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## ***L'Appel des arènes: A Postcolonial Development of the *Buildungsroman****

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### **Abstract**

Despite the fact that many critics consider the *Buildungsroman* obsolete, the genre is still alive. Many African writers have revised the classical *Buildungsroman* in order to underscore the conflict of cultures and the complex subjectivities of their characters. By analyzing the discourse on identity in *L'Appel des arènes*, we understand how Aminata Sow Fall recreates the modalities of enunciation found in African traditional literature while structuring *L'Appel des arènes* with generic patterns from the *Buildungsroman*.

Aminata Sow Fall has published seven novels, and *L'Appel des arènes* (1982) is her third one.<sup>[1]</sup> With Mariama Bâ and Nafissatou Niang Diallo, Aminata Sow Fall belongs to the first generation of female novelists whose literary production started in the seventies in Senegal. Sow Fall's work is often critiqued in relation to feminism and/or her social commentary, therefore privileging ideology. Rarely do critics approach it in the light of her poetics of the novel. Alongside narrative forms and strategies inspired by traditional literature, Aminata Sow Fall's work incorporates oral discourse, thus pointing to the presence of an African symbolic universe in the novel, a genre borrowed from the West. Critics, like Eileen Julien in *African Novels and the Question of Orality*, claim that aspects of traditional African literature are irrelevant to the criticism of Francophone literatures since they are written in French. But many critics also state that the literary text in Africa refers to various texts - oral and traditional as well as written and Western - and is constructed by that reference to other texts. This process reveals that when third-world writers combine traditional, indigenous forms with an inherited European one, the resulting mixture often challenges secure, Western notions of conventional generic categories.<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, intertextuality and the challenge of the cultural monocentrism of Western systems of representation are central to understanding the notion of genre in African literature.

The characters in *L'Appel des arènes*, like those in African tales, find themselves involved in a central project whose goals are delineated along three axes: a desire to be satisfied, a command to be carried out, and a struggle to withstand. Considering the function of these characters in the story, we find abstract traditional figures, such as the donor, the object, the recipient, the adjuvant, the opponent, and the subject, aligned along the three axes. The plot of the novel is based on a series of trials that Nalla, the young protagonist, must confront in order to integrate himself into the world of traditional values despite his parents' opposition. All the characters in the novel, his grandmother, his parents, his tutor, and two traditional wrestlers, attempt to influence the adolescent in the direction they find beneficial to his education and development. Their plan is therefore an outgrowth of their roles as agents so that Nalla can succeed like the hero of traditional tales. The roles of the agents in the novel position each participant in relation to the central project of the tale. Thus, *L'Appel des arènes* portrays the quest motif, which situates the work within the tradition of

the *Bildung* initiation tale. Since Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister Lehrjare* (1795-96), the distinctive feature of the *Bildungsroman* is the experience of the world, which is regarded as an *arena*, a training ground where man strengthens himself.<sup>[3]</sup>

In Africa the *Bildungsroman* typically examines the conflict of cultures in which a young individual struggles to achieve a balance between the 'civilizing' education of the colonial power and the traditional culture of the forefathers.<sup>[4]</sup> Writers like Mongo Beti in *Mission terminée*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane in *L'Aventure ambiguë*, Sow Fall in *L'Appel des arènes*, and many others, have revised the classical *Bildungsroman* when portraying a total personality in order to underscore the complex subjectivities of their characters. Such fictional practices prove that the genre can be applied across different historical periods, cultures, and classes, despite the fact that many critics still consider it as an outmoded, unfashionable historical genre.<sup>[5]</sup> Also, the exploration of self-development in the *Bildungsroman* presumes a theoretical *genre*, one governed by universal experiential phenomena and interpersonal relationships in the formation of personality.<sup>[6]</sup>

By analyzing the discourse on identity in *L'Appel des arènes*, we understand how Aminata Sow Fall recreates the modalities of enunciation found in traditional literature while structuring *L'Appel des arènes* with generic patterns from the *Bildungsroman*. Her adaptation of narrative processes and discourse strategies that are both inspired by mythic elements from the Wolof [7] cultural heritage and the *goetheen Bildungsprinzip* thus reveals the hypertextual dimensions of the novel.

