

ARTICLE

Writing to Heal: Therapeutic Writing in Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou*

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SUMMARY

In her autobiographical novel *Le Baobab fou*, Ken Bugul relates her personal journey into finding her identity between her native Senegal that abandoned her and the European North that would always be an unfit home. As abandonment leads to rupture and rupture to trauma, writing becomes a therapeutic arena where Ken Bugul can explore her own identity and heal. Butting up against traditional and contradictory ideals of femininity and feminism in Africa and the West, as well as her own mental health, Ken Bugul's voice is a rebellious voice which allows her to speak simultaneously for African and Third World women who are seeking their own identities.

KEYWORDS: Therapeutic Writing, Ken Bugul, *Le Baobab fou*, Feminism, Africa, Home, Francophone, Trauma, History, Globalization, Immigration, Identity, Women, Rebellion

"Writing is an act of audacity, commitment, and courage, and therefore, an act of transgression. [. . .] We must write to bear witness, to denounce." -Ken Bugul

Among the first African Francophone women writers, Ken Bugul is notably the first Senegalese female migrant autobiographer. Ken Bugul, the pen name of Mariétou Mbaye Biléoma, narrates a novel that can be classified using Nicki Hitchcott's definition as a "herstory," that is "the story of one's life written by herself" (17). *Le Baobab fou* is an autobiographical novel that focuses on Ken Bugul's self-exploration and her attempt to fill a void by situating herself in a historical context as she is torn between her African heritage and the Western culture imposed on her from colonial times. The narrative begins with Ken Bugul earning a scholarship that allows her to leave her native village in Senegal in pursuit of higher education in Belgium and ends with her return to Africa. The unconventional novel disrupts the rules of a polite discourse as it challenges cultural conceptions. Ken Bugul goes against the norms, permitting the narration of an African and Muslim woman to speak freely on several topics that are traditionally considered taboo, all the while battling an unhealthy psyche. In her work of autofiction, Ken Bugul provides a textual testimony for the oppressed people – specifically, Third World women – and the aftermath of occurrences in history which led to their fractured present. Within this framework, I will argue that writing acts as a tool for the author to create a voice for herself and analogous persons asserting an opinion into various discourses in which their voices were marginalized.

Narrative as Therapeutic Writing

Writing can be used as a means of externalize emotional and psychological instability. In Ken Bugul's case, writing allows her to create her own narrative and fill the missing links in her

search for an identity as she says, “Toute mon enfance et toute mon adolescence s’étaient déroulées dans le vapeurs de recherches constantes de l’indéfini” (64) [My whole childhood and my whole adolescence, too, had unfolded in the haze of a constant searching for the undefined (51)].¹ The act of creating a narrative can be supported by Sangeev Uprety’s argument, which states that “all post-colonial writers – as subjects of cultural hybridity – are metaphorically disabled and employ writing to reconstruct a sense of wholeness and coherence to ‘imagine’ a body that is not deformed or deviant” (367). Ken Bugul’s imagination is what led to her discombobulation of searching for a place to which she belongs, a home, as she says: “Moi qui avais rêvé d’un foyer, d’un père, d’une mère, d’ancêtres, moi qui voulais être reconnue!” (99) [I, who had dreamed of a home, of a father, of a mother, of ancestors, I who wanted to be recognized!] (82). The unprepared reader may feel frustrated by such a narrative, as the plot does not conclude with the protagonist finding any definitive cure for her ailment. As Ken Bugul’s “herstory,” this lack of any real closure is authentic. As Julie Nack Ngue explains it, the reader’s “expectation of cultural desire to find a solution invalidates and silences any other possible ‘ending’” (53). Though the plot of the narrative focuses on the protagonist’s search for a solution to her crisis of identity, the remedy is found after the fact, in the process of her writing the story as it represents a realistic nature of healing from trauma. However, along this very process, there are times where we can see her narration interrupted by traumatic memories that carry pain so great that is difficult for the narrator to put into words. Ken Bugul refers to the subsequent writing of her story that offers possible healing as “l’écriture thérapeutique” [therapeutic writing, author’s translation] (Magnier 151). Envisioning the novel as emerging from a need to bear witness to lived experience, Ken Bugul suggests the act of bearing witness means to write one’s self freely without limitations. The flow of the narrative is interrupted by fragmented memories of traumatic experiences that have scarred her, paralleling her quest in search of an identity. Writing allows Ken Bugul to recreate a mythical “home” in her writings, thus denouncing the homes for which she was unfit from her journey, whether they were her family home in Senegal, or the homes she was to find in Europe. The creative process of writing is vital as Ken Bugul confirms in her narration: “Chacun essaie un chemin dans le vide, mais la fuite incite à la création et créer c’est combler le vide, le seul vrai adversaire de l’homme” (22) [Each one tries a new path in emptiness, but flight inspires creation, and to create is to fill the void, humankind’s only true enemy (15)].

