

Gaps of Silence: Trauma, Memory and Amnesia in *Le baobab fou*

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Le baobab fou refers to the baobab tree, which can live over a thousand years. Ancient trees are hollow; the wood deteriorates causing a cavity at the core. Due to its unusual appearance, according to oral stories about the baobab, the devil has turned its roots to the air “causing both the tree and the local populace to die” (De Vita 35). In the Pan-African world, trees are often a way to connect with the ancestors; where the tree is rooted becomes a gravesite, and the tree is able to bridge material and spiritual worlds. When Marietou M’Baye decided to publish *Le baobab fou*, she chose the pseudonym Ken Bugul, a Wolof expression that means “nobody wants it.” Ken Bugul is generally a name given to a baby who comes after several miscarriages. Giving this name is a traditional way for parents to protect their babies from death. By adopting the pseudonym Ken Bugul, Marietou M’Baye is attempting to ensure survival and avoid death. The pseudonym protects the author while revealing her agency and political authority.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth argues that before the traumatized subject is ready to unveil the story of trauma, there is a lapse of time or a period of latency. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Caruth states that trauma is the act of remembering and trying to come to terms with a painful experience. For her, effects of trauma in the present often link the traumatized subject to a haunting past. Given that imagination acts as a medium to reconstruct subjectivity, narrativizing a traumatic experience provides healing (Caruth 1996). In this sense, Ken Bugul’s autobiography, *Le baobab fou*, a text written in a liminal space in the interstices of memory and imagination, deals with symbolic, discursive or epistemic violence which might not hurt the body, but damages the soul. Here, I argue that Ken Bugul’s text is the literary testimony of a traumatized colonial subject who searches for healing in Europe, where she instead finds pain that aggravates her state of mind. I emphasize that the act of telling the story not only provides her with healing, but also opens a space to envision female solidarity as a powerful tool in the search for freedom.

Traumatic memories often haunt the present; thus, “the subjects of autobiography ... are present in absentia. They cannot testify in their own voices (Leigh Gilmore 90). In Bugul’s text, the narrator struggles to find a voice to tell her story, transferring her pain to the baobab tree that responds to each experience of Ken’s life: “on se demandait à quoi

il pensait. Car, parfois, il se mettait à rire, parfois à pleurer et cela arrivait aussi, il s'endormait pour rêver" (25). Through *prosopopeia*, a personification often used to represent absent, mute or deceased persons, the narrator tells the story of the suffering and deteriorated baobab tree, which goes mad and dies, while coming to terms with her own madness and spiritual death. Paul de Man, in "Autobiography and De-facement," states that *prosopopeia* is the trope of autobiography; "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of a latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (926). In Ken Bugul's narrative, the protagonist, empowered to narrate the death of the baobab, finds courage to reveal the mind of an ill and exposed woman who utilizes imagination to unveil her scars as a colonized subject in Senegal, and an African migrant woman in Brussels. By narrating her pain, Ken struggles to achieve healing. As a baobab tree that often appears to be alive, but may be hollow, deteriorated at the core and probably dead for many centuries, the narrator carries a wound in her soul.

An Absent Mother: Alienation, Displacement and Trauma

Le baobab fou tells the story of Ken, a Senegalese woman who is educated under the French system and receives a scholarship to study in Belgium. This autobiographical narrative has two parts, entitled "Préhistoire de Ken" (Pre-History of Ken) and "Histoire de Ken" (History of Ken). In Ken's pre-history, a sort of myth of origins, the siblings Codou and Fodé steal sugar from their mother to make *ndiambane*, a juice made from the fruit of the baobab tree. When Fodé is drinking the juice, he spits out a seed and where it lands a baobab tree will grow. This tree becomes witness to major events in the village. It is under this tree that Ken's ancestor builds a house to settle down with his family. It is also under the same baobab tree that the baby Ken, neglected by her mother, pushes an amber bead into her own ear. The episode causes not only physical injuries but is also a traumatic event that echoes throughout the story. Due to this trauma, her childhood experiences are absent from the beginning of the second part of the book entitled "History of Ken."

