

Stuck on *So Long A Letter*: Senegalese Women's Writings and the Specter of Mariama Bà

by

Maramé Gueye
East Carolina University, USA

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Mariama Bà's widely studied novel *une si longue lettre* is considered the classical feminist statement by a sub-Saharan African woman. Published in 1981, the novel won the prestigious Noma Prize and gained wide acclaim. Upon its translation into English in 1989, *So Long a Letter* became a constant in American classrooms. Although it is not the first novel written by a Senegalese woman, the novel is the work through and by which Senegalese women's writing is evaluated. The novel's appeal to most Western educators is attributed to its thematic focus on the negative effects that Islam and polygamy have on women. The novel validates Western feminists' assumption or myth of a subordinated African woman who is eternally victimized by her religion and culture. Bà's critics have highlighted the novel's many contradictions and others have suggested that the narrator's story is not representative of the voices of most Senegalese women (Rueschmann (1995), D'Almeida (1986)), and that Ramatoulaye's interlocutor is the West (Nwachukwu-Agbada (1991), Ogede (2011)). However, these critical investigations have not sufficed in moving beyond *So Long A Letter*. Thirty years after its publication, the novel continuously features in college syllabus, as a text through which to examine the condition of women in contemporary Senegal. It is taught in a varied range of courses in disciplines such as literature, gender studies, religion, and anthropology, among many others. In his essay *une si longue lettre: An Erziehungsroman*, Riesz and Bjornson (1991) study

the ways in which the novel is about the effects of the colonial French education system which trained the Senegalese elite to which Bâ belonged, and turned them into brainwashed intellectuals. These authors conclude by asking: "What has changed since then?" There are many answers to this question. A compelling one is that several Senegalese women writers have since emerged and their literary projects challenge the themes and issues at stake in Bâ's first novel. Although many are products of the French education system which remained in Senegal after independence, these authors have produced works that suggest ways in which one can, and must move beyond *So Long A Letter*. Among other works, *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (1999) [Riwan: or the Sandy Track] by Ken Bugul (Pen name of Senegalese author Marietou Mbaye Biloema) is a pertinent text to utilize as a response to Riesz and Bjornson's question. Both *So Long A Letter* and *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* are semi-autobiographies of two Senegalese women of the same generation. In *Riwan*, Ken Bugul challenges Bâ's representation of the Senegalese culture and her advocacy for a universal brand of feminism. Contrary to *So Long A Letter* where Islam and the Senegalese culture are oppressive of women, *Riwan* portrays a brand of Senegalese Islam that allows female agency and turns polygamy into a practice that can be empowering to women.

So Long A Letter is the first of two novels written by Senegalese author Mariama Bâ before her premature death in 1981. Bâ uses the epistolary form to reflect on the female condition in postcolonial Senegal. Through a long letter which is more of a memoir than a novel, the first person narrator, writes to her childhood friend Aissatou, Bâ delineates the effects of Islam and tradition on women. As the letter begins, we learn that Ramatoulaye has just lost her husband to a heart attack. She resolves to write the long letter as a way of coping with the four months seclusion mandated by Islam, for widows. Although Ramatoulaye takes on

several issues such as politics and the future of the Senegalese family, polygamy is the main focus of her epistolary endeavor. Her missive serves as a reflection on the negative effects of polygamy on Senegalese women. Both Aissatou and Ramatoulaye have experienced sharing a husband with another woman, although their reactions to such experience are different. Aissatou divorces Mawdo after he succumbs to his mother's pressure and takes his cousin Nabou as a second wife. She goes on to France to study and later works as an interpreter at the Senegalese embassy in the US. Conversely, after twenty five years of marriage, Ramatoulaye decides to stay with Modou when he marries Binetou, a much younger woman who was their daughter's friend. When Modou abandons her for Binetou, Ramatoulaye assumes the upbringing of their twelve children but stays legally married to him until his death, the landmark event after which she writes the letter.

