



rites of passage and the disruption of female education in Khady's *Mutilée*: A female Bildungsroman perspective

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Abstract

A rite of passage is a ceremonial event that marks an individual's transition from one social or religious status to another. Rites of passage in Khady's Mutilée are considered as a rigid convergence of cultural expectations and life-altering barriers that redirect a girl's path from a classroom to marriage. This is designed to enforce traditional or cultural conformity. Thus, this paper examines how rites of passage in Khady's Mutilée impede the educational development and personal growth of the protagonist, Khady. Drawing on the theoretical framework of the contemporary female Bildungsroman, the study argues that the cultural rituals imposed upon Khady, particularly female genital mutilation and the social expectations that follow initiation rites, interrupt her journey toward intellectual and psychological maturity. Thus, all these cultural rituals depicted in Mutilée are not considered as rites of passage but a violation of fundamental women's rights. Unlike the classical Bildungsroman in which the protagonist progresses toward self-realization and social integration, Khady's development is constrained by patriarchal traditions that redefine her identity primarily in terms of marriage and reproductive roles. Through close reading analysis, the paper demonstrates how Khady the writer, the narrator and the protagonist of Mutilée critiques the cultural practices that transform rites of passage into mechanisms of gendered control, thereby limiting girls' educational opportunities and reinforcing patriarchal domination. The narrative reveals that the convergence of initiation rituals and early marriage not only interrupts the educational trajectory of girls but also shapes their identity formation within a system that privileges patriarchal authority. Ultimately, the paper argues that Mutilée exposes the structural challenges confronting girls as they navigate the passage to womanhood in a hostile world, while simultaneously foregrounding the importance of education as a pathway toward autonomy and self-determination. This paper therefore recommends formal education as a weapon for African women to overcome hegemonic restrictions.

Keywords: *female Bildungsroman, initiation rites, early marriage, girls' education, patriarchy, Khady's Mutilée.*

Introduction

Bildungsroman, frequently equated with coming-of-age narratives, depicts the formative and intellectual development of individuals as they navigate social structures and attain self-awareness. However, feminist critics have argued that the traditional Bildungsroman often fails to account for the unique constraints faced by female protagonists. As Abel, Hirsch, and Langland (1983) note, the female Bildungsroman frequently depicts a conflict between individual aspirations and patriarchal expectations that restrict women's autonomy. In the context of African literature, this tension becomes particularly pronounced when cultural traditions interconnect with gender inequality.

Literally, on a daily basis, young girls face obstacle to education due to cultural norms and harmful practices, early marriage, poverty and violence. In view of this, African women literary writers in this contemporary era, have put pen to paper to identify and deconstruct (if not all) some of the profound socio-cultural ills that hinder the educational attainment of young girls' coming-of-age in androcentric societies.



Education is a right for all children irrespective of the gender. However, in some African societies, female children are still denied the right to education which makes it difficult for them to play equal roles with their male counterpart in patriarchal society. Historically, some cultures do not accommodate the education of females and when they do, girls are not granted the chance and support they need to thrive. Hence, some female children turn to be loafers.

Several scholars had explored initiation rites as fulfillment of tradition in the indigenous African society, but not much have been said on the initiation rituals as the violation of fundamental human rights of young girls in male dominated societies. To this end, this paper intends to unearth the negative effects of cultural rites on the education of young girls and women in Africa and particularly in Senegal through the African female Bildungsroman of Khady Koita's *Mutilée*.

Bildungsromane (plural form) according to (Bezhanova, (2014:5) offer a space where female writers and readers can explore how women's experiences advance their personal growth and analyse obstacles to such growth. Bildungsromane, thus, become a shared territory where female writers and readers can discuss different scenarios of development, voice their concerns about the problematic aspects of growing up female, and participate in a joint effort of resolving the issues facing them. By situating Khady's narrative within the framework of the contemporary female Bildungsroman, the study highlights how the protagonist's coming-of-age journey is marked by tension, resistance, and the negotiation of oppressive cultural norms. Khady through her personal experiences, exposes the contradictions inherent in cultural practices that claim to preserve tradition and to prepare her for womanhood but instead become instruments that undermine her educational prospects and personal autonomy.

