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The Aesthetic of Vulnerability

Un-heard Female Voices and the Question of Identity and Recognition in the Work of Ken Bugul and Fatou Diome

Abstract

In their novels, Ken Bugul and Fatou Diome portray fragile female identities characterized by a cultural conflict between Africa and Europe, staging an aesthetic of vulnerability of un-heard voices, dealing with the topics of returning and remaining and the struggle for recognition. The power and strength associated with the erotic promise of the female body is under constant threat from self- and external exploitation. The un-heard female voices try to make themselves heard and to create identities of empowerment in literary writing, to express the demand to be perceived and to be healed, both in the autobiographical and the fictional dimension. The novels emphasize the ambivalence between the fascination with and rejection of the foreign culture. The protagonists experience the hybridity of the narrative identity as a painful wound that requires the experience of return to be healed.

1. Introduction

Female voices, as expressed in the novels *Le baobab fou* [*The Abandoned Baobab*] (2009 [1982]) by Ken Bugul and *Le ventre de l'atlantique* [*The Belly of the Atlantic*] (2003) by Fatou Diome, use fiction to explore experiences of migration, diaspora and/or globalization, touching on the question of recognition and identity when doing so. Diome's and Bugul's novels portray an aesthetic of the vulnerability of un-heard female voices, dealing with the topics of returning and remaining, each

from the other aspect. The loss of identity, experienced by the protagonist of Bugul's novel *Le baobab fou* as a chaotic occidental ego state,¹ is an encounter with recognition as misunderstanding, culminating in a maelstrom of losing one's self. "Ces gens riches étaient libres de faire ce qu'ils voulaient, ils absorbaient la diaspora pour l'originalité. 'Nous avons une amie noire, une Africaine', était la phrase la plus 'in' dans ces milieux" (Bugul 2009 [1982]: 123). In Bugul's work, the topic of returning is represented as an act of desperation and rescue. In Fatou Diome's novel *Le ventre de l'atlantique*, by deciding on a future in Africa for her brother Madické, the protagonist Salie displays a reconsideration of her views in terms of a decolonization of thought and action. Identity as a hybrid construction is located in the context of self- and external perception while remaining in Africa is attributed positive connotations as an opportunity on multiple levels.²

In these novels, the body as a place "in which power itself is transferred" (Butler 2003: 58) plays a key role from the female perspective, particularly in terms of the erotic and sexual – also with regard to a particular form of vulnerability. In ethical terms, human vulnerability, which, according to Judith Butler, is fundamentally linked to a state of being at the mercy of the other, requires others to perceive the individual; to see and hear them (cf. Butler 2010a). This perception of others, continues Butler, also has a medial aspect that makes aesthetic staging appear as an attempt to make the person concerned visible and audible (cf. Butler 2006, 2010b). This aspect is manifested in the novels as an aesthetic of vulnerability. After investigating the question of identity, vulnerability and recognition, especially on the basis of the recognition theories of Judith Butler, Axel Honneth and Achille Mbembe, the literary works of Ken Bugul and Fatou Diome will be examined as examples of un-heard female voices with regard to the connection between identity, language and memory. Literary writing oscillates between resignation and empowerment.

¹ Ken Bugul refers to "mon chaos occidental" (Bugul 2009 [1982]: 125).

² The terms 'Africa' or 'African' used in the essay in a generalizing manner refer to Africa as a conceptual construct.

2. Identity and recognition: Honneth, Butler, Mbembe, inter alia

Honneth's theory of recognition, which alludes to a struggle for recognition (2016 [1992]), is based on a concept linking identity to recognition; this is, in turn, derived from Hegel's work. In this model of identity, mutual recognition is the basis for subjectivity in reciprocal relationships. "Recognition from others is thus essential to the development of a sense of self. To be denied recognition – or to be 'misrecognized' [...] – is to suffer both a distortion of one's relation to one's self and an injury to one's identity" (Fraser 2009: 203). This relational model of identity, taking the Hegelian schema as its starting point, is also transposed onto psychological and cultural and political terrain (cf. *ibid.*). Fraser writes on this subject,

