



REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE: INDIAN AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S TEXTS AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORAS

by Jaspal Kaur Singh

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Educational Debates and the Postcolonial Female Imagination in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* shows the changing consciousness of the educated African woman writer who examines and questions women's social positions in a (post)colonial society. *So Long a Letter* helps situate my discussion on African women writers within the educational system in French West Africa during the 1930s and 1940s in order to see how the Western educational system impacted the construction of gender identity in Senegalese society during colonialism, and how it still impacts them in a postcolonial/neocolonial world. In this way, we can see how the selective modernization of African women, just as in India, altered their imagination and how many began to view their own culture as limited. Many female writers, such as Bâ, who critique Senegalese cultural practices, tend to use easy binaries of the East as limiting and the West as liberating, yet their texts betray interesting ambiguities and contradictions.

As seen in many colonized spaces, nationalism redefined the colonized in opposition to colonial representations of the colonized as inferior. Since nationalism was seen predominantly as a male enterprise, woman's place in literature came to be redefined through male perspectives. It is only in the 1980s that African women's literary voices began to be heard

and they began to inscribe themselves into a male literary tradition. In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, Florence Stratton provides the historical context in which African women begin to write. Stratton suggests that the colonial “trope of Africa as Female” was unproblematically “reiterated” in nationalist texts (18).

In Stratton’s discussion of male literary tradition, she posits that women were not only excluded from participating in it, they “are also systematically excluded from the political, the economic, the judicial, and even the discursal life of the community” (25). Did the exclusion occur because women did not participate in nationalist movements? Certainly not, indicates Stratton: “Of course, women all over Africa did, in fact, participate in the struggle against colonialism, sometimes as leaders. In Nigeria, [for example], there were mass protests by Igbo women against British and their agents which began in 1925 and culminated in the Women’s War of 1929–30” (35). Yet, despite women’s participation in anticolonial struggles, Négritude’s deployment of Mother Africa as a trope for women became limiting for them because it excluded women “implicitly, if not explicitly, from authorship and citizenship” (Stratton 40). Why has the vision posited by the Négritude movement, while uplifting the image of the “savage” African male, further oppressed African women?

“Senghorian Négritude,” asserts Stratton, “resorts to the binary logic of the western philosophical tradition, opposing feeling or emotion, which it equates with African civilization, to reason, which it identifies with western culture” (41). Such an engagement with colonial discourse managed to continue what JanMohamed calls the Manichean allegory. The continued deployment of the trope in male literary tradition delineates “a situation that is conventionally patriarchal. The speaker is invariably male, a western-educated intellectual” (Stratton 41).

Stratton posits that “lurking within Négritude ... is another manichean allegory ... the allegory of male and female, domination and subordination, mind and body, subject and object, self and other” (41). The feminization of Africa and the female body posits the male gaze as normative. “He is the active-subject-citizen. She is the passive object-nation” (51). Women are not only excluded from the male literary tradition as subjects; their objectification leads to their exclusion from cultural spaces as well.

Additionally, valorizing women as Mother Africa, or as the nation penetrated and violated, and therefore impure, also adds to the historical continuum of males as narrators (Stratton 53). “The main function of the

prostitute metaphor, the flip side of the Mother Africa trope, is to reproduce the attitudes and beliefs necessary for preserving the otherness of women and hence to perpetuate their marginalization in society” (Stratton 53). As women are inscribed and “conscripted” through male narrative, they have to “repudiate” this trope; such an act will be an attempt to undermine “the manichean allegory” of gender (Stratton 54). When Senghor, in 1959, claimed that African woman does not need to be liberated as she has been free for thousand of years, Mariama Bâ responded thus:

The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice.... In the family, in the institutions, in society, in the street, in political organizations, discrimination reigns supreme.... As women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. *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 ... , room we will fight for with all our might. (qtd. in Stratton 54–55, original emphasis)

Thus, women writers have to reclaim a space for themselves in national historiography through a feminist literary tradition. Stratton states that the continued deployment of romanticized and idealized images of women in androcentric texts “mask the subordination of women in the patriarchal socio-political systems of African states from which they do ... need to be liberated” (55). Let us examine how certain women visualize liberation.

