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TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS IN FRANCOPHONE SENEGALESE LITERATURE WRITTEN BY WOMEN

RELACIONES PROFESOR-ESTUDIANTE EN LITERATURA SENEGALESA FRANCÓFONA ESCRITA POR MUJERES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to propose an interdisciplinary connection between pedagogy – the concept of teacher-student relationship - and literature – the images of schoolgirls in Francophone Senegalese novels written by women. Senegal, which gained independence from the French colonial rule in 1960, has had two educational systems: Quranic and state schools. The analyzed novels: *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ, *The Abandoned Baobab* by Ken Bugul and *The Belly of the Atlantic* by Fatou Diome, all present girls who were given the opportunity to study in state institutions, both before and after the independence. By examining positive and negative images of teacher-student relationships, the article attempts to prove that supportive teachers, even in difficult circumstances, give the female protagonists a sense of security and self-worth, whereas dismissive or abusive ones discourage girls from further education and deprive them of confidence. The applied methodology consists of statistics concerning education in Senegal, as well as research on teacher-student relationships.

Keywords:

Senegal, teacher, female student, Mariama Ba, Ken Bugul, Fatou Diome.

RESUMEN

El objetivo del presente artículo es de proponer una conexión interdisciplinaria entre la pedagogía (el concepto de la relación profesor-alumno) y la literatura (las imágenes de colegialas en novelas francófonas senegalesas escritas por mujeres). Senegal, que logró la independencia del dominio colonial francés en 1960, tiene dos sistemas escolares: instituciones coránicas y estatales. Las novelas analizadas son *Mi carta más larga* de Mariama Bâ, *El baobab que enloqueció* de Ken Bugul y *En un lugar del Atlántico* de Fatou Diome. Todas presentan niñas que tuvieron la oportunidad de estudiar en escuelas públicas, tanto antes como después de la independencia. Examinando las imágenes positivas y negativas de las relaciones profesor-alumna, el artículo intenta demostrar que pedagogos solidarios, incluso en circunstancias difíciles, dan a las protagonistas la sensación de seguridad y un sentimiento de valía personal, mientras que maestros displicentes o abusivos desalientan a las niñas de continuar con sus estudios y las privan de confianza en sí mismas. La metodología aplicada consiste en estadísticas relativas a la educación en Senegal, así como de los estudios sobre la relación profesor-alumno.

Palabras clave:

Senegal, profesor, alumna, Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul, Fatou Diome.

INTRODUCTION

The official educational system in Senegal has been inextricably connected with the French colonial rule. Traditional Quranic schools – *daaras* – in which children are often abused and forced to beg on the streets, are still not properly regulated or supervised by the government (Seibert, 2019). In these schools, the teacher, who is a *marabout* – a religious leader – often takes advantage of his young students, sent to his *daara* in search of a better future in a bigger city. In state schools, children can receive a more formal education. These institutions, previously colonial, are based on the French educational system and teach in French, the official language of the country. However, the majority of the population communicates in native languages, among which Wolof is the lingua franca. According to the statistics, in 2002, only 23% of the Senegalese could speak French (Niang Camara, 2010). As Omar Ka reveals, under the colonial rule, only 10–25% of children went to school for any length of time, because education was mostly confined to the urban elite (Stringer, 1996). Additionally, going to a colonial school often resulted in an identity crisis, since African children used to study the same racist textbooks as European pupils and learn about “their ancestors, the Gauls”, whereas their own cultural heritage was completely devalued (Fanon 1952).

In the years 1964–1965 in Senegal, only 11% of males and 1% of females could write in French (Stringer, 1996). Thus, not only was the access to the colonial school limited, but it also favored boys. In the traditional Muslim Senegalese society, in which the role of women involved primarily getting married and having children, educating girls was viewed as unnecessary or even harmful. Milolo (1986), states that an educated woman was considered a source of marital problems: too much studying would lead to disobedience, as well as to acquiring the morality and mentality of white colonizers. Even when girls were allowed to go to school, as the author reveals, their education was not taken seriously – it was viewed more as a game, a pastime, than a foundation of life, since women were supposed to stay silent, polite and submissive. Although a lot more girls (and children in general) started going to school after independence, the traditional roles have not changed much, especially in smaller communities.