[a]s a result of repeated encounters with the stigmatizing gaze of a culturally dominant other, the members of disesteemed groups internalize negative self-images and are prevented from developing a healthy cultural identity of their own. (Fraser 2009: 203)

Likewise, Frantz Fanon emphasizes the interdependency of external and self-perception. He argues that being white appears attractive in all respects and is associated with social and economic success, while being black is devalued (cf. Fanon 2008: 26).³ This devaluation is accompanied by a corresponding self-denigration. Fanon posits – entirely in line with Hegel – that the white master is, however, equally dependent on external perception and a prisoner of his own 'mastery'.⁴

In her theory of recognition, Judith Butler integrates Althusser's theory of interpellation as a concept of subject constitution into Hegel's concept of interpersonality and reciprocity (Butler 1997: 32f.). In doing so, she takes the assumed fundamental vulnerability of all human beings as her starting point and analyses its impact on the formation of the subject. Both interpellation and non-interpellation can be painful for the

³ He writes for example, "one is white above a certain financial level" (Fanon 2008: 26). He argues that being white is always also associated with socio-economic impulses.

⁴ "The white man slaves to reach a human level. [...] The white man is sealed in his whiteness" (Fanon 2008: XIII).

individual. Since the term ‘identity’ can be misunderstood as meaning ‘remaining-identical-with-one’s-self’, thus reinforcing an ontologizing viewpoint, Butler prefers to use the term ‘subjectivation’ (Butler 1997: 83). Performative acts that occur within the scope of iterative displacement result in the reshaping of the categories, norms and values that determine recognition and contempt. Structural reshaping, in particular by the state, go hand in hand with this. Butler therefore emphasizes the options for action available to the interpellated subject (ibid.: 2). For Mbembe, human vulnerability in the African context is linked, especially, to colonial and post-colonial experiences in general and to civil war experiences in particular, which saw brothers become enemies. These experiences manifest themselves in subject formation processes and are linked to the constitution of identity. Working from these observations Mbembe focuses on the aspect of victimization, which prevents individuals from developing a new relationship to themselves and to others (cf. Mbembe 2008: 9).⁵ In this context, he advocates coming to terms with traumas and the re-writing of history.

Fraser sees an inherent risk in the identity model of recognition, namely that the economic dimension will be excluded and – similarly to Butler – that identities will be objectified.

The overall effect of these tendencies is to impose a single, drastically simplified group identity which denies the complexity of people’s lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations. (Fraser 2009: 205)

She continues critically,

[b]y shielding such struggles from view, this approach masks the power of dominant fractions and reinforces intragroup domination. The identity model thus lends itself all too easily to repressive forms of communitarianism, promoting conformism, intolerance and patriarchalism. (Ibid.: 206)

Moreover, the Hegelian premiss of dialogicity is obscured, whereby “accordance with their self-image” (ibid.: 206) should be the primary focus of attention, not the negotiation process. Taking criticism of the

⁵ Elsewhere he refers to the ideology of victimization (cf. Mbembe 26.12.2005: 2).

identity model as her starting point, Fraser proposes a recognition model based on negotiation of social status – the status model – which strives for mutual “recognition and status equality” (Fraser 2009: 206) and in which “the problem of recognition [is situated] within a larger social frame” (ibid.: 210), however, without aiming to oversimplify the relationship between recognition and economic distribution.⁶

From this perspective, misrecognition is neither a psychic deformation nor a free-standing cultural harm but an institutionalized relation of social subordination. To be misrecognized, accordingly, is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued by others’ attitudes, beliefs or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute certain participants in social life as unworthy of respect and recognition. (Ibid.: 206f.)

Within the context of the question of identity and recognition, Fraser views the aspect of possible equal participation of all actors in social life as decisive; an “interaction with others as full partners” (ibid.: 207). She also focuses on the granting “of honor, prestige and esteem within the scope of interaction with others” (ibid.: 209). Fraser argues that this granting is generally linked to economic categories relating to property, labor and class affiliation (ibid.). Taking these theories as a starting point, it can be asked what role the concept of recognition and identity plays in the novels of Ken Bugul and Fatou Diome. What is its significance in terms of self- and external perception, also regarding the gender question, in the authors’ fictional works?