If, as Stephanie Newell suggests, “women’s writing is not outside the dominant male zone,” and the aesthetics of women’s writing, which are “beset by legacies of colonialism,” manage to “interrogate the totality of the society and claim it as a contexts for the redefinition of women” (20), why do women writers continue to posit liberation through a Westernized discursive system which ignores the social conditions of the culture? Is it because of the politics of location of certain writers?

Mariama Bâ is one such writer who questions traditional cultural constructions of women and tries to locate an alternate identity for them

in a patriarchal society within (post)colonial social spaces. While the context for this text is Senegal, an ongoing dialogue is created between it and other postcolonial writers and texts, providing a platform for a comparative poetics of postcolonial literature. As Charlotte H. Bruner in *African Women's Writing* rightly points out, "Now African women writers are no longer isolated voices crying from a 'wilderness.' They are aware of each other.... And their wilderness is no bleak desert nor isolated jungle" (vii). And although her metaphors are problematic, to say the least, her sentiments are in the right place. While this chapter will provide a historical context for social change and the construction of the conflicted modern woman in colonial Senegalese society, it will also help to highlight the colonial and postcolonial condition of other African women writers and their texts, and place them within the postcolonial debate that this study is located in.

Bâ, one of the first Senegalese women to receive a Western education, shows the period of change in social and cultural structures in her text and discusses the socioeconomic and historical conditions of the African woman within a colonial and postcolonial context. Although there were many social changes during nationalist movements that reconstituted women's roles in modern Africa, texts such as Bâ's re-examine the question of women's liberation in the context of national liberation and Westernization. Bâ elaborates on the formation of the "new" woman within the Muslim African culture; this new woman is the product of a Western education, and she questions her role in the domestic sphere, which remains primarily unchanged.

Bâ brings up the female condition and the conflicted imagination and psyche produced by traditional African and modern French notions of womanhood in terms of family structures, particularly when faced with the Western educational system imposed by colonial administrators in French West Africa. In *So Long a Letter*, the protagonist, Ramatoulaye, a fifty-year-old Senegalese woman, recently widowed, is the first-person narrator. She is writing "so long a letter" to her friend, Aissatou, whom she recalls going to school with and who now lives in the United States.

Ramatoulaye fondly remembers going to the teachers' training college in Sebikotane in Pontyville, where she met her future husband, Modou Fall. She recalls being "the first pioneers of the promotion of African women," while remembering the contradictory reactions of Senegalese men: "Men would call us scatterbrained. Others labeled us devils. But

many wanted to possess us” (14–15). The anxiety that Western education produced within the colonized culture is apparent in such statements.

While narrating the many happy memories of the Normal School for Women in Rufisque – the French teacher whom she loved, the women who shared the same dreams of “emancipation” as herself – Ramatoulaye describes the “aims of the wonderful French headmistress”: “To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal values in us” (15). She assures the audience that the French headmistress was not patronizing, for “she knew how to discover and appreciate our qualities” (16). She adds that “the path chosen for our training and our blossoming had not been at all fortuitous. It has accorded with the profound choices made by New Africa for the promotion of the black woman” (16). Thus, we see that in the new consciousness of New Africa as well as in the new African woman, Western education is to bring choices, liberation, and positive change. What that liberation is bringing is questionable as social structures remain unchanged, but for Ramatoulaye, the promise of modernity portends flights into a realm of fantasy and romance incongruent with lived experiences.

When Aissatou marries Mawdo Bâ for love, it turns out to be what Ramatoulaye calls a “controversial marriage” (17) because Aissatou is a goldsmith’s daughter and Mawdo’s mother is a “Dioufene, a *Guelewar* (Princess) from the Sine” (17) and their two families are seen as incompatible. The traditionalists, when they see the path Western-educated elite are taking, declare, “School turns our girls [‘short skirts’] into devils who lure our men away from the right path” (17). Such attitudes are not uncommon toward modern young women and are reflected in the educational debates of the 1930s and 1940s in French West Africa. Bâ’s novel illustrates the ideological crisis of tradition and modernity in the cultural construction of women in colonized countries.