Nalla's rejection of his parents' Western model of upbringing and the psychological crisis leading to his initiation ritual illustrate the emphasis, by the *Bildungsroman*, on repressive environmental factors, on the process of disillusionment necessary for personality change and maturity, and on the possibilities for transformation offered by individual choice.<sup>[8]</sup> Since Nalla has not experienced the tests of a traditional initiation and the sojourn in the *case d'homme* [men's hut] at the time of his circumcision, and his attitude toward traditional values reveals this lack, there is a hole in his upbringing that he must now fill. According to Eno Belinga, the psychodrama comes as much from the psychoanalytic "praxis" as from initiation rites whose influence on artistic or literary creation can be more or less pronounced.<sup>[9]</sup> In *L'Appel des arènes*, the lack that Nalla feels must be remedied through the ritual steps prescribed by mythic constructs to fulfill the hero's destiny. The story thus perfectly illustrates the adage "*La cure obéit à un rituel*" [Therapy must follow a ritual]: Nalla's interaction with André, Malaw, and Mr. Niang is presented as a series of learning possibilities whose goal is to remedy this lack and change his social status. *L'Appel des arènes* evokes all the more a space of initiation because, according to Léopold Senghor, initiation is knowledge through poetry, song, drama, masked dance, all to the primordial rhythm of the tam-tam.<sup>[10]</sup> Consequently, Nalla's attraction to activities associated with traditional wrestling can be read as a clear manifestation of the hero myth.

At the beginning of the novel, Nalla's meeting André appears as a special event whose fortuitous nature cannot help suggesting the motif of transcendence so frequently

present in mythic tales. The contact with André launches Nalla's initiation quest and reaffirms traditional values, leading the protagonist to hold the universe of his childhood sacred. This world, in which Nalla is immersed during his visit to his grandmother's village while listening to her tales, mixes the ancestral, the paradisiacal, and the mysterious. The first stage of ritual initiation thus includes acquiring knowledge about traditional life as well as lessons based on oral tales that Nalla "listened to as you would listen to a tale you hoped would never come to an end" [écoutait comme on écoute un conte dont on ne souhaite pas la fin] (*L'Appel* 29). The protagonist's first steps in initiation with André, founded upon a base of memories stemming from his experiences with Mame Fari, is therefore entirely located within oral culture. The initiation ritual is mediated by two groups of initiators: theoretical initiators, including Mame Fari, André, and the griot Mapaté, and practical initiators, including Malaw and M. Niang. Nalla's practical initiation is carried out in the hero's relationship with Malaw at the time of André's death. This relationship also refers to several motifs common to initiation tales, but in the context of a physical, material ritual. Nalla's nocturnal fugues to meet his initiator, for example, reproduce motifs of exile and separation from one's parents. These motifs serve an important initiation function in adolescent development.<sup>[11]</sup> In fact, Malaw explicitly promises Nalla that he will have him undergo initiation tests: "Don't worry about it, little one, you will do your *case d'homme* with me . . . I'll make you live out the sacred retreat" [T'en fais pas Petit, ta case de l'homme, tu la feras avec moi... Je te ferai vivre la retraite sacrée...] (*L'Appel* 78). He organizes this in such a way as to replicate the stages of traditional initiation: a stay in the sacred forest, mythic stories, and ritual dance. Thus Nalla engages in mystical and sacred experiences when he becomes a member of the wrestler's entourage: "You'll bear" witness to my contacts with the invisible forces of air and water" [Tu seras le témoin de mes contacts avec les forces invisibles de l'air et de l'eau] (*L'Appel* 112.) Using various forms of mythic stories, Malaw continues the boy's education, begun by his grandmother, André, and the griot Mapaté: "Their meetings [...] ended in guessing games and tales that showcased the strength, courage, and dignity of men of old" [Leur rencontre [...] s'achevait par des jeux de devinettes et des récits où étaient mis en relief la force, le courage et la dignité des hommes d'autrefois] (*L'Appel* 49). The tale of Siga Ndiaye, which Malaw tells Nalla, allegorically underscores the brotherhood between initiator and initiated. This link echoes the motif of apprenticeship, which is often present in initiation tales when the hero is often accompanied by a foil, another self, a friend who is by his side at every trial.<sup>[12]</sup>

