

Mariama Bâ and the Politics of the Family

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In describing the relatively late "coming to writing" of Senegalese women in the mid to late 1970s, Christopher Miller, in his chapter on Mariama Bâ in *Theories of Africans*, places the following statement in a footnote:

On the subject of Bâ's biography, and in considering the belated entry of women in the literary tradition, it would be wrong to ignore the fact that Mariama Bâ had nine children and a career as a teacher before turning to novel-writing. (273)

But Miller is strangely silent on why "it would be wrong" to ignore this fact. He seems to be implying that motherhood and teaching careers have been incompatible with novel-writing, given time constraints.¹ I would like to approach Bâ's motherhood and teaching career from a slightly different perspective, one that considers the politics of the family in a changing Senegal and suggests that Bâ's life experiences as mother and teacher enable her to comment with special insight on how the Senegalese might negotiate the vast social and cultural changes occurring in Senegal in the late 1970s.

In *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long A Letter*), the first feminist novel in Senegal (1979), Mariama Bâ's central character affirms that "La réussite d'une nation passe . . . irrémédiablement par la famille" (130) 'The success of a nation . . . depends inevitably on the family' (89), and she outlines some progressive measures that might be taken within the family to rebuild a society that has been "ébranlée dans ses assises les plus profondes, tiraillée entre l'attrait des vices importés, et la résistance farouche des vertus anciennes" (106) 'shaken to its very foundations, torn between the attraction of imported vices and the fierce resistance of old virtues' (73). Bâ has established a mother as her central character, and Ramatoulaye speaks at length about her experiences as a mother and her shifting relationships with her children in a changing Senegal. To understand the political import of Bâ's focus on the mother, however, one must read this novel against the background of cultural, social, and political events in Senegal in the 1970s.

It is important to state at the outset that I will be reading Bâ in the context of the kind of subversive "journalism-vérité" called for by the

Francophone African philosopher Paulin Hountondji, rather than through the lens of French feminist theory of the 1970s (more on this later). In "Daily Life in Africa: Elements for a Critique," Hountondji explains that "journalism-vérité" is a purposely anecdotal reconstruction of facts combined with organization and interpretation that leads readers to an awareness of the real conditions of daily life and exposes the structures that make them possible. Similar to the project proposed by Henri Lefebvre in *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, although different in that Hountondji's plan is Africa-specific, Hountondji calls for a demystification, a "return to what is real beyond the pretentious stream of discourses that obscure it" (361). As he puts it:

The critique of the everyday must bring to light this weighty system that clutches at our heels and which we ended up by accepting as normal through sheer habit. The critique must identify this familiar system and make it recognizable. . . . (362)

Hountondji has not been the only African to encourage African writers to focus attention on the real conditions of daily life. In the 1970s, the Nouvelles Editions Africaines created a series called "Les Vies Africaines" to publish works that would enable Africans to recognize their everyday lives. According to Alain Fresco, who has studied the works published in this series between 1974 and 1978, these texts (three autobiographies and two short novels) stand as sociological documents in that they reflect the lives and concerns of African people in post-independence Africa. Chief among the concerns is the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the pressures that rapid westernization has placed on traditional ways (Fresco 176).

Bâ's novel, although not published in this series, documents the same kinds of concerns, and reading the novel in relation to the type of "journalism-vérité" called for by Hountondji challenges more traditional readings of Bâ that focus on the central character's personal development or her psychology. *Une si longue lettre* exemplifies this "return to the real," not only because Bâ speaks about and exposes the all-too-common reality of abandonment in Senegal, but also because her story of an abandoned family is firmly rooted in the detail of everyday reality, such as the inadequacy of public transportation, or a motorcyclist accidentally running into children playing because of the lack of playing fields.² Through her characters, she criticizes the exorbitant costs of building too many embassies and inviting too many foreigners too often, when that money could be used more wisely for

the building of schools and roads, the purchase of hospital equipment, and increases in wages. She also deplors the small number of women in the National Assembly and, through her character Daouda, challenges what she perceives to be women's relative lack of interest in taking an active role in public life.