Ramatoulaye reflects on the old professions, like that of Aissatou’s father; he was a goldsmith and his sons would have followed in his footsteps. But now she realizes that Aissatou’s younger brother’s “steps were directed towards the white man’s school. Hard is the climb up the steep hill of knowledge to the white man’s school: kindergarten remains a luxury that only those who are financially sound can offer their young ones” (18). She discusses the pitfalls of education, for many do not get access to higher

education, and “apprenticeship to traditional crafts seem[s] degrading to whoever has the slightest book learning” (18). But even though she realizes there are drawbacks to “book learning,” she sees it as useful and unavoidable: “We all agree that much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present, we deplore ‘hard sweat’ that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we knew that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia but were resolutely progressive” (19)

The ones who were resolutely progressive were the urban, upper-class elite of the colonized nation. Ramatoulaye rejoices in her friend’s good fortune in marrying Mawdo, who “raised you up to his own level, he the son of a princess and you a child from the forges” (19). She reflects on the lifestyles of the urban elite when she reminisces about the picnics organized by them in Sangalkam at Mawdo’s farm, which he had inherited from his father: “Sangalkam remains the refuge of people from Dakar, those who want a break from the frenzy of the city. The younger set, in particular, has bought land there and built country residences; these green, open spaces are conducive to rest, meditation and letting off steam by children” (22). The educated elite see the progress of the nation in terms set up by the colonizers. If they are to progress in the material sphere, they have to adapt to modernity and the lifestyles of the Whites.

In the next section of the letter, Ramatoulaye elaborates on the system of education and teachers, who are responsible for the “minds” of the young people and must work as an “army” to eradicate “ignorance”: “Teachers ... form a noble army accomplishing daily feats, never praised, never decorated. An army forever on the move, forever vigilant. An army without drums, without gleaming uniforms. This army, thwarting traps and snares, everywhere plants the flag of knowledge and morality” (23). She narrates the role played by her generation in the making of a New Africa: “It was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence” (25). Ramatoulaye calls these educated, urban elite the “messengers of a new design. With independence achieved, we witnessed the birth of a republic, the birth of an anthem and the implantation of a flag” (25).

What of women’s place within this new republic, and in particular, what of the educated woman with ideas of individualism and choice? Women’s participation in the modern notion of individualism produced ambivalence, which is reflected in the formation of the female subject in

women's texts. In a society where one does not choose one's mate, Ramatoulaye takes great pride in being one of the first ones to do so. The concept of marriage was being refashioned to meet the needs of the changing, urban society. The patriarchal control of female sexuality was changing from the traditional system of polygamy to the more liberal companionate marriage, with the promise of romantic love and mutual esteem. Nationalism constructed a discursive space for the accommodation of traditional roles. However, even though educated women had a "choice" in whom they could marry, the system of marriage remained unchanged for many modern women in that it enabled the persistence of the traditional family roles.

Ramatoulaye, too, has a choice in whom she marries. She has earlier rejected Daouda Dieng, her mother's obvious preference, and chooses instead to marry Modou for love. Falling in love seems to indicate she will achieve equality and freedom. We see a textual manifestation of what equality means to Ramatoulaye when she falls in love with Modou: "Modou Fall, the very moment you bowed before me, asking me to dance, I knew you were the one I was waiting for. Tall and athletically built, of course.... But above all you knew how to be tender. You could fathom every thought, every desire" (13). The concept of Christian monogamous romantic love impacts many lives. As a person who is placed in a historical moment of Westernization, we can see Ramatoulaye celebrating choice and love in modern terms.

Emmanuel Obiechina claims that formal literary study, Christian monogamy, and modern media are primarily responsible in bringing the concept of Western romantic tradition to West Africa (32–41). "The insistence of Christianity on monogamy meant that, at some stage or other, a single man would have to confront a single woman with whom he would have to forge a most individualistic and private relationship – that of the fusion of two personalities (or souls) into a mystical unity" (40). The ritual of romantic love was garnered and "learned from English literature, from boy-meets-girl romantic magazines, from romantic fiction and most dramatically, from the cinema and television" (40). Love songs added another dimension to this ethos. "The result," adds Obiechina, "has been the emergence of romantic love as a vital factor in modern West Africa" (40). Notions of romantic love were disseminated throughout colonial Africa.