Reflecting on his students' reception of *So Long A Letter* John Champagne (1996) points that one of the dangers of teaching postcolonial literatures in the West, "is that, like the ethnic food fair, it may treat the artifacts of "foreign cultures simply as commodities for Western consumption" (22). Such "commodification" is generally caused by the fact that Westerners utilize their "Western" lens to read "foreign" texts. However, in the case of *So Long A Letter*, the Western reader need not put on their lens because the narrator purposefully caters to a Western audience. Although the letter is addressed to Aissatou, it is clear that Ramatoulaye's targeted audience is the West as indicated in Bà's dedication: "To all women and to men of good will." The numerous footnotes which translate or explain Wolof terms and practices confirm that Aissatou, who has witnessed or taken part in most of the events narrated, is not the interlocutor. By speaking to an audience geographically and culturally situated outside Senegal, Ramatoulaye's epistle is a quest for Western sympathy. Champagne shared how readily his class

empathized with Ramatoulaye, and even suggested options for her to free herself from her horrible culture and religion.

Students seemed uniformly horrified at Ramatoulaye's plight, and, in particular, at the role assigned to women by Islam. A particularly bright student remarked that the Islamic religion seemed to sexualize women excessively. Another wanted to know why Ramatoulaye remained faithful to her religion, given Islam's negative influence on her life. Why didn't she just convert to some other religion, he wondered. (26)

In his attempt to have his students move beyond their assumptions of Islam, Champagne appropriately remarks that their reading of the text is corrupted by the negative representations of Islam in the media. Ramatoulaye's representation of Islam reinforces such stereotype because she fails to emphasize that the practice of Islam is not homogeneous, and that, the kind of Islam she portrays is specifically Senegalese.

The caveat for using a literary work in order to teach a specific culture is that students tend to believe that novels are realistic, especially if the focus is Africa. Because of the chronic assumption that African cultures are homogeneous, backward, and fixated in time, Western students easily believe that what they read is true and inherent to each and every African community. By addressing a Western audience, Bà feeds such stereotypes.

Sharing his pedagogy on teaching *So Long A Letter* in an anthropology course, James A. Pritchett (2000) substantiates how effectively Ramatoulaye's narration pulls western readers in. "There is an extensive focus on polygyny, Islam, and urban lifestyles in contemporary Senegal.

All are treated with such brutal honesty and intimacy of detail that it leaves the reader feeling a bit like a voyeur" (50). Voyeurism is an historical staple of Western scholarship on Africa. Western anthropologists have particularly approached African communities as terrains of discovery of things exotic and weird. Bâ's Western audience is not disappointed because the book shrewdly pulls them into the "intimate" aspects of the Senegalese culture which they had set out to discover. *So Long A Letter* is a book that Western educators can easily assign in order to meet their students' expectations about Africa.

So Long A Letter's greatest appeal in the West lies in its ability to confirm Western feminists' assumption of the African woman as a beast of burden. Based on its reception in feminist and gender courses, Bâ has accomplished her literary project. An internet search for "*So Long A Letter* in gender courses" revealed 960,000 results. Although this is not proof that the novel is taught in that number of courses, it shows that it is viewed as a statement on gender struggles in Africa. Based on the idea of a global sisterhood whereby all women have the same plights and aspirations, the novel is embraced by most students in gender courses. Lisa Williams' (1997) students found parallels between their lives and Ramatoulaye's.

While *So Long a Letter* is concerned with the lives of two women in postcolonial Senegal, this novel spoke to the needs and struggles of the women in my class. As members of the first generation in each of their families to attend college, these students faced tremendous obstacles to gain an education. Some were single mothers working at demeaning jobs during the day and attending school at night.

(142)

Obviously, one can point to the dangers of comparing the lives of first generation female college students in the US to that of an educated middle class Senegalese woman, but the point is that these students assume the universality of women's struggles. This universal brand of feminism allows Western feminists to feel the need to form a coalition with Ramatoulaye. With *So Long A Letter*, Bà positions herself as a champion of the liberation of the African woman from the whims of tradition. Champagne remarks about his students: "As properly trained Western feminists, students saw their role as one of championing Ramatoulaye's attempts to free herself from both her backward and oppressive culture and the confines of Islam" (26). Together with her "global sisters", Ramatoulaye takes Islam and polygamy to the trial bench. Her representation of polygamy aligns itself with Western feminist scholarship of the 80s and 90s which generally claimed that women in Africa are victims of patriarchal societies.