The stage of formal initiation, achieved with Malaw, ends triumphantly in the dance and festival of the arenas, in the very location that is so attractive to the adolescent Nalla: "The arenas are overheated [...] Malaw points a horn decorated with *cauris* beads toward the other cardinal directions. After that, he throws seven stones toward the setting sun with great energy. Then he sits and a boy pours the contents of a bottle over him. It's Nalla" [Les arènes sont surchauffées. [...] Malaw oriente une corne garnie de cauris vers les autres points cardinaux. Après cela, il jette sept pierres vers le couchant, avec une très grande énergie. Ensuite il s'assied et un garçon lui verse le contenu d'une bouteille. C'est Nalla] (*L'Appel* 141). The victory that Nalla's actions signal is in fact a double victory: the first is the one Malaw will have over

his opponent; the second, the one that young Nalla has won over his psychological issues, through the initiation process. For, according to Van Lent, "in contemporary societies in Africa, [...] it [initiation] is still a test of adolescent courage and a learning experience as well as a symbolic act, an outward and physical gesture representing a spiritual event in the life of the individual."<sup>[13]</sup> Such a conception precisely describes the educational and representational functions of initiation symbolism, two functions that we find in the initiation ritual and the discourse of *L'Appel des arènes*.

The symbolic elements of ritual create in each initiate a certain affective disposition unique to the development of proper habits of behavior.<sup>[14]</sup> This educative function, a factor in the hero's acquisition of courage, acts upon the unconscious and therefore the personality of the initiate, through attending performances and engaging in ritual actions. The epic tone of *L'Appel des arènes* is manifested above all in a metalanguage dedicated to the almost-mythic figure of Lat Dior who embodies all the values that inform the Wolof people's beliefs during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: their resistance to colonialism and the liberating influence of Islam.<sup>[15]</sup> Aminata Sow Fall thus employs poetic license in her depiction of space and time to evoke an episode of the Wolof epic of the Kajoor, which includes the essential characteristics of "Wolof epic literature." This epic, which transmits elements of the cultural traditions of the sub-region's major ethnic groups, appears as a locus to synthesize and revitalize epic, as well as mythic, schemas and motifs.<sup>[16]</sup> Setting the story in Louga, a Kajoor town – which defines one of the great Senegalese kingdoms – and naming the wrestler Malaw are codes that evoke the epic figure of Lat Dior, a national hero of Senegal, a figure who resisted Western colonial domination. Indeed Malaw's name, in the context of a Wolof epic, must certainly recall the name of Lat Dior's last steed. This parallel is reinforced by the fact that the two Malaws play the same narrative role. Lat Dior's steed and Malaw the wrestler are two figures whose function as companions plays a key part in the respective tests the heroes face. Finally, the metaphoric tie between the historical personage and Aminata Sow Fall's story can be read in Nalla's refusal to totally adhere to the principles of Western culture that his parents impose on him. The traditional heroism supporting this refusal of domination, whether of a colonial or a cultural nature, runs through the stories of both Lat Dior, the epic hero of Senegalese history, and Nalla, the epic-cultural hero of *L'Appel des arènes*. By examining the motifs evoked in the novel, we can also discover the entire archaeological typology of the traditional epic. Thus we see the pertinence of the narrative process and discourse strategies that link the novel to the epic of Kajoor, the cornerstone of Wolof oral literature. The adaptation or evocation of these elements contributes to the workings of the educational function of initiation symbolism in Nalla's development.

In the representative function of initiation symbolism, symbols are a representation - in permanence perceptible to the senses - of the moral ideal proposed by initiation, of which they constitute a poetic image.<sup>[17]</sup> It is in this sense that *L'Appel des arènes* represents a discourse on the place one must give to tradition in the inescapable context of modern society. The theme of education that runs throughout Aminata Sow Fall's work is only a pretext to the more pertinent question regarding the role of tradition in the modern arena, a context into which the African is called to integrate himself or

perish.<sup>[18]</sup> Hence *L'Appel des arènes* opposes two models of education. The first is Western, and is personified in Nalla's parents, who are portrayed as acculturated characters with inadequate behaviors; the second is traditional, represented by Mame Fari, André, Malaw, and Mapaté the griot. In so doing, the novel puts forth the following question in symbolic terms: What is the place of tradition in the modern world?