Ken was born during the colonial period and was educated in a French school, another traumatic experience that resonates throughout the text. Her history starts with the narrator leaving Senegal at an unspecified time, but the narrator gives hints that the story happens right after the country's independence, because she refers to the World Festival of Negro Arts (FESMAN) held in 1966. Approximately six years after the independence of Senegal, she departs on a scholarship to continue her college studies in Belgium. In Europe, experiences of racism and rejection lead Ken to self-destructive behavior, including experimenting with drugs and prostitution. Her experiences contribute to the degradation of her soul and eventually to madness. In Brussels, she struggles with her reminiscences of the colonial past. Her traumatic experiences in Belgium lead to a reconnection with what was left

behind; flashbacks of her childhood force her to reconnect with her African culture.

Memory plays an important role in *Le baobab fou* as the narrator selects the experiences she wants to disclose. In this process of folding and unfolding her story, amnesia is essential to survival. As Cathy Caruth states, “[t]he historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (*Trauma* 8). Therefore, Ken’s autobiography is replete with unspoken moments, where words cannot translate her pain. Past events come into her consciousness every time she suffers in Brussels. Through flashbacks, Ken remembers that during her childhood she found an amber bead in the sand and pushed it into her ear to the point of causing an irreversible deafness:

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)

At this moment, she ceases listening to the community. Ken does not learn how to communicate with her people, thus disconnecting from her culture. As Amy Hubbell suggests, “Bugul’s originary myth inscribes her into African history and simultaneously separates her from the community” (86). At that very moment, her mother ceases to be a nurturing presence and becomes a deep absence in Ken’s life. The lack of protection the baby felt under the baobab tree provides her with an unrelenting feeling of solitude and abandonment: “*Comme je voudrais dire à la mère qu’elle ne devait pas me laisser seule à deux ans jouer sous le baobab! Ce baobab dénudé dans ce village désert*” (30 italics in original). The delinking gets more persistent, and as she becomes a teenager and adult, she gets more displaced and more disconnected from her mother.

Fragments of memories interrupt the narrative, which results in a palimpsest, replete with gaps of silence. Amnesia effaces past events which cause shame and discomfort. Chantal Kalisa affirms that “epistemological violence results in partial or complete memory loss” (Kalisa 55). The absence of her mother contributes to Ken’s feeling of solitude:

Ah! mère! Pourquoi parlais-tu? Pourquoi devais-tu t’en aller? Pourquoi me laissais-tu? Je me blotissais contre elle, souhaitant ardemment que nous soyons collées pour la vie. Je ne me souvenais pas beaucoup de la vie à la maison, dans le village depuis la perle d’ambre dans l’oreille. (80)

The narrator is forced to live with her father and his co-wives when her mother’s polygamous marriage crumbles. Later, her father’s wives send her away from the compound and she starts living in different places. Without a home, Ken, as a child and a young adult, has to struggle to survive. In *Le baobab fou*, home is equated with pain and death. Carole Boyce Davies suggests that in African women’s writing, “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).

The cry for the mother in the narrative assumes an ambiguous tone. Her questions about her neglectful mother become questions about mother and the motherland. By questioning maternal love, Ken is also questioning patriarchal structures in Africa and “attacking the traditional foundations of society in its myths and beliefs” (Cazenave 101). By utilizing the mother as a metaphor for Africa, she criticizes the trope that Leopold Sédar Senghor and Négritude nationalists generally use to describe Mother Africa. Francophone African women writers, feminists, and activists vehemently criticized the nationalist movement of Négritude that was founded in the 1930s by Léopold Sédar Senghor, the Martiniquan Aimé Césaire, and the Guyanese Léon Damas in Paris. These young men founded a literary, ideological, and political movement to restore African culture and reunite African people on the continent and in the diaspora.