The Concept of Initiation Rites

Initiation rites are regarded as sacred ceremonies that transform an individual's social or sexual status. Initiation into adulthood for young girls and women is a sacred rite of passage that many people accept as cultural values in African societies. At this stage, parents or community prepare young girls for their deeper development or growth when they are on the brink of middle age; to make them become "real women". Hipple (2019) quoted Fraizer John, "When you come through the initiation process, you are officially a man or woman. You know it, society knows it, and you are prepared for the tasks at hand and the entirely different situation because you go through a training process to learn all your new roles in society." In this regard, initiation period is painstakingly an education ground whereby young girls and boys are being prepared to learn new things about life and culture that will transform them from one social position to another. The acquisition of these new cultural values may tend to be detrimental to female children.

Van Gennep (2003) elucidates rites of passage as ceremonial devices used by societies to mark the passage or transition of an individual or a group from one social status or situation to another. According to him, rites of passage resolve *life-crises*; they provide a mechanism to deal with the tension experienced by both individuals and social groups during ambiguous occasions including, but not limited to, birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Rites of passage function to accomplish status transitions; they provide a mechanism for individuals and their societies to recognise those who negotiate the rites as intrinsically different beings. (Van Gennep cited in *International Encyclopaedia*: 2003).

Van Gennep explains further that rites of passage fall into three phases: separation, transition and incorporation. In the first phase, people withdraw from the group and move from one place or status to another. The second stage which is also referred to as liminal stage is when the ritual or initiation is properly done. During this period, one's sense of identity hangs up to some extent during the period of transition. In the third phase, the initiators reintegrate back into the society, having completed the rites.



Ampim (2003) in his own turn identifies five stages of rites of passage that are essential to human growth and development: rite to birth, rite to adulthood, rite to marriage, rite to eldership and rite to ancestorship. Ampim further states that “initiation rites are a natural and necessary part of a community, as are arms and legs natural and necessary extension of the human body.” In essence, initiation rites and human beings are inseparable. Following the above notions, it is noted that during the process of becoming adulthood, an individual undergoes certain rituals to change status, identity or to metamorphose to adulthood. Thus, the person involved, changes and grows into “responsible, community-oriented adults.... or, to the next more mature phase. In some African countries, coming-of-age rituals are not taken for granted. This is because society looks down on someone who has not undergone the process of traditional initiation and regardless of the person’s age, he is not viewed as a “full grown adult”.

All human beings pass through transitional stages, but women's lives are especially marked by changes, which force them to another level of direction. For instance, the experience of genital mutilation, menstrual cycle, stage of pregnancy and even motherhood among the rest are changes that transform young girls coming-of-age to adulthood. There are also physical changes when the breasts start showing, there are emotional changes when a girl starts socializing to the world and learn from people, and there are intellectual changes when a girl awakens to her consciousness to question all the obnoxious coming-of-age rituals.

The initiation process of young girls as revealed in Khady Koita’s *Mutilée*, starts when they undergo important life events such as female genital mutilation, menstrual cycle (girls), ritual bath, virginity test and a knock on the head. All these serve as an indicator that the teenagers are mature, ripened for marriage and sexual union. Having crossed the hurdles of all these rituals, it means one has come-of-age or somewhat reached the stage of maturity or adulthood. Thus, all the aforementioned rituals change Khady’s identity in *Mutilée* and also divest her fundamental human rights.

Rites of Passage and the Interruption of Female Education

Female genital mutilation as a violent rite of passage

A central component of Khady’s initiation is female genital mutilation which is traumatic and coercive experience. The female genital mutilation in Khady’s *Mutilée* is served to integrate individuals into the social fabric of their communities. However, such a rite is portrayed by Khady as a mechanism that redefine the identity of young girls according to patriarchal expectations. Female genital mutilation (Salindé) is presented as a ritual of purification under the guise of Islamic religion, which is nothing but a myth. The reality dawn on the author when she gets to know that female genital mutilation has nothing to do with religion but just for men’s domination. “Seule la domination en est la vraie raison” (P.16). She affirms :

La grand-mère nous annonce que nous allons être salindé pour « pourvoir prier » ce qui veut dire [...] « être purifiées pour accéder la prière ». En français : “excisées » [...] « coupées ». (Mutilée 15)

[The grandmother announces to us that we are going to be salindé “to be able to pray” which means “to be purified, to have access to prayer” In French, “excised” [...] “cut up”.] *My translation*

Khady describes her coming of age ritual thus:

. Les jambes écartées. [...] La dame chargée de l’opération dispose d’une lame de rasoir [...] Elle tire avec ses doigts, [...] ce minuscule morceau de chair et coupe comme si elle tranchait un morceau de viande de zébu. (19) C’est une douleur inexplicable (Mutilée 20)

[The legs apart. [...]. The woman in charge of the operation held a razor blade. She pulls with her fingers, this tiny bit of flesh and cut as if she was cutting a piece of bull meat. It is an indescribable pain.] *(My translation)*



