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**Dr. Mansour Gueye**  
African and Postcolonial  
Studies Laboratory,  
Cheikh Anta Diop University,  
Dakar, Senegal

## **Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*: A new path to women empowerment**

**Dr. Mansour Gueye**

### **Abstract**

This article addresses the woman question under the sway of patriarchal order in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. The novelty of the work resides in its aim to provide an insightful overview of restrictive traditional conventions that work together with the fashionable dharma and principles at the same time to subdue and alienate woman who is stripped of her voice and identity. The paper shows that, contrarily to most pioneers of African women writers whose portrayal of the woman subject spins around her victimization, *per se*, Bâ's novel under study paves the way for the resistant woman whose resilience sows the seeds of rampant African feminism that will surely bear out the true voice that will retrieve the African woman her dignity and privileged status for a more balanced-world.

**Keywords:** African woman-conventions-identity-feminism-voice

### **Introduction**

The bulk of modern African literature extols the writing talent of male writers at the expense of women who are generally depicted as minor characters. The ostracism women have seen in the literary field is paradoxically similar to the same Euro-centric and exclusivist views as regards the denial of African civilization, if we consider the work of some Western thinkers, which ultimately gives credence to African scholars' refutation of the heresy. It is in this context we should understand Omotade Adegbindin's re-evaluation of the Hegelian Dialectic he views as a scar that should be wiped out on the face of the African continent:

[Hegel's] work on Africa is said to glorify Ancient Greece, while ignominiously and grotesquely denigrates Africans, whom he sees as children in the forest, unaffected by the movement of history. (Adegbindin, 2015: 20) [2].

Likewise, in his poem *Femme noire*, Leopold Sédar Senghor celebrates the divine beauty of Black woman, but does not truly use his poetic talent he is known for to confer upon the Black woman a power that goes beyond her aesthetic nature. This oddity does not escape Charles C. Fonchingong's critical view. In his work "Unbinding Gender Narratives in African Literature", he comes back to that uneven depiction of the woman subject: '[b]y omission or commission, most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalization of women.' In this context, female characters are made marginal to the plot of the fiction, while only a few emerge as powerful and credible protagonist. (Fonchingong, 2006:135) [5].

If one reads between the lines it comes clear that the unrecognition of women's worth in the literary field is a knock-on effect of sexism that stemmed from the double colonization of African with the patriarchal order and colonization.

However, disappointing the depiction of woman is, still African women writers like Flora Nwapa, Nadime Gordimer, Ama Ata Aidoo, to name but a few, take fresh heart to debunk the negative views that pessimistic writers hold on them in their writings. It is in this frame the work of the Senegalese female writer, Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, is studied at length as the novel brings to the fore the complete question of woman woven from the fibres of "two sisters in arms" sad experience and whose lives are mostly channelled by the weary social conventions totally moulded from the author's religious context.

The analysis is thoroughly engrained in African feminism. That is, at a larger scale, it talks into consideration the empowerment of African woman aligned on her African realities.

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Mansour Gueye**  
African and Postcolonial  
Studies Laboratory,  
Cheikh Anta Diop University,  
Dakar, Senegal

Thus, Bâ's novel blends together the concerns of the Senegalese traditional woman and the unyielding Islamic dharma in a totally changing society in order to give voice to the "subaltern" woman on restrictive mythical questions that entrap her progress.

As a structure, we divide the paper into two main points. In the first point, we will be analysing the deceitful nature of man through the concepts of hope and despair in his social interaction with woman. The second point will be articulated on the committed stance of Mariama Bâ seen through "the new path to empowerment".

### Hope and Despair

Hope, the same as moral values, is one of the cardinal ideals that governs and energizes people's lives in their quest for happiness. From a psychologist's perspective:

A hopeful disposition usually makes us feel happier, and feeling well often strengthens our hope for a good future. However, both hope and subjective well-being can take different forms, and the relationship between hope and subjective well-being is sometimes ambiguous. (Peeging and others, 2019) <sup>[11]</sup>

History has also shown that during slavery in America, the quest for a happier life was nurtured by a strong feeling of hope to gain freedom, which explained the aspirations of people to leave the South for the North, a grim reminder of despair for them, for the Promised Land.