In his famous poem *Femme nue, femme noire*, Senghor envisages Africa as a maternal figure, a sensual woman, a nurturing and spiritual place:

*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
Et voilà qu'au cœur de l'Été et de Midi,
Je te découvre, Terre promise, du haut d'un haut col calciné
Et ta beauté me foudroie en plein cœur, comme l'éclair d'un aigle.*
(Senghor 1945)

As Florence Stratton points out, the naked woman evokes erotic feelings in the poetic persona who becomes a national subject at the expense of the objectified woman. Through the dichotomies man/woman, subject/object, he is represented as a privileged man, an intellectual educated in the West, while she is just a sexual or aesthetic object (Stratton 41). Paradoxically, this woman functions as both a spiritual entity and a sensual woman. Most importantly, however, Senghor's “Femme Noire” would seem not to be capable of desire; she appears to be a voiceless blank space that exists to satisfy the poet and to bear the sons of the new nations.

While in the writings of Négritude poets the mother is equated with purity and fertility, Ken accuses her mother of abandonment, unveiling the complexities of the mother-daughter cathexis. Unable to understand her culture, she cannot come to terms with the rules to survive in Africa. Ken feels neglected by Mother Africa who gradually loses her spiritual power and cannot protect and nurture her. Ken deconstructs the idea of Africa as home for women—a place to derive spiritual strength. As Davies states, “home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement” (21). Ken states that Négritude has often portrayed Africa as motherland where her children come back to be nurtured and get strength. However, for women who cope with traditional practices that reinforce patriarchal structures, home sometimes is not synonymous with love and care. For the narrator,

patriarchal power has defined the destiny of the continent in such ways that Africa becomes a site of pain and anguish for women.

In Bugul's *Le baobab fou*, memory counter-narrates history. As Ranjana Khanna argues, "memory is called upon to claim or disclaim an official past, its resonance as counterfactual narrative becomes extremely important, especially in conditions of the suppression of truth" (Khanna 13). For women writers, the portrayal of Africa is more complicated than in male narratives. While women may not despise their cultural roots, Elleke Boehmer suggests, some also cannot accept the image of a fertile, nurturing mother who has been present in many nationalist narratives, as is the case in Senghor's Négritude writings. As men struggle against the injustices of colonialism and search for the spirituality of Mother Africa to give them strength to fight the colonizers, women's struggles are much more complex:

This dilemma is that where male nationalists have claimed, won and ruled the "motherland," this same motherland may not signify "home" and "source" to women. To "Third World" women and women of color these concerns speak with particular urgency, not only because of their need to resist the triple oppression or marginalization that the effects of colonialism, gender and a male-dominated language create, often usefully adopted from the older and more established nationalist politics of "their men." (Boehmer 5)

Boehmer emphasizes the ways in which nationalist politics in Africa excluded the discussion about gender hierarchies and the need of female participation in the spheres of power. Though women participated in the struggles for independence, their efforts were frequently not recognized by their male counterparts who became the leaders of the newly independent states. This situation generated criticism by women who fought against colonial rule but also needed to counteract internal patriarchal structures that impeded female participation in the construction of the new nations.

Abiola Irele argues that Négritude forges a solidarity among Black people from Africa and the diaspora that acknowledges Africa as a common mother that, "instead of being a source of shame, it becomes a source of pride" (49). Irele suggests that, in spite of Négritude's attempts to undo stereotypes and negative images related to Africa, the movement ended up "reinforcing the antagonism created by the colonial situation, between the White master and the Black subordinate" (48). In *Le baobab fou*, the protagonist also states that Négritude is a way to expose and display African difference:

C'était encore une forme d'aliénation, tout cela avait été fomenté par le Blanc, pour mieux camoufler ses ravages et faire dévier le Noir d'un vrai éveil à une conscience depuis que des oracles avaient trouvé l'idée de négritude que le Blanc noya dans l'embryon sous ses applaudissements. (89)

Ken Bugul follows Mariama Bâ and other women writers in her criticism of Négritude. Like the first President of Senegal, most first-generation male writers treated women as if they were invisible or incapable of speaking with their own voices. The nationalist literature of Senghor and others claimed masculine identity as the norm. While

males were the subjects constructing nations, women remained symbolic figures. Mariama Bâ criticizes the way Africa is represented in nationalist discourses, affirming that “the black woman in African literature must be given the dimension that her role in the liberation struggles next to men has proven to be hers, the dimension which coincides with her proven contribution to the economic development of our country” (Innes 130). In so many nationalist narratives, mothers are symbols of continuity and survival, embodying the land and thus becoming interchangeable with it. Women become the elements of fertility and survival and are “excluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic 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” (McClintock 354).

