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**BETWEEN MOTHER FIXATION AND COLONIAL ATTRACTION:  
DERACINATION, ILL-FATED MIGRATION, AND REDEMPTION IN KEN  
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**ABSTRACT**

*The Abandoned Baobab*, Ken Bugul's brutally sincere autofiction, is the prototypal model of African postcolonial, feminist, and psychological narrative built around the post-traumatic stress disorder, self-flagellation, and "excesses" of a speaking female/colonial subject in desperate need of love and empowerment. Hallmark of autofiction, trauma subtends the author's fictionalization of a lived agony. The paper analyzes the protagonist's alienation, identity crises, and ill-starred sojourn in Europe against the backdrop of maternal attachment and colonial attraction. The study is eclectically anchored on Hendrika C. Freud's reconstruction of the Electra complex and postcolonial theory. Its major finding is that, notwithstanding the protagonist's anguish at maternal abandonment and her subsequent colonial assimilation, she still employs repressed norms and values associated with the mother/the land/Africa to berate (neo-)colonialists, Westerners, and herself. The paper concludes that the protagonist-narrator redeems herself somehow through the willful adoption of the appellation Ken Bugul, the admission of her errors, and the return to the motherland.

**KEYWORDS**

Ken Bugul, deracination, migration, postcolonialism, autofiction

## Introduction

Since the publication of Ken Bugul's autofiction, *Le baobab fou* (1982), translated into English by Marjolijn de Jager as *The Abandoned Baobab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese Woman* (1991/2008), it has established itself as an exemplar of African postcolonial, feminist, and psychological self-narrative. It depicts the tribulations of the author-protagonist-narrator from infancy to adulthood, offering a harrowing account of lived (post)colonial and transmigrant experiences (trauma, assimilation, racism, objectification, political disenchantment, etc.) from the perspective of a female narrating subject. Traumatically "abandoned" at age five by the mother, the delicate Ken Bugul develops symptoms of a prematurely weaned girl, susceptible to melancholia and a sense of incompleteness, errancy, and alienation, from the primary school, through tertiary education in Belgium. Named Mariétou M'baye at birth, she later adopts the pseudonym, Ken Bugul, which in her native Wolof, means "The One Nobody Wants", a derogatory appellation but also a death-liberating invocation. In this autofiction, Bugul often likens her disorientation and rejection to those of the baobab, the national symbol of her native Senegal, profiled as a culturally and politically misgoverned neo-colony. The story begins with the image of a fruitful baobab and ends with the tree's reported demise.

Constitutive of this bipartite trauma narrative of *The Rejected One*, are "Ken's Prehistory" and "Ken's History." Relatively short, the first part functions as a Genesis-like parodic myth with its attribution of the original sin to males, not females, its depiction of symbolic incest, and its prophecy on collective and individual disequilibrium. Much longer, the second section serves to serialize the grave consequences of the foretold Fall. Both parts are, however, replete with motifs of nomadism and quest. The inscription of history in the two subheadings underlines the author's desire to write her nervous conditions into the public repository of transnational experiences, recuperating her lacerated self, and using her case to pay homage to similarly dismembered colonized subjects. Complementarily, it highlights her determination to compose a micronarrative, a localized "herstory," feminist autofiction, to challenge the grand narratives of phallogocentric/imperial historiographers.

Based on the tradition of imposed public silence or at least the will to inflict such exclusion on women, Asaah submits that the resurgence of African women's writing in the public space amounts to the reappropriation of discourse, that is the erasure, subtle or brutal, of the imbalance between women's recognized role as first imparters of speech/culture/oral literature and the generally institutionalized patriarchal marginalization of women's speech in power relations (194). He adds that African women's reclamation of the written word reconnects them to power as they seek to positively reengineer and reorientate societal growth by using fiction as a multifaceted countervailing force against gender discrimination emanating from diverse sites: traditional African patriarchy, racism, modern androcentric state, and violent international order (194).

As a corollary, African women's use of autofiction connects them even further to the possession of written discourse for the scriptural expression of gender-specific traumatic experiences in asymmetrical contexts and the creation of a better world for both women and men. It is for this reason that Henke posits the self-narrative as a liberating counter-discourse for subalternized women writers:

Because the author can instantiate the alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text, the newly revised subject, emerging as the semi-fictional protagonist of an enabling counternarrative, is free to rebel against the values and

practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world. (xv-xvi)

Relatedly, Henke, Hitchcott, and Wimbush also stress the capacity of autofiction to heal trauma and inspire self-invention.

As a narrative of psycho-social development with postcolonial trans-local settings, *The Abandoned Baobab* has predictably elicited insightful commentaries from the academy. Carmen goes as far as crediting Bugul's novel with the first sustained fictional exploration of problematic mother-daughter relations in African letters. In contrast, González Alarcón explores the relationship between humor and gender in the novel. For their part, Man, Coly, and Jones-Boardman have studied the leitmotifs of the abject, trauma, and postcolonial madness in the work. For example, commenting on the morbid disorientation of Ken and other colonized subjects, Jones-Boardman notes that the disfigurement of the colonized psyche, as in the case of Bugul, not just inhibits the formation of hybridity but also fractures the colonized from within as it produces insidious and long-lasting effects that prove to be greatly exacerbated for women who also suffer gendered alienation within patriarchal societies (83).

