**Submitted by Lauren Daugherty**

**Mariama Bâ**

**CONTEXT**

In the 1960s, Senegal was a new, independent nation. It had previously been ruled in succession by the Portuguese, the Dutch and finally the French, becoming a part of French West Africa around half a century earlier. With independence, Senegal struggled to create its own cultural identity. In 1963, the young nation wrote its first constitution, and three years later its only political party became the Senegalese Progressive Union. About a decade later, a three-party political system was introduced.

After being citizens of French West Africa for many years, many individuals had assimilated to aspects of French culture with its norms. As a result, the nation created a unique blend of Islamic religious beliefs and practices, African cultural norms and French influence, resulting in the Senegalese values that are still a hybrid of practices today. While different, all three cultures – African, French and Muslim – have traditionally viewed women as a subordinate sex whose primary responsibilities are domestic and who live in the shadows of their husbands. Mariama Bâ used her novels, influenced by her personal experience as a Muslim women living in postcolonial Africa, to reveal the unjust treatment of women justified by a patriarchal society, polygamous practices, and certain Muslim traditions.

Leopold Sedar Senghor, the first president of Senegal, believed in assimilation and supported the continued use of French as Senegal’s national official language with the result that indigenous languages were repressed. He was a renowned poet in French – having mastered the French language while studying in France during the colonial period -- and he believed that independence would bring about a partnership between Africa and the West. A giant literary figure in his own right — strictly speaking, Senghor who started the Negritude literary movement in 1920’s is Bâ’s literary forebear. But his writings did not address the issues African women in Senegal face. Once Senghor took office, resistance to the French language and education system, which had begun years prior when Senegal was still a French colony, increased.[[1]](#footnote-1) Senghor’s adherence to French language and culture resulted in a form of repression that hindered the progression of Senegalese culture, while citizens and nation alike struggled to find their own unique identity.

While embodying aspects of African and French culture, Senegal was a primarily Muslim nation, and Islamic practices and beliefs played a large role in forming the nation’s identity. Senegal primarily embraces Sunni Islam, sharing some common takes on the different interpretations of the Quran, and believes strongly in the practice of purdah. Purdah involves women living behind a curtain or in a different room, and dressing conservatively in order to stay out of the sight of men.

**LIFE**

While Senegal was negotiating its values as a nation, Mariama Bâ was going through a similar personal journey – discovering her role as a Senegalese and Muslim woman. Born in the capital of Senegal in 1929, she lived with her grandparents from a young age. While obtaining her early education, in French, she simultaneously attended a Koranic school. These are religious schools common throughout Muslim countries that teach the Koran. In the French school, Mariama Bâ showed she was an extremely intelligent student, receiving the highest exam score for all of colonial French West Africa at age fourteen. Bâ had to fight to continue her education past primary school when living under the traditional roof of her grandparents. It was common for women to receive an education in Senegal and the Koran’s stance on women in education is widely debated, with different groups within the Muslim religion taking different stances on the issue - even across Sunni and Shia branches of Islam. One interpretation is as follows:

Allah says in the Koran, “And Allah has brought you out from the wombs of your mothers while you know nothing. And He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts that you might give thanks (to Allah)” (An-Nahl, 78). The link of the key words (knowing nothing and giving thanks) in the two sentences of the above is a clear indication of exploration and seeking knowledge. It may be noticed that there is no preferred sex indication in the verse (Taj Khan 2016, 340).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Much of what influences the individual interpretation of the Koran relates to the pronouns used, and whether these pronouns should be considered mutually exclusive. It’s clear from this verse that Allah is viewed as passionate about education and knowledge. Many verses play into varying opinions about the Koran’s stance on education, however one thing is commonly agreed upon – Allah encouraged the exploration of knowledge. Senegal is an example of how a society has hindered its progress in a more globalized world by restricting the search for knowledge to a single gender, and Bâ constantly works to combat this in her writings and own education. Since her grandparents didn’t believe that a woman in Senegal needed an education, Bâ had to resist gender norms from a young age. She recognized early that she was discriminated against as a woman, and used this to fuel her resistance later in life.

Bâ’s father, the Minister of Health for Senegal, was an open-minded politician who valued education. He eventually interfered and insisted on her receiving a formal education through the Teacher’s College for girls. Upon seeing her scores on the entrance exam, the school’s principal took particular interest in Bâ and personally trained her for a second entrance exam that would jumpstart her teaching career. She received her teaching certificate in 1947 and worked as a teacher for twelve years. As she taught, her health deteriorated to the point where she had to take a position at the Senegalese Regional Inspectorate of Teaching rather than continue her own teaching. However, her teaching had been so exceptional that in 1977 President Leopold Senghor founded a school in her name.