Lexical Architecture in *Le Baobab fou*

Ken Bugul’s writing style is quite ambiguous as there is a plurality of meaning to the text that cannot necessarily be captured by those foreign to her experience. She hints at such ambivalence in the novel when retelling and translating a story recounted by a fellow Senegalese national, Souleymane, to her American neighbor in Belgium:

(J)e traduais pour l’ami américain, qui me disait que sûrement je ne lui traduais pas tout. Il avait raison; la façon dont Souleymane racontait son périple était intraduisible. Il fallait comprendre le dialecte. (111)

[I’d translate for the American, who told me I surely wasn’t translating everything. He was right; the way in which Souleymane told the tale of his journey was untranslatable. One had to understand the dialect. (76–77)]

Ken Bugul seems to suggest that to understand the complexities of someone's journey, one would have to understand the dialect in which they speak; in other words, the culture and poetry behind the language is defined by a certain state of being. Ken Bugul embodies this concept in her choice of a pseudonym. The linguistic construction of the chosen pen name is explained by the author:

En Wolof, Ken Bugul veut dire "personne n'en veut." Lorsqu'une femme, qui a eu beaucoup d'enfants morts-nés, a un nouvel enfant, elle l'appelle *Ken Bugul* pour le faire échapper à ce sort-là. Ce sont des noms symboliques que l'on donne ici, en Afrique. Si l'on dit "personne n'en veut," Dieu lui-même n'en voudra pas donc il ne le tuera pas; les esprits n'en voudront pas donc ils ne lui feront pas de mal. Et ceci permettra à l'enfant de vivre. (Magnier 153)

[In Wolof, Ken Bugul means "no one wants it." When a woman, who has had many stillborn children, has a new child, she calls him Ken Bugul to escape that spell. These are symbolic names given in Africa. If anyone says "no one wants it," God himself will not want it as well so he will not kill it; the spirits will not want it so they will not hurt it. And this will allow the child to live. (Author's translation)]

Hence, the name protects the child from an unwanted end and thereby assures its survival. However, the single term "Ken" in Wolof, which translates to "nobody," can also represent post-colonial subjects as they were considered undesirable and only suitable to be used as pawns for the economic gain of the colonizers. The protagonist in the novel is an emblem of post-colonial subjects who are trying to heal from an interrupted and traumatic history on a macro scale. The term suggests that she sees herself as a "nobody," as at no point in the novel does she mention her real name; she is simply referred to interchangeably as the "African woman," "the Senegalese woman" or "the Negress." While in Belgium, Ken Bugul saw herself among the Europeans and begins to question her identity, even her own ontology, seeing herself as "cet être supplémentaire, inutile, déplacé, incohérent" (102) [that supplementary being, useless, displaced, incoherent] (85). *Le Baobab fou* can be considered a textualist approach into granting the reader access to the consequences of the entanglement of the French and African nation's history resulting in fractured identities such as that of Ken Bugul. As such, Ken Bugul utilizes writing to heal from her fractured nation and people's history, as well as her personal traumas.

Moreover, the title of the novel gives us insight into the protagonist. Ken Bugul utilizes prosopopoeia "a personification often used to represent absent, mute or deceased persons" (Silva 2) to narrate the story of a baobab tree that goes through suffering, madness and an eventual death, mirroring her own story of suffering and a metaphysical death. Though the traditional symbol of the baobab suggests life and positivity in a harsh and dry environment, Ken Bugul considers the baobab a symbol of anguish and pain due to its implantation into an unfulfilling environment. Like the baobab tree, Ken Bugul feels hollow and deteriorating at the core leading to an ongoing spiritual death, one repeated throughout the novel.