This paper has benefited immensely from these probing studies. Its major difference is the situation of attraction and aversion at the very heart of the libidinous adventures of a (self-)anathematized persona who bears the derogatory but redemptive name Ken Bugul, *The Unwanted One*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To decode the protagonist's complicated attachment to and revulsion towards the mother, recourse will be made to Hendrika C. Freud's reconfiguration of the Electra complex. Following Jung, Freud contends:

The frequently absent father is seen more from a distance and both desired and idealized, as in the case of Electra and in girls of our day. In contrast, the mother-image, *whether loved or hated, is ever-present,*<sup>1</sup> both in reality and in the girl's mind's eye (...). The mother is blamed for not being the satisfying love object of the girl. This leads to a split between the frustrating "bad" mother, on the one hand, and the idealized "good" father, on the other. Thus, as metaphor, Electra seems to me to be more suitable than Oedipus to the problematic aspects of female development. (79)

Freud explains that she has named her model the Electra complex not as a "replacement of the Oedipus complex but as a complement thereto" and that though "not every woman has an Electra complex, (...) the designation is valid when complications in the mother-daughter relationship impede normal development" (154).

Additionally, postcolonial theory, with its emphasis on Othering and alienation, will be deployed to shed light on the protagonist's estrangement, internalized oppression, and oscillation between cultures. Conceptualized by Spivak as central to imperialism and racism, Othering underpins the construction of Manichean binaries. By its very Othering nature and hierarchical logic, the imperial order necessarily creates its excluded others, dominated others, and racial subalterns as the basis of empire-building.

Frantz Fanon's two classics, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, provide sufficient evidence and justification for the joint recourse to psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory in the probing of the complicated angst of (post)colonial subalterns. Van Zyl thus postulates, "Many of the paradoxical figures and qualities which haunt colonial texts—the puritan and the dissolute, pleasure in pain, eroticism mixed with repulsion—are characteristically psychoanalytic. (...) no represented world seems more in need of psychoanalysis than that of the Other" (82). This position is compellingly defended by Hook and Truscott. In short, the investigation of the dual celebration and ostracization of Africa and the West by a conflicted colonized subject in this trauma narrative, *The Abandoned Baobab*, merits both psychoanalytical and postcolonial approaches.

### **Self-narratives in Francophone African Literature**

Although de Jager uses the word "autobiography" as part of the subtitle of her translated work, Bugul herself, according to Garane (173, note 1), prefers the term "autobiographie romancée", that is fictionalized/fictional autobiography or autobiographical fiction<sup>2</sup>. Her choice appears to echo Doubrovsky's prototypical definition of autofiction as "Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement reels"/"Fiction of strictly real events and facts" which he used to describe his 1977 novel, *Fils* (blurb)<sup>3</sup>. While he associates the "language of adventure", classy style, sovereign selfhood, and highborn smugness with autobiography, he views his autofiction as an "adventure of language", rejection of stylistic elegance, recourse to multiple narrative perspectives, and the self-projection of ordinary people like him (Doubrovsky, blurb) into literature. Conveyed by linguistic experimentation and instability, this avant-garde blend of truth and fiction has inspired diverse fluid interpretations and applications of the then neologism. This is even more so as Doubrovsky's invention of the term was made against the backdrop of European postmodernism of the 1970s and 1980s with its repudiation of totalizing narratives, interrogation of autonomous compact selfhood, and the era of intellectual suspicion. As a result, parallel, complementary, and contestatory literary terms/inventions, such as autobiografiction, auto/biography, autofabrication, autofabulation, and faction have proliferated. Paradoxically, these new creations seem to underline the vitality of autofiction which has, since Doubrovsky's time, merged with other art forms, such as music, film, and photography, to engender multiple hybridized creations.

That said, it is important to note that life writing/autobiography/self-writing/life story/self-narrative has played a crucial role in the development of Francophone African literature. Over a period spanning almost a century from Diallo's *Force-bonté* ["Abundant Generosity"] to Miano's *Stardust*, issued respectively in 1926 and 2022, self-narratives have been a major avenue for personal re-creation and articulation of collective aspirations. Written by a Senegalese, *Force-bonté* counts among the earliest novels from Francophone Africa. While in Rwanda, the first major literary work was Nayigiziki's life narrative *Escapade ruandaise*, ["Rwandan Escapade"] published in 1950, in Guinea that honor went to Laye's life story *L'Enfant noir* (*African Child*), issued in 1953. Published in 1956, the autobiographical novella *Ngonda* by Cameroon's Matip is the first Francophone fictional work written by an African woman. If early Francophone African life writing appears pro-colonial, as in the case of Diallo, or moderately anti-colonial, in the hands of Nayigiziki, Laye, and Matip, later self-narratives, such as Kane's autofiction *Ambiguous Adventure*<sup>4</sup> and Bugul's autofiction *The Abandoned Baobab*, are largely counter-hegemonic in temper.

The poignant depiction of neurosis and trauma in both autofictions recalls the morbid mental anguish experienced by authorial personas in key African autofictions such as Armah's *Fragments*, Marechera's *The House of Hunger*, and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. In all these monumental African autofictions, trauma, as Caruth puts it, has a "moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is released (. . .) through the wound" (2). While Dix's definition of autofiction sets the subgenre apart from traditional autobiography and possibly other forms of life writing, it also reinforces the element of trauma as fundamental to autofiction and highlights the autofictional credentials of the aforementioned five texts:

Autofiction is a project of self-exploration and self-experimentation on the part of the author. This in turn is partly because many works of autofiction have been written in the aftermath of some kind of traumatic experience—real or imagined—so that the process of writing in response to trauma can be seen as a means of situating the self in a new context when other relational contexts have been removed or jeopardized. ("Introduction: Autofiction in English" 4)

In all these five autofictions, consequent upon the incidence of a foundational breach, the trauma, in an imperiled social landscape (unwelcoming home, neo-colony, exile, disenchantment, etc.), the personas of the various authors embark on redemptive self-construction and self-investigation. Arguably, however, Bugul's autofiction stands out of the ensemble. First, *The Abandoned Baobab* is a brazen and harrowing representation of unspeakable agony built around African taboo subjects such as suicide, alcoholism, drug abuse, abortion, homosexuality, prostitution, incest, self-laceration, and lactification. Second, after its eruption in *The Abandoned Baobab*, her traumatic abandonment by the mother has been further thematized in six of Bugul's novels: *Cendres et braises* ["Ashes and Embers"], *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* ["Riwan or the Sandy Path"], *De l'autre côté du regard* ["Life seen from the Other Side"], *Mes hommes à moi* ["The Men in my Life"], *Cacophonie* ["Cacophony"], and *Le Trio bleu* ["The Blue Trio"]. Such autofictional serialization is unique in African letters.