Taking into account the complexity of education in Senegal, the present article aims to analyze the relationships between teachers and female students in the novels written by three female writers – Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul and Fatou Diome. Regardless of institutional organization, the relationship in question seems to greatly affect the pupil's sense of self-worth, as well as their eagerness to learn. In his study of attachment theory and

teacher-student relationship, Riley (2010), emphasizes “*the importance of the teacher's role as a secure base for students in the classroom*” (p.11). Meehan, et al. (2003), state that “*a positive teacher-student relationship can function as a protective factor that buffers children from the effects of known risk factors*”, and thus minimize childhood aggression, academic failure, substance abuse and delinquency (p. 1145). Krsti (2015), notes that “*Positive teacher-child relationships provide children with the emotional security necessary to engage fully in learning activities and scaffold the development of key social, behavioral, and self-regulatory competencies needed in the school environment*” (p. 168). The aforementioned research, as well as numerous other studies, prove that such regularities can be observed in classrooms; the present article focuses on examining them in literary works. To that end, it aims to compare a negative teacher–student relationship in Ken Bugul's *The Abandoned Baobab* with positive ones in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Fatou Diome's *The Belly of the Atlantic*, in order to determine how they affect the schoolgirls' sense of self and further life.

DEVELOPMENT

The first analyzed novel is Ken Bugul's *The Abandoned Baobab*, whose original title is *Le baobab fou*. Published in 1982 and translated into English in 1991, this text, containing a great deal of autobiographical motives from the author's life, tells a story of a Senegalese immigrant in Belgium. The writer was born in 1947 and went to primary school under the colonial rule, as the first girl in her family. Her protagonist, whose name is also Ken Bugul, experiences the same hardships in the French educational system.

When the heroine narrates some events in her elementary school, the reader learns about the shockingly brutal behavior of both her principal and her teacher. The latter first threatens to cut the throat of a student who speaks up; then, when Ken raises her hand, he orders her to leave the classroom and sharpen the knife. The headmaster, who is passing by, asks the protagonist what she is doing, then slaps her on the face and calmly walks away. As Ken explains:

As for the principal, some deep dissatisfaction had made him violent and mean. He was of the first generation of Black teachers who had been soldiers under a foreign flag, and was deeply disappointed.

The blade of the knife seemed well sharpened. I went back to the classroom as silent as a cemetery. The teacher was pacing up and down, his hands behind his back, in the same position that the colonizer used to show his domination.

I didn't dare let him know I was back before he himself noticed it, and my poor cheek vibrated with a smack that surely was premeditated. Why? Because I hadn't been afraid to have my throat cut? Because I stood up to him? (Bugul, 2008).

The teacher–student relationship is believed to consist of two primary dimensions: Closeness and Conflict. The first one “*represents the warmth and positive affect between the teacher and the child and the child's comfort in approaching the teacher*”, whereas the second one “*refers to the negativity or lack of dyadic rapport*” (Mason, et al., 2017). In Ken Bugul's novel, Closeness is nonexistent, while Conflict is escalated to the point of physical abuse. This goes beyond corporal punishments, frequent in colonial schools: here, the pupils are tortured and fear for their lives. The teacher unleashes his frustrations on the students, who are completely dependent on his authority. When Ken volunteers to go sharpen the knife, she challenges him: instead of being quiet, she speaks up and responds to the teacher's threat. This is viewed as a sign of rebellion, but the protagonist's courage in a way protects her from sadist behavior. The teacher does not slice her throat, but instead he whips the whole class. According to the protagonist, his sense of power resulted from the fact that he was a colonial official, eager to fulfill his mission to teach “*the colonial language, the colonial dream*” (Bugul, 2008, p. 136). The class becomes a place of ultimate oppression:

Few pupils managed to continue school, scarred by the blows they'd receive as a present from an entire life lived in frustration. Those who escaped constituted an elite that was even more frustrated, the neocolonial elite. The teacher had a torture that consisted of making a student hold his earlobes, arms crossed, and then do kneebends on a regular beat (up-down, “*oumou-diodo*”), until the child would faint (Bugul, 2008).

Although the translation uses the possessive pronoun “his” in the aforementioned quote, the mistreatment and tortures concerned students of both gender. The protagonist mentions her friend, Oumoul, who “*wasn't able to continue on the path that would have made her a brilliant intellectual, intelligent and inspired – and only as a result of these tortures whose aftereffects she still bears today.*” (Bugul, 2008, p. 136). It appears that, maybe because of her courage, Ken is the only pupil that escapes this cruel treatment. However, her relationship with the teacher is as pathological as the other students': even though she is not physically abused, she lives in constant fear, threatened to be killed and with no one to protect her. Having a neglectful mother, who abandons her at the age of five, and being moved from one relative's house to another, Ken

does not have a “secure base” at home. Her teacher's sadistic behavior strips her of all confidence and shows her that her life has no importance to anyone. When she speaks up in class, she admits: “*Perhaps I had already learned that the most important thing wasn't to be born, or to live the human cycle, but to die*” (Bugul, 2008, p. 134). A very similar teacher is mentioned in another novel by the same author, *De l'autre côté du regard [As Seen from the Other Side]*. Its female protagonist does not mention beating or throat cutting, but she recalls how she was scared to ask for permission to go to the toilet, or even scared to breathe, and how she lost all self-confidence and an entire schoolyear (Bugul, 2003, p. 530–531). Therefore, the presented teacher–student relationship in the colonial school proves to be traumatic for the heroines, both on the physical and the emotional level. It is also worth noting that once Ken Bugul, the protagonist of *The Abandoned Baobab*, emigrates to Belgium, she loses control of her life, spiraling into drugs and prostitution, as she desperately wants to be accepted by white men. Abandoned by her mother, Ken does not find a “*corrective emotional experience*” (Riley, 2010, p. 15) at school: consequently, she continues to search for one in her adult life.