However, the connectivity between hope and despair in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, is grounded in the issue of woman and the intersection of culture, religion, modernity and the side effects of colonization on Africans in general and on Senegalese women in particular. Although, they have gained their sovereignty, the way of life and thinking of most African people are captured in the past. Change blows in the wind along with its drawbacks with a rear of hope and despondency.

For instance, in the prime of their lives, Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou and their friends are portrayed as ambitious school girls whose future looks bright. They are counted among the chosen few who have the chance to go to school, a pledge of success and emancipation where they also embrace a western culture that would secure them an outlook on the world and free reign of their ideologies and aspirations:

Aïssatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an 'uncommon' destiny. Together [...]. To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstitions and customs, 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. (Bâ, 15-16) <sup>[3]</sup>.

The interesting point that stands out from the epistolary exchange between Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou is the reminiscence of the intelligent lively girls they used to be. It also provides the place of hope and the role of colonial school in the formation of *self* of the young girls. The confession that Ramatoulaye makes regarding the headmistress also shows the trust they have in her in initiating them into becoming assimilated women. But from a postcolonial perspective, the initiation of Ramatoulaye and her age-group is biased as it is moulded around a western-type category inflicted to them by the White woman under the disguise of school to indoctrinate them. Even though, the

young school girls are blindfolded by the hope that should change their living conditions, the type of education they are given at colonial school will not leave unscathed their imagination and value judgement about the relevance or irrelevance of their traditional values.

Thus it is noteworthy to emphasize the deep-based relationships of the female protagonists with their would-be husbands, woven from unconditional love, faithfulness and hope, to understand the extent to which they are cheated by life and men.

In fact, the novel under study juggles simultaneously hope and despair regarding the female subject. It is undeniable that the indoctrination of African indigenous people is centred on education which explains the plethora of churches and schools in settler-type colonies and exploiting colonies in Africa. In modern African literature, school is therefore seen as a double-edge knife: first as a misleading place, but mostly as a medium that paves the way for success and guarantees assimilation.

In fact, the juxtaposition of hope and despair is fully evidenced in *So Long a Letter*. For example, the issue of happiness and its connectivity to marriage is intensively explored. Under the yoke of patriarchy, the empowerment of women is uncertain and marriage appears as a hope and means through which the woman subject can lean on to acquiesce in her subjugation, though in traditional Africa marriage generally "enriches" the family of the bride at her expense. In her semi-autobiographical novel, *Second-Class Citizen*, The Nigerian female writer, Buchi Emecheta, comes back on the crucial need for her parents to accelerate her marriage to rescue the ambition of her brother and that of the whole family:

Time went by quickly, and when she reached the age of eleven, people started asking her when she was going to leave school. This was an urgent question because the fund for Boy's education was running low; Ma was not happy with her new husband and it was considered time that Adah started making a financial contribution to her family. This terrified Adah." (Emecheta, 1974: 18) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Emecheta shows the extent to which patriarchy can alienate woman. Marriage which should change the social status of woman and be a shift in her life turns out to be the peak of female "objectification" as it strips her of her pride and dignity. But in *So Long a Letter*, the issue of marriage is not solely portrayed in a bad light, it also provides a tinge of hope and deceitfulness of male ego.

In the beginning, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are optimistic about marriage. Their respective husbands, Modou Fall and Mawdo Bâ, are of the same age group and school mates as them and have grown up in the same social milieu. The unconditional love and dedication they have for their suitors entice them to get into marriage without reservation. Unfortunately, after many years of marriage, regret and contempt overtake their one true love as both are disappointed after the separation with their husbands, i.e., before he dies, Modou Fall relinquishes Ramatoulaye, his heartfelt love, to satisfy his sexual inclinations and marries Young Binetou. Likewise, Aïssatou experiences a watershed with her husband who has replaced her with his mother's namesake, Young Nabou, which rakes up the bone of contention between her own family and her in-laws who look down at her as someone who does not belong:

With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal. His abandonment of his first family (myself and

my children) was the outcome of the choice of a new life. He rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account. (BÂ, 1981:10) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Ramatoulaye is deeply touched and cannot understand the extent to which men could be cruel, particularly coming from the very man she has sacrificed her life for. To think about it, she also seems to be flabbergasted about the cynical attitude of her husband towards his offspring.