In her parody, *Femme nue Femme noire*, the Cameroonian, Paris-based novelist Calixte Beyala challenges the mythical, spiritual woman who is the source of inspiration of Senghor’s verses, while revealing women characters that expose their bodies and sexual desires. Her protagonist, Irène Fofó, a sexually liberated woman who finds in prostitution a path to her subjectivity, affirms in the first lines of the novel: Ces vers [“Femme nue, femme noire, vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté... »] ne font pas partie de mon arsenal linguistique.” In a text filled with digressions, sexual transgressions and linguistic violence, Beyala satirizes Senghor’s mythical mother and Mother Africa, thus emphasizing that when women look for this idealized mother, they may find pain and death.

The Mozambican writer Paulina Chiziane also portrays Mother Africa as a site of suffering for women. Chiziane portrays Africa as being as fragmented and diverse as women’s identities. Africa is metonymically represented as a woman who gets explored at different moments of her life. Chiziane’s protagonist explains that Africa has engendered some sons who exploit, invade and abuse her. She affirms that the first son was a consequence of Portuguese invasion, the second one, the consequence of another abuse. For the protagonist Rami, the authors of the second violation are Africans themselves. She accuses the new government of continuing many of the Portuguese policies. The raped woman is Africa, in general, and Mozambique, in particular. Rami parodies the comparison between Africa and women, the trope employed by colonialists and African male nationalists. In Rami’s analysis, Africa is as exploited, abused, and humiliated as African women themselves.

As in Beyala’s *Femme nue, femme noire* and Chiziane’s *Niketche*, in *Le baobab fou* the mother ceases to be connected to survival, fertility, or spirituality. The narrative deconstructs the myth of Africa “which involved a glorification of the African past and nostalgia for the imaginary beauty of African traditional society” (Irele 49). The abandonment by the mother is also a metaphor for the suffering of not being accepted by Mother Africa where cultural traditions and male privilege contribute to women’s pain. In Europe, Ken’s experiences seem to be very personal, but they become clearly collective. When

she reflects on the fallacies of colonialist and nationalist policies, she comes to terms with the construction of her own identity.

Migration, Trauma and Postcolonial Feminism

For Ken, migration to Europe turns into a process of violence to the soul. As Ken makes every effort to fit in Europe, she corrupts her body through drug addiction and prostitution; she distorts and exposes her mind. In Brussels, when Ken faces the mirror, she wants to tear off her skin. She does not recognize the image in the mirror because in Europe her otherness becomes overwhelming and unbearable. Until coming to Europe, she was not able to understand the meaning of being a black woman because in Senegal, the overlapping of ethnicity, social class, and cultural hierarchies blurred the significance of skin color. Also, French education and acculturation had contributed to making her feel like a French citizen. In Brussels, she is forced to reconcile with the part of her self that French assimilation effaced. The image in the mirror tells her another story, reminding her of Senegal and Africa, of her cultural roots, while demanding the deconstruction of the self. In Europe, she tries to free herself from her past in the company of those who can understand her European language and culture, but she suffers racism and rejection.

Julie Ngue states that Bugul's text is "a testimony of a chronically ill, traumatized postcolonial subject who searches desperately and in vain for healing, whether in Africa or in the West" (54). Ngue points out that the protagonist's search for healing through sex and drugs is in vain because the narrator cannot find remedy for pain either in the West or in Africa. It is worth noting that many layers of trauma have contributed to turning the protagonist into an absent, ill subject who encounters death, as Ngue suggests; however Ngue does not mention that Ken is also able to regenerate and find healing for her pain when she is able to unveil her story. Externalizing her experiences in Europe not only heals Ken, but helps her reconcile with her culture. Back in Africa, under the baobab tree, the narrator encounters the possibility of looking at herself in the mirror, thus acknowledging the multiple facets of her own identity. She can examine her colonial education, her expectations about family, her hope to find a better place to live in Europe and her frustration with the reality she finds abroad. While she externalizes her story, the self she unveils searches for freedom.