Critics are right to point that this fight for women's liberation is vested in her attempts to evaluate an African culture through patronizing Western standards. As women who attended colonial French schools, both Bà and her narrator Ramatoulaye look at their culture through corrupted eyes. Champagne has pointed to the importance of evaluating postcolonial literatures within the context of the postcolonial environments which produced postcolonial intellectuals such as Bà (27). Ramatoulaye's text reveals that her generation constitutes a female elite trained by the colonial French school which agenda was to produce assimilated subjects. To that effect, Ramatoulaye perceives her culture as a liability. Recounting Modou's funeral, she sees the ceremony as an inconvenience and anticipates that mourners would be stealing from her. "On the third day, the same comings and goings of friends, relatives, the poor, the unknown. The name of the deceased, who was popular, has mobilized a buzzing crowd, welcomed in my house that has been stripped of all that could be stolen, all that could be spoilt" (6). Ramatoulaye's arrogance

toward her culture is a byproduct of the French's educational project. Praising her former teacher, she writes:

Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was first to desire for us an 'uncommon' destiny. To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, 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. (15-16)

As an assimilated subject, Ramatoulaye conceives her French education as an enlightenment of her backward African mind. She embraces many aspects of French culture, including her adoption of the nuclear family, isolates herself from her culture and seems to have no relatives. She defines herself by her relationship to Modou, excluding other places where most Senegalese women find their worth such as in their roles as aunts, cousins, nieces, surrogate mothers, sisters, and much more.

Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are fixated on monogamy and romantic love imported from French culture. Based on romantic love, Ramatoulaye goes against her mother's apprehension about Modou, while Aissatou and Mawdo defy their families and marry outside their respective social castes. Though their husbands' second marriages are betrayals in their inability to inform their wives beforehand, the two friends' attitude toward polygamy is defined by romantic love, which they both made the premises of their marriages. Their definition of love is the complete surrender of oneself to a man. Speaking to Tamsir, Modou's older brother who wanted to marry

her after the latter's death, Ramatoulaye writes: "You forgot 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" (56). She further confesses to Aissatou: "Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived happiness outside marriage" (56). Her inability to fathom a life separate from Modou, makes it difficult for her to cope with his betrayal. Both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou see their husbands' polygamous choices as an annulment of a contract sealed through romantic love.

Contrary to *So Long A Letter*, *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*'s narrator celebrates polygamy. Published in 1999, the novel is the third installment in a trilogy by Ken Bugul [The one no one wants (Wolof)] (Pen name of Senegalese author Marietou Mbaye Bileoma.). The narrator in *Riwan* juxtaposes her quest for her identity with that of a mentally ill man whose name Riwan, serves as the title of the book. After a long stay in Europe, the narrator returns to her small village alienated and disillusioned with the West. Through her friendship with the local Serigne, a Muslim cleric from the Mourid brotherhood, she is able to rediscover her roots and reconcile her fragmented self. She later becomes the Serigne's 28th wife, upon invitation from the other women.

Ken Bugul's first novel, *The Abandoned Baobab* (1982), garnered the same appeal from Western feminists as *So Long A Letter* because it features a female protagonist who is fascinated with the West. In *The Abandoned Baobab*, Ken Bugul followed the steps of Bâ in *So Long A Letter* by featuring victimized African woman who is at odds with her culture and looks to Europe for salvation. In *The Abandoned Baobab* the narrator's fascination with Europe leads to objectification, prostitution, drug abuse, and mental illness. In *Riwan*, Ken Bugul shatters

Western feminists' assumptions about African women and challenges the negative portrayals of polygamy. Because of this tour de force, Ken Bugul's popularity among Western feminists has diminished. Although she has written more than two books, her work is not taught or translated as widely as Mariama Bà's. *Riwan* has won the prestigious Grand Prix de l'Afrique Noire, yet it still does not have an English translation¹, which would make it accessible to most Western readers.

Going back to my claim that *So Long A Letter* is the book by which Senegalese women's writing is represented, I would like to offer ways in which *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* constitutes a work to contrast with Bà's novel, in order to look beyond the representations that the latter offers.