Embedded in the title of the autofiction, *The Abandoned Baobab/ Le baobab fou* (mad baobab), is rejection and ostracization. Given the centrality of the meaning of her name Ken Bugul, The Unwanted One, to the texture, diegesis, motifs, and atmosphere, etc., of this self-narrative, the work oscillates, in the fashion of Doubrovsky, between paratext and text. Additionally, Ken's artistic adoption of the baobab as her alter ego, the mixture of the first- and third-person narratives, the near effacement of the author-protagonist in the first part of the novel, the mythologization of her origins, and the recourse to the "techniques of the novel" (narration, treatment of time and space, focalization, stream of consciousness, etc.) all contribute to the fictionalization of her post-traumatic stress disorder. Wimbush endorses Doubrovsky's 1980 conceptualization of autofiction whereby writers have the freedom to manipulate the truth of their lives to undertake internal identity quests (45).

Glossing Dix, one could argue that African-focused autofictional works, such as *The Abandoned Baobab*, contribute to new forms of memory culture by challenging hegemonic constructions of imperial history and inserting into them the voices of the forgotten, the dispossessed, and the defeated ("Autofiction, Post-conflict Narratives" 189). Again, for Dix, autofiction, as a mode of writing that involves a dialogic exchange between text and paratext, has the potential of recalling to public consciousness brutal episodes from the colonial past that have been left to disappear from public memory, thus

giving rise to a collective silence and forgetting for which certain authors feel a direct individual responsibility to re-present (“Autofiction, Post-conflict Narratives” 187). By so doing, he stresses, such writers challenge the cultural amnesia visible in some individual and collective forms of discourse, thereby invigorating the “autofiction to enact a fusion of subjective narratives with concerns that are social and historical, or of ‘I’ with ‘we, and so re-incorporate expressions of collective experience” (“Autofiction, Post-conflict Narratives” 187).

The question then is how did the foundational wound and cultural oblivion come about in *The Abandoned Baobab*?

### **Mother-Daughter Bond and Maternal Detachment**

During her innocent childhood, the hypersensitive and lastborn Ken<sup>5</sup> conceives of herself as an extension of her mother. In this primary identification, she, in a narcissistic fashion, subsumes her being in that of her primary caregiver, nurturer, and protector. The self-reflection is deepened as they share the same bed and warmth, and she fiercely clings to her “life-giving breasts” (Bugul, 65) even in their sleep. The child configures the mother’s tenderness as a “nest of feathers” (Bugul, 65) and her half-covered body as a powerful attraction to which she would like to be glued forever, unconsciously deploying strikingly sexual images with an incestuous and homosexual charge (Bugul, 64-65). In the manner of Irigiray (421), Freud (65) contends that the mother occupies a permanent and central position in the life of every woman, stressing that the very first love relationship girls have is homosexual (with the mother) rather than heterosexual. Freud further argues that since the girl’s first love object is the mother and she is of the same sex as her, she is also the person with whom the daughter will primarily identify (65).

In *The Abandoned Baobab*, such is the force of this horizontal dyadic union between Ken and her mother that it precludes the “normalized” triangular father-mother-child relationship. Not for once, does the narrator make any reference, during this phase, to Ken’s father or any paternal figure in the form of a colonialist, a male teacher, an uncle, or a person in authority.

Aside from her softness and warmth, the mother is also a refuge and a confidence booster as she is likened, in a nativistic and pantheistic mode, to the adjoining immense *dobali* tree, celebrated for its sheltering foliage and palpable protective presence. Additionally, as a trailblazer, she sets the pace for Ken, inspiring her to imitate her. In Ken’s laudatory words can be measured the depth and extent of her cathexis, emotional investment, in the goddess-like mother: “Wherever she put her foot I put mine” (Bugul, 65). For all these reasons, the very mention of “home” (Bugul, 64) always evokes memories of the quintessential mother, *her* mother.

However, when her divinized mother has to depart for her own mother’s village, some twenty kilometers away, ostensibly to support her lactating fifteen-year-old granddaughter,<sup>6</sup> leaving behind the inconsolable little girl, it elicits the shrieking cry of bloody murder from the traumatized five-year-old daughter.<sup>7</sup> Gone forever are the bliss of the home, the idyllic innocence of childhood, and the paradisiac union with the mother. In their stead, the abandoned daughter, assailed by hitherto unknown emotions, begins to feel like a total stranger in her nonagenarian and purblind father’s house. And this, surrounded by insensitive and incommunicative adults, half-siblings, and surrogate mothers, rival wives of the lost mother. As in a lapsarian tragedy, she, suddenly, becomes acutely aware of the hiatus between her and her “home.” Home, for her, is no longer



home; home is no more. Rejected by the Mother-lover, Mother-creator, and Mother-protector, she conjointly becomes The Unhomely and Unloved One.

After the unannounced departure of the mother, Ken blames the frail but devout father for not taking her into his arms and holding her tight (Bugul, 124) to console her. Later, as an adolescent, the grieving daughter tries to replace the mother with the father in her sensual games (Bugul, 26). However, the results do not meet her expectations.

