

## The Personal and the Political in the Work of Mariama Bâ

Adele King  
*Ball State University*

While the slogan “the personal is the political” is a commonplace of contemporary Western feminism, many American and European novels that relate personal to political issues seem thin or unaware of problems beyond a narrow range of middle-class experience. Mariama Bâ, however, addresses both women’s issues—those she defined as emanating from a “woman’s cry” that has a “certain unity” everywhere in the world (Cham 89)—and political concerns in Senegal. Issues include the relations between men and women and the relations of post-colonial societies to pre-modern traditions. She describes the tensions felt by women educated in modern schools but expected to accept roles in polygamous extended families. A desire to “return to traditions” after independence leads, she feels, not only to the subjugation of women but also to corruption and a dangerous political conservatism. Raising questions of what is best for both individuals and the state in independent Senegal gives a moral depth to Bâ’s work.

In her two novels—*Une si longue lettre* and *Un Chant écarlate*—Bâ links the strength of the family to the strength of the country; each must support the other.<sup>1</sup> *Une si longue lettre* addresses the conflicting claims in women’s lives of family and profession, of self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment, of love and individual dignity. These conflicts are related to the political dilemmas facing contemporary Senegal. In *Un Chant écarlate*, the disintegration of an interracial marriage is both a personal tragedy and a political tragedy, since it is caused by a perversion of the ideals of Negritude into a black racism.

Although Simone de Beauvoir sees parallels between the situation of women and that of blacks, most Africans, as Mineke Schipper has observed, do not (40). African men seldom sympathize with white female characters in their novels; they seldom see African women as being

doubly victims. Since male dominance is considered a colonial importation, women should be content with their traditional, precolonial roles. Feminism is also imported; if African women complain, they are being anti-African. For Femi Ojo-Ade the "true African woman" is always in solidarity with her man, since "male chauvinism" is a "Western way" ("Female Writers" 176). "Femininity is the virtue of the traditionalist; feminism, the veneer of the progressive striving to become a man" ("Victim" 84).

Until recently, few African women writers or intellectuals were willing to embrace feminism; even Mariama Bâ denied being a feminist. This is partly a result of male intimidation, as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie suggests (11), and also because feminism is too often equated with an aggressive bourgeois individualism on the part of a small elite of women who opt for radical separatism or who denigrate motherhood. In Tigray (northern Ethiopia) "feminism is defined within the context of capitalist power relations. They see it at worst as separatist in the terms of radical feminism; at best . . . as actually or potentially divisive of the struggle of women and men against the real enemy" (Hammond 57-58). Yet these are women striving to overcome a traditional culture especially oppressive of women, who have never been encouraged "to trust to class struggle as the sole means of liberating themselves" (Hammond 58). We cannot, of course, compare the situation of working class women activists in Ethiopia with that of Mariama Bâ, but the distrust of feminism, seen as primarily a movement in Western capitalist countries, is somewhat similar.

We may define feminism as a recognition that women are always in a subordinate position and as a concern for improving the place of women in society. With such a broad definition of feminism, Bâ would perhaps have agreed. In any case, it is clear from her work that she does not consider an attack on male domination to be anti-African.<sup>2</sup> As the narrators of her novels often point out, the unequal relationship man/woman is both more universal and more essential to the structure of society than any unequal class or race relationship. The third-world woman has a difficult job balancing the need to fight on two fronts at once: against Western racial and cultural discrimination and against male claims of superiority. However, as Susie Tharu, an Indian feminist, has commented: "the question of which victimization takes precedence is only academic" (213).

Tharu's analysis of the particular place of women in modern Indian culture has relevance for Africa. The nationalists in India made the mythological figure of Savriti a symbol of the woman who voluntarily chooses suffering and death in order to redeem her people. Thus woman

is identified with the country (*Bharat Mata*, Mother India) and her role is to suffer, to deny herself for others. Africa, like India, has a feminine mythic essence. For Senghor, Africa is more “emotional” than Europe just as women are usually stereotyped as more “emotional” than men. The symbolic figure of Mother Africa, however, transcends this simple reason/emotion dichotomy and embodies notions of nurturing, suffering and fidelity to the land and to ancient traditions. So women’s potential power is linked with a respect for traditions. According to Ogundipe-Leslie, the African male needs the myth of the traditional rural woman “to buoy-up his conservatism and his yearning for that precolonial patriarchal past” (8). The maternal, nurturing element in a woman’s love is seen as natural by both men and women. In *Un Chant écarlate* the narrator speaks of “un désir de protection maternelle, enfoui dans chaque amante” ‘that maternal, protective instinct which lies buried in every woman in love’ (C 32, SS 21). Thus the woman is expected to be maternal, to conserve family and traditions, both cultural and political. In order to have any real power in the contemporary world, however, a woman must be educated, must bypass a strictly domestic role and break free from religious constraints. It is this conflict between the maternal role and the role in the wider world that Bâ examines in her work.