Torn Between Two Worlds: The aftermath of colonial rule on post-colonial subjects

Ken Bugul's autobiographical novel is divided into two parts, the brief, pre-colonial "Préhistoire de Ken" (Ken's Prehistory, pp. 7–25) and the subsequent post-colonial "Histoire de

Ken” (Ken’s History, pp. 27–182).² In the earlier “Préhistoire,” Ken Bugul paints the image of a pre-colonial African village, pure and yet to be tainted by colonial rule:

Vu de loin, le village, tout en banco et toitures de paille sèche, semblait s’offrir comme une vierge à la vie. [. . .] Tout le monde y était heureux, car tout le monde partageait tout. La naissance, la vie et la mort. Les douleurs et les peines, les bonheurs et les joies. Dans ce village, les gens étaient ensemble. (18)

[Seen from afar, the village, all of dried mud and straw rooftops, seemed to be offering itself to life like a virgin. [. . .] Everyone was happy there, for everyone shared everything. Birth, life, and death. Sorrow and trouble, happiness and joy. In this village, people were together as one. (11)]

This prefatory section goes on to narrate the origins of an allegorized childhood memory, beneath the eponymous baobab tree, in which Ken Bugul at two years of age, deserted by her mother, plays in the sand, finds an amber bead and forces it into her own ear. As she explains, this experience did not only cause physical pain, but the traumatic experience of introducing a foreign object into her being is reverberated throughout the text. The Prehistory concludes abruptly:

Soudain un cri! Un cri perçant. Un cri qui venait briser l’harmonie, sous ce baobab dénudé, dans ce village désert. L’enfant s’enfonçait de plus en plus profondément, la perle d’ambre dans l’oreille. (25)

[Suddenly a scream! A piercing scream. A cry from underneath the denuded baobab tree came to shatter the harmony of the deserted village. The child was pushing the amber bead into its ear, deeper and deeper. (17)]

As the reader discovers in Ken’s History that these disembodied cries were from Ken herself, abandoned by her mother beneath the same baobab tree, she also recalls that the amber bead had fallen, in another moment of rupture, from the broken necklace of the mother in a family of strangers from the North. Due to the text’s ambiguity, we are never told where “the North” is, but we can be assured they are foreign transplants to this land.

In her article on the novel, Nicole Meyer examines this scene in some detail and reads the amber bead that baby Ken finds and forces into her ear as symbolic in that amber is not native to Africa and therefore “this action parallels that of the forcing of French culture onto the Senegalese” (192). This traumatic event is a physical representation foreshadowing how Ken Bugul will turn out to be a product of uprooting and assimilation through colonial education, forcing an implanted object from the North into her Senegalese being. However, another interpretation of this symbol could be to read this penetration as the abandoned Ken Bugul’s desire to look like the women of her village:

Dans mon village, les femmes portaient des perles enfilées des épingles de nourrice aux oreilles. J’avais associé la perle d’ambre trouvée dans le sable à cette image de la femme de mon village pour m’enfoncer la perle dans l’oreille. (30)

[In my village, the women used to wear beads on diaper pins in their ears. I made a connection between the amber pearl found in the sand and that image of the women in my village, and so I pushed the bead in my ear. (22)]

On that account, a conclusive representation of the amber bead can be drawn from these explanations to foretell how the amber bead is an emblem of culture; the first stage of her life being Senegalese culture and the second stage of her life being European culture. In both stages, whether it was her attempt to fit in with her family by trying to situate herself in a home and ignore the feeling of abandonment caused by her mother, or her failed attempt to fit in with the Europeans, she was put through agony in search of an identity and sense of belonging.