The second example, completely opposite to the violent relationship described in Ken Bugul's work, comes from Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. This semi-autobiographical, epistolary novel, penned in 1979 under the original title *Une si longue lettre* and translated into English in 1981, is one of the first literary manifestations written from the perspective of a Senegalese woman. Its author, born in 1929, spent her whole childhood and early adulthood under the colonial regime in Dakar. As indicated in its title, the text is in a form of a long letter from a Senegalese woman, Ramatoulaye Fall, to Aissatou Bâ, her childhood friend. Both heroines are born in the colonial Senegal and reach adulthood after independence: in their lives, modernity and tradition intertwine. As children, they attend both a Quranic and a French school. In the latter, all students have a very positive relationship with their female principal. As Ramatoulaye writes:

Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an ‘uncommon’ destiny. To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress. The word ‘love’ had a particular resonance in her. She loved us without patronizing us, with our plaits either standing on end or bent down, with our loose blouses, our wrappers.

She knew how to discover and appreciate our qualities (Bâ, 1989).

The quoted passage, especially the use of the word “love”, clearly shows closeness between the headmistress and her female students. According to Krsti (2015), “*student-teacher attachment will develop when a teacher has a positive emotional relationship with students: when he/she is helpful, friendly, satisfied and non-conflictual*” (p. 179). Without a doubt, one can conclude that, contrary to Ken Bugul's protagonist, Mariama Ba's heroines enjoy going to school and adore their teacher: they feel safe, understood and positively challenged in the classroom.

Of course, their cultural identities remain a complex subject. As Latha (2004), points out, the attention of the principal “*appears to aggravate the cultural conflicts and disappointments of her disciples. Her propagation of a secular type of modernity is not easily synchronised with customary and religious laws*” (p. 65). As colonial and then postcolonial subjects, both friends make choices that reflect both their traditional and French upbringing. Aissatou gets married in Senegal, but when her husband takes a second wife (as permitted by law and religion), she divorces him and moves to the United States. As far as Ramatoulaye is concerned, when she writes the letter, she mourns the death of her husband, who betrayed her by marrying their daughter's classmate. Unlike Aissatou, the protagonist does not choose divorce, as she is a devout Muslim and a mother of twelve children. But Ramatoulaye is also a feminist, fighting for women's rights in her home country. Thus, even though tradition plays a significant role in her life, she also finds Western education very important: she remains grateful to the principal for teaching her “*universal moral values*” and lifting her “*out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom*”. Even though her family life is based on tradition and religion, Ramatoulaye values education and becomes a teacher herself. As she describes it: “*How we loved this priesthood, humble teachers in humble local schools. How faithfully we served our profession, and how we spent ourselves in order to do it honour... In those children we set in motion waves that, breaking, carried away in their furl a bit of ourselves*.” (Bâ, 1989, p. 23)

Ramatoulaye's career choice might be a result of her positive relationship with the principal and a rewarding school experience. As Riley (2010), states: “*If a relationship formed with a teacher afforded the child a corrective emotional experience, then it may also consciously influence a later decision to join the profession: a wish to help others achieve the same successful outcome*” (p. 15). Having experienced a lot of support as a pupil in a French school, the protagonist treats her teaching job as a mission; she

also cares a great deal about educating her own children and is outraged when her husband's second wife is forced to drop out of school. The protagonist is also able to support her family financially when her husband abandons her. Thus, Ramatoulaye's career is certainly part of that “*uncommon destiny*” that the principal wished for her.

The third and last example takes us to the times after Senegal's independence, to a small island of Niodior. Born in 1968, Fatou Diome wrote her partially autobiographical novel *Le ventre d'Atlantique* in 2003; it was then translated into English, under the title *The Belly of the Atlantic*, in 2006. The text tells a story of Salie, who emigrated to France as an adult. Similarly to Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, she has a close relationship with Ndétare, her elementary school teacher:

I owe to him Descartes, I owe to him Montesquieu, Victor Hugo, Molière, I owe to him Balzac, Marx, Dostoyevsky, I owe to him Hemingway, Léopold Sédar Senghor, I owe to him Aimé Césaire, Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Yourcenar, Mariama Bâ, and all the rest. I owe to him the first love poem I penned in secret, I owe to him the first French song I ever murmured because I owe to him my first phoneme, my first morpheme, the first sentence read, heard, and understood in French. I owe to him the first letter scrawled across my broken piece of slate. I owe to him my schooling. I owe to him my education. And because he satisfied my first conscious desire—to go to school—I owe to him every little step of French cancan I took toward the light (Diome, 2005).