The lives of the women who are revolutionary activists in the West African fiction of Sembène Ousmane are to some extent outside the conventional female roles of their society. In his *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, for example, Penda is a prostitute, Niakoro is an old woman, Maimouna is blind, N’deye Touti is a modern schoolgirl out of touch with her community. The rebels against their society in the work of Calixthe Beyala are also to a large extent outcasts, daughters of prostitutes or prostitutes themselves, with no ties to normal society. On the other hand, Bâ’s female characters are firmly rooted within their communities, communities in which men are expected to be the leaders. This dual role produces a conflict: they are bound by traditions, both African and Islamic, yet part of the modern world; they want to guard the stability of the family, yet also want to use their intelligence as active individuals. Ramatoulaye, in *Une si longue lettre*, is well aware of conflicts; though she cannot fully resolve them, she is willing to allow her daughters a freer role than she can even imagine for herself. She cannot forget for a moment her role as mother, cannot imagine herself outside the structure of her society. She is not an exemplary hero fighting to better her position in the world. Critics have disagreed as to whether Mariama Bâ sees Ramatoulaye’s friend Aissatou as a more exemplary female hero. Aissatou is less traditional, willing to divorce her husband when he takes a second wife. She is also able to assert her individuality through the good fortune

of getting a good position abroad. She has, however, opted out of the conflict in Africa. For Mildred Mortimer, Aissatou is an "important role model" for her friend (136). Katherine Frank sees the ending of the novel as a "crucial union of westernized feminist fulfillment and African culture" (19). It is also possible to read it as a hint that Aissatou has moved too far from her own culture:

Ainsi, demain, je te reverrai en tailleur ou en robe-maxi? ... Habitée à vivre loin d'ici, tu voudras ... table, assiette, chaise, fourchette. — Plus commode, diras-tu. Mais, je ne te suivrai pas. Je t'étalerai une natte. Dessus, le grand bol fumant où tu supporteras que d'autres mains puisent.

So, then, will I see you tomorrow in a tailored suit or a long dress? ... Used to living far away, you will want ... table, plate, chair, fork. More convenient, you will say. But I will not let you have your way. I will spread out a mat. On it there will be the big, steaming bowl into which you will have to accept that other hands dip. (L 130; SL 89)<sup>3</sup>

Ramatoulaye attempts to preserve the tradition of the common bowl and the stability of the family, while also having a role in the modern world: a job, the possibility of working in national politics. But she cannot be considered, at least throughout most of her narrative, as a fighter. When her husband takes a second wife, she does nothing except wait. As he never returns to his first household, "J'avais la solution souhaitée par mes enfants—la rupture—sans en avoir pris l'initiative" 'I had the solution my children wanted—the break—without having taken the initiative' (L 77; SL 52). Her story is typical of the woman who, in the words of Claudine Herrmann, because she is "always obliged to take others into account, and also to consider a material reality from which she escapes less easily than man, can only conceptualize a cosmos of which she is not the center" (170). Bâ herself was well aware of both the specificity to West Africa and the universality of her theme. As she said in an interview (one that also shows the limits of her disclaimer of feminism):

In all cultures, the woman who formulates her own claims or who protests against her situation is given the cold shoulder. ... 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. (Schipper 46-47)

Bâ's comment about the patriarchal nature of different religions reminds me of an observation by Mehr Nigar Masroor, a Pakistani feminist writer. In spite of the conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, "this was also a very old and very familiar tale, one common to all Indians be they of any religion, caste or colour, be they high or low; it was always the woman who bore the shame, the guilt and the burden" (246). Masroor's heroine, also an older, abandoned woman, can find peace only in suicide.

The problem of how to reconcile the family with the individual rights of the woman is, Bâ suggests, particularly that of a contemporary transitional generation, those who came to maturity at the time of political independence. Ramatoulaye gives the impression that for her mother and grandmother there was less conflict. Their aspirations were simpler, but, more importantly, they lived in a world of mutual support among women: "Nos grand'mères dont les concessions étaient séparées par une tapade, échangeaient journellement des messages" 'Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange messages daily' (L 7; SL 1). The absence of friends, the isolation of the housewife, the lack of a strong maternal figure are frequent themes of women's writing in the West.<sup>4</sup> From her mother and grandmother Ramatoulaye can draw strength. Her need to write "such a long letter" to her best friend, however, reminds us of the changes in her society. If women have careers, they have less time for talks across the compound wall. Her mother was sure that a young woman should choose the most suitable husband without being swayed by romantic impulses. This traditional way of life for women is, of course, not unique to Africa. Most marriages in the world are arranged by families; the idea of a romantic marriage is fairly recent even in America and Europe.<sup>5</sup> In choosing a husband solely by sentiment, Ramatoulaye represents a modern deviation from the world-wide norm. When she finds that the handsome, charming beau is not the most reliable husband, she faces a problem common to many women. As the narrator of *Un Chant écarlate* remarks, "Et puis l'infidélité n'est point l'exclusivité des Noirs!" 'And, when all's said and done, black men are not the only ones who are unfaithful to their wives!' (C 242; SS 162). What makes her case particular to her culture is the immediate cause for her disillusionment: her husband's decision to take a second wife, one the age of his daughter.