During her twelve years as a teacher, she married Senegalese politician, Obeye Diop. Together they had nine children. Bâ later divorced Diop and was left to raise all nine children alone in a society where typically women are completely dependent upon their husbands for food, housing and money. This divorce led to her publication of her first epistolary novel, *So Long a Letter*, and began her activism for women’s rights in Senegalese culture.

Bâ reveals many issues through various characters in her literature, including the relations between men and women and the relations of traditional to modern societies. She portrays a disconnect in education – provided by the French – where women are taught to adopt modern principles and ideals, but at home are subjugated to the social rules of polygamous families, according to Islam which dictated their domestic lives and relations. Thus Bâ conveys this backtracking from independence to traditional practices which perpetuates the subjugation of women.

**WRITINGS**

***So Long a Letter***

A collection of letters entitled *So Long a Letter,* written from the perspective of a woman to her close friend, depicted the daily struggles of women living in Senegalese culture. Polygamy was common, and often women struggled with their roles and identity. Social status depended upon whether or not a woman could conceive a boy. With other wives working to please the same man, no woman would stand out for who she is or what she achieves. Instead, she simply becomes another wife and is often replaced by a newer, younger version of herself – especially if the younger wife is believed to be more likely to conceive (or has conceived) a boy.

*So Long a Letter* opens with a funeral scene, as Ramatouleye’s husband, Madou Fall, had recently died of a heart attack. An important aspect of the Islamic faith is the belief of life after death, and as a result Muslims strictly follow the rules and regulations surrounding death dictated by the Koran. These rituals emphasize prayer, cleanliness and purity.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Mirasse* is another Muslim tradition followed after death where family members reveal all of the secrets held by the deceased, including financial status.[[4]](#footnote-4) In *So Long a Letter,* Bâ’s main characters, Ramatouleye and her friend Aissatou had been promised monogamy by their husbands. However, both Ramatouleye and Aissatou’s husband’s promises of monogamy were broken and their respective husbands reverted to the Islamic practice of polygamy. What Ramatouleye learned during her observance of *mirasse* was that Madou Fall’s new wife, Binetou had received immense amounts of money, including funds to send her parents to Mecca, to buy a house, as well as a monthly allowance to make up for the fact that he interrupted her education. Later in her letters, Ramatouleye compares her story to that of Aissatou, and shares how both women felt betrayed and abandoned by their husbands.

Bâ uses irony to portray the character of Ramatouleye. In the opening scenes of the funeral she is illustrated as a submissive wife who was treated unjustly by her husband. Throughout the grieving process, each practice is perfectly traditional, and Ramatouleye appears to have done everything socially right as both a Muslim woman and widow. What is not clear until the end of the funeral ritual is that her marriage to Madou Fall was intended to be an act of rebellion against both her mother and Senegalese social norms. This rebellion is the first illustration of Bâ’s activism in her writings, stemming from the education her character had received during which her French teachers encouraged their classes to be “the first pioneers of the promotion of African women” (So Long a Letter, 14).[[5]](#footnote-5) By choosing the man her mother didn’t approve of instead of the perfect, socially respected doctor, Ramatouleye was claiming her right to choose as a woman. Unfortunately, the marriage resulted in her being unable to escape the traditional practices of Senegalese marriage, and ended in polygamy. Mariama Bâ depicted in her character Ramatouleye a life of attempted rebellion and activism, while simultaneously practicing these same characteristics herself. A year after its publication, *So Long a Letter* was awarded the first Noma Prize for Publishing in Africa. Translated into English a year later, it soon became available in fifteen different languages.

***Scarlet Song***

In 1981, Mariama Bâ died after a long battle with cancer. Five years after her death, her second novel, *Scarlet Song* was published. This novel followed the love story of Ousmane Gueye and Mireille – two young people who fight through cultural differences for their love. Much of the point of the story is similar to that of *So Long a Letter* in that Bâ uses her literature to highlight the unjust institution of marriage in Senegalese culture. *Scarlet Song*, however, provokes madness and violence in response to a husband taking a second wife, whereas in *So Long a Letter*, it leads to divorce and abandonment.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Throughout the novel, their love breaches traditional norms much to the disapproval of both families as well as their community. Mireille and Osumane secretly marry after Mireille has converted to Islam, however Ousmane’s extended family soon pressure him into taking a second wife. While a beautiful love story to start, the failure of the marriage is instigated by an unwillingness to compromise, “and as a result, Ousmane is drawn to a cultural practice that an outsider like Mireille cannot tolerate.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Bâ illustrates that no matter how strong the bond of love is, cultural values and norms in postcolonial Senegal have the strength to continue to pull until it breaks. She reveals how difficult it is to live in a society while going against social and cultural norms, and shows that culture always pulls one back home – an illustration of her frustration with the lack of flexibility in regards to these norms.