For Khady, initiation marks the moment when her role within the community shifts dramatically. Once she undergoes the ritual, she is no longer treated as a child whose primary responsibility is learning. Instead, she is regarded as a woman who must prepare for marriage and domestic life. Thus, womanhood is defined not by intellectual maturity or personal growth but by conformity to tradition. Within the framework of the female Bildungsroman, such a definition undermines the protagonist's opportunity for self-development. Rather than facilitating Khady's growth, the ritual imposes a predetermined identity that restricts her educational aspirations. This physical violence of the initiation ritual is accompanied by deep psychological trauma that further undermines Khady's educational prospects. The pain and humiliation she experiences leave lasting emotional scars that affect her sense of self-worth and confidence. Her suffering becomes a barrier to intellectual engagement, illustrating how cultural violence can erode the psychological foundations necessary for learning. Within the framework of the female Bildungsroman, psychological resilience is essential for the protagonist's journey toward maturity. However, Khady's traumatic initiation disrupts this process, leaving her emotionally vulnerable and socially constrained.

Patriarchal Authority and the Regulation of the Female Body

Beyond the immediate violence of the ritual, the novel illustrates how patriarchal power operates through the regulation of the female body. Khady's initiation represents a moment when the community asserts its authority over her future. By subjecting her to the ritual, society symbolically claims ownership of her body and identity. This dynamic reflects broader feminist critiques of patriarchal systems in which women's bodies are treated as sites of social control. Firestone (1970) argues that patriarchal societies often maintain their dominance by regulating female sexuality and reproductive capacity. According to Khady, it is men that instigate female genital mutilation and compel women to execute the operation. In addition, the reasons why they want women to be circumcised as manifested in the text are:

Assurer leur pouvoir, croire que leurs épouses n'iraient pas vers d'autres géniteurs, ou que les hommes des tribus ennemies ne les violeraient pas ! D'autres explications, encore plus absurdes, voudraient que le sexe des femmes soit impur, diabolique [...] (Mutilée 16)

[To affirm their power, to believe that their wives would not go after other men, or that enemies from other tribes would not rape them! Other more absurd explanations were that female organs are impure and diabolical [...] (My translation)

In view of this, initiation rites perform precisely this function. The ritual effectively transforms Khady into a socially acceptable woman whose primary role is to serve the expectations of men and the community. Her body becomes a symbol of cultural continuity, ensuring that traditional norms remain intact. However, this symbolic function comes at the cost of her personal autonomy and educational potential.

Early Marriage and the Restriction of Educational Aspirations

Following her initiation, Khady is expected to transition into marriage and domestic life. In the cultural framework depicted in the novel, initiation signifies that a girl has reached the stage where she can assume the responsibilities of a wife and mother. It is affirmed in the text,

A partir du moment où une fille est réglée et que les seins sont visibles, les parents pensent qu'elle est prête à être mariée. Et ils souhaitent un mari le plus vite possible (Mutilée 51)

[The moment a girl starts menstruating and the breasts are visible, the parents think she is ready to be married off. And they crave for a husband as soon as possible.] My translation

This ideology of early marriage announces another rite of passage which is "a knock on the head". This particular rite of passage symbolises that a girl-child is ripe for marriage in Senegal. Khady,



while discussion with her grandmother, one of her elder sister's friends rushes in and gives her a small knock on the head which is an indicator that Khady is already married off. This is exemplified in the excerpt below:

Une amie de ma sœur aînée arrive un courant et me donne un petit coup de poing sur la tête. [...] Et là, j'ai compris. C'est fini. Ils m'ont mariée à la mosquée. Le coup de poing est le signal. (Mutilée 55).

[One of my elder sister's friends runs in, and gives me a knock on the head. [...] And there, I understood it is finished. They have got me wedded in the mosque. The knock is the signal] (*My translation*)

At this juncture, Khady's education has grounded to a halt, she is overwhelmed with sadness. Her mother warned her not to go out again, not to move close to boys and she should not talk to them. According to her, she is mischievous and difficult to control but never meant any harm. Sneaking out to chat with her boyfriends and girlfriends is just a game. Khady is entrapped by marriage: she can no longer do whatever she likes. This scenario makes her to be psychologically and emotionally devastated.