As Krsti (2015), argues, “*the positive and secure relation with teacher affects not only school marks, but also affects development of positive attitudes towards school and learning*” (p. 179). In Salie's case, this positive influence is even more visible than in the second analyzed novel: here, the protagonist clearly states that she owes her education and her “*key to the world*” to her first teacher. The authors that she lists suggest her vast general knowledge, in both Senegalese and European literature. Mentioning Simone de Beauvoir and Mariama Ba is also significant, as the protagonist grew up to be a conscious woman, unafraid to choose her own path.

Salie's relationship with the teacher begins with the little girl's determination to study. Salie, born out of wedlock to very young parents, is rejected by her mother and stepfather. On the small island of Niodior, where everyone knows everyone, she is discriminated against because of her origins. However, unlike Ken Bugul, Salie feels safe at home: she is raised and loved by her illiterate grandparents. Fortunately, the teacher, who is also an outsider, understand Salie's difficult position and starts taking

particularly good care of her. At first, because she is not enrolled at the school, Ndétare chases her away when she approaches the classroom. Afterwards, he lets her stay and attend the classes. Then, finally, realizing the child's potential, he goes to her grandmother's house to ask for permission to enroll the girl at the school. Ndétare skillfully uses his position of a civil servant to convince Salie's caretaker. He tells the grandmother that the child would be able to help her with writing letters and administrative procedures. Very reserved at first, the grandmother finally agrees and she begins to help Salie with her homework, even though she cannot read. She also starts to treat Ndétare as a member of their family. Therefore, the little girl feels important to both her grandmother and her teacher, which allows her to feel confident in a hostile environment. Ndétare understands her struggles:

Dragging me out of yet another scuffle, he whispered: "You, like myself, will always remain a stranger in this village, and you can't pick a fight every time someone makes fun of your name. Besides, it's a very handsome name, it means *dignity*; so be dignified and stop fighting. You should stay in the classroom and learn your lessons during recess; with a little effort, you'll get out of this crab pot one day.

For the first time in my life I felt proud of my name. That very day I asked my grandmother about it. She confirmed Ndétare's version and, in her own special way, told me a story about my father's side of the family that made me hold my head up good and high (Diome, 2005).

Out of all the analyzed protagonists, Salie seems to have the most support, both at home and at school. According to Krsti (2015), "*attachment studies suggest that secure children tend to have higher verbal ability, math ability, reading comprehension, and overall academic achievement, and exhibit more curiosity than insecurely attached children*" (p. 169). Since the protagonist is securely attached both to her grandmother and her teacher, she manages to succeed at school and endure the hardships of emigration in her adult life. Unlike little Ken in *The Abandoned Baobab*, self-destructive and scared for her life, Salie knows how to fight for herself: when she realizes that she wants to learn, she persists until she achieves her goal. This is only possible because her voice matters: thanks to Ndétare, the heroine is able to choose a different fate.

CONCLUSIONS

All the examples of teacher–female student relationships examined above show different images of childhood and education in Senegalese literature written by women. The results of social studies conducted by various researchers

in the classroom seem to be reflected in literary works. The relationship between Ken Bugul, the protagonist of *The Abandoned Baobab* and her violent school teacher is conflictual, abusive, highly traumatic. The instructor causes some children to drop out of school; because of him, the protagonist loses her self-confidence and the remainder of her sense of security. As she does not have a "secure base" at home either, Ken continues to search for acceptance in her adult life.

The heroine does not have any objectives regarding her education, she completely loses control over her life in Belgium. On the contrary, Ramatoulaye, who also starts her education in a colonial school, has a completely different experience. Although her identity as a postcolonial Senegalese woman is hybrid and sometimes conflicted, she has good memories of her school years.

The positive, nurturing relationship that the protagonist has with her principal encourages her to pursue a teaching career herself. Ramatoulaye remains a Muslim woman, a wife and a mother, but she also values formal education. As far as Salie is concerned, her situation reveals a secure attachment to both her grandmother and her elementary school teacher. The environment wherein she lives allows her to develop her competences and to make her own decisions.

In the three novels, all containing autobiographical motifs, we can see how the Senegalese education has changed throughout the years. As more and more girls have access to schooling, it can be hoped that teacher-student relationships presented in the works of future female Senegalese authors will be positive, nurturing and rewarding.

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