In an article entitled ‘The Face of Eve: Feminist Writing in African Literature’, Chukwuma argues that often men are made to be the only enemy, when in fact women play a key role in “encouraging intimidating norms and traditions of subjugating and negative values inherent in our society.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Bâ uses the mother-in-law in *Scarlet Song* to perpetrate the very culture other women are attempting to displace, and to illustrate that men were not alone perpetuating repressive and oppressive values.

The sanctity of a women’s body has long been a significant aspect of any society. As a place of creation and birth, a community depends on the ability of the female body to reproduce and thereby continue to exist. Bâ approaches this topic in *Scarlet Song*, as she reveals that a women’s body has become a signifier of race and culture, and therefore subject to regulation, discipline and management. Here Bâ attempts to identify the root of the issue with women’s rights. She reveals how due to the power that a mother holds in the perpetuation of a race and community, all women have become subject to control by men. Bâ argues that instead, a women’s body should be the purest representation of her identity where she brings life and nourishment to her children.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**RESISTANCE**

Bâ’s activism was most prevalent in her literature. Her novels serve to illustrate “women’s ability to transcend the negative consequences of the irresponsible use of power in a traditional Muslim and patriarchal society.”[[10]](#footnote-10) However, Bâ also worked as a journalist where she wrote about women’s issues and participated in women’s organizations. The label ‘feminist’ is often associated with Bâ due to her work to promote women’s rights. She, however, insists that she is not a feminist because she doesn’t believe in the separation of the sexes.[[11]](#footnote-11) Feminism is often portrayed as a fight for women to gain more rights than men, however Bâ recognized that the sexes need not be separated in their work, abilities or social status. African women writers of the first generation, Bâ, Nwapa and Emecheta refused the label of feminism so as to reject notions widely associated with white feminism, such as the belief that women were better or more important than men. Thus, the label feminism with its negative connotations was rejected.

While her primary form of resistance was through writing, Bâ was also known to be active in women’s associations and a defender of women’s rights. She emphasized women’s right to education, for that was how she learned of her ability to break the cultural barriers placed on her as a woman. Bâ recognized the importance of women’s education, and fought for it – among other rights – through speeches and articles published in local newspapers.

 In *So Long a Letter,* Aïssatou and Ramatouleye serve as catalysts for change within the Senegalese culture. Aïssatou leaves her husband in order to show that she has her own principles and intends to follow them – regardless of traditional values.[[12]](#footnote-12) Ramatouleye stands up to traditional norms through her refusal to marry Modou’s brother or another man after his death. In a society that is designed for a family to be provided for by a father, both Aïssatou and Ramatouleye prove that women have their own principles and don’t need a husband in order to be prosperous. Bâ’s characters “affirm the ability of women to experience such potentially devastating situations, and yet move beyond victimization to action and a wholesome self-expression.”[[13]](#footnote-13) By standing by their values, Aïssatou and Ramatouleye prioritize their own values as opposed to falling prey to the traditional practice of polygamy and unjust treatment under Islamic norms.

In Western schools, Bâ’s rendition of life in postcolonial Senegal is often included in the syllabus. African literature was often written with the intended audience of other Africans who already understand the culture embodied in the novel. However, it is also clear that Bâ’s literature was intended to reach Western culture, as she caters to the Western reader through her dedication and extensive footnotes and explanations.[[14]](#footnote-14) Her voice is often the only lens through which Westerners view life in postcolonial Senegal, and for this reason Bâ has become a spokeswoman for all of Senegal, with an emphasis on women. Bâ used her novel as a resistance against African cultural practices oppressive to women, and in doing so appeals to the West to gain support in her movement to dispel the negative effects on women of the practice of polygamy in Islam. Bâ carefully reveals both strengths and weaknesses of every culture and religion throughout her literature.

In her acceptance speech for the Noma Prize, Bâ said, “People must be instructed, cultured and educated, so that things can advance.”[[15]](#footnote-15) This statement as well as her writings make it clear that Mariama Bâ intended to educate others on the negative effects of polygamy, patriarchal hegemony and Islam on women. Bâ achieved this through her writings, activism and teaching. In her writings, she primarily used the institution of marriage to portray these effects, and clearly intended for her books to be read not only in her own Senegalese culture, but to expand beyond borders to the West. By writing such compelling stories with irrespirable proof in the unjust treatment of women, Bâ has attained what she intended to do: she has infiltrated the classrooms of schools worldwide, and has brought attention to the struggles that women face in the post independence era in the Senegalese culture.

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