The mother's separation from Ken becomes the refrain in the narrative, as the story is punctuated with lugubrious recollections of this life-threatening experience. Equally, the mourning daughter equates the devastating moment to the break of the umbilical cord, rendering her empty, unfulfilled, and disaster-prone. At every distressful moment in her life, at every descent into another neurosis and perceived aberration, she recollects that life-shattering precipitous separation, when her mother ceases to be her mother and becomes *the mother*<sup>8</sup>. Thus, it is that when she indulges in erotic dancing, stripping, and exhibitionism, which she considers to be deviations, she laments, once alone in her room, "I'd been playing in order to flee from loneliness for it always took me back to the mother's departure" (Bugul, 92-93).

Additionally, in the extremely nightmarish nocturnal adventure with the rich intoxicated Caucasian client at Brussels's Hilton Hotel, in which her John nearly dies, and she almost commits suicide, she sobs, "Oh, Mother, what did I do to you? What have you done? Ah, if you were here to see me at this moment, how I'd want to die!" (Bugul, 53). However, "the chain of unreal dreams" (Bugul, 152) and the death wish are not peculiar to her stay in Belgium. Reeling from the perceived lack of supportive family ties in the so-called communal Senegalese society, she, at age sixteen, almost commits suicide while in high school. She stresses, "I, abandoned as I was, I felt unloved by my own, lacking any emotional framework" (Bugul, 124). For her, the mother's rejection fits into a pattern of familial/social exclusion as she feels like an orphan even when surrounded by family and friends. It is therefore significant to emphasize Ken's unhomeliness in Belgium as a continuation of her earlier unease in diverse "homes" in Senegal.

Elegiacally, she remarks, "I gave myself wholeheartedly to tragedy ever since the mother's departure" (Bugul, 153). Still significant in this respect is her ardent prayer to God to be reborn, to have another chance at daughter-mother bonding (Bugul, 157). It is like a prayer to her divinized mother. Throughout Ken's turbulent life in Africa and Europe, the absent but powerful mother remains the missing "emotional framework" (Bugul, 125), "sacred bond" (148, 150), "necessary reference" (148), vital building block, and "foundation" (Bugul, 150) in Ken's life. The incestuous urge to "crouch between the mother's warm thighs" (Bugul, 125) salutarily resurfaces in her heart as a defense mechanism when she meets the belligerent phallic mother of her first Belgian lover. Again, during her abortion ordeal, she links the reassuring and protective sky of her native village to the mother. The mere mention of "home" (Bugul, 64) serves as a stimulus taking her back to the lost Edenic mother of pre-Fall bliss. Put another way, the absent mother is portrayed as the bulwark against aggression from colonial, racist, and paternalistic figures. Curiously, the mother is also the sacred paragon deployed to measure her (Ken's) "waywardness" and the incomprehensible ways of her Western hosts. At the same time, Ken blames her for her own "deviations."

Cross-cultural perspectives on matricentrism, maternal bonding, and mother veneration offered by Irigaray and Angira provide useful insights into the importance of the mother in the life of the subject. Angira (2004a 312-13), for example, supplicates his mother: "Let me suckle your breasts (...). For dreams are but pictures of the fetal empire"

and reiterates in a prayer to the divinized mother: “Were I clever/I’d send me back to mother’s womb/...and feed me more/ on fetal food” (2004b 331).

Given the primordial importance of the mother, the traumatic separation from her results in Ken’s disequilibrium, her descent into pernicious alienation, and her tumble into a “void without contours” (Bugul, 95). Exacerbated by the apparent incapacity of lifting herself up, the unease prepares the ground for her to become the “‘unbalanced’ Black woman” (Bugul, 57), predisposed to colonial attraction, objectification, and self-reification. She begins to “love life through self-destruction” (Bugul, 148). Such ambivalent impulses are coterminous with what van Zyl describes as the urge for “pleasure in pain, eroticism mixed with repulsion” (82). Beneath Ken’s masochism lurks the nervous condition, inflicted on natives by colonialism but facilitated by them (refer to Sartre in *Wretched* 20).

At once alluring, apathetic, repulsive, and immemorable, the enigmatic figure of Ken’s biological mother may be interpreted as the complex living symbol of Africa. Anthromorphized, the continent, like the mother, attracts, seemingly abandons its children, is in turn rejected by them, and yet, remains engrained in their thoughts forever. Such a representation prefigures and reinforces Ken’s experiences of the home in both Senegal and Belgium.

### **Deracination, Colonial Seduction, and Inauspicious Migration**

Hounded by an implacable destiny (Bugul, 157), Ken is tormented by a sense of permanent lack, and finds it impossible to feel at home in any of the many rural, peri-urban, and westernized abodes in Senegal into which she is introduced: her grandmother’s, aunt’s, eldest brother’s, second brother’s, half-sister’s, etc. If Ken’s inevitable loss of innocence is triggered by the mother’s departure, it is aggravated by her eager absorption of colonial references, codes, and mores. For, in her desperate desire to replace the love, and guidance of the lost mother, she, like a neophyte, zealously embraces the exogenous colonial order which teaches all children attending the French school that their progenitors are Gauls. Her enthusiasm for indoctrination and assimilation is discernible in these confessions: “The only thing I was interested in at that time was the French school” (Bugul, 115) and “I thought I’d found a way to feel self-confident by acting white” (Bugul, 120).

During this critical phase, colonialism represents for Ken the “idealized ‘good’ father” and her mother “the frustrating ‘bad’ mother” as theorized by Freud (79). So strong is her zeal to please the colonial master/father that she applies herself to French studies and always comes top in examinations.