It is essential to note here that the bone of contention between the female protagonists, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou, and their husbands, Modou Fall and Mawdo Bâ, is not *per se* polygamy, but the very reasons why they are set to take a second wife, i.e., why after so many years of sacrifice and “happiness” there comes a cloud that emanates from a female body, close to the family, to mess up their harmonious life with the back of their hand?

Through the experience of her female characters, Bâ invites her readers to ponder over the pervasive issue of marriage, but more precisely over the issue of polygamy in the Islamic context and how important is the recognition of merit and self-sacrifice for women after years of companionship.

Likewise, even though the two women, Binetou and Young Nabou, who rob Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou of their heartfelt, out of revenge or materialistic drive, they are not left unscathed as they are entangled in a web of deceit. By substituting for their ‘sisters’ their statute of married they pretend to achieve the pinnacle of hope, but their so-called happiness is eventually mitigated by the pitfalls of the deed.

In her novel, *One is Enough*, Floran Nwapa comes back to the vicinity of love, hope and despair. But Nwapa seems to center her story more on the pervasive issue of barrenness and masculinity that impede women empowerment. After six good years of marriage, Amaka is shocked and disappointed by her husband, Obiora, who, somehow, like Modou Fall and Mawdo Bâ, in *So Long a Letter*, has an affair with a woman with whom he got two children out of wedlock. It is true that Mariama Bâ weaves her story around her background culture through mainly the category of polygamy, modernity and tradition, but still can be likened to Flora Nwapa’s perspective as, at a point in her life, the female protagonist queries the existentialist function of marriage:

[...] God had deprived her of the greatest blessing bestowed on a woman, the joy of being a mother. [...] Was that really the end of the world? Was she useless to society if she were not a mother? Was she useless to the world if she were unmarried? Surely? Why then was suffering these indignities both from her husband and his mother? (Nwapa, 1992:20) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Both writers posit that in the beginning, the relationship between women and men can be unbiased and nurtured by love that gives a rear of hope, but the cohabitation of harsh cultures, religion and modernity is often a heavy weight for women. Moreover, seen from a postcolonial feminist perspective, Bâ shows a displacement of emphasis regarding the disappointment of women attached to marriage. In other words, when everything is said and done, she rearticulates her discourse on the disillusionment that prevails at nation-wide after independence and talks about joblessness, poverty, corruption and the mismanagement of her own country in particular and African in general. Through the intensive conversation between Ramatoulaye and the member of the parliament and admirer, Tamsir, Bâ hits the nail on the head:

[...] We have a right, just as you have, to education, which we ought to be able to pursue to the furthest limits of our intellectual capacities. We have a right to equal well-paid employment, to equal opportunities. (Bâ, 1981: 63) <sup>[3]</sup>.

### The Voice for a New Beginning

Analyzing Yvonne Vera’s work in his essay, “Language, Voice and Presence in Under the Tongue and Without a Name”, Kizito Z. Muchemwa gives prominence to the female voice:

Three meanings of voice that can be isolated are ‘speech’, ‘the power to articulate’, and ‘authority to speak oneself, others and the world. The first meaning, ‘speech’ [...] allows characters to engage in significant speech acts [...] Possession of speech is an indicator of presence and privilege; lack of it is a sign of want and absence. The second meaning, ‘the power to articulate’, denotes the ability to protest and indict. Vera’s fiction exhibits this aspect of the voicing of wrongs done to women in a patriarchal culture. The third meaning, ‘the authority to speak oneself, others and the world’, is central to Vera’s entire feminist creative enterprise.... (Muchemwa, 2002: 4) <sup>[8]</sup>.

In another novel by the Zimbabwean writer, Yvonne Vera, *Nehanda*, Meg Samuelson explains the crucial need for a voice for women, as well as men, to speak out and take a stand regarding the exploitation of their own people under the yoke of the colonial system coupled with traditional beliefs that deprive a woman, specially, of her freedom. What is interesting here is that, the mere fact of showing women as victims is an acute way of taking a side and fighting back structural violence. In her novel, Vera portrays her main protagonist as a commander in chief to unshackle the chains that bar her people from freeing themselves from gender discrimination and retrieving the lost land from the White man:

Yvonne Vera’s writing offers a critique of colonialism, oppositional nationalism and patriarchal structures, and their customary ideas of land ownership and control over the female body.... Silence is posed as the standard response to the trauma and national rape.... This silence operates most fully under the restrictions of taboo, which mute the cry of pain from the female body.” (Samuelson, 2002:15) <sup>[12]</sup>.