Ken Bugul's simultaneous entanglement and conflict between these two worlds, the imbalance between what it meant to be her, an abandoned but educated Senegalese girl back home and a sexualized, objectified African woman in the North, is illustrated poignantly when she says:

L'identification était difficile. Je consommait deux réalités d'une façon contradictoire. Parce qu'au fond de moi, la nostalgie du lien me hantait. Dechirée! Les talons aiguille dans le sable chaud qui m'enveloppait jusqu'aux chevilles, le gras qui dégoulinait de mes cheveux décrêpés jusqu'à la brûlure, marcher en serrant les fesses. Et parfois l'envie de m'abandonner comme les femmes du village, cette grâce que j'appréciais et rejetais à la fois. (143)

[Identification was difficult. I was working to achieve two realities in a contradictory fashion: in my innermost self, the yearning for a bond haunted me. Torn in two! Spiked heels in the hot sand that enclosed me up to my ankles, grease that dripped down from my straightened hair all the way to my burn, my walk with tightened buttocks. And sometimes the desire to let myself go like the village women, that grace I both treasured and rejected at the same time. (123–24)]

Ken Bugul's personal traumas are intermingled with her nation's historical trauma of colonialism. Such traumas involve the damaging effects of receiving a colonial education resulting in a separation from initially her mother, followed by her family as she sought out higher education in Belgium. The earlier departure of Ken Bugul's mother at the age of 5 is a traumatic experience that can be compared to the rupture of the umbilical cord between mother and child, and constitutes an experience that left Ken Bugul to feel abandoned and unwanted by her mother. The bloody scenery of baby Ken being snatched away from her mother denotes the bloody wound that is still vividly sketched in her memory. The onset of this traumatic experience in her childhood where Ken Bugul is denied the love and nurturing that a child needs foreshadows her adolescent life in which she seeks out love and belonging to any people and an environment that will accept her.

Her time in Belgium augmented her feelings of abandonment as she did not fit in with the Europeans as she expected and instead faced a harsh reality of discrimination and racism. As the plot progresses, we see a growth in Ken Bugul's character as she demystifies notions she had formerly accepted from her colonial education. Echoing the premises of Frantz Fanon's philosophy in *Black Skin, White Masks*, she begins to view these myths as the colonizer's way of assimilating its subjects by brainwashing them into believing that they are an inferior people (Fanon, *Black Skin* 138–40, 192). Her awakened conscious to the falsehoods of her colonial education is

accompanied by a diminishing of her mental state, also accounted for by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which he makes clear that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” (35). The novel proves this to be true as we witness Ken Bugul suffer psychic violence: an oppressed state of mind infringed by the colonizer’s sexual and domineering role, as well as was the case of the patriarch in the Senegalese society before and after colonialism.

Colonial education and its *mission civilisatrice* had the aim of assimilating its colonized subjects and separating them from their heritage and culture to become a “civilized” people. It is from her colonial schooling that Ken Bugul carries falsehoods and feelings of inferiority from her childhood into her adolescence. Colonial education plays a role in Ken Bugul’s separation from her family, both physically and metaphorically. According to Ken Bugul’s narration, the reason why her mother had to leave her behind was because Ken Bugul was due to start school. At the same time, however, Ken Bugul’s grandmother, considered as a maternal figure in traditional African societies, rejects the child because of Ken Bugul’s attendance at a French school. Furthermore, a physical barrier was placed between her and her ancestral people when she receives a scholarship to pursue higher education in Europe. Ken Bugul’s many displacements during her childhood, resulting in her not having an appropriate concept of a home is due to multiple moving around family member’s houses in order to be in a location that is accessible to Western schooling. The psychological impact of the French schooling also led to a psychological displacement as Ken Bugul begins to acquire about “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” (39, 129) ([Our ancestors the Gauls (28, 111)], led her to believe that her true ancestors were blond-haired, blue-eyed Celts in Europe. The French schooling teaches Ken Bugul to glorify images of the Western world and see it as superior to her African background and identity. As she reflects on her past-self, she writes “Ah, Dieu! Que j’étais épuisée de vouloir plus que ‘ressembler,’ me déformer” (139) [I became so exhausted from wanting more than to “look like,” from deforming myself (120)]. The repercussion of colonial education is described when Ken Bugul encounters Europeans as she says:

J’étais souvent avec les Blancs; je discutais mieux avec eux, je comprenais leur langage. Pendant vingt ans je n’avais appris que leurs pensées et leurs émotions. Je pensais m’amuser avec eux, mais en fait j’étais plus frustrée encore: je m’identifiais en eux, ils ne s’identifiaient pas en moi (67).