Although elements of a radical critique of Senegalese society occur throughout the text, in the second half Bâ turns her attention explicitly to social commentary. In the midst of a conversation about the advances already made by women, Bâ's central character, Rama, refers briefly to the Family Code, one of the pieces of legislation that became law in Senegal during the presidency of Léopold Sédar Senghor (president of Senegal from 1960 to 1980). She then alludes to the troubling resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism, which threatens to undo all the gains made by women:

Nous avons droit, autant que vous, à l'instruction qui peut être poussée jusqu'à la limite de nos possibilités intellectuelles. Nous avons droit au travail impartialement attribué et justement rémunéré. Le droit de vote est une arme sérieuse. Et voilà que l'on a promulgué le Code de la famille, qui restitue, à la plus humble des femmes, sa dignité combien de fois bafouée.

Mais, Daouda, les restrictions demeurent; mais Daouda, les vieilles croyances renaissent; mais Daouda, l'égoïsme émerge, le scepticisme pointe quand il s'agit du domaine politique. (89)

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 employment opportunities and to equal pay. The right to vote is an important weapon. And now the Family Code has been passed, restoring to the most humble of women the dignity that has so often been trampled upon.

But Daouda, the constraints remain; but Daouda, old beliefs are revived; but Daouda, egoism emerges, skepticism rears its head in the political field. (61)

In Senegal, the Family Code gave women equal rights, protected them against arbitrary repudiation, and reinstated women's traditionally recognized rights as wives and mothers (Magassouba 112-14). However, religious leaders in Senegal strongly opposed the Code, which they quickly denounced as a synthesis of tradition, Islamic law, and the

needs of modern life, claiming that the Code opposed the principles of the Qur'an.³ Although the Family Code became law in the early 1970s, it was not uniformly applied because religious leaders simply refused to recognize civil jurisdiction involving marriage, divorce, or inheritance, and because most women outside of the urban centers did not even know it existed. The consequences of its lack of application is a major area of investigation in Bâ's novel, as the central character and her family are abandoned by a husband who, under the system of polygamy, takes another wife. When Bâ's central character speaks at length about the reality of abandonment while, at the same time, affirming that "[t]he success of a nation . . . depends inevitably on the family," her statement, read in its historical context, is quite radical indeed. It is radical in that Rama, a self-described devout Muslim who observes religious laws and customs, positions herself politically against Senegalese religious leaders fighting to abolish the Family Code and the gains made by women.

When one takes into account the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism toward the end of the 1970s, when Bâ was writing, the political nature of her text is even more apparent. Some critics have seen a connection between deteriorating economic conditions in Senegal toward the end of the 1970s, the social unrest that resulted, and this rise in fundamentalism (Magassouba 127-28). Several dry years in a row made it virtually impossible for farmers to grow crops, and runaway inflation restricted the buying power of the middle classes as rising prices outstripped salary increases. Young people grew uneasy about their future when they experienced the difficulty of finding work in a private sector that had been laying off workers and an already overcrowded public sector. For this younger generation, whose "ideological umbilical cords with Marx or Coca-Cola" were broken, Islam promised a welcome refuge (Magassouba 128).

The resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in Senegal was so strong that in August 1979 an Islamic political party was created by Ahmed Niass (the first of its kind in Sub-Saharan Africa) and quickly banned by the Senegalese authorities. Following the model of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, the goal of this extremist right-wing party was to raise the religious consciousness of Muslims in Senegal, fight against materialism, and purify Islam by ridding it of non-traditional practices. Ahmed Niass called on the Senegalese to topple the government of President Senghor, but his cry was unheeded by the Senegalese, and eventually, after being refused status as a political refugee in France, he joined Khadafy in Libya (Magassouba 130-36).

