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## BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL, BETWEEN AFRICA AND THE WEST: ANNA SWOBODA ON THE TRAIL OF KEN BUGUL

### ABSTRACT

The article discusses the main premises of Anna Swoboda's monograph *La Prose de Ken Bugul : entre le réel et le surnaturel*. Swoboda assumes that the key to deciphering the characteristics of Ken Bugul's prose is the interpenetration of the two dimensions present in the work of this contemporary Senegalese writer: the real and the supernatural. The book analyzes the fantastic, marvelous and uncanny elements that constitute the supernatural aspect of Bugul's hybrid prose, as well as examines the fragmentation and multifaceted identity of the autofictional female protagonist (in the part devoted to the real elements). The eclectic methodology combines Western and African research on non-mimetic fiction with postcolonial and feminist theories.

KEYWORDS: supernatural, fantastic, marvelous, uncanny, autofiction, Ken Bugul, Senegal, Africa

Anna Swoboda's monograph *La Prose de Ken Bugul : entre le réel et le surnaturel* is devoted to the analysis of Ken Bugul's prose. The author in question is a contemporary Senegalese French-language writer. As the title suggests, according to the researcher, the key to deciphering the characteristics of Bugul's prose is the interpenetration of its two dimensions: the real and the supernatural. Therefore, Swoboda's work is divided into two parts corresponding to these two crucial aspects.

The book opens with a preface by Professor Isabelle-Rachel Casta (University of Artois, Textes et Culture research center), an outstanding specialist in non-mimetic fiction in literature, cinema and new media. Casta describes Swoboda's study as "important and necessary" (Casta 2021: 10), as well as "consistent and meticulous" (Casta 2021: 10), since it literally scans, from the aesthetic and genealogical point of view, the complex work of the writer. Ken Bugul is an author who lives between the Western and the African culture, which renders analyzing her texts even more complicated. Casta emphasizes that Swoboda perfectly fulfills this difficult task by focusing on the numerous facets of Bugul's work: from the Western, cerebral, dark neofantastic to the animistic, African one, which sometimes blends with the marvelous or the uncanny. All these aspects are shown against the background of the Senegalese mimesis.

In the introductory part, the researcher introduces the reader to the Senegalese writer's world by presenting her eventful life, discussing her most important texts, highlighting her position in the pantheon of Senegalese and Francophone writers, and describing the current state of research on her oeuvre. It is worth noting that Anna Swoboda's research is groundbreaking in the Polish academia. Internationally speaking, her monograph is also innovative, as existing critical works focus on other aspects (e.g. linguistic, feminist, migratory, autobiographical) of Bugul's works and often analyze the older texts created by the Senegalese writer (published in the 1990s), while Anna Swoboda primarily examines the relatively new prose, published in the years 2000–2014<sup>1</sup>.

The first part of the monograph is devoted to the supernatural elements in Ken Bugul's prose. Building on Pierre Abossolo's research (to some extent<sup>2</sup>), Swoboda uses the Western methodology of fantastic literature to analyze Bugul's texts<sup>3</sup>. While Abossolo's work may arouse controversy<sup>4</sup> among the researchers of the fantastic, Swoboda's book is an example of a consistent (and not fragmentary, as in Abossolo's work) use of the Western theories of non-mimetic fiction in order to analyze the syncretic prose of the African writer in question, strongly influenced by both Western literature and culture, and Senegal and Africa as such. Unlike Abossolo, Swoboda – very appropriately – retains the existing distinction between the related genres – fantastic, marvelous and *uncanny* – which are present in Ken Bugul's hybrid work. The researcher begins her reflections with the exploration of the most important Western and African<sup>5</sup> theories of fantastic literature, which are used to study the canonical elements of each diegesis: space and time. When examining the space-time frame in Bugul's texts, the researcher distinguishes two types of places: the rural space and the city, which become the scene of supernatural, distressing events, taking place not only at night (as it traditionally happens in the fantastic literature), but also during the day. Here Swoboda notes a very interesting and innovative parallel of the analyzed African texts with the Western neofantastic, which has similar characteristics. Such a comparative juxtaposition of Ken Bugul's texts and the Western neofantastic is justified; however, the same cannot be said about Abossolo's research comparing contemporary African texts with French short stories (not always fantastic!) from the 19<sup>th</sup> century written by just two authors, Guy de Maupassant and Prosper Mérimée.

<sup>1</sup> After *Cacophonie*, published in 2014, another novel (*Le Trio bleu*) was not released until 2022.

<sup>2</sup> The study in question is Pierre Martial Abossolo's *Fantastique et littérature africaine contemporaine. Entre rupture et soumission aux schémas occidentaux*, published in 2015, based on the doctoral thesis *Fantastique et rapport au surnaturel: essai de lecture comparée des textes français et africains* defended in 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Castex (1951), Caillois (1965), Bozzetto (1998), Bozzetto, Huftier (2004), Prince (2015), Vax (1965).