[I spent a great deal of time with white people; I found it easier to converse with them, I understood their language. For twenty years, all I had learned were their thoughts and their feelings. I thought I was having a fine time with them, but I was actually even more frustrated: I identified myself in them, they did not identify themselves in me. (53)]

As described above, the falsehoods of the Western education as well as coming from a broken home that failed to aid Ken Bugul establish any sense of origin or roots drove her to completely dissociate herself from her family and heritage. Writing, embarking on a voyage of self-exploration, allows her to reflect on her quest for an identity, developing an alternative way of thinking. She goes on to take an atypical route making herself a reference point despite being unable to identify a historical origin or a people to which she can belong. We see her transition from trying to fit in with the European crowd yet not finding comfort among them to reckoning with her African heritage and ultimately walking away from both cultures to define herself on her own terms. The narrative evolves throughout the novel as Ken Bugul reshuffles her ideas, abandoning degrading societal constructions placed on post-colonial subjects and women, making

the tone of her writing rebellious at times. Alvina Burrows mentions how in writing, “The hero with whom the writer identifies [. . .] rises triumphant over his adversaries. Being in the role of authority over one’s characters is a vicarious and constructive way of balancing the score” (135). Consequently, we can observe how the act of writing allows Ken Bugul to tell the story of a post-colonial subject within the framework of writing back to the empire, telling her story and the aftermath of a traumatic global interruption in history and its consequences on the African people’s psyche. Another notable component of her therapeutic writing style is her unconventional narration as she does not take on a teacher-educator role of aiming to provide her readers with moral education. Instead, Ken Bugul puts forth plenty of philosophical questions and statements allowing the reader to do some soul searching of their own: “(M)ais qui était justement soi et comment je l’appriivoiser pour être en paix?” (124) [(B)ut who exactly was the self and how could I tame this self in order to be at peace? (105)].

Invigorating Aspects of Therapeutic Writing: Re-shaping societal fabrications of the Third World woman

Beyond providing an insightful glimpse into a Senegalese woman’s life experience, the publication of *Le Baobab fou* required a pseudonym for the protection of the author as well as the publishing house. Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines foresaw scandal in a text that spoke so candidly of sex, abortion, lesbianism, drugs and prostitution, written by a Senegalese Muslim woman. According to Julia Watson, the novel received appalling reactions such as that from novelist Cheikh Aliou Ndao calling the protagonist’s behavior unbecoming of a woman (150). Such a novel is revolutionary because not only does it challenge a misleading cultural image of the nature of the African woman, it stands up against the picture of women painted by African male authors. From the inception of African literature, specifically Francophone African literature, one of the fathers of Négritude, Léopold Sedar Senghor, illustrated the image of the African woman in his celebrated poem “Femme Noire” as a docile, sensual, sexual, even maternal object: “Femme nue, femme noire / Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté / J’ai grandi à ton ombre; la douceur de tes mains bandait mes yeux [. . .]”(16) [Naked woman, black woman / Clothed with your color which is life, with your form which is beauty / I have grown up in your shadow; the gentleness of your hands stretched over my eyes [. . .]; author’s translation]. This submissive and gentle image of the African woman was propagated by subsequent male authors as they added on characteristics such as women representing life, nurturement and key components of fertility and survival (Lambert 75–76).³ Though women are portrayed as agents that energize the people through difficult times, Anne McClintock nuances the situation in terms of nation:

All too often in male nationalisms, *gender* difference between women and men serves to symbolically define the limits [. . .]. Excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politics as its boundary and metaphoric limit. [. . .] Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, but are denied any direct relation to national agency. (62, her italics)

Ken Bugul’s narrative rebuts the traditional portrayal of women and presents women as multi-dimensional in terms of personality and sexuality; each possessing a unique and admirable psyche of her own. Ken Bugul goes on to portray an opposing view regarding the paradigm of Mother Africa and maternal love by dissociating herself from it and blaming her own mother for abandoning her from the very beginning underneath the baobab. She equates her neglectful mother

to a Mother Africa who creates a non-suitable home. As Silva states “Ken deconstructs the idea of Africa as home for women, a place to derive spiritual strength” (4). Instead, she views the motherland as place where patriarchal powers divide women and control their destinies making Africa a place of suffering for women. Ken Bugul presents her own viewpoint in the novel when she encounters the same Senegalese male mentioned above:

Souleymane fréquentait les compatriotes; je ne lui offrais pas une atmosphère où il pouvait se retremper. Je lui offrais une Afrique qui souffrait, une Afrique tourmentée, une Afrique qui voulait se libérer et Souleymane se contentait d’une Afrique qui s’arrangeait, s’accommodait. (108)

[Souleymane spent much of his time with the other Senegalese; I didn’t offer him an atmosphere in which he could feel reinvigorated. I offered him a suffering Africa, a tormented Africa, an Africa that wanted to liberate itself, while Souleymane was content with Africa that made do and compromised. (91–92)]

Here we see how Ken Bugul refers to Africa as a woman who inhabits anguish and suffers at the stake of a patriarchal structure which does not compromise and only sees masculine identity as the norm. Ken Bugul sets forth a rebellious tone when she contemplates the effects of a patriarchal society, leading to an awakening of a feminist consciousness. Such an awakening causes her to feel a dissonance between the two cultures is in relation to the sexual portrayal of women in both Senegal and Belgium. Ken Bugul’s refusal to see herself akin to the village women can also be read as her refusal to conform to the role of the traditional African woman, as she says:

Je ne pourrais pas être comme ces femmes, qui le soir, attendaient le mari plus que l’air qu’elles respiraient. Dès que l’homme rentrait, toutes ces femmes s’affairaient autour de cette masse de sueur et de fatigue, lui prodiguant mille attentions, mille soins, mille craintes, mille plaisirs. (133)

[I couldn’t be like those women who, in the evening, awaited the husbands more than they awaited the air they breathed. As soon as the man came home, a woman got busy around that mass of sweat and fatigue, smothering him with a thousand bits of attention, a thousand fears, a thousand pleasures. (114–15)]

In both environments, she falls victim to the sexualized portrayal of women but eventually finds the necessity of female solidarity as a key component to female liberation. Though her hardships in adjusting to a foreign land was inevitable in terms of finding her identity, it can be said that her suffering was certainly augmented by the lack of a stable female companionship. Ken Bugul’s experience of how her female consciousness was born is still relevant in today’s society making her writing timeless for females from diverse cultural backgrounds. Ken Bugul goes to describe the value in female friendship:

Je découvrais l’amitié entre femmes et me disais que les femmes devaient reseter ensemble. Que de sottises, il restait encore pour l’ignorer! Les femmes se haïssent, se jalouent, s’envient, se fuient. Elles ignorent qu’il n’y a pas “des femmes,” il y a seulement la femme. Elle (*sic*) devraient se retrouver, se connaître, s’imprégner. Elles ont des choses à se dire

puisqu'elles sont toutes semblables. Se libérer n'est pas se détacher de ses semblables pour chercher l'amitié, la compagne de l'homme. (100)

[I began to discover the friendship between women and said to myself that women should stay together. How foolish, still so many who didn't know this! Women hate each other, are jealous of each other, envious, flee from each other. They do not know that there aren't any "women," there is only woman. They ought to find each other again, get to know each other, soak each other up. They have things to say to one another since they're all alike. To be liberated doesn't mean to detach oneself from one's own in order to search for friendship, man's companion. (84)]

However, Ken Bugul's awakening in the need for the refinement of female solidarity is only brought about by its absence in a Western environment. Apart from Leonora, an Italian woman who aided her during trying time of her abortion, and a lesbian lover, Ken Bugul was seen by other European women as a sexual rival. Though the novel can be classified as feminist, Ken Bugul points out a difference in the feminist fight separating Western feminism from African feminism. She depicts a feminine discourse that needs to be understood within the parameters of the cultural context at hand. The readers are obliged to understand the given background to comprehend how the African feminine ideology is tied to issues such as post-coloniality and Third World issues. As explained by Kolawole:

Despite the varying reactions to feminism, many African women seem to agree that the way African women perceive their reality and the exigency that shape their consciousness and mobilization has to be different from the way western women perceive and react to their situation. (35)

The African woman faces multiple forms of oppression concurrently as presented by the protagonist in *Le Baobab fou*. Apart from the divisive role of patriarchy, imperialism and the impact of post-colonialism contribute to the African woman's suffering. As African nations face frequent turmoil and political unrest, it is the women who face the aftermath of the instability taking place. It is they who are confronted with poverty for themselves and their children, particularly in polygamous situations.