The system of marriage in a Muslim society is very different from the Western system, yet Ramatoulaye's actions in selecting a mate for herself

seem progressive and liberated. However, romantic love, with its idealized concept of male-female affinity, ultimately supports patriarchal institutions. While romantic love inspires Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to rebel against traditions, their actions mainly reflect their subject position as Western-educated.

The letter continues with the story of how Ramatoulaye survives, emotionally as well as economically, after Modou betrays her by marrying Binetou, a school friend of Daba, their daughter. Her husband neglects to tell her of his second wife, waiting until the day of the marriage. Yet, even after this incidence, Ramatoulaye continues to see love in its idealized version:

To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely toward the other! If each could only melt into the other! If each would praise the other's successes and failures! If each would only praise the other's qualities instead of listing his faults! If each could only correct bad habits without harping on about them! If each could penetrate the other's most secret haunts to forestall failure and be a support while tending to the evils that are repressed! (89)

Ramatoulaye sees marriage and romantic love as the inevitable outcome of the "complementarity of man and woman" (88). Her reaction toward marriage reflects the perspective of a middle-class, Western-educated woman.

Yes, she sees the "evil" inherent in the system of polygamy, as she is supposed to as a liberated, Western-educated woman. She speaks out against polygamy. When she becomes a widow and Tamsir asks to marry her, she lashes out at him, accusing him of exploiting his many wives: "You, the revered lord, you take it easy, obeyed at the crook of a finger. I shall never be the one to complete your collection" (58). She states that she will never be an extra burden to him, nor will she wait her turn for him to visit her on the allotted night. Additionally, she rejects Daouda's marriage proposal because she is not in love with him, and also because he is already married. While reiterating the oppressive nature of polygamy, she rejects the view that polygamy can be helpful if all the co-wives coexist peacefully, helping each other in bringing up the children and sharing household

chores, particularly for the rural and non-Westernized communities. She declares, "You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joy of change" (68). She emphasizes the need for a greater community among women to alleviate the pain they suffer due to polygamy: "Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family" (68). Bâ's frustrations with the exploitative nature of polygamy are also directed toward other women. She sees the erosion of the communal space for women's solidarity but is unable to locate that erosion in the aftermath of colonialism and Westernization, nor does she tie it in with class.

Ultimately, Ramatoulaye rejects both Tamsir and Daouda for sentimental reasons: "You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you (I emphasized the word 'chosen')" (58).

Ramatoulaye emphasizes the word chosen in order to show her preference for love marriages. She also rejects Daouda's marriage proposal, even though she knows he has loved her for a long time and is a reliable person, and she does like him, because, ultimately, she is not in love with him (68).

Yet Ramatoulaye is conflicted and split, and in spite of valorizing love and marriage, for her individualism is not paramount, but communal identity is:

I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman. Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings.... The success of the family is born of a couple's harmony, as the harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony. The nation is made up of all the families, rich or poor, united or separated, aware or unaware. The success of the nation therefore depends inevitably on the family. (88–89)

Bâ is unable to move beyond colonial and nationalist discourses and continues to see female identity in traditional and familial terms – as wives and mothers. Therefore, we see ambiguity in her notion of romantic individualism which clashes with traditional and communal identity formation in Bâ's text.

Putting such ideas about Westernized women in their social context, Obiechina contextualizes traditional practices such as polygamy:

Romantic love, whether as an autonomous experience or as a stepping stone to marriage, was played down and subordinated to familial and community interests. Because of the close linking of the fate of individuals to that of the group to which they belonged ... romantic individualism was curbed by stringent taboos.... In a situation of underdevelopment and fragile political and social infrastructure, families and communities depended for stability largely on the balancing of group relationships and the linking of families and segments in marriage alliances. (34)

And while Ramatoulaye sees Aissatou's divorce as empowering, ultimately, however, Ramatoulaye chooses not to leave her husband, explaining that it is because of her children; she lives a life of "despair," "rancour," and "sadness" (12). Bâ's protagonist is a Western-educated, middle-class woman who finds that her sense of self and her individual identity are continually clashing with the expectations of a patriarchal society. The exploitation in the relationship of power – economic and sexual – between the two sexes is reworked through the image and language of love and individualism by a strong, although exploited, woman in Bâ's text.