The answer to this question can be found in Mr. Niang's role in the novel as Nalla's second practical initiator. Mr. Niang plays an essential part in that he represents Western schooling: It is he who dispenses Western knowledge. However, he also facilitates Nalla's knowledge of the traditional music of the arenas that the boy loves so much. In the mind of this educator, the goal is not to privilege one culture to the detriment of the other, but to achieve the right balance for Nalla's development through a synthesis of the two worlds. Mr. Niang personifies a symbiotic relationship between Western culture, based on the written word, and traditional culture, based on orality. Furthermore, the novel fully confers this symbolic role upon him in having him preserve oral culture with a tape recorder. He thus will transmit orality with the aid of Western technology. However, he is also the only writer in the novel. Whereas characters such as Mame Fari, André, Malaw, and Mapaté tell stories, Mr. Niang is the only character who writes in the book. This activity is a significant reference to textuality in this story that celebrates the oral tradition. Therefore, this character obviously represents a compromise between the conceptual thinking of writing and the image-based thinking of orality. Mr. Niang represents a modern griot insofar as he is successful in the marriage he personifies – the union between Africa and the West. Such alliance is inevitable because, as revealed in Mr. Niang's writing, “the disorder that overturns the world is caused by a collective alienation” [Le désordre qui bouleverse le monde a pour cause l'aliénation collective...] (*L'Appel* 86). This social dysfunction is illustrated by Ndiogou's and Diattou's behavior and it can only be laid to rest by a union with the culture's mythic origins, as shown by Nalla's developmental path, as described in Mr. Niang's text: “The umbilical cord cut from the mother but reunited to the grandmother. One of the signs of our times [...] perhaps even salvation . . . The grandmother, she's still the earth . . . the tie to the earth ” [Le cordon ombilical coupé avec la mère mais renoué avec la grand-mère. Un des signes de notre temps. [...] Peut-être même le salut . . . La grand-mère, c'est encore la terre . . . Le lien avec la terre] (*L'Appel* 86).

The ideal education does not limit the individual; it is a person-centered process, assuring balance and happiness. Mr. Niang, who infuses his grammar lessons with wrestling references, who speaks of physical, spiritual, and mental balance, takes up Aminata Sow Fall's own vision. This is why the speech of Nalla's father, Ndiogou, in the next to last chapter of the novel, is so eloquent:

All our lives, our parents charged us with a mission: represent our community in the larger interests of the general human condition. And they gave us models. What have we ever said to Nalla? We raised him according to

abstract, watery, vague principles ... I think we have ruined his education.

[Nos parents nous chargeaient d'une mission dès le départ de la vie : représenter la communauté dans l'intérêt supérieur de la condition humaine. Et ils nous offraient des modèles. Qu'avons-nous jamais dit à Nalla ? Nous l'avons élevé selon des principes abstraits, flous, vagues... Je crois que nous avons raté son éducation] (*L'Appel* 132).

Ndiogou's unfolding turnaround, perceived by the reader at the end of the novel, is evidence of his choice's failure and of the inappropriateness of his actions. Hence, the importance of the tale of Petite Coumba – woven into the plot of *L'Appel des arènes* – which operates allegorically in Aminata Sow Fall's text to signify the weight of tradition in identity formation and cultural balance. In fact, it is a code, a key for the reading of *L'Appel des arènes*. The passage that makes a quick nod to the famous tale from Wolof culture emphasizes above all its effect on Nalla:

So it was whenever Mame Fari told him of Petite Coumba's miraculous voyage, summoned to go meet the faraway sea of Dayanne, inaccessible to any mortal. Nalla followed the mistreated orphan through her descent to hell, railed against the inhuman monster, and was amazed by the divine generosity that sent Coumba back endowed with fabulous riches and followed by a miniature world, where all the species were represented.