Due to this marked difference between Africa, the Third World and the West, women are now educating, and advocating for various types of feminism which is expressed by Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan in their discourse on feminism and East Asian women:

Feminism is based on historically and culturally specific realities and levels of consciousness, perceptions, and actions. This means that feminism meant one thing in the seventeenth century (when the word was first used) and that it means something quite different in the 1980s. It can also be articulated differently in different parts of the world and within a country, differently by different women depending on their class, background, levels of education, consciousness. (1)

The failure to recognize the distinct types of feminism caused a distrustful relationship between the rapport of Third World/non-Eurocentric women and Western feminists. Many Third World

women prescribe to the rejection of feminism as a concept put forth by Mandhu Kishwa, an Indian woman activist:

Feminism was an outgrowth of eighteenth-century humanist thought in Europe and the USA, reinforced by thinkers from other schools of thought, such as utilitarianism and Marxism. [...] While I stand committed to pro-women politics, I resist the label of feminism because of its overclose association with the western women's movement. I have no quarrel with the feminist movement in its own context and feel strengthened by the existence of women's movements in Western as in Eastern countries. However, feminism, as appropriated and defined by the west has too often become a tool of cultural imperialism. (quoted in Kolawole 16)

Thus, though African women are agents in supporting women's issues, they traditionally reject feminism as a label. As Kolawole argues, Western feminism is not as global as it claims to be but is in fact "racially construed and culture specific" (17), Ken Bugul's narration affirms her point as she distinguishes between Western feminism and Third World feminism:

Là-bas, dans le village, les femmes se donnaient des conseils, se confessaient, vivaient ensemble. Pourquoi ici a-t-on cherché à bouleverser la nature? Insatisfaites, elles revendiquent. Que revendiquent-elles? Pour pouvoir être bien avec les autres, en l'occurrence l'homme, il faut d'abord que les femmes soient bien avec elles-mêmes dans leur peau et entre elles. Il faut que les femmes s'acceptent. (100)

[Down there, in the village, women gave each other advice, told each other their secrets, lived together. Why did they look to turn nature upside down here? Dissatisfied, they make demands. But what do they demand? To get along with others, in this case with men, women must first of all feel good about themselves and with each other. Women must accept themselves. (84)]

From this we can conclude how Ken Bugul uses writing as an artistic tool to respond to popular ideologies allowing the audience to see an alternative perspective that may be unknown to them. Her message of feminism and the importance of female solidarity is narrated from a global lens as she bridges two different types of feminisms to meet in the middle and remember the common goal that is shared of upholding female companionship for the better and not the worst.

Reconstruction of Romantic Concepts: Home and Imagination

Ken Bugul, among other African women writers, writes against the typical underlying romanticism involved in simple concepts from similar first-person accounts by introducing a melancholic reality that is suffered by women in traditional and patriarchal societies. An example that can be found in most African women's writing is the notion of a home. As stated by Carole Boyce-Davies, "the mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized moorings to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways" (21). In *Le Baobab fou*, home is synonymous with pain and abandonment. As a child, Ken Bugul had to live in various places due to her mother's failed polygamous marriage, and the jealousy of her father's co-wives. From an early age, she did not have a concept of home as a place of nurturing

and love. Despite this, during her time in Europe, we see how her writing reflects a growth in consciousness when she describes the home of her European lover as revealing the following:

On avait un chez-soi pour y être chez soi. Avec toutes les lois de l'extérieur, toutes les contraintes, tous les interdits, son chez-soi offrait le refuge à tout l'épanouissement de ses instincts. "Chez-moi," cela m'avait manqué toute la vie. (79)

[One had a home in order to be at home. With all the laws out there, all the constraints, all the prohibitions, his home offered the refuge in which his instincts could fully bloom. "Home" was what I had missed all my life. (64)]