Though the first girl from her family and village to acquire Western education, Ken starts speaking French to illiterate villagers, feeling empowered by the French colonial school, and snubbing the mother whenever they chance to meet. The imperial Father and colonizing Other replace not only Ken’s mother but also the almost effaced and muted biological father. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin lucidly explain the patriarchal sway of the colonial master on the colonized: “The significance and enforced dominance of the imperial language into which colonial subjects are inducted may give them a clear sense of power being located in the colonizer, a situation corresponding metaphorically to the subject’s entrance into the Symbolic order and the discovery of the law of the Father” (156).

Ken's animosity towards the mother may come as little surprise for, according to Freud, "the fiercest parent-child conflicts typically develop between mothers and daughters, not between fathers and sons, as the Oedipus myth recounts (...). Conflicts between mothers and daughters—often a life-and-death battle in fantasy—are of all time" (140). Despite the exhaustion, self-deformation, and awkward gait (further allusion to masochism) that colonial imitation inflicts on Ken (Bugul, 120), despite her condemnation of her deracinated eldest brother, she perseveres in her (self-)indoctrination with this rationale: "What I liked from the West was the identification that it imposed on me, and my justification went so far as to renounce my deepest realities" (Bugul, 122). Later, neither the newly acquired formal independence of her country nor the mother's reconciliatory overtures could bring her back from alienation:

I learnt the songs from the West by heart and wanted to live them that way. More and more the gap widened, desperately. Africa called me back with her life force, her moments of poetry, and her rituals. But I held on tight to the bond I'd made with the values that colonialism had brought (...). Mired in my fantasies, I rejected the mother through my Western references. (Bugul, 124)

As Fanon would say, she seeks "total identification with the white man" (*Black Skin* 124), and identifies herself with the imperial "explorer, the civilizing colonizer, the white man who brings truth to the savages, a lily-white truth" (*Black Skin* 126). Wearing a white mask over her black skin<sup>9</sup>, Ken sees herself through the gaze of the Caucasian race.

Such is the depth of her deracination and fantasies that, notwithstanding her voracious reading and her inquisitive mind at high school and the university in Senegal, she still regards Westerners (not just the French) as sharing a common paternity with her. To the extent that she is alienated from her aboriginal milieu, her need and struggle for a new profound attachment, complete acceptance, and empowerment in another culture, i.e., Western colonial culture, render her a psychologically displaced person in Senegal. She later discovers that living in the (neo)colonial periphery, in the newly proclaimed republic, whether in the capital or the hinterland, is not enough. She needs to live in Europe and appropriate the metropolis, the Center, that is the harrowed origins of the idealized and idolized Father, as Freud would say. Germane to this argument is Man's reflection, in his study on alienation and madness in *The Abandoned Baobab*, that every alienation is necessarily a physical and/or mental movement of the deracinated subject toward the Center (51).

Thanks to a scholarship from a Belgian agency (Office of Cooperation and Development, OCD), Ken arrives in Brussels as a psychological and emotional refugee in dire need of fulfillment, wholeness, and "paternal" origins. Her delusion makes her genuinely believe that she can find her ancestors, the Gauls, in Belgium. Europe will be her new home. Recognition beckons, acceptance awaits her, good company will be her portion. Once in Belgium, a vista of opportunities in the Global North, she believes, will open before her, in fulfillment of sacred prophecy: "I am in the Promised Land. It's happened. Life is mine! Farewell loneliness!" (Bugul, 33). Her earlier survival skills will presumably be effortlessly upgraded to a prosperity strategy in Eldorado/Eden. If she considers the French, Belgians, and indeed all Europeans to be her Gallic patrician members, and this, after the independence of Senegal, it means that to her, colonialism is not only coextensive with Westernization but that the formal autonomy of her country has in no way nullified assimilation. In short, (neo)colonialism has forever made her a proud member of a big Gallic/Western community. The configuration of the North in

hyperbolic and sacred terms reflects Ken's "mired fantasies" and the desire to venerate her supposed origins.

To Ken's consternation, she notices upon her arrival in Europe that Westerners do not greet her and that Belgians do not accept her, much less accord her the honor of being considered a member of their nation or seeing her as a descendant of a common progenitor. On countless occasions, she expresses her yearning to meet Caucasians to communicate with them and feel loved. Instead of the much-needed attention, acceptance, and affection from her presumed Gallic patrician, she notices her strangeness and especially her unhomeliness. In addition to polite indifference, she must contend with undisguised racism from multiple sources (wig seller, abortionist, her lover's mother, parents of her friends) and condescending self-exoneration (the Denoël couple). This does not prevent her from making very genuine Western friends (such as Jean Wermer, Leonora, and Laure), mingling with Bohemian artists, savoring the delights of multicultural diversity, and getting initiated into Western feminist thought. Nonetheless, even in the company of these pleasant friends, she feels deep loneliness. She captures the general chasm between her hosts and her in these self-depreciatory words: "I spent a great deal of time with white people (...). I identified myself in them, they did not identify themselves in me" (Bugul, 53). Brown explains the protagonist's predicament: "Unfortunately for Ken, assimilation had not yet de-cloaked her of the skin color that carried an imposed external identity, and which, ironically made her an invisible non-entity at worst, or at best a *misrecognized* subject in the West" (Bugul, 106).<sup>10</sup>

Ken's sense of loss coupled with her dislocation as a racial other in what Man calls a "cultural ghetto" that is neither African nor European (73), and as an existentially invisible woman, reminiscent of Ellison's anti-hero,<sup>11</sup> resonates with Bhabha's conceptualization of the uncanny and the unhomely (9). Her life has become what Bhabha would call the "estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (9).