It is within this social and political context that Mariama Bâ's novel needs to be read. Her novel is revolutionary because it calls attention to some of the ways in which women have suffered under Islamic law as it is commonly practiced in Senegal, particularly under the institution of polygamy, where the husband often abandons his family upon taking a second wife.⁴ It is important to point out, as Edris Makward has done, that while Bâ does not explicitly condemn polygamy or the traditions of her society, she does condemn the contemporary perversions of these traditions (278). In *So Long a Letter*, Rama decides to remain with her husband, Modou, when he takes a second wife because she believes that he will follow the precepts of Islam in treating the two wives and the two families equally. She says, with resignation: "Je m'étais préparée à un partage équitable selon l'Islam, dans le domaine polygamique" (69) 'I had prepared myself for equal sharing, according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamic life' (46). The central character is heartbroken that she has to share a husband with another woman, and the situation is rendered even more difficult because the other woman is her daughter's friend, the same age as her daughter. She nevertheless reasons that this is the best course of action for her, given her beliefs. (Throughout the novel we see her observing various religious rituals, such as the *Mirasse* commanded by the Qur'an, which stipulates disclosure for the purposes of inheritance in the Islamic family.)

But Rama's husband, Modou, for reasons of vanity, does not follow the precepts of Islam and abandons his first wife and family when he marries the younger Binetou.⁵ Rama is not even aware of the marriage until after the wedding, when her husband's brother, a friend, and his local *Imam* visit her house to announce the news in as matter-of-fact a way as possible: "Oui, Modou Fall. . . Il n'a fait qu'épouser une deuxième femme, ce jour" (56) 'Yes, Modou Fall. . . All he has done is to marry a second wife today' (37). Although she has prepared herself for equal sharing, Rama will learn the sad truth about her situation, similar to that of so many other women in Senegal: "Il ne vint jamais plus; son nouveau bonheur recouvrit petit à petit notre souvenir. Il nous oublia" (69) 'He never came again; his newfound happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us' (46). For Rama, this modern perversion of the system of polygamy opens up questions about the economic and social consequences for women, children, and the country. From this point in the novel, Bâ will develop several related subjects, including the effects of abandonment on her own family, and the effects of this forced marriage on the young co-wife, Binetou.

We learn that Binetou was pulled out of school and forced into marriage by her parents, to whom Modou promised an apartment and a trip to Mecca, in addition to the villa, car, jewels, and monthly allowance he promised to his new wife. As Rama astutely puts it: "Binetou est un agneau immolé comme beaucoup d'autres sur l'autel du 'matériel'" (60) 'Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of "affluence"' (39). It is clear that Bâ, like her heroine Rama, feels sympathy for Binetou, a young girl who is essentially "sold" to please a greedy mother interested in material gain and social status. Throughout the novel we are provided with glimpses of Binetou's mother wearing her new wealth ostentatiously, trying to impress.

Rama paints herself as the antithesis of Binetou's mother in her insistence on the importance of education for young girls. She is unusually supportive when one of her own daughters, Aissatou, becomes pregnant, relieved that the girl will be able to avoid expulsion from school by wearing loose clothing and giving birth during the holidays. She wonders about the unfair system that denies education to girls who become pregnant: "Quelle loi clémente viendra secourir les lycéennes fautives, dont les grandes vacances ne camouflent pas l'état?" (124-25) 'When will there be a lenient law to help erring schoolgirls whose condition is not camouflaged by long holidays?' (85). Unlike Binetou's mother, who seeks only to raise her own social standing through her daughter's marriage, Rama is much more concerned with her daughters' happiness and welfare.⁶ In contrast to Binetou's forced, unhappy marriage with her rich "sugar-daddy," Rama presents her oldest daughter Daba's relationship with her husband as a progressive example of equality.⁷ The stark contrast between Binetou's mother and Rama is meant to illustrate a point: that in a postcolonial age where Western cars, clothes, and nightclubs lure adults and children to Western ways of thinking and materialism, the guidance and decisions made by mothers vis-à-vis their children are of prime importance. With Senegalese culture very much in a state of flux, the ideologies passed on to this generation of children by their mothers will serve as the foundations for the future direction of the country. As Rama tells her daughter Daba toward the end of the novel: "Ce sera votre choix qui dirigera ce pays et non le nôtre" (106) 'It is your choice, and not ours, that will direct the country' (73).