Another example of an alteration of a romantic concept is the notion of imagination. The romantic view of imagination involves feelings and emotions giving little to no weight on rationalism. Indeed we see this play out in Ken Bugul's imagination preceding to her embarkment for Europe as the place in which she would feel whole and satisfied in her search for an identity. As a young adolescent leaving on her first journey to Europe, she romanticizes it as "Le Nord des rêves (*sic*), le Nord des illusions, le Nord des allusions, Le Nord référentiel, le Nord Terre promise" (33) [The North of dreams, the North of illusions, the North of allusions. The frame of reference North, the Promised Land North (23)]. In doing this, she completely ignored the possibility that she is indeed different from them. Upon her arrival, she is disappointed to find out that she is out of place, ill at home, accompanied by disharmonious feelings between her and the Europeans. As she walks the streets of Belgium on her first day, her Promised Land is demystified, as she is greeted coldly, unlike anything she could have imagined:

J'avais avancé dans les rues. Comme ils marchaient vite, ces gens-là. Et moi qui étais si habituée à plonger mes pieds dans le sable chaud et réconfortant. Ici tout le monde marchait trop vite. J'avais aussi nonchalemment (*sic*) qu'un fauve rassasié en promenade dans la brousse. J'étais bousculée, parfois projetée de tous les côtés. Je m'étais arrêtée à plusieurs reprises pour chercher à me faufiler entre ces personnes qui couraient presque dans tous les sens. Et ils ne faisaient même pas attention à moi. "Qu'est-ce qui se passait donc ici? Un incendie s'était-il déclaré, propagé? Était-ce la fin du monde ou quoi? Vous ne m'avez pas vue? Vous ne m'avez pas reconnue? Mais c'est moi." (47)

[I kept on moving through the streets. How fast they walked, these people. I was so used to digging my feet deep into the warm and comforting sand. Here everybody walked too fast. I continued as carelessly as a sated animal in the wild, wandering through the brush. I was shoved, sometimes thrown from every side. I stopped several times to find a way out between these people who were almost running in every direction. And they didn't even pay any attention to me. What was going on here? Was there a fire somewhere? An alarm? Was it the end of the world or what? Didn't you see me? Didn't you recognize me? This is *me*. (34–35, translator's italics)]

Her imagination of finding a common identity among the Europeans is met with disbelief as she finds herself, once again, alienated and discriminated against when she visits a wig shop. She is told by the saleslady that the wigs are only suitable for white people. She takes a glimpse of her reflection in a glass window:

Comment ce visage pouvait-il m'appartenir? Je comprenais pourquoi la vendeuse m'avait dit qu'elle ne pouvait rien faire pour moi. Oui, j'étais une Noire, une étrangère. Je me touchais le menton, la joue pour mieux me rendre compte que cette couleur était à moi. Oui, j'étais une étrangère et c'était la première fois que je m'en rendais compte. (50)

[How could this face belong to me? I understood why the saleswoman had said she couldn't help me. Yes, I was a Black, a Black woman, a foreigner. I touched my chin, my cheek, to better help me realize that this was my color. Yes, I was a foreigner, a stranger, and it was the first time I realized it. (38)]

She realizes that she is perceived as “other.” Despite the confrontation of reality shattering her fabrications, through writing, Ken Bugul once again uses her imagination allowing herself to piece together a narrative to help her heal.

In *Le Baobab fou*, Ken Bugul demonstrates how writing has helped her reconcile with her culture by externalizing her pain. Through her narration, we see how she comes to grips with her culture despite not initially recognizing her homeland. Her return home suggests a long-awaited and hard-earned acceptance; she is now prepared to incorporate her African heritage onto her self-made, self-discovered identity. The role of literature here allows silenced female voices to progress to a place of self-expression and self-discovery in an admiring manner and freed from guilt and shame to find peace within themselves.

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Notes

¹ All quotes in French and pagination for *Le Baobab fou* are from the original 1984 Nouvelles Éditions Africaines text. Bracketed translations and corresponding page numbers from Marjolijn de Jager's 1991 treatment *The Abandoned Baobab* (see bibliography).

² In the English version, pp. 1–17 for the “Prehistory” and pp. 19–159 for the “History.”

³ According to Lambert, Senghor's African woman is progressively “Femme – Mère – Amante – Épouse – Princesse – Reine” [Woman – Mother – Lover – Wife – Princess – Queen] (76). As such, her value is always already determined by the man.