Bâ's novel shows resistance where the alienated subject displaces its anxiety onto another space in the character of Aissatou. Ramatoulaye recalls how Aissatou, who had defied conventions and caste barriers to marry Mawdo, had also felt betrayed by her husband when he, too, had brought home a second wife, Nabou. However, Aissatou refuses to be defined by patriarchal society, and chooses to leave with her four sons. She writes a letter to Mawdo in which she states that she finds his actions of "procreating without love" hateful, even if he was just trying to please his ailing mother; she then leaves him.

She rebuilds her life, but in another space. She goes back to school, leaving for France to be an interpreter and eventually working at the Senegalese embassy in Washington, D.C. Thus, Aissatou rejects the “Old World” with its tradition-bound cultures for the transformative potential and liberation for the individual in the “New World.” Bâ’s text ends up questioning the national identity of women like Aissatou who are culturally alienated and who reject indigenous African customs (130). Aissatou cannot be a role model for the new Senegalese women.

It is Ramatoulaye who struggles with conflicts produced by the discourses of modernity and tradition in “New Africa.” While she gains some sort of an independent identity in the public sphere due to her status as a teacher, in the domestic sphere her status remains ambiguous. For her, the available paradigm of womanhood in a transitional society is limited. She rejects Tamsir and Daouda but waits for a special man who will fulfill her. While she is passionately against polygamy, she accepts it, albeit unwillingly, by staying with Modou after he marries Binatou. Thus, although it appears as though Ramatoulaye could choose as a Western-educated woman, in actuality her choices are very limited. Thus, the rhetoric of modernity and liberation produces ambiguous results for many women who do not simply reject all traditional or African cultural practices as backward, or are unable or unwilling to relocate to the “liberal” West.

And although Aissatou represents the “liberated” woman, the text seems to emphasize the similarities between her and Ramatoulaye rather than the differences. And while comparing young Nabou’s oral education and her life as a nurse, Ramatoulaye realizes that all of them are really alike and share the same oppressions and problems: “Young Nabou, responsible and aware, like you, like me! Even though she is not my friend, we often shared the same problems” (48). The narrative allows for the acceptance of traditional patriarchal roles and women’s oppression within the domestic spaces.

Liberating possibilities are only hinted at in the margins of the discursive systems; however, such possibilities too appear ambiguous. One such conflict comes out of Ramatoulaye’s relationship with her children and particularly with her daughters. While she thinks a liberal education will help them create their own subjectivity, she does not equate that with sexual liberation. She is troubled and shocked when her liberated daughter allows herself to become pregnant, as though such a thing could not be a possibility in one so educated. In the final analysis, Bâ’s text allows her to

question traditions, but she is unable to move toward another space, or see an alternative vision. What becomes so complex and tricky is that the traditional roles were rewritten as modern, and thus liberating, but they actually became coercive and oppressive. Ramatoulaye must remain in the domestic sphere so that the overall structure of neocolonial patriarchal society may survive. Even though a new imagination seems possible, it cannot be incorporated into the identity of the African woman. She still has to be either a housewife or mother in the manner of Ramatoulaye, or leave the home space in the manner of Aissatou. Bâ's text does bring out the complexities of redefining gender roles for the middle-class patriarchy, but it remains ambiguous and full of contradictions. She sees the role of the new women in terms set up by colonialism and nationalism during educational debates in colonial Africa – as “educated” and transformed wives and mothers. In her text, patriarchal roles and values of the middle-class women are challenged but not reconstituted; women's redefined roles do not allow them to negotiate for “emancipation” within the acceptable spaces provided for them in society. Bâ's text does not offer a radical revision of the women question; while it allows her to question traditions in terms of modernity, it is unable to show us an alternate future, for she sees the future of the nation as dependent on the traditional family model.