Dori Laub affirms that survivors of a trauma often continue to be attached to traumatic events, which repeat in the present. In this sense, the healing could be attained via "a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing history and *re-externalizing the event*" (Laub 69). For Laub, the re-externalization of the event only happens when the subject can transmit the story "to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside" (Laub 69). In an interview, Bugul emphasizes how the act of writing her story provided her with freedom: "Thus, writing reveals me to myself, and reveals things buried in my innermost self, my existential secrets. I break free, through being

revealed to myself. I feel liberated, in harmony with myself..." (De Larquier 330). Bugul acknowledges literature as a powerful tool to rescue her from fears, helping her to find the courage to reveal part of the self with which she is not easily able to reconcile. Through the act of writing, she can come to terms with experiences that she struggles to bury or to forget.

As a testimony, *Le baobab fou* resonates with the lives of other postcolonial female subjects who struggle to get free from the chains of colonial education, acculturation, and the postcolonial feeling of alienation and incompleteness. For Shoshana Felman, "a life-testimony is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*" (2 italics in the original). Hence, reading turns into a way of sharing the pain of the other, by piecing together the fragments of an overwhelmed memory which oscillates between remembering and forgetting. While Ken Bugul's autobiographical text reveals her condition of degeneration and deformity, it also traces the blueprint for her path to freedom.

In Europe, Ken understands her condition as a postcolonial female subject. She feels solidarity among women when she gets pregnant by Luis, her first boyfriend in Belgium, but decides that the best way to maintain her freedom is to have an abortion. She sees that all the poor and foreign women, packed into the waiting room, are at the mercy of the doctors and share a similar condition. In this traumatic experience, Ken remembers Senegal and her Wolof culture; she compares the doctor to a hyena, which, in Senegalese culture, is a symbol of corruption and dirt. In the waiting room of the doctor's office Ken sees many pregnant women, all of them foreigners needing abortions. The hyena-doctor is there to perform his work:

Il y avait quelque chose qui ressemblait à une salle d'attente, mais on aurait dit plutôt une pièce d'un bureau de recrutement où s'alignaient des femmes de toutes les couleurs: des Arabes, des Africaines, des Antillaises. Chacune avait l'air de vivre une tragédie propre à elle. (55)

Ken feels that their disempowered condition has put them in this situation. They listen to the doctor's attack on interracial relationships:

Je suis absolument contre le mélange. Chaque race doit rester telle. Les mélanges des races font des dégénérés; ce n'est pas du racisme. Je parle scientifiquement. Vous êtes Noire, restez avec les Noirs. Les Blancs entre Blancs. (60)

The doctor's shocking position awakens in her a feminist consciousness. By examining other women at the doctor's office, Ken starts to compare how the lives of women from a different class, nationality, or race might converge. Ken affirms that her feminist consciousness begins to emerge when she discovers solidarity among women: "Une Italienne venait les voir, ils me la présentèrent juste au moment de mes ennuis. Cette rencontre m'apporta une idée plus nette des rapports entre femmes. Ma conscience féministe était née" (63). Her feminism does seem to take stock of barriers of class and skin color, but gradually Ken starts to perceive that she has a different

condition. Though she is a woman, she can share with other women some of her pain, her skin color, her alien status, and her social class, and find a place for herself in Europe.

Ken's feminist consciousness contributes to her liberation. Women friends in Brussels take care of her during an overdose episode and when she attempts to commit suicide. When death appears as the only alternative to end her suffering, she finds shelter, love, friendship, sisterhood, and sexual desire among women. Her sexual relationships with women give her life new meaning and hope. Her regeneration starts when her feminist consciousness begins to restore her humanity. Among women, she does not need to wear so many masks or be the erotic body. Her feminism provides her with an opportunity to undo her sexual colonization. Through a relationship that goes beyond sexual desire, but is firmly based in sisterhood and friendship, Ken is able to begin to reconstruct her identity.