According to Soninke tradition, when a young woman is married, an agreement is reached among men and the ceremony takes place without her in the mosque. However, in a utopian society, where the society is perfect, it is absurd to marry a girl off in absentia and to an unknown man. Khady's consciousness is awakened, she knows exactly what the problem is but she dares not challenge the tradition in order not to be ostracised. Khady expresses her feelings that she sits there like an idiot, passive and incapable to react to the confirmation of her new status. « *C'est notre destinée. Donc, il est impensable de dire non* » (*Mutilée*, 50). [It is our destiny. So, it is unthinkable to say no]. And if any girl says no, the response is "*Tu l'aimeras plus tard*" [You will love him later] (*Mutilée*, 51). To buttress her argument further, she reveals : « *Une fille qui refuse ce que les parents lui proposent tombera forcément sur un mauvais mari !* » (*Mutilée*, 52) [A girl that refuses whomever the parents propose will possibly fall on a bad husband] (*My translation*)

Khady as a young girl is totally submissive to her parents' wish, so as not to put the family honour in jeopardy. And to reach for self-culture or seek her own voice placed the protagonist in the position of a rebel or criminal to society.

This compliant attitude of Khady is refuted by Malimouna, the *bildungsroman* heroine of Fatou Kéïta's *Rebelle*. Through confrontation and violence, Malimouna rejects every initiation revolving around coming-of-age rituals. She defies Female Genital Mutilation, child marriage, virginity test and all the rest.

In Khady's *Mutilée*, the *Soninke* perpetuates self-imposed traditions instead of creating an enabling future for their daughters. Child marriage usually marks the end of a girl's education, restricting her chance of developing skills that can help her achieve economic survival and also rid the prospective children out of poverty. This expectation has profound implications for Khady's education. Once she is considered marriageable, the community no longer prioritizes her schooling, instead, her future is envisioned within the confines of the household. And barely at the age of thirteen and half years old, she is married off to an unknown cousin Moussa. « *La demande en mariage d'un cousin inconnu [...] à treize ans et demie* » (*Mutilée* 48).

Within the structure of the female *Bildungsroman*, such an early transition into marriage represents a significant interruption of the protagonist's developmental journey. Rather than pursuing intellectual growth, Khady is forced to conform to domestic roles that limit her independence. Thus, Khady highlights how cultural norms surrounding marriage can restrict girls' access to education and economic autonomy.

Tradition and the Struggle for Female Empowerment

The genre of female *Bildungsroman* is adopted by Khady to portray her own coming-of-age experiences. Khady's experience is literally a matter of life and death and that is why the genre of coming-of-age is labelled as a wilderness survival novel (near-death-experience). Khady's narrative ultimately highlights the tension between traditional cultural practices and the modern ideal of



education as a pathway to empowerment. While the community views initiation as an essential cultural institution, the novel reveals the harmful consequences it has for young girls.

This tension reflects broader debates within African feminist thought regarding the need to reevaluate cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality. As Oyèwùmí (1997) argues, gender hierarchies in many societies are maintained through institutions that regulate women's identities and social roles. By depicting her suffering, Khady invites readers to question the legitimacy of traditions that restrict female autonomy. The novel suggests that genuine cultural progress requires a critical examination of practices that undermine the intellectual and personal development of women.

Conclusion

Khady, through her autobiographical text, exposes the detrimental effects of certain rites of passage on girls' educational attainment and personal development. Rather than facilitating the transition to empowered adulthood, the initiation rituals depicted in the novel reinforce patriarchal norms that limit female autonomy. When examined through the lens of the contemporary female Bildungsroman, Khady's experience represents a disrupted coming-of-age narrative. The rites that are meant to prepare her for womanhood instead derail her educational aspirations and subject her to a system of social control.

Having considered the physical and psychological trauma Khady passes through, this paper finds out that coming-of-age rituals like those treated in this article, violate the fundamental human rights of Khady and any other girl-child in male-dominated society. It is also discovered that coming-of-age rituals deter Khady's progress and impede her educational achievement. Finally, it is critically observed that initiation rituals have nothing to do with religion; the only reason behind it, is men's domination. Youssafai (2013) categorically stated in United Kingdom, when she was delivering her speech on 'the right to education of every child', avows, "Let us pick up our books and our pens. They are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher and one book, one pen can change the world. Education is the only solution. Education first." As a survivor, Khady uses her pen as a tool to reconstruct and restore the identity and dignity of womanhood. She conserves new ideologies that undermine the socially imposed traditions called rites of passage in a male-dominated society.

Therefore, to eradicate illiteracy, education is not attached to one particular gender; every child either male or female has the right to be educated. However, Education is the only weapon that will make women economically buoyant, liberate young girls and women from fetters of poverty and servitude status.

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