An object of constant Othering, Ken is never spared commodification. And yet, the visceral need to fill the void left by the mother (as a lover, creator, and protector), to love, and feel loved and empowered, propels her, the postcolonial subaltern, the unhomely, and the Unwanted One, from one adventure to the other: from polyandry to lesbianism, from alcohol to drugs, from voyeurism to free love, from sadomasochism to prostitution, evocative, in her mind, of the moral and mortal disorientation of the baobab. Even so, Ken rationalizes her recourse to prostitution: "They [Caucasian clients] desired me, I pleased them; prostitution provided me with a moment of attention, a recognition different from the one that identified me daily with what I didn't want to be" (Bugul, 106). And again, "I believed that being accepted, no matter how, was better than not being accepted at all" (Bugul, 150).

Typical of Fanon's alienated subjects in *Black Skin, White Masks* so pathologically inclined to identify with the metropolitan Center and elusive whiteness for power and fulfilment, Ken, sensing that the blackness of her skin smothers her, tears at her skin until it bleeds (Bugul, 96). Her delirium is actuated by the obsession to free herself of her primary pigmentation (Bugul, 96), her mother's legacy to her. In yet another instance where her mother appears in proximity to God, Ken laments: "Oh God, the mother was so far away!" In the same hallucination-driven frenzy, while holding on tightly to Laure, her Italian friend with whom she has an ambiguous complex relationship (with maternal, sisterly, lesbian, and pedagogical charge), she avers, "I was clinging to her and asking her to rip my skin off; I didn't want to have black skin any longer" (Bugul, 96). A declaration such as this, directed at a friend who possesses the inordinately desired pigmentation and who functions at once as a mother, big rich sister, lover, mentor, and a role model not

only invests Laure with unequivocal demiurgic and reproductive powers over the supplicant but also transfers proprietary rights over Ken to her. She, Ken, has voluntarily alienated her individuality and freedom to the proud owner of the coveted skin color and by extension, all members of the Caucasian race, whose embrace and “liberating gaze,” as Fanon puts it, she desperately needs to put an end to “suffocating reification” (*Black Skin* 89). If Ken “lives an ambiguity that is extraordinarily neurotic” (*Black Skin* 169), her morbid situation also calls to mind Sartre’s configuration of the colonized, captured in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*: “The status of ‘native’ is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with *their consent*” (20)<sup>12</sup>. In this respect, she becomes a facilitator of her self-annihilation initiated by colonialism. Further, Ken’s delirious embrace of Laure, not without its libidinal undercurrents, transforms Ken’s self-mutilation into masochism.

Instructively, Ken’s neurotic self-destructive wish to be white recalls the lactification (the obsession of becoming white) syndrome of colonized black subjects, problematized in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Perceiving herself through the gaze of her White hosts, and as an additional symptom of her lactification neurosis, she begins to shun the company of Africans and to reduce contact with members of the Black community. Ken’s situation further lends credit to Fanon’s observation: “White civilization and European culture have imposed an existential deviation on the black man. (...) what is called the black soul is a construction by white folk” (*Black Skin* xviii). Fanon’s thesis is echoed by Jones-Boardman’s thought on the psychological damage of colonialism in *The Abandoned Baobab*: “fracture zones are not confined to the physical world but produce distorting effects that infect and deform the psyches of the colonized causing internal fissuring and even internalized abjectification” (81).

Whereas Ken, on occasion, appears to dazzle and transfix her Western audience with the polymathic depth and breadth of her knowledge, a Philistine bar proprietor, in a gesture of sexual objectification, tells her, “a woman can be nothing other than consumption (...) you make a bond of femininity and intelligence and *you are Black*.<sup>13</sup> So if you want to make money, stop discussing metaphysics, Sumer, and poetry with the customers. We aren’t poets here” (Bugul, 101-102). Szymanski, Moffit, and Carr explain that sexual objectification occurs when a woman’s physique or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a human being with the woman primarily viewed as the physical object of male sexual desire (8). For Jones-Boardman, Ken’s objectification fits into the logic of Western oppression:

Throughout her stay in Belgium, Ken is continually subject to an identity imposed on her from the outside, in order for her to be intelligible to Westerners (...). Ken exists in Belgium as a specular surface reflecting the sexualized and exoticized images projected onto her, images which leave no room for any expression of her most profound realities. Furthermore, having come from an already shattered base in neocolonial Africa, Ken does not have a solidly grounded pre-existing subjectivity that could help her resist objectification in the West. (142-43)

Ken’s self-objectification is manifest in her self-exoticization, display of nude pictures, suggestive dressing at upscale night clubs, and self-advertisement at sex parties, all of which reinforce colonial erotic prejudices about Blacks. Remarkably, she has enough lucidity to recognize that her conduct feeds into “luxury’s decadence” (Bugul, 105) and “auction of luxury” (106), thus rendering her a byproduct of perverted richness

and compelling her to love life through self-destruction (Bugul, 148). Ken's tragic lucidity is also palpable in this threnody-like confession:

Loneliness followed me silently everywhere. I'd flee it and it would pursue me. I was smoking a lot of marijuana and taking more and more opium (...). To this loneliness, so harshly found again, now was added the shock of having lost my ancestors the Gauls. The loneliness that follows one all the way into the sheets of one-night stand; that throbbing need for other people, who cannot be found. (Bugul, 93)

Ken is under no illusion about the mother's implacable presence in her interminable anguish. For, lurking behind the insatiable desire for love, protection, and empowering acceptance in her adopted fatherland is the history of failed primordial love: the dysfunctional bond with the mother. Put differently, her unresolved problematic union with the mother explains the morbid propensity, reminiscent of Stockholm syndrome, to love the colonialist and the aggressor. She views her libidinous adventures, "aberrations," and neurotic "deviations" as nothing but reflections of the failed detachment from her mother. In her interview with Dieng, Ken Bugul unabashedly attributes her prostitution and multiple love affairs to a basic need for love and protection.