Friendship and sexual desire between women awaken her feminist consciousness in ways that allow Ken to start to rethink how patriarchal culture focuses on women's separation. She starts to advocate that women join together for strength while separating themselves from heterosexual relationships, which add suffering to their lives. In Brussels, all her relationships with men fail as gender hierarchies come into play in their relationships. On the contrary, her relationships with women soothe her pain:

Laure, que j'avais rencontrée entre deux coupes de champagne à une rétrospective, galerie Empain, avec ses cheveux longs comme les lianes de la savane, son visage presque beau, ses yeux qui riaient avec ses dents, brune comme une Polynésienne, ... Elle était disponibilité et tolérance je la fréquentais assidûment. Sa façon de vivre me convenait. (73)

When she gets involved with Laure, there is no monetary exchange, and for a few moments she is able to experience pleasure. By coming to terms with same-sex desire for women, *Le baobab fou* opens new spaces to discuss a subject that remains taboo in many African countries. These representations bring to view the awareness that in African women's literature some issues remain ignored. For Natalie Etoke, *Le baobab fou* discusses sexuality in a way that transcends boundaries; however, she notes that in the narrative "African sexuality is neither exclusively heterosexual nor openly gay or bisexual" (176). Etoke's analysis follows along the same lines of criticism and writing that prefer to deny homosexuality in Africa, avoiding a theme that is still considered inappropriate in many regions of Africa. When Etoke says that sexuality in the narrative is ambiguous, she denies that same-sex desire is part and parcel of the narrator's path. I argue that for Ken, same-sex desire is crucial to the development of the narrative, as women's desire becomes a tool to recover Ken's dignity.

According to Signe Arnfred, one of the factors which contributes to this silence about African women's sexualities has to do with nineteenth-century discourses. Arnfred further suggests that "there may be other reasons as well linked to the ways in which sexuality has been dealt with in daily and ritual life" (Arnfred 59). Odile Cazenave

also recognizes the absence of the discussion on sexuality in African literature, thus suggesting that “particularly for an African woman writer to speak about her body and her desires represents a daring act” (126). Cazenave affirms that even when writers discuss sexuality in their literary works, it is very difficult for them to disentangle from the “traditional idea of romantic, heterosexual love” (141). As she notes, representing sexuality is still a taboo for African women authors, and very few women dare to take on the theme in their literary works.

Same-sex desire gives Ken a way to counter the loss and solitude she experienced with migration. Same-sex desire becomes a tranquilizer, an anesthetic to her pain. She gains some agency, but she is aware that even in a relationship with another woman she might be seen as an African, colonized, black, poor, migrant woman. While all of these other categories mark her difference in relation to European middle-class women, her challenge is to cope with these differences while maintaining connection with women from different contexts, nationalities, skin colour and religion, among other differences. In this sense, Ken is increasingly aware that despite speaking a European language and feeling united with European women in a major struggle against gender oppression, other categories also contribute to her subaltern status.

In Africa, the definition of feminism has undergone many interpretations and nuances. The Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo envisages a feminist movement that would seek justice not only for African *women* but for all African *people*, suggesting an inclusive movement that could integrate all people into the construction of the continent. For her, there is no possibility of African development if women do not take part in the project, however, she argues that “it is not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that Africa women must have the best that the environment can offer (*African Woman Today* 39). In her creative writing, Aidoo often presents emerging female characters who are searching for new roles within African nations. Similarly, the narrator of *So Long a Letter* by Senegalese author Mariama Bâ argues that “women must be encouraged to take a keener interest in the destiny of the country” (64).

Obioma Nnaemeka argues that the concept of African feminism probably does not do justice to the heterogeneity of Africa as a continent with numerous ethnic groups, languages, and cultures. For Nnaemeka, Africa’s pluralism must be respected. For her “to speak of feminism in Africa is to speak of feminisms in the plural within Africa and other continents in recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives” (31). Though Nnaemeka cites the inappropriateness of the concept “African Feminism” to define the struggle for women’s rights on the continent, she paradoxically asserts that “naming feminism is an act of (agency), of resistance that sustains its dynamism and expands its horizon” (2). Despite recognizing African heterogeneity and the complexities of a diverse continent, Nnaemeka envisions herself as part of a common struggle that has its foundation in pan-African ideals.