Like Ramatoulaye, the narrator in *Riwan* belongs to the Senegalese female elite trained by the colonial French educational system. Further alienated by an extended sojourn in Europe, she returns to Senegal fragmented. She later demystifies the West through her interactions with the Serigne and the companionship of the women in his harem. Her re-birth allows her to take a closer look at her alienation and offer a counter discourse to western epistemologies on women and marriage. From the start of the novel, Ken Bugul subverts the Western style of narration employed by Bà (the letter), and adopts an African form of storytelling.

*Un lundi.
Jour de marché.
A Dianké.*

One Monday.
Market Day.
At Dianké.

¹ The Novel is translated in many other European languages including Italian. I am in part to blame for this delay because I had promised the author that I would work on an English translation.

The repetition of these phrases throughout the book, defies fixed temporality as in the usual opening line for stories: "Once upon a time." This embracing of African oral traditions implies the author's desire to go back to her Senegalese roots. The evocation of the market day reiterates that desire to return to African ways of evaluating time, and suggests that many members of the community bear witness to the events which she is about to narrate. The narrator's interlocutor becomes anyone who is present during the telling of the story. Furthermore, a major convention of African storytelling is that stories are not true. Their purpose is to impart wisdom. African stories and tales are didactic means to instruct future generations. As substantiated in her dedication "*A Mame Yande Fall, ma copine de la ville et à mes très regrettées nièces Sokhna Mbaye et Mame Diarra Diagne à qui je raconte ceci aujourd'hui.*" [To my friend from town Mame Yande Fall and to my much mourned nieces Sokhna Mbaye and Mame Diarra Diagne to whom I am telling this story today.] Although her nieces are deceased, Ken Bugul imparts her wisdom to them for the next generation to learn from the lessons imbedded within her story. Storytelling allows the narrator to refuse the responsibility of representation adopted by Ramatoulaye through her epistolary narration.

The setting is also a subversion of the urban focus of *So Long A Letter*. In so doing, Ken Bugul decentralizes the debate about the female condition. Dianké, the fictive name of the village, is a way to reject verisimilitude and to register the tale within the framework of a non-place. It also suggests that Western assimilation is more anchored in urban areas where many intellectuals reside. Rural areas are places where traditional practices are resilient. With nostalgia, the narrator recounts Nabou Samb's nuptials. "*Aujourd'hui encore, le mariage de Nabou Samb était accroché aux lèvres des gens, à la poussière des chemins sablonneux de Mbar à Mbos.*" [To this day Nabou Samb's wedding hangs on people's lips, on the dust from the sandy

roads between Mbar and Mbos (41).] Unlike Ramatoulaye who dreads family ceremonies, Ken Bugul's narrator celebrates them and regrets not having gone through some of the rituals.

*Que de femmes modernes avaient souffert en silence, sans oser se l'avouer, de n'avoir jamais vécu ces moments?
Comme moi!
Etre issue d'un milieu, y avoir grandi, et n'avoir pas connu les rites et les pratiques de ce milieu, conformément à des échelles de valeurs qui commandaient toute une vie ou toute une mort.*

How many modern women have suffered in silence without daring to acknowledge to themselves the regret of having never lived these moments? Like me! To have come from a place, to have grown in that place, and not having gone through the rituals and practices such as the ascending values which govern a whole life or a whole death. (75-76)

She tries to recover her identity and acknowledges that her generation is conflicted. Their adoption of Western culture has led to a disjointed self, which longs for the African traditions they had rejected in the name of modernity. In her attempt to instruct future generations, the narrator describes in detail Wolof wedding ceremonies such as *céet*² and *xaxar*³. Her didactic project includes the safeguarding of Wolof traditions through storytelling, including polygamy.

In Riwan, polygamy does not have a negative connotation. Unlike Ramatoulaye, she conceives monogamy as a relationship dictated by possessiveness. While taking a stand against child marriages through the story of Rama, the young girl who was offered to the Serigne without her consent, the narrator suggests that when women are given a choice, polygamy can work. In her case, she willingly decides to join the Serigne's harem because of her spiritual connection to him. Her marriage to the Serigne allows her to find the self she has been searching for.

² Ceremony during which a bride leaves her parents' home in order to join her husband's.

³ Within the context of polygamy, when a bride is joining co-wives, this ceremony is sometimes organized to welcome her. Women have a verbal fight through songs.