[Ainsi en était-il lorsque Mame Fari lui contait le voyage miraculeux de la petite Coumba, sommée d'aller à la rencontre de la lointaine mer de Dayanne, inaccessible à tous les mortels. Nalla suivait l'orpheline maltraitée dans sa descente aux enfers, fulminait contre la marâtre inhumaine et s'éblouissait de la générosité divine qui ramena Coumba gratifiée de fabuleuses richesses et d'un monde miniaturisé où toutes les espèces étaient représentées] (*L'Appel* 29).

The motifs of trial and triumph of the hero are obvious in the story, and according to Kesteloot and Bodj, the tale is traditionally used in an initiation capacity during ritual preparations for marriage.<sup>[19]</sup> Also, the idea of wealth here is linked with the idea of diversity, to union, insofar as marriage is a union of two individuals. The miniature world where all the species are represented stands for the importance of a symbiotic vision in bringing about progress. This union is also expressed at the end of *L'Appel des arènes* in the festival atmosphere of the arena where Ndiogou has followed his son, who is participating in the fight between Malaw and Tonnerre. Here, Ndiogou finally realizes that the arena is a place of high celebration, and not of confrontation, of differences, where everyone meets up:

A general drunkenness flowed from the cheering crowd [...] The arenas are overheated. Ndiogou thinks to himself that he has never seen such a sight, even when he was younger. He glanced around [...] his gaze fell on Saer's face, the face of a famous doctor from the capital, a specialist in mental illness. He spent twenty-five years in the West and came back with a white wife. He's there, seated, [...] he saw Fara, the most infamous state inspector [...] Fara was there, excited [...] he saw Anthiou, prosecuting attorney at the courts. He passed his *agrégation* in classics before undertaking studies in Law [...] he shouted with the crowd, [...] In the shouting, gesticulating crowd, Ndiogou recognized Mr. Gartinet, among other *toubabs* [whites]. Mr. Gartinet is there, sweating, vibrating with the crowd's passion.

[Une ivresse générale s'empare de la foule qui acclame. [...] Les arènes sont surchauffées. Ndiogou se dit n'avoir jamais rien vu de tel, même quand il était plus jeune. Il a jeté un coup d'œil autour de lui ... [...] il a rencontré le visage de Saer, médecin réputé dans la capitale, spécialiste des maladies mentales. Il est resté vingt-cinq ans en Occident et en est revenu avec une femme blanche. Il est là assis, [...] il a aperçu Fara, le plus décrié des inspecteurs d'Etat. [...] Fara est là, excité [...] Il a aperçu Anthiou, avocat général à la cour. Il a passé son agrégation de Lettres Classiques avant d'entreprendre des études de droit. [...] Il hurle avec la foule, [...] Dans la foule qui crie et gesticule Ndiogou reconnaît Monsieur Gartinet, parmi d'autres toubabs [blancs]. Monsieur Gartinet est là, en sueur, et il vibre de la passion de la foule] (*L'Appel* 141-143).

The linear mode of narration in *L'Appel des arènes* suggests as well the structural pattern of the classical *Buildungsroman*: The novel starts with a secluded childhood of Nalla, followed by his formal initiation, and ends with a symbolic scene of assimilation and maturity of the protagonist. The message of the scene in the arena needs no further explanation since it evidently stands for the possibility of uniting everyone without conflict in a festival atmosphere, one of sharing, of giving and of receiving, in a space which is paradoxically the seat of competition and confrontation. And that is why *L'Appel des arènes*, to use Jacques Chevrier's terms, is written from the mythic perspective that valorizes a full understanding of ancestral values, and at the same time as an opening to modernity.<sup>[20]</sup>

-- Too bad, Nalla sighed. So many wonderful things that you are telling me about don't exist any more!



-- Because "Cosaan" [tradition] is dying, my little one...

[-- C'est dommage, a soupiré Nalla. Tant de merveilleuses choses que tu me racontes n'existent plus !

-- Parce que « Cosaan » se meurt, mon petit...] (*L'Appel* 95).

Aminata Sow Fall's writing of the mythic thus reclaims a sense of the sacred in depicting the hero's journey as a process of reclaiming ancestral values in modern-day Africa. Her writing ultimately shows the transgeneric and transcultural nature of her work, since the inscription of orality is only part of her poetics of the novel in which ethnotextual features coexist with traces of readings of French literary texts. Hence we need to rethink the importance of African literary works from a polymorphous and multicultural perspective.

