Integrated Reading

The analysis demonstrates that Toundi's subalternity emerges from a network of mutually reinforcing practices. The mission provides ideological incorporation. Domestic service provides labour discipline. Race provides social classification. Spatial segregation materialises hierarchy. Surveillance regulates behaviour. Violence enforces obedience. Colonial ideology legitimises the entire structure.

Yet the same system creates conditions for counter-knowledge. Literacy enables writing. Domestic proximity enables observation. Social invisibility enables access. Experience produces critical consciousness. The diary records the resulting knowledge. The relationship can therefore be represented as: institutional incorporation → domestic servitude → racialised classification → disciplinary regulation → violence → critical consciousness → narrative counter-knowledge.

The significance of this sequence is that the final stage emerges partly from the earlier ones. The colonial system produces the conditions of its own exposure. Toundi becomes a witness because he is a servant. He sees because he is present. He records because he is literate. He understands because he experiences contradiction. The very structures intended to subordinate him inadvertently provide the materials through which he can interpret colonial domination. This is the central paradox of Oyono's novel.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* represents colonialism as a system that produces particular kinds of subjects rather than merely as a political structure that oppresses an already formed population. Toundi's experience demonstrates how subalternity is constructed through missionary incorporation, domestic labour, racial classification, spatial segregation, surveillance, disciplinary practice, violence, and ideological conditioning.

The close readings demonstrate that this process is visible in the novel's language and narrative structure. Toundi's description of himself as the "dog of the King" reveals the contradictory desire for proximity to power and the acceptance of subordinate status. His changed perception of the Commandant reveals the collapse of the psychological mystique surrounding European authority. The representation of racial disgust demonstrates how colonial hierarchy is inscribed upon the body, while the segregated church and colonial town materialise racial difference in space. The prison scenes reveal the coercive foundation underlying the supposedly civilising colonial order.

These scenes also demonstrate why theory must remain closely connected to textual form. Gramsci's subalternity becomes visible in Toundi's subordinate position; Foucault's disciplinary power becomes visible in the organisation of labour, space, surveillance, and punishment; Fanon's colonial psychology becomes visible in Toundi's changing perception of European authority; and Spivak's problem of representation becomes visible in the tension between Toundi's narrative voice and his continuing material vulnerability.

This study's central contribution is consequently not the claim that *Houseboy* has previously escaped theoretical attention. Rather, it demonstrates that several strands of existing criticism can be integrated through the concept of subaltern subject formation. Toundi is not simply oppressed. He is produced as subordinate. But he is not produced completely. The same

colonial institutions that subordinate him provide him with literacy, proximity, observational access, and eventually narrative agency. His diary transforms the servant into a witness and the object of colonial observation into a producer of counter-knowledge. This transformation should not be understood as complete emancipation. Toundi's ability to narrate does not provide him with institutional authority, nor does consciousness automatically overcome material vulnerability. His position remains precarious until the end.

Nevertheless, the diary disrupts the colonial monopoly over representation. The coloniser possesses administrative power. Toundi possesses narrative perspective. The coloniser controls institutions. Toundi records their contradictions. The coloniser disciplines bodies. Toundi interprets what that discipline means. This is the central paradox through which Oyono's anti-colonial narrative derives its power. *Houseboy* ultimately demonstrates that colonial domination operates through both coercion and subject formation. It produces servants, racial categories, disciplined bodies, and ideological subjects. Yet it cannot completely determine how those subjects understand what they experience. Toundi's critical consciousness therefore represents a limited but important form of resistance. The article concludes that the most significant irony of *Houseboy* lies in the relationship between subordination and knowledge: colonialism produces Toundi as a houseboy, but the position of the houseboy enables him to become the witness of colonial power.

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