In his book, *Chinua Achebe et La Tragédie de l’Histoire*, Thomas Melone studies Achebe’s male protagonists who naturally go from rags-to-riches and sudden twilight of life as a “circular fate”:

The story of man in Achebe's novel can be represented by a circular curve where the point of fall, at the brink of death, always merges with the point of departure. Man always comes out of nothingness and by a desperate attempt tries to rise to the top of society and happiness, then always falls back into nothingness, after the explosion of the final drama. (Melone, 1973: 204, translation mine) <sup>[7]</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Melone: L’histoire de l’homme dans l’oeuvre d’Achebe peut être représentée par une courbe circulaire où le point de chute, au terme de l’existence, vient toujours se confondre avec le pont de départ. L’homme y sort toujours du néant et par une tentative désespérée essaie de s’élever au plus haut de la société et du Bonheur, puis retombe dans le néant, après l’explosion du drame final.

In contrast to almost all African male writers literary works whose heroes' life trajectories are portrayed with a juxtaposition of a bad and bright light, African women writers like, Mariama Bâ, come up with the same ascendant or "uphill depiction" of woman that tilts the balance away from bondage, masculinity, sexism and patriarchy as a whole.

In fact, it is from the above that we should analyze the quest of identity and happiness through women's voice in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. Bâ's female protagonists, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou, are fully conscious of the trials and tribulations of the African traditional woman whose life is more steeped in their community's male-oriented dharma than their own aspiration and apprehensive state of mind. On top of that, their Islamic faith is antagonistic to any form of rebellion, disgust or disrespectfulness from women towards men and elderly people, to say nothing of those who no longer belong to the living land. From then on, the struggle of Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou is between themselves and the community, but also the dead people.

In traditional Igbo society, the individual must act and react as his ancestors would in any circumstances. Ancestral deeds are the reference and jurisprudence book for society. That is why a few characters in Achebe's novels face the delicate problem of adaptation and strategies building in front of unexpected situations such as the invasion of Igboland by white missionaries and, later on, by colonizers. (Sow, 2008: 287) <sup>[14]</sup>.

Even though Igbo people's lives, as discussed in Achebe's work, are controlled by metaphysical forces that lead them off the path to salvation, the lives and empowerment of Bâ's female protagonists cover the same ground as her male writers since their empowerment is constantly hindered by restrictive forces engrained in pure social inventions that prevent their personal growth. This actual fact betokens the *legerdemain* and acuteness through which the main feisty female characters carry out their little quirks to take a stand. The death of Modou Fall, Ramatoulaye's husband, represents a turning point in the novel as the event makes her recognize her true friends and enemies. More still, this moment is a tipping point in the sense that it is epitomized as the rupture with the submissive and acquiescent woman she once was to start life anew with more assertiveness, truculence and pride. It is traditionally known that, there are myriads of superstitions and conventional norms that impede a woman to enjoy life and redeem herself especially during her forty-day mourning period and widowhood, ranging from the issue of hygiene to the nagging problem of (re)marriage:

Today is Friday I have taken a refreshing bath. I can feel its revitalizing effect, which, through my open pores, soothes me [...] Clean clothes replace crumpled ones. The cleanliness of my body pleases me. I think that as she is the object of attraction for so many years, cleanliness is one of the essential qualities of a woman. The most humble of huts is pleasing when it is clean, the most luxurious setting offers no attraction if it is covered in dust. Those women we call 'house'-wives deserve praise. The domestic work they carry out, and which is not paid for in hard cash, is essential to the home (Bâ, 1981: 66) <sup>[3]</sup>

While extolling the legitimacy and merits of hygiene through the mouthpiece of her main protagonists, Bâ celebrates the traditional African women who contend themselves with pleasing men and devoting their time to the education and

the personal development of their children without expecting anything in return, but the satisfaction and happiness of their husbands. Analyzing sexuality and the condition of women in her essay, "Procreation Not Recreation: Decoding Mama in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*", Marie Umeh contends that:

[T]he glory of a woman is a man; a woman without a son is a failure; marriage is for the production of male heirs to continue the husband's lineage; and a complete woman is a mother of healthy sons. These codes give voice to the historical regression of female sexuality in African society. (Umeh, 1996: 192) <sup>[15]</sup>.