There is little doubt that her self-reification is primarily a function of her objectification and Othering by some of her Western hosts, who have themselves been adversely impacted by colonialism. Her degradation by predators, such as the abortionist, the rich client, and the bar proprietor, is matched by the level of their own degeneration.

That said, intersectionality, Crenshaw's conceptualization of the interconnecting links between racism, sexism, classism, and other sites of discrimination that inevitably reify and crush the oppressed (139-67), can be invoked to explain Ken's victimization and despised status in Europe as a poor female African migrant: "that Negress (...), that supplementary being, useless, displaced, incoherent" (Bugul, 85). The negating gaze of the Other reduces her to "a foreigner, a Black girl," a pariah, and the unspeakable taboo (Bugul, 157). Female, black, subaltern, migrant, poor, defenseless, victim, Ken becomes the very incarnation of the abject, consigned to the "zone of non-being" (*Black Skin* 167).

In her study of the abject in *Ambiguous Adventure*, *The Abandoned Baobab*, and other postcolonial works, Jones-Boardman observes that power-infused polarities do not dissipate to produce a space of negotiation, but instead remain as protective borders that are ferociously defended by those whose privileged identities depend on them (81). In consequence, Jones-Boardman notes that "These 'protective borders' form fracture zones in which unwanted populations are (im)mobilized and abjectified" (81). In this respect, the author-protagonist's name, Ken Bugul, the Unwanted One, inscribed on the narrative and in the diegesis, assumes additional significance.

### **Towards Ken's Redemption and the Triumph of the Mother**

The initial perceived rejection by the mother, the subsequent estrangement from the extended family, the lived repudiation by some Whites in Belgium, and the narrator-protagonist's self-anathematization prepare the ground for her conscious adoption of the degrading name, Ken Bugul, a name traditionally associated with the dregs of the earth and the netherworld.

Nonetheless, beyond its denotation of non-entity and the category of non-being, the designation Ken Bugul also connotes resilience, rebirth, and redefinition. For, it is a name given to a child to empower a new orientation. By personally assuming this name, the

author becomes her own creator, her own namer, and her own decider. Bequeathed by Wolof orality and traditional belief systems and typically transmitted through a maternal agency, the name Ken Bugul becomes a cultural legacy of the mother. Surely, the name is (self-)vilifying but it also has cathartic value, by reason of it being a death-intimidating invocation, motivated by the overarching determination to shield the bearer, the reincarnated child, from inimical and lethal forces. In the name is thus subsumed the co-existence of contrary calls to death and life, the past and the future. As a designation, Ken Bugul denotes nothingness and yet, means everything. In her interview with de Larquier, she reveals how the writing of her first novel saved her from certain death: “Had I not become Ken Bugul, I would have ceased to exist (...). I was in a decisive phase in which I had to write or die. As I was progressively filling out the pages of a school pad, I began living again” (319). Adopting the name Ken Bugul ultimately helped to wrench the author from the claws of death. Writing herself into redemption, existence, and history also allowed her to contribute to the healing of other fragilized colonized subjects (or at least, solidarizing with these fragmented subalterns) to whom she dedicates her autofiction.

Having adopted the pseudonym Ken Bugul, the novelist converted all the original occurrences of Mariétou M’baye in the herstory into either Ken or Ken Bugul. Most often, the homodiegetic narrator employs Ken to refer to herself. Nonetheless, the appellation, Ken Bugul, resurfaces at critical moments of the narrative. For example, after the prologue in “Ken’s History,” the very first sentence is “Ken Bugul remembers” (Bugul, 23). Again, in the eternal triangle involving Jean Wermer and his live-in bisexual lover, François, with Ken as the “prized quarry,” the host stoutly stakes his propitiatory claim thus: “Ken Bugul is *my* woman. She is mine” (Bugul, 63)<sup>14</sup>. Whether inscribed as Ken or Ken Bugul, the paradox-driven appellation, by its appearance on virtually every page of the narrative, serves to highlight the author’s intention of reminding herself and her readers of the crucible that gave birth to the herstory. Thus, it functions as a reminder of the need to transform seemingly hopeless situations into empowering narratives.

Clearly, the deliberate and intimate etching of the name Ken Bugul onto the fabric of the autofiction is as liberatory as it is therapeutic. The gesture and the entirety of the autofiction reflect Henke’s representation of “scriptotherapy” as the “process of writing out and writing through a traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment” (xii). She further defines it as the “discursive space within which all the psychological wounds one suffers from are re-enacted with the purpose of making them heal” (4).

Appositely, Man notes that Bugul’s merit in writing *The Abandoned Baobab* is to have transformed a personal story, her private tragedy, into social criticism (95). Similarly, Hitchcott remarks that Bugul’s “herstory” constitutes a “feminist confession in which the intimate experiences of the writing self address an international community of women. (...) it discusses the personal experience of an individual in relation to the public experience of sexual politics on an international scale” (31).

In this confessional representation of her shattered self, Bugul inevitably resorts to psychoanalysis. Autofiction allows for the deployment of the subconscious by the unstable subject to deal with trauma. This prompts Man to stress that the narrator of *The Abandoned Baobab* remembers her past in the manner of the neurotic on the psychiatrist’s couch who recalls her/his past lives (149). He concludes that just like the patient seeking therapeutic treatment at the psychiatrist’s, the narrator speaks to heal herself and empties herself to heal herself (149). Following Doubrovsky, Wimbush believes in writers’ capacity of using the autofictional space for psychoanalytical self-examination (96) and reflection on the numerous sinister effects of colonialism on their psyche (20).