<sup>4</sup> It is enough to mention, for example, the researcher's reduction of fantasy to a "literary motif" (2015: 9), or his permanent failure to distinguish between the fantastic and the marvelous (2015: 9–10). Abossolo argues that in the African fantastic, objects, events and supernatural characters are "allant de soi", which is, however, a characteristic of the marvelous, not the fantastic. It may also be surprising that a corpus of Western short stories described as fantastic (e.g. *Mateo Falcone*, analyzed on page 71: absolutely not a fantastic short story) was chosen for a comparative analysis with African texts. Cf. Carminella Biondi, "Pierre Martial Abossolo, *Fantastique et littérature africaine contemporaine. Entre rupture et soumission aux schémas occidentaux*", *Studi Francesi* [Online], 180 (LX | III) | 2016, Online since 01 January 2017, accessed on 15 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/studifrancesi/5453>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/studifrancesi.5453>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Kane (1982), G. Doho (1994), F. Boualit (2012), P. Abossolo (2015).

In the next chapter, Anna Swoboda's attention is drawn to fantastic phenomena, which she divides into two groups: physical phenomena (fantastic creatures and characters-phenomena, defined in Malrieu's terms, i.e. deformed bodies referring to *body horror* and unusual atmospheric phenomena) and psychological phenomena (traditional, not to say 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western fantastic motifs: madness and death). The existence of the phenomena from the first group is objective and explicit, whereas the existence of the phenomena from the second group is subjective and implicit. In order to investigate how the character reacts to the appearance of these phenomena in the diegesis, Swoboda further examines the heroine in Bugul's fantastic. The researcher immediately notices that in Bugul's prose, it is the female protagonist who matters the most – not the male one, as was the case in the canonical Western fantastic. Nevertheless, the characteristics of Bugul's protagonist remain similar to those of the Western fantastic protagonist: she is solitary (from a social, emotional and intellectual point of view), and sometimes anonymous. A certain novelty lies in the fact that her confrontation with the (not always ominous) phenomenon does not have to end with her destruction, fall, or death (which was the case in the European and American classical fantastic), and her reaction to the manifestation of the phenomenon is quite ambivalent, related to African culture, as the protagonist “believes a little<sup>6</sup>” in the existence of an unusual phenomenon that defies the laws of reality.

Continuing the exploration of the hybrid forms of the supernatural in Bugul's texts, Swoboda analyzes the elements of wonder present in the prose of the African writer. Rightly assuming Todorov's hesitation (or lack thereof) as the main genological criterion that distinguishes the fantastic from the marvelous, the researcher notes the enormous variety of marvelous motifs in Bugul's work, as well as specifies the broadly understood field of marvelous studies in all its manifestations and forms (including contemporary ones like SF). In this chapter, Swoboda consistently upholds the same structure as in the chapter concerning the fantastic; that is, she analyzes the same elements of diegesis: space-time frames, characters, and objects related to the marvelous. Anna Swoboda's academic rigor is admirable and allows the reader to compare the various forms of the supernatural in Bugul's oeuvre. The examined marvelous aspect is undoubtedly saturated with traditional African elements; however, borrowings from myths, fairy tales and Western SF are also visible.

The last chapter related to the supernatural is devoted to the presence of Todorov's *étrange* (uncanny) in the Senegalese writer's oeuvre. Once again, the researcher analyzes the same elements of the presented world (time, space, characters, phenomena), this time from the uncanny perspective. Swoboda notes that this facet of the supernatural is the one least explored by Bugul, but it may disturb the reader the most, because “the only horror is that there is no horror”: the African reality becomes more terrifying than the supernatural.

These three parts of Swoboda's monograph create a comprehensive vision of the supernatural in Ken Bugul's texts – eclectic works skillfully combining elements of Western and African horror, situated between the two so very different traditions and cultures. In my opinion, this first, more extensive part of Anna Swoboda's book

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<sup>6</sup> A reference to Farida Boualit's term (2012: 8).

undoubtedly demonstrates the originality and innovation of her research on the characteristics of African fantastic and fills a certain research gap.

Nevertheless, it is good that the author does not stop at this point, but continues her analyses by examining the real component of Bugul's prose, complementary to the supernatural, namely the fragmentation and multiplicity of the subject. It should be pointed out here that critical works on Ken Bugul's oeuvre (focusing on the real dimension, and not the supernatural one) are not uncommon, and specialists often examine autobiographical, and autofictional motifs of her prose. Swoboda is also interested in these issues: she analyzes the autofictional protagonist in the Senegalese space, and then in the context of emigration. The researcher presents the protagonist's family relations (mother's hostility, father's distance) and the endless search for love in Senegal (polygamy) and Europe (Western strategies of seduction). She condemns some of the problems of Western societies, such as racism and violence. Furthermore, she notes that the identity of Bugul's protagonist fluctuates, as it depends on the environment (European or African) in which the protagonist is currently staying. This part of the monograph is shorter than the first one and slightly less original due to the already existing research findings of other critics, but it is worth emphasizing that the selection of both components for analysis (the supernatural one and the real one), as well as the examination of their continuous interpenetration enables a comprehensive assessment of the hybrid prose of the Senegalese writer. Anna Swoboda fulfills this ambitious task perfectly. Her monograph is an excellent compass on the intricate paths of African prose.

Last but not least, Anna Swoboda's book opens the *Phantasticus* publishing series (University of Silesia Press), with the scientific committee comprising of recognized researchers of fantastic literature from around the world: Europe (Isabelle-Rachel Casta, Christain Chelebourg, Arnaud Huftier, Denis Mellier, David Roas, Matthieu Letourneux, Denis Moreau), Canada and the USA (Michel Lord, Philippe Met), guaranteeing with their authority the high quality of the published texts. The book is under the honorary patronage of international scientific journals: *Brumal* and *Bélphegor*, as well as the Polish Africanist Society and the French Institute.

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