Ramatoulaye is part of the transitional generation in which the conflicts in women's roles are the most pronounced. It is also the generation that links "deux périodes historiques, l'une de domination,

l'autre d'indépendance" 'two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence' (L 40; SL 25), an observation that again points to the parallels between the personal and the political. This generation is still rather conservative: Ramatoulaye talks of "des vices importés" 'imported voices' as opposed to "des vertus anciennes" 'old virtues' (L 106, SL 73). She expects her daughters to do the housework, but not her sons; when she learns that her unmarried daughter is pregnant, her immediate reaction is "Qui? qui est l'auteur de ce vol?" 'Who is behind this theft?' (L 119; SL 82), as if her daughter's virginity were a treasure that should not be stolen. Many of her attitudes with respect to women's roles may seem traditional in comparison to Western feminist ideals, but they represent her own blend of African and Western values. She believes in stability but also has a romantic conception of marital love; she has "jamais conçu le bonheur hors du couple" 'never conceived of happiness outside marriage' (L 82; SL 56). Her world is never a separatist world without men: "Je reste persuadée de l'inévitable et nécessaire complémentarité de l'homme et de la femme" 'I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman' (L 129; SL 88). Marriage remains the basis of harmony. When she argues for women's rights, she feels she is being "un peu frondeuse" 'a bit of a rebel' (L 90; SL 61).

Ramatoulaye is no radical in national or in family politics:

C'est de l'harmonie du couple que naît la réussite familiale, comme l'accord de multiples instruments crée la symphonie agréable. Ce sont toutes les familles, riches ou pauvres, unies ou déchirées, conscientes ou irréfléchies qui constituent la Nation. La réussite d'une nation passe donc irrémédiablement par la famille.

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 a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family. (L 130; SL 89)

Harmony of man and woman, harmony of rich and poor, harmony of educated and uneducated. It is not a revolutionary political philosophy, since the rich and the poor remain. The working classes are not idealized: "L'humble logis autant que l'orgueilleuse demeure pouvait abriter une harmonie familiale ou connaître le règne de la discorde et de l'animosité" 'The humble dwelling and the proud abode alike could shelter domestic harmony or be ruled by discord and enmity' (C 9; SS 4). The nation

must establish both stability and democratic freedom; all members of the state, like all members of the family, have or should have both rights and responsibilities.

Alongside this conservatism is a tendency not to rock the boat. Ramatoulaye accepts her son's teacher's preference for a white pupil, saying philosophically, "La vie est un éternel compromis" 'Life is an eternal compromise' (L 105; SL 72). Ramatoulaye can sound like a member of NOW when she demands more women in political office: "Presque vingt ans d'indépendance! A quand la première femme ministre?" 'Almost twenty years of independence! When will we have a female minister?' (L 89; SL 61). Her militancy, however, is tempered by a realization that relations between the sexes never exist solely on the level of discussion: "Daouda m'écoutait. Mais j'avais l'impression que bien plus que mes idées, ma voix le captivait" 'Daouda was listening to me. But I had the impression that more than my ideas, it was my voice that captivated him' (L 90; SL 61). The acceptance of the "éternel compromis" in relations between the sexes and in the political sphere shows how Bâ's values, like those of many third-world women, can be distinguished from those of much Western feminism. Life is a hard struggle, small matters must be overlooked, traditions cannot be destroyed indiscriminately. Ramatoulaye is practical, capable of assessing realistically what can be accomplished. She sympathizes with her unmarried pregnant daughter, but the child's father is ready to marry her as soon as possible. In spite of her husband's infidelity towards his family, she judges that he had "de la grandeur" 'was a great man' (L 106; SL 73), for she is in agreement with his political, if not his personal values. Although he felt the two spheres could be separated, she knows that they cannot.

Finally neither the conservative Ramatoulaye nor the westernized Aissatou is an ideal. The new generation—the generation of Ramatoulaye's daughters—is the source of hope. They are able to assert themselves within their culture, profit from the female bonding that aided their mothers and grandmothers, and yet establish good relationships with men. Unlike her mother, committed to national politics, Daba has decided to work within women's organizations, scorning the "appétit de pouvoir" 'greed for power' (L 107; SL 74) of politics dominated by men. The association she describes is typical of feminist groups of the 1970s:

Il n'y a ni rivalité ni clivage, ni calomnie, ni bousculade; il n'existe pas de postes à partager ni de places à nantir. La direction varie chaque année. Chacune de nous a des chances égales de faire valoir ses idées.

There is neither rivalry nor schism, neither malice nor jostling for position; there are no posts to be shared, nor positions to be secured. The headship changes every year. Each of us has equal opportunity to advance her ideas. (L 107-108; SL 74)

The rather naive idealism of Daba's description is perhaps an indication that Bâ is imagining a world that does not yet exist.