Ainsi le Serigne m'avait offert et donné la possibilité de me réconcilier avec moi-même, avec mon milieu, avec mes origines, avec mes sources, avec mon monde sans lesquels je ne pourrais jamais suivre. J'avai échappé à la mort de mon moi, de ce moi qui n'était pas à moi toute seule. De ce moi qui appartenait aussi aux miens, à ma race, à mon peuple, à mon village et à mon continent.

The Serigne had offered and given me the possibility of reconciling myself with myself, with my surroundings, with my origins, with my roots, with my world, without which I would never have been able to survive. I had escaped the death of my self, that self that didn't belong to me alone. That self also belonged to my people, to my race, to my village and my continent. (167-168)

The narrator finds herself through her union with her spiritual father but most importantly, the companionship of his other wives constitutes the catalyst of this recovery.

She joins the harem because of her longing for female companionship. Her relationship with the other wives is based on mutual respect and a desire to reap the benefits of a union with a man who is religiously and spiritually gifted. Through her bonding with the Serigne's other wives, the narrator discovers that her education and travels across the globe have exposed her to foreign ideas and theories, which ultimately are the source of her alienation. She voices envy toward the women who remained home and did not benefit from a Western education. "*Les épouses du Serigne qui n'avaient pas voyagé autant que moi, n'avaient pas connu les angoisses qui avaient gaché une grande partie de ma vie.*" [The wives of the Serigne who had not traveled as much as I had, didn't not have the kinds of concerns which destroyed a good part of my life (189).] Because of their limited exposure to the West and its ideas, the Serigne's other wives are

not perpetually yearning for masculine validation. The courtyard where they spend most of their time is a world filled with laughter and female bonding. Their conversations revolve around the prices of commodities, the latest fashion, politics, the education of their children, God, life, death, and occasionally, the Serigne. Though they look to the Serigne for occasional sex, they practice masturbation and engage in erotic games for sexual fulfillment. Through these women, the narrator learns that she did not have to define her existence based on her relationship to a man. "*Je découvris ainsi que nous n'avions pas besoin de recréer les mâles, d'accrocher nos vies aux leurs.*" [So I discovered that we did not have to re-create males, to hang our lives on theirs (177).] This realization is a subversion of the Western feminist tradition where educated women positioned themselves as those who know.

By acknowledging that she learned to redefine herself from the uneducated women in the Serigne's harem, the narrator challenges Western feminist ideas, and suggests that the feminist discourses which contributed to her loss of self, are Eurocentric and patronizing. They are discourses based on too many theories, false assumptions, and a desire to compare oneself to men.

"Les femmes modernes étaient condamnées au bavardage mondain pour se faire accepter et aimer. Taisons nous et agissons." [Modern women are doomed to empty mundane talk in order to be accepted and loved. Let us shut up and act (185). She enumerates many places where the co-called subordinated African women find agency (187). These examples serve to challenge Western feminist scholarship about African women and contradict the universal female struggle implied in *So Long A Letter*.

Over thirty years after her death, Mariama Bà's specter has stands over Senegalese women's writings. Her novel *So Long A Letter* has been the text through which Senegalese culture and the practice of polygamy in Africa are evaluated. Western scholars and readers are particularly drawn to this novel because it substantiates their stereotypes of Africa. They identify with Ramatoulaye because of her attempts to evaluate her culture through Western standards. Like *Things Fall Apart*, which continues to be the representative of African literature in world literature courses, *So Long A Letter* is the statement about Senegalese women's lives. This seemingly fixation on *So Long A Letter* suggests that Ramatoulaye's representation is applicable to all Senegalese women, and that her vision of the culture is absolute. It also implies that Senegalese women's writings has not moved from the themes and issues raised in Bà's novel. Ken Bugul's *Riwan ou le chemin Riwan* offers complex ways of looking at polygamy and Islam. It complicates Ramatoulaye's representations and contradicts her Western feminist claims. Through *Riwan*, Ken Bugul shows that there isn't a universal brand of feminism and that postcolonial intellectual must free herself from empty theories by decolonizing her mind, in order to recover her fragmented self. Unfortunately, *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* is not translated into English.

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