In *Le baobab fou*, Bugul offers an alternative to Western feminism. Ken's feminism might be compared with the proposal of Werewere Liking's *Elle sera de Jaspe et de Corail*, in which the term *misovire* is presented as an alternative to the term "feminist." Liking envisages a new movement where women get together to change the destiny of Africa. Liking's work is a response to nationalist discourses. It is an attempt to rescue Africa from impoverishment, corruption, and bad governance through dismantling masculinist ideologies and including women's voices in African affairs. Throughout the chapters of Liking's book, this *misovire* develops her project of creating a new race that shall be of jasper and coral, a race that overcomes the dichotomies of Black versus White created by the colonizers and maintained by nationalists. In this project, the term "race" no longer refers to Black and White; these categories have been gradually erased and replaced by a multitude of bright colors.

For the *misovire*, hope for a new Africa will be created not only through women's participation in power, but also through the participation of the whole community. In many ways, one of the truths that the *misovire* proposes is that despite all odds, Africans have the power to overcome obstacles and emerge triumphant. Liking's text struggles with the idea of a project that involves written language but also orature, songs, poetry, and drama. A crucial aspect of this experiment is the centrality of women's contributions to the creation of a new reality. A new reality can only be created through the inclusion of women in all aspects of African affairs. Like Ken Bugul's narrative, Liking's text opens up new and previously unexplored spaces for discussion.

Conclusion

If life in Brussels contributes to the protagonist's madness and spiritual death in *Le baobab fou*, her survival depends on her courage to unveil herself. As Bugul voices her story, her text becomes a mirror in which she is able to see herself and to provide the community with tools to examine the colonial legacy through other lenses. As the writer affirms, her text is a way for her to see herself:

When I wrote my autobiography, I spewed out this lived experience, and facing my own life through writing it down enabled me to better take responsibility for that lived experience. Maybe this is so because it was out, unveiled. (Bourget and D'Almeida 353)¹

Bugul confesses that this autobiographical novel is the author's moment of looking in the mirror where she is able to deal with her phantoms. As a text that provides readers with a broader perspective on the consequences of the colonial encounter on women's minds, *Le baobab fou* becomes a collective document that bears witness to Africa's status after colonization. As Ken unveils her own degradation, the narrative provides not only individual healing, but also a collective moment of catharsis. Ken's experiences in Europe show that she is not

the beneficiary of an enlightened project of civilization, but is instead a displaced postcolonial subject who searches for freedom.

Using her own body, the narrator rewrites historical narratives that have appropriated the female body by portraying it as a native land or a source of spirituality. In the end, Ken's body is neither virgin nor spiritual: it is deformed and corrupted. Through memory and amnesia, Ken designs the path that ends under the same baobab where her story began. Back in Senegal, she seeks to restore her culture and to reconnect with her ancestors. Although the baobab is still there, at the same place, someone tells her: "Ce baobab que tu vois là, il est mort depuis longtemps" (181). Observing Ken's deterioration, the baobab got mad and died. Under the baobab she says a funeral prayer: "sans paroles, je prononçais l'oraison funèbre de ce baobab témoin et complice du départ de la mère, le premier matin d'une aube sans crépuscule. Longtemps, je restai là devant ce tronc mort, sans pensée" (182). Her silent funeral prayer is not only for the baobab that is dead but also for herself. After many traumatic experiences, Ken goes mad and experiences a spiritual death. Being dispossessed from her cultural roots, she is just as hollow as an ancient baobab. However, her death under the baobab brings hope of a new beginning where regeneration is possible.

Notes

1. "Quand j'ai écrit mon autobiographie, j'avais ce vécu hors de moi, et d'avoir ma propre vie en face de moi à travers l'écriture m'a permis de mieux assumer ce vécu. Peut-être parce que c'était sorti, dévoilé." The Editor's translation.

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