Finally, the revision of the *Buildungsroman*, as a postcolonial development of the genre, attests to the interplay between the typical and the indeterminate registers of textual experience, particularly in those works expressing modes of writing self or novel, self-defined identities. Typicality enables *knowledge*, while indeterminacy assures us of the possibility of *progressive change*.<sup>[21]</sup> It is certainly an appropriate form to address the questions of subjectivity and narrative agency, which Syrotinski places at the heart of Francophone African writing.

## Notes

[1] Le Revenant (1976), La Grève des Bàttu (1979), L'Appel des arènes (1982), L'Expère de la nation (1987), Le Jujubier du patriarche 1993), Douceurs du bercail (1998), and Festins de la détresse (2005).

[2] See Mickelsen, 418. In the The Empire Writes Back, Bill Ashcroft asserts that theories of style and genre, assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems are all radically questioned by the practices of postcolonial writing. See Ashcroft et al., 11.

[3] See Jost, 9. [Depuis Wilhelm Meister Lehrjahre (1795-96) de Goethe, le prototype reconnu du Bildungsroman, c'est l'expérience du monde ... [qui] est *une arène* [Emphasis mine], un terrain d'exercice où l'homme se fortifie... ] All translations are mine, including the English text of L'Appel des arènes.

[4] See Mickelsen, 418.

[5] However as Karailis notes, the recurrence of the term *Bildungsroman*, in such entities as the female *Bildungsroman*, the Caribbean *Bildungsroman*, and even the postmodern *Bildungsroman*, suggests that the genre is not quite dead. See Karailis, 63.

[6] See Braendlin, 77.

[7] The Wolof ethnic group constitutes the majority of the Senegalese population, and Wolof is spoken by a large number of people.

[8] That's why Braendlin affirms that in contemporary American literature the *Bildungsroman* portrays the particular identity and adjustment problems of people

whose sex or color renders them unacceptable to the dominant society. See Breandlin, 75-77.

[9] See Belinga, 42. [Le psychodrame relève autant de la 'praxis' psychanalytique que du rite d'initiation, dont l'influence, dans la création littéraire ou artistique, peut être plus ou moins profonde.]

[10] See Koné, 42.

[11] See Hovet, 18. These fugues also suggest the traditional trope of journeying found in the *Buildungsroman*.

[12] See Derive, 156.

[13] See Van Lent, 39.

[14] See Belinga, 44.

[15] See Kesteloot et B. Dieng, 252. [Le héros, Lat Dior, incarne toutes les valeurs qui informent l'agir des Wolof durant le XIXe siècle, la résistance à la colonisation et l'islam libérateur.]

[16] See Kesteloot et B. Dieng, 249-250. [L'épopée du Kajoor [...] résume les caractéristiques essentielles des épopées wolof [...] L'épopée wolof, qui charrie les éléments culturels des grands groupes ethniques de la sous-région, apparaît comme un lieu de synthèse et de redynamisation des schémas et motifs mythiques et épiques.]

[17] See Belinga, 44. [Les symboles sont une représentation, en permanence perceptible aux sens, de l'idéal moral proposé par l'initiation, dont ils constituent une image poétique.]

[18] As a consciousness-raiser, reconciler, or mediator, the African artist attempts to transform daily experience through inventing, in the liberated space of literature, a New

Discourse that will form the base of the new cultural space to come. [Éveilleur, médiateur ou réconciliateur, dans cet espace de liberté qu'est la littérature, l'artiste africain tente de métamorphoser le vécu quotidien par l'invention d'un Nouveau Discours fondateur de l'espace culturel à venir.] See Kazi-Tani, 64.

[19] See Kesteloot et Bodj, 23.

[20] See *Littératures africaines dans quelle(s) langue(s) ?*, 110.

[21] By describing textuality in terms of typicality and indeterminacy, Wells intends to affirm the representational power of literature at the same time that she respects the historicity of interpretation: The typicality register pertains to [...] the referential dimension of the work [...] its persuasive force. Indeterminacy, on the other hand, pertains to those aspects of literature that resist interpretation, either formally, because a work is logically undecidable, or referentially, because it violates received conventions of verisimilitude. See White, 210-211.

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