Bâ's decision to present a strong, positive image of a progressive mother as the central character in her novel constitutes a break not only with the male tradition of writing in Africa but also with the more recent writing of African female novelists. As Mineke Schipper has written in "Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in

African Literature and Criticism," the image of women in the novel has been a male writer's affair, and women have usually been stereotyped as negative, "a source of perdition and of menace" (48). When she is cast positively, it is as a virgin or the virtuous maternal character: "The positive view of woman is usually associated with her reproductive function, the dearly loved and loving mother who takes care of her children and sacrifices herself for them" (40). Schipper finds both views prevalent in African oral literature and the myths and fairy tales she studies. It is not surprising that in the more recent feminist African novels, the image of women has changed dramatically. Katherine Frank notes that heroines have tended to be educated, highly Westernized, and living in urban environments, and she cites Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981), Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1982) and *Destination Biafra* (1982), and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977). Yet even in feminist novels, mothers are not absent. In some of these novels (*One is Enough*, *Destination Biafra*, *Double Yoke*), conflicts between the generations arise when the heroine's mother, embodying traditional African values, disapproves of her daughter's behavior. In these novels, the heroine is cast in the position of daughter, breaking from the patriarchal values that her mother reinforces. As Frank says, "Like their daughters' suitors and husbands, these mothers want to see their daughters securely married and perpetually pregnant" (16-17).

Quite a different story takes place in *So Long a Letter*, where Bâ writes her heroine, Rama, as a mother, not a daughter. Here, it is the *mother* who decides to abandon patriarchal values when raising her children. It is in this sense that Bâ's novel breaks with the stereotyping of mothers seen not only in male-authored literature but in many female-authored texts as well. As Bâ has said in an interview:

In the family, in the institutions, in society, in the street, in political organizations, discrimination reigns supreme. Social pressure shamelessly suffocates individual attempts at change. The woman is heavily burdened by mores and customs, in combination with mistaken and egoistic interpretations of different religions. . . . We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. Within African literature, room must be made for women. . . . (qtd. in Schipper, "Mother" 46-47)

Here, Bâ is making a distinction between women—that is, real women—and the "African Mother," or the stereotyped image of the

mother in male writings, who is often conflated with Mother Africa, eternal beauty, and inspiration, as in the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor and David Diop. I take Bâ's comments about "rejecting the nostalgic praise to the African Mother who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa" to mean that rather than continuing to see the mother as an object, it is time for novelists to represent women, including mothers, as they are: as subjects with minds of their own. Man has confused the country with the woman: both exist *for him*, but if this is true, woman has not been an active subject in her own right. In this regard, Schipper quotes the South African novelist, Miriam Tlali:

[I]t is a problem when men want to call you Mother Africa and put you on a pedestal, because then they want you to stay there forever without asking your opinion—and unhappy you if you want to come down as an equal human being! (qtd. in Schipper, "Mother" 49)

Indeed, female critics often argue that one of the commitments of the African female writer must be to correct the false images of women that appear in African literature (Ogundipe-Leslie 8; Davies 14-15).

There is one more mother represented in Bâ's novel, a mother who is neither the stereotypical, traditional maternal figure nor the new, progressive mother: Mawdo's mother, Aunty Nabou. A Princess of the Sine who clings to her old privileges, customs, and traditions, Aunty Nabou is insulted when her son marries the daughter of a goldsmith, a woman from a low caste. Because of her caste prejudice and because the goldsmith's daughter has deprived her of her "seul homme" (42) 'one and only man' (26), she resolves to take her revenge by raising her brother's daughter and offering the girl to her son as a co-wife. As Rama writes to her friend, Aissatou (the goldsmith's daughter who divorces Mawdo when he takes a co-wife):