It is worth stressing that Ken's trajectory is one of two loves: maternal desire and colonial attraction, primary identification with the mother, and secondary identification with the colonial paternal order/Other. Her infatuation with her first French teacher in Senegal, her liaison with Louis (Caucasian), her affair with Jean Wermer (Caucasian), and her many experiences of one-night stand with clients in Europe all fall under the constellation of colonial seduction. They conjointly bespeak libidinal energy and the imperious need for recognition and empowerment from her imaginary ancestors: "I wanted nothing other than to be with a white man (...). I wanted to be recognized (...), I wanted to be accepted" (Bugul, 107).

Additionally, not unlike Electra, Ken attempts on many occasions to kill the mother in her. This notwithstanding, in this protracted loyalty war between primary/ instinctual love and acquired/secondary love, it is the mother who wins. Ken's "excesses" and colonial/Western infatuation can also be interpreted as symptoms of ersatz love, or what Francis terms "usurped affection" (37). Such is the hold of the mother on Ken that her desire for the mother remains the true love of her life. The slumbering maternal fixation is often reactivated by Ken, both in Senegal and Belgium, to castigate colonialists, Westerners, and herself. The guilt complex that she often displays is in direct correlation with the moral code acquired from her mother. It is towards this maternal presence and the motherland that she makes the difficult return, in the coda of the story.

To a certain extent, the choices Ken makes in Europe as an adult, the alienating roles she plays, the neglect of the mother's pre-departure advice to comport herself well in Europe, and the stubborn belief, even as a grown-up, in her fantasized Gallic ancestry, portray her as a consenting victim. Coupled with the appropriation of the name Ken Bugul, her acceptance of responsibility in her torment (Bugul, 111) reflects a high level of maturity, self-redemption, and self-direction.

## Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to interrogate the vagrancy and identitarian anguish of Ken Bugul, using as theoretical tools postcolonial theory and Hendrika Freud's Electra complex construct. Key to *The Unloved One's* quest in both Senegal and Belgium is her conflicted attraction to the mother and the colonial/Western order. The loss of innocence and the rupture of maternal symbiosis provoke an endless cycle of dissatisfaction, neuroses, and migrancy. Torn between maternal attachment and colonial/Western attraction, she finds it extremely difficult to establish a functional program of survival and prosperity. Despite her matricidal posturing, she is never totally free of her mother's influence. Ken's countless "deviations" (abortion, drugs, alcoholism, attempted suicides, prostitution, etc.) from the socio-moral code established by the mother prompt her to assimilate her alienation and neurosis to those of a mad baobab. Her seeming moments of grace and redemption from colonial/Western Othering, emotional malaise, and internalized oppression include her adoption of the death-insulating invocation, Ken Bugul, a vital paratextual and textual feature of the autofiction. Notwithstanding the usual depreciatory meaning of the name, the distraught female writing subject leverages its inherent emancipatory qualities in a conscious project of empowerment and healing.

Ken's other redemptory acts are the assumption of responsibility for her actions and her decision to return to the native land and maternal roots, not to exorcize her demons but to try to tame them. The recurrence of the trope of trauma in her later autofictions testifies to this ineradicable transnational entanglement. The constant representation of the life-threatening wound may be explained by Bugul's experience of unhomeliness



and unwelcomeness after her return to the motherland. While the searing pain lingers on, she is still able to propose her autofiction and her healing as examples to other subjects, traumatized and reified by intersectional sites of oppression. The functional integration of trauma into the work confers on *The Abandoned Baobab* the traits of autofiction, orienting the author towards self-healing and self-invention.

As a diasporic autofiction, travel narrative, trauma story, postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, feminist work, love narrative, and an allegory, Bugul's herstory has many facets that endear it to readers. Her fictionalized treatment of the mother, anonymized, silenced, and yet so powerful in her own right as a giver and sustainer of life is fascinating. This fascination becomes even greater when the biological mother is configured, sometimes subtly, sometimes directly, in a nativistic fashion, as the symbol of Africa, hallowed traditions, Nature, and maternized earth. Despite her anonymization and muteness in this daughter-centric autofiction, in which she becomes the creation of her own creation, that is her daughter/Ken (at once adoring, vindictive, and remorseful), she paradoxically approximates the figure of the nurturing, resilient, and responsive mother cherished by womanism, motherism, and matricentric feminism in their different ways. In view of this, a deeper study of the still evolving mother-daughter plot in the context of the changing dynamics of the home in Bugul's seven autofictions, from 1982 (*Le baobab fou*) to 2021 (*Le Trio Bleu*), appears an exciting prospect.

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### **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this manuscript has not been submitted elsewhere for possible publication.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> In reality, no autobiography is immune to fictionalization.

<sup>3</sup> Autofictional works predate Doubrovsky's definition of the term.

<sup>4</sup> Little affirms that Samba Diallo, the name of the protagonist, is indeed the family name of the author, Kane.

<sup>5</sup> Ken will be used in this article because it is the name of the persona.

<sup>6</sup> Although the mother later revealed to Ken that she could not leave with her (Ken) because of the latter's schooling, the daughter did not forgive the mother for that decision. Still, in the mother's departure could be read some dissatisfaction with her husband's household.

<sup>7</sup> The importance of this trauma traverses her writing.

<sup>8</sup> To mark the subsequent marred relationship between her and all the members of the family, the narrator-protagonist uses the definite article instead of the possessive adjective, "my", for all her relatives.

<sup>9</sup> Allusion to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

<sup>10</sup> The emphasis is by Brown.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ellison's *The Invisible Man*.

<sup>12</sup> The emphasis is by Sartre.

<sup>13</sup> The emphasis is from the novel.

<sup>14</sup> The emphasis is from the novel.