3. Between Africa and Europe. Identity, recognition and language in the work of Ken Bugul

Ken Bugul’s oral voice develops into a silence; a loss of speech that begins to dissolve into the written word. This loss of speech is caused by her abandonment by her mother as a small child and also simul-

⁶ “The result is a partial uncoupling of economic distribution from structures of social prestige” (Fraser 2009: 210).

taneously symbolizes her place of origin, Africa. The discontinued process of learning her ‘mother’ tongue, the language of emotions⁷ and the norms of African life, which is linked to her leaving the continent, is replaced by learning French language and culture at the village’s French school,⁸ reinforcing the process of alienation and thus, simultaneously, changing certain aspects of identity and recognition respectively degradation. Ken Bugul mirrors and reflects on these processes in her literature.

En me parlant, ça me permet aussi de déconstruire un personnage bricolé que j’étais, [...], un personnage inachevé, [...], parce que tout revient à la séparation d’avec la mère [...]. Je déconstruis ce personnage et l’écriture me permet de construire le personnage que je voudrais être. [...] je veux me fabriquer une autre moi-même. (Bugul in Ahihou 2013: 124)

When discussing her literary writing, which is an integral element of her search for identity, she refers to a “démarche de déconstruction et de reconstruction” (ibid.: 127). The demand that the – literary – voice be heard “indicates possible dangers which can be implicit in raising your voice, from which he (i.e. Cavell) infers a *gender*-specific turn in the problem of scepticism”, which influences the critical dimensions of language in general (Korsmeier in Cavell 2002: 280). For him, writing is an expression of criticism and self-assertion – also with regard to the question of gender, which fights scepticism.

As an autofictional work, Ken Bugul’s autobiographical novel *Le Baobab fou* (2009 [1982]) makes it possible to reveal a deep connection between the literary and real-life experiences of the author and protagonist. “Moi qui ai abandonné le baobab qui est le symbole de tout ce que l’Afrique représentait mais que j’identifiais à la mère, la mère

⁷ “Toujours donc, il ya a ce contact avec sa mère qui le touche, qui l’embrasse, lui donne le sein, [...] et le berce. Pour moi, tout ça, c’est langage” (Bugul in Ahihou 2013: 116). She continues, “Mais je ne vivais pas parce qu’on sait qu’en Afrique, les traditions [...] c’est avec les mères. Ce sont les mères, ce sont les femmes qui s’occupent de la tradition, ce sont elles que sont les gardiennes des valeurs, qui transmettent les messages de la tradition, qui inculquent les valeurs traditionnelles” (ibid.: 118). The author has only been able to approach African traditions through observation (cf. ibid.).

⁸ “Je me suis réfugiée dans l’école française. Je veux partir vers la terre promise” (Bugul in Ahihou 2013: 119).

Afrique parce que ma mère m'avait séparée" (Bugul in Ahihou 2013: 119).⁹ Language becomes a key driver in the construction of narrative identity in the literary, particularly in the personal sense – while also relating to cultural, ethnic, national and African identity – and is, to an equal extent, linked to the impetus of recognition or contempt. Ken Bugul says of her literary language:

[...] je me suis fabriqué ma propre langue. Mais un mélange de [...] ce que j'avais acquis avec ma mère dès les premières années de l'enfance, avec la langue de l'école française dans laquelle je venais d'entrer, plus la langue de mes sens [...]. (Ibid.: 121)

The physical-sensual inscription of language reveals the vulnerability of the individual associated with it and in the sense of Butler.

Ken Bugul's formerly un-heard voice makes itself heard in her literary writing, in particular in the form of orality:

La langue que j'utilise, c'est vraiment un langage parlé: peut-être aussi un besoin de réentendre cette langue; peut-être pour l'intérioriser et peut-être, à la longue, avec les émotions tirées de la relation avec la mère: les bruits, les sons, les premiers mots [...] avant qu'on ne se sépare [...], en même temps le langage que je me suis fabriqué moi-même: peut-être pour mieux m'en rendre compte, [...] l'écrire sous forme orale [...]. (Ibid.: 122)¹⁰

⁹ She continues, "Comme ça je me débarrasse de cette mère Afrique, continent, tradition, qui m'avait laissée. Mais moi aussi j'avais abandonné un baobab. [...] Rejetée par cette école française en même temps, je reviens. Et le baobab! Il était devenu fou! Il est mort!" (Bugul in Ahihou 2013: 119f.).