C'est "pour ne pas voir sa mère mourir de honte et de chagrin" que Mawdo était décidé à se rendre au rendez-vous de la nuit nuptiale. Devant cette mère rigide, pétrie de morale ancienne, brûlée intérieurement par les féroces lois antiques, que pouvait Mawdo Bâ? Il vieillissait, usé par son pesant travail et puis, voulait-il seulement lutter, ébaucher un geste de résistance? La petite Nabou était si tentante. . . . [T]u ne comptas plus, pas plus que tes quatre fils: ceux-ci ne seront jamais les égaux des fils de la petite Nabou. (48)

It was "so as not to see his mother die of shame and chagrin" that Mawdo agreed to go to the rendez-vous of the wedding night. Faced with this rigid mother moulded by the old morality, scorched within by the fierce ardour of antiquated laws, what could Mawdo Bâ do? He was getting on in years, worn out by his arduous work. And then, did he really want to fight, to make this gesture of resistance? Young Nabou was so tempting. . . . [Y]ou no longer counted, any more than did your four sons: they could never be equal to young Nabou's sons. (30)

Interwoven in Bâ's portrait of a changing Senegal, then, is the story of the power of a woman who, motivated by strong caste prejudice, raises a child to be the wife of her son for the sole purpose of keeping the blood line pure. While Bâ, through Rama, sees caste prejudice as one of the elements detrimental to Senegal as a nation, she does not, interestingly enough, paint Aunty Nabou as a completely negative figure. Rama acknowledges what she calls Aunty Nabou's "strength of character" and admires her for providing young Nabou with an oral education full of folk tales and stories: "Cette éducation orale, facilement assimilée, pleine de charme, a le pouvoir de déclencher de bons réflexes dans une conscience adulte forgée à son contact" (71) 'This kind of oral education, easily assimilated, full of charm, has the power to bring out the best in the adult mind developed in contact with it' (47). She also admires the knowledge and experience of young Nabou, who has become a midwife by profession, and whose social conscience leads her to deplore the lack of hospital beds and the high rate of infant mortality in Senegal.

Although Rama's pretext for writing this "letter" to her friend Aissatou is the traditional period of seclusion after the death of her husband, and although several critics have discussed this novel from the perspective of Rama's personal "coming to writing," I feel that it is a mistake to read *Une si longue lettre* through the French feminist critical screen that was popularized in France in the 1970s, most notably by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Christopher Miller, for instance, uses the title of Cixous' essay, "Coming to Writing," as a heading in his chapter on Bâ, thus linking Cixous' ideologies and Bâ's project (270). Instead of discussing the political implications of Bâ's social critique, however, Miller is much more concerned with the question of Bâ as a woman overcoming silence, coming to writing, and, through writing, gaining selfhood. Although Miller deconstructs the binary opposition of speech and silence and shows that the Western association between silence and oppression does not always hold true

in Africa, his attention to the dialectics of speech and silence leads him to overlook other important aspects of Bâ's novel. Because his analysis emphasizes the personal, individualistic level that preoccupied the "New French Feminists" of the 1970s, he passes over the parts of Bâ's project that are much more civic-minded and explicitly political. Nor does Miller address the radical critique of Senegalese society proposed by Bâ. In fact, as he says, he does not see Bâ's novel as being very radical at all:

She ends "silence" and exclusion; she borrows certain forms and twists them to her own needs. But her "radicalism" ends there: women's literature as she describes it will be a building-block of the family and the nation, beginning from a (re)construction of selfhood, an emergence from shadows. Women will write, but the values they espouse will pose no threat to the literary or economic system. Those who wish for something more radical will not find it among Senegalese women novelists, at least not yet. (289)

The "(re)construction of selfhood" that Miller sees as the driving force of the novel does not, in my reading, stand out so prominently. Indeed, his application of theories of French feminists to an African text might be seen as a process that Miller himself, in the introduction to his book, calls Western projection, or "colonial inscription" (14).⁸ Rather than reading this text through our familiar categories of analysis, I have argued for the need to consider it in relation to the kind of "journalism-vérité" called for by Hountondji, keeping in mind its historical specificity and paying attention to what Mariama Bâ tells us about her culture. Instead of focusing on an individual heroine and her personal development, I have preferred to trace what Mbye B. Cham has seen as the "human and social detail" that "capture[s] the soulbeat of a society in the midst of a historic effort to balance its weakness and strength for a healthier future" (101).