As the maturity and the conscience of some of Bâ's subordinated female characters merge, they raise awareness about the fight for their own freedom. That is what justifies the solidarity and strong ties that unite the two main protagonists, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou, upon which any subaltern woman should build their connectivity with other people for the sake of liberty and a shared identity. Analyzing the concept of friendship in Toni Morrison's work from a psychologist perspective, Elizabeth Abel contends that:

Identification in friendship becomes a means of mutual recognition instead of an obstacle to objectivity, and interpretation turns into a self-reflexive enterprise as each psyche gains definition through relation to the other. (Abel, 1981: 421) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Even if postcolonial feminism is specifically rooted in voicing categories that subdue African women's cultural, economic and social progress, what stands out beyond all is the pervasiveness of gender violence in the main stream narrative across the world. The commonality of gender violence thus suggests togetherness, solidarity and openness in the strategies used by women for their empowerment. This actual fact validates the audacity of Mariama Bâ to align the female voice on a strong spirit of solidarity, sisterhood, daughter-mother love and friendship of the new African woman.

With regard to all this reality, there lies in to give strains of adjacent female voices that act as foils of change. In *So Long a Letter*, Bâ adheres to the idea that, the materialization of women's freedom is not a solitary struggle, but a joint resolution of women, from all walks of life, to subdue the common injustice: violence. In the novel under review, the author comes up with a profound notion of the main characters' spiritualism, mutual respect totally engrained in analytical psychology through the concept of *individuation, self-recognition and maturity* that the philosopher, Carl Jung <sup>[9]</sup>, sees as a stage from which the individual extirpates himself from the obscure and depressive world to reinvent himself/herself for his/her personal growth.

The abrupt disappointment Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou experience from their respective husbands, Modou and Mawdo, and the similarity of their own destiny grow into a rising tide of friendship that helps them rebound after the spate of misfortunes that befall them. The epistolary acumen of their relationship yields a catalytic impact on the way they foresee the future of woman. They vow to bar the way to any patriarchal or matriarchal order and sexist inclinations that come to subdue them. In reality, a closer scrutiny of Bâ's *So Long a Letter* shows her uncompromising stance to advocate women's empowerment. For instance, the character of Aunt Nabou is

portrayed as a leading figure in the emasculation of man and the objectification of women since she is qualified, by right of tradition, to enact decisions that demote men, as well as women by one grade. The bone of contention between Aïssata and Mawdo roots in her right to interfere in family politics and social matters, at a larger scale, which is fully accountable by the concept of *solipsism*<sup>[16]</sup> totally engrained in her. Cheikh A. Kane comes back to the same female power lust and nobility through the character of The Most Royal Lady in his *Ambiguous Adventure*. The two female characters in the aforementioned novels, Aunt Nabou and The Most Royal Lady, are at the borderline between power and a decaying society that values people's worth not from a "strong breed", but from righteousness.

### Conclusion

In her *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Bâ astutely juggles the pervasiveness of the alienation of women with a breakthrough in the making up of female empowerment. Bâ cuts deep in the various categories that generally alienate women worldwide and Senegalese women in particular. The novelty of her satire is her ability to articulate the subordination of woman on what I call the "smartness" of man to invent a social dharma that constantly projects him on the top and continually rejects woman on the peripheries. In the novel under review, Bâ draws the reader's attention to the straightness that governs Islam and the Senegalese society. In fact, she contends that religion should come first as a guiding light to man, especially for woman, but in no way should it sap her strength to such an extent that her faith in religion and the fact that she abides by the law society dictates should lead her astray from the path to freedom and emancipation. As such, Mariama Bâ blows the whistle on any form of violence against woman under the disguise of patriarchy through categories such as colonialism, poverty, modernity, marriage versus betrayal, unusual mourning rituals imposed upon woman that yoke together to devalue her human status.

But with regard to the high amplitude of violence against women, the authoress does not merely suffice to highlight the facts out, but rather contributes to breaking loose from the *feminine* portrayal of woman in modern African literature. After many twists and turns of life of the leading female protagonists, they find a new voice woven from the fibres of friendship and sisterhood that help them "upset the setup" and reinvent themselves for a more egalitarian society in a world of globalization.

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