¹⁰ The oral element is linked to the linguistic-musical rhythms of the poetical:

Il n'y eut jamais de nuit.
 Il n'y eut jamais de matin.
 – Quoi?
 – Qu'est-ce que tu dis?
 Les mains se refermèrent en poings sur les bouches.
 Les mouchoirs de tête devinrent des voiles.
 Les chaussures furent enlevées des pieds.
 Soudain chacun s'en alla de son côté.
 Les chemins furent soudain désertés.
 Les salutations se firent plus brèves.
 Les devantures des maisons se vidèrent.
 La fontaine devint silencieuse.
 Les mots devinrent de brefs soupirs. (Bugul 1999: 11)

In the process, her style of writing simultaneously and continuously breaks taboos, “Peut-être que les problèmes de tabou, c’est une forme de révolte [...]. C’est inconscient, et je ne dirais pas ça à ma mère; mais il y a une révolte dans le départ de la mère” (Bugul in Ahihou 2013: 122).¹¹ Her style of writing is subject to continual change, which is, in turn, linked to the choice of topic,

[L]a thématique influence l’intensité du propos et sa rythmique [...]. Pour savoir ce que j’écris, j’ai besoin de l’entendre, et pour l’entendre, j’ai besoin de l’écrire sous cette forme d’oral et de rythmique [...]. C’est parce que je m’entends écrire [...] et comme c’est musical. (Ibid.: 131)

Her literary French bears traits of her mother tongue – its emotionality, tones, smells and touch – the African environment is inscribed in it. “Nous avons appris la langue française dans notre environnement” (ibid.: 137).¹² Learning French in Africa can, argues Bugul, be viewed as ‘appropriation’ (cf. ibid.).

Quand j’écris en français, je ne pense pas en français et je ne pense pas en wolof non plus. Quand j’écris, je ne pense pas. Je sens des émotions, je sens des odeurs, je vois des couleurs, j’entends des rythmes, et je sens la brûlure de la chaleur du lieu de ma naissance. Donc, dans quelle langue écris-je? C’est cela même la question! (Ibid.: 138f.)¹³

¹¹ Bugul also writes, “Je regrette, mais [...] je suis peut-être nostalgique! [...] si je devais renaître je serais une profonde Africaine; je n’irais même pas à l’école française. Ça c’est dans mes regrets. J’aurais tellement aimé vivre comme ma copine Nabou Samb que est dans Riwan ou le chemin de sable; avoir été élevée comme elle, avoir été initiée, etc., et puis là peut-être, j’aurais su ce qui est tabou, qu’il ne faut pas faire ici, ce qu’il ne faut pas faire là, etc.” (Bugul in Ahihou 2013: 123).

¹² For example, “Fodé Ndao avait réussi à décrocher le fruit tant convoité. En le voyant basculer du haut de l’arbre dans son velours moutarde, couleur de ventre de lionceau, couleur de la savane, le jeune Fodé hurla de joie. Le fruit, hésitant dans l’air, tomba en spirale sur le sol jouché de racines. Fodé le ramassa avec précaution, le palpa pour vérifier s’il n’avait pas éclaté dans la chute. Il était intact” (Bugul 2009: 13).

¹³ Bugul’s African mother tongue, Wolof, is out of the question for her as a literary language, “Je suis née dans un village de Ndoucoumane où la langue parlée est un mélange de gestes, de sons, d’attitudes” (Bugul in Ahihou 2013: 139).

In the same way that it is accepted practice for other artists to use plexiglass, bronze, wood, etc., Bugul exercises her creative freedom when choosing language material (cf. Bugul in Ahihou 2013: 139). “Une langue est un matériau avec lequel vous vous sentez confortable” (ibid.). She continues, “[l]orsque j’ai commencé à écrire mon premier roman *Le Baobab fou*, je n’ai pas pensé à la langue. Ce qui était important pour moi était l’évacuation que je faisais à travers l’écriture d’une autobiographie” (ibid.). For Bugul, writing in French is linked to creative freedom,

L’écriture est un processus de création qui a besoin de liberté. J’écris pour me secouer, me déconstruire à travers l’éducation, la condition sociale, la religion, etc. donc, quand j’écris dans une autre langue je me sens libre. Ce n’est pas une question d’aliénation: c’est une question de choix. (Ibid.: 140)

The use of French within the scope of the artistic creative process is, for Bugul, a precondition for her literary creativity – for her artistic freedom.

Bugul describes herself as westernized and assimilated (cf. ibid.: 126) – also within the context of womanhood. She leads “une vie à l’occidentale” with “l’air d’une Européenne” (ibid.). Her intercultural experiences have resulted in an inner conflict. This conflict is comparable to that of the protagonist of the novel *Le Baobab fou*, who, in the fiction in the Western sense, dreams of the deep attachment inherent in monogamous coupledom which is rooted in romantic love; a desire which will, however, never be fulfilled. On the contrary, the protagonist’s dependence on recognition and her loneliness causes her to seek solace in drug excesses, sexual adventures and prostitution; a spiral in which her emotional and physical vulnerability threatens to rob her of herself. Her only possibility of rescue is to return to Africa, where she once again encounters the baobab tree of her childhood, now dead; a symbol of her ‘Africanity’. Her un-heard voice employs the unheard-of and obscene in an attempt to provoke. In an interview Bugul complains about the image of Black people in general and Black women in particular in the post/colonial context – endorsing Fanon’s arguments, “Et ça, il faut le comprendre dans un contexte historique avec la

colonisation où l'image du Noir et de la femme noire en particulier n'était pas bonne: et puis de la politique d'assimilation aussi du colonisateur" (Bugul in Ahihou 2013 : 126). This denigration is often coupled with an exotic interest in the other, as dealt with in the novel, "Ces gens riches étaient libres de faire ce qu'ils voulaient, ils absorbaient la diaspora pour l'originalité. 'Nous avons une amie noire, une Africaine', était la phrase la plus 'in' dans ces milieux" (Bugul 2009: 123). Over and above this exotic interest, the exotic otherness frequently triggers sexual desire, which, however, is not accompanied by the envisaged increase in closeness and solidarity.

Both the author and the protagonist reveal a yearning for an unbroken identity, also with regard to womanhood in the traditional-African sense. In the novel *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (1999) Bugul's fiction describes the process of harmonizing the protagonist's broken identity; the healing of her wounds and the living out of her traditional femaleness. Like Bugul herself, the protagonist becomes the wife of a spiritual ruler with almost thirty wives, experiences polygamy as fulfilling and the competition among the wives as erotically stimulating. She also, however, suffers from jealousy when she loses her position as the ruler's favorite, itself based on the fact that she is his most recent wife, because he takes a further wife. This act in turn, however, causes her to focus on her life as a writer and cultivate her independence. As Fraser posits in her status model, it is the protagonist's status as the serigne's wife¹⁴ with its accompanying material, cultural and social benefits which earn her the recognition of her African environment and give her a feeling of belonging and being appreciated. The novel's protagonist is now, finally, reconciled with herself and succeeds in harmonizing the disparate elements of her hybrid identity. The poetry of Bugul's literary language, inspired by oral culture, allows the female voice to make itself heard and, within the scope of giving birth to the creative act, strengthens the potential linked to it.

¹⁴ His sudden death, which occurs after one of his wives leaves him without warning, brings with it further sweeping changes in the protagonist's life; these changes are, however, not described in the novel.

4. Self- and external perception. Memory, identity and recognition in the work of Fatou Diome

In Fatou Diome's novel *Le ventre de l'Atlantique*, the belly of the Atlantic becomes a mass grave for poor fishermen, failed emigrants to Europe returning to their homelands, unwanted children and those who transgress social norms. The Atlantic cannot, however, digest everything put into it, "[m]ême l'Atlantique ne peut digérer tout ce que la terre vomit" (Diome 2003: 114). The ocean is, however, also a symbol of freedom – it makes the escape from Africa, to a new life, possible.

Mais pour tous ici, la France, l'Eldorado, représentait aussi la plus lointaine destination de toutes les escapades et figurait une sorte de lieu mythique de la perdition, le refuge des Pitiamôme-Bopame, les oiseaux libres, envolés de toutes parts. (Ibid.: 136)

Personal, national and/or African identity and gender are all closely interlinked in Fatou Diome's novel *Le ventre de l'Atlantique*. "Ah! Sacrée France, c'est peut-être parce qu'elle porte un nom de femme q'on la désire tant" (ibid.: 202).¹⁵ An erotic facet of yearning for all things French resonates here; the fascination and attraction of a former colonial power, which very few are able to resist.¹⁶ French is considered the "langue de la réussite" (ibid.: 82). The process of writing allows the first-person narrator and protagonist of the novel, Salie,¹⁷ to make her voice heard, whereby her identity is closely linked to her memories and can, simultaneously, be viewed as an act of liberation, despite and because of the pain linked to exile – a combination of freedom and foreignness,

¹⁵ And, "Après la colonisation historiquement reconnue, règne maintenant une sorte de colonisation mentale: les jeunes joueurs vénéraient et vénèrent encore la France. À leurs yeux, tout ce qui est enviable vient de France" (Diome 2003: 53).

¹⁶ The idealized, embellished reports of returnees, visitors and migrants' families reinforce this image of France (cf. e.g. Diome 2003: 83-91). Moussa's fate demonstrates how boys' aspirations to make it big as footballers in France are exploited (cf. ibid.: 95ff.). In common with many other Senegalese boys, Madické, Salie's half-brother, also dreams of a football career in Europe; his idol is Italian football star Maldini.

¹⁷ Salie has been living in Strassburg for almost ten years; she has escaped her guilt about her grandmother, who brought her, a child of shame, up, "L'exil, c'est mon suicide géographique" (Diome 2003: 226).

[t]ant pis pour les séparations douloureuses et les kilomètres de blues, l'écriture m'offre un sourire maternel complice, car, libre, j'écris pour dire et faire tout ce que ma mère n'a pas osé dire et faire. [...] Ma mémoire est mon identité. (Diome 2003: 227)

Early in life, the protagonist learns the power of words from her grandmother, exploring it for the first time during an encounter with her step-father:

Cette histoire, je la répétais mot pour mot à mon beau-père, le jour où, sous l'arbre à palabres, avec tous les hommes de son quartier, il avait osé m'appeler de son nom à lui. J'avais alors dix ans, et depuis il ne m'a plus jamais regardée dans les yeux. Ma grand-mère m'avait appris que si les mots sont capables de déclarer une guerre, ils sont aussi assez puissants pour la gagner. (Ibid.: 78f.)

The female voice is answered with silence, and thus un-heard, and the lowered gaze of the step-father. Salie feels torn between the expectations of her family,¹⁸ itself the eternal link to her home in Africa, and her ambitions, which are connected to France or rather Europe. While she equates Africa with destiny, coincidence and hope, Europe is characterized by a lifestyle based on strength of purpose and achievement.¹⁹ This inner conflict between the cultures defines her identity. “[L]e tourbillon du brassage culturel qui me faisait vaciller les laissait indemnes” (ibid.: 60). In her short stories told in *La Préférence Nationale* (2007 [2001]), the protagonists endure brazen sexual advances by men and, in particular, working conditions as domestic workers or babysitters, which demean them as individuals. This degradation and contempt are juxtaposed with education as a way to gain social recognition in the

¹⁸ The protagonist asks herself, “Qui sont ces gens que j'appelle mon frère, ma sœur, etc.? Qui suis-je pour eux? [...] L'étrangère qui débarque? La sœur qui part? Ces questions accompagnent ma valse entre les deux continents” (Diome 2003: 227). The alien expectations of the others, who expect success, weigh heavily on her. “J'avance, les pas lourds de leurs rêves, la tête remplie des miens. J'avance, et ne connais pas ma destination. J'ignore sur quel mât on hisse le drapeau de la victoire, j'ignore également les grandes eaux capables de laver l'affront de l'échec. [...] L'écriture est ma marmite de sorcière, la nuit je mijote des rêves trop durs à cuire” (ibid.: 14).

¹⁹ “En Afrique, je suivais le sillage du destin, fait de hasard et d'un espoir infini. En Europe, je marche dans le long tunnel de la performance qui conduit à des objectifs bien défini” (Diome 2003: 14).

academic and literary fields. In this context, the female voice shows itself to be an instrument of power for women which transcends eroticism, altering self- and external perception and the question of the relationship between recognition and identity in writing. In contrast to Salie, Memoria, the protagonist in the novel *Kétala* (2006), uses not words but her body; driving herself to absolute exhaustion as a prostitute. All the painful, degrading experiences are inscribed on her body – which functions as her memory – until it is utterly destroyed. Marked by a terminal illness, she returns to Africa to die, accompanied by her homosexual husband, to whom she is bound by an arranged marriage and whom she has repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to seduce. France has not been able to fulfil its promise as the country of love for her; a promise she succumbed to in an attempt to save her marriage. Salie, the protagonist in *Le ventre de l'Atlantique*, wishes to protect her half-brother Madické from the disappointments she herself has experienced and which are integral to life in the diaspora and successfully encourages him to remain in Africa.²⁰ In this context, remaining appears a positive alternative to migration.

5. Conclusion – Between resignation and empowerment and the liberating function of literary writing

In their novels, Ken Bugul and Fatou Diome portray fragile female identities (Ricœur 2006: 138) characterized by an internal conflict between cultures, staging an aesthetic of vulnerability manifested in language. “Confrontation with others, whether individuals or groups, reveals the fragility of the narrative identity” (ibid.). This fragility applies, in particular, to portrayals of the vulnerability of the female body in romantic relationships and in prostitution. Literary gender discourses are amplified in the context of self- and external perception ‘post’ migration, uncovering a heightened perception. The power and strength associated with the erotic promise of the female body is under constant threat from self- and external exploitation. There is, however, also

²⁰ Her financial assistance allows him to set up a small general store. As a result, he forgets his dreams of becoming a football star in Europe.

always a fundamental dormant potential for fulfilment. Literary writing is the prerequisite for raising un-heard female voices in Africa and the African diaspora in Europe; to express the demand to be perceived and to be healed, in both the autobiographical and the fictional dimension. By engaging with the issue of identity, writing explores questions of both recognition in its various aspects and of inadequate reciprocity, denigration in self-perception and vulnerability, and thus the related social, economic and political implications. “Only in a reciprocal relationship of recognition with their counterpart does each acting subject become a moral subject who, within the scope of co-existence, is able to act self-determinedly, i.e. freely” (Kwon 2008: 285). The literary world is engaged in an embittered conflict concerning this topic. The creation of a narrative identity leads to conflicts with painful intercultural experiences within the scope of memory processes, characterized by internal conflict and feelings of contempt, and realignments, both of which increasingly include the subjects of returning or remaining in Africa. The novels emphasize the ambivalence between the fascination with and rejection of the foreign culture linked to interculturalism. At the same time, becoming familiar with another culture and the associated process of distancing also allows a critical view of Africa itself, equally characterized by ambivalence. Nevertheless, the experience of once again immersing one’s self in African culture following the return proves to be consoling. The protagonists experience the hybridity of the narrative identity as a painful wound that requires the experience of return to be healed. Returning home to die can, as in *Memoria*’s case, also be interpreted as the integration of the disparate into the damaged identity, as harmonization and as a making of peace. Literary writing is a means to construct a ‘healed’ identity – also in the sense of letting go of the role of victim. Fraser argues that the “language of recognition” represents a new “constellation in the grammar of political claims-making” (2009: 201)²¹ and thus does not remain an exclusively private issue. This dimension of the political is expressed as a desideratum in the authors’ novels.

²¹ Fraser’s concern is to develop “a theory of recognition that can accommodate the full complexity of social identities” (Fraser 2009: 202).

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