Notes

1. Quite a different view is provided by Alice Walker in her article on Buchi Emecheta, "A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children": "[S]he integrates the profession of writer into the cultural concept of mother/worker that she retains from Ibo society. Just as the African mother has traditionally planted crops, pounded maize, and done her washing with her

baby strapped to her back, so Adah can write a novel with her children playing in the same room (qtd. in Davies and Graves 5).

2. *So Long a Letter* has been characterized as an epistolary novel that is very close to a diary (Schipper, *Beyond* 121-24). Because of its highly personal nature, “journalism-vérité” has obvious links to both the epistolary novel and the diary form.

3. In discussing the patriarchal aspects of culture in Islam, Mineke Schipper quotes the Qur’an: “Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that Allah has preferred in bounty one of them over the other” (“Mother” 37).

4. In speaking about the negative effects of polygamy on women, one needs to remember that Bâ is describing women of a particular class in an urban setting at a particular time in history. Defining “women” as a category apart from a specific historical context is inadequate, as many theorists have shown. Chandra Mohanty, for instance, has condemned those who assume that women form a homogeneous group or category, and she sees this assumption as common in Western radical and liberal feminisms: “While radical and liberal feminist assumptions of women as a sex class might elucidate (however inadequately) the autonomy of particular women’s struggles in the West, the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the third world colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks”(351). Bâ herself reminds us of the differences among women by including stories of women from different classes, castes, age groups, and religions in her text. She also reminds us, with her story of Jacqueline, of the vast differences between two different African countries, or even the differences within the same country.

5. One critic has tried to deny the reality of abandonment (and Modou’s responsibility) by claiming that Modou and his new wife are forced from the house by the bothersome presence of a passive-aggressive Ramatoulaye. This is an interpretive move that blames the victim: “Modou, le père de famille, ne se sent plus à l’aise pour regagner son domicile. . . . La présence continue de Ramatoulaye dans le foyer familial constitue sa stratégie dans sa révolte et résistance passives car c’est une présence gênante qui hante le mari et son épouse à tel point qu’ils ‘divorcent’ de la maison” (Mokwenyé 93) ‘Modou, the father of the family, no longer feels comfortable returning home. . . . Ramatoulaye’s constant presence in the home constitutes her strategy in her passive revolt and resistance, for hers is an annoying presence that haunts the husband and his wife to such an extent that they “divorce” themselves from the house’ (my translation).

6. The points I am making here are ones usually overlooked by critics distrustful of Bâ’s feminism, or those who dismiss feminism as a Western import. Femi Ojo-Ade, for instance, misreads the novel in many places in order to lash out against Bâ’s feminism, which he misunderstands: “According to Bâ, two camps are precisely delineated: the victimizer, the slave-master, the ruler of this hell on earth, is Man; the victimized, the slave driven

at times to the point of mental exhaustion, is Woman" (73). As we have seen, however, this naive characterization of Bâ's work is patently false.

7. Here, my reading differs from Miller's, who claims that the institution of marriage, according to Bâ's novel, "demands the submission and silence of women" (275). I do not believe that the text condemns marriage as an institution. Besides characterizing Daba's marriage as ideal, Rama describes her own marriage to Modou as a happy one, before his abandonment. Edris Makward, too, finds Bâ sympathetic to the institution of marriage: "[A]lthough she did not embark on an outright diatribe against polygamy, Mariama Bâ was convinced that happiness—and not just women's happiness, but men's as well, a whole society's happiness—must be based on a monogamous marriage. And in the modern context, for her, monogamous marriage meant a close association between two equals . . ." (273). What Bâ does criticize, however, is the fact that the wife has lower status than members of the husband's family and must cater to them.

8. Other theorists have described the West's desire to "know" the other and the resulting appropriation or colonization of the other using different terms, such as "epistemological ethnocentrism" (Mudimbe 15) and "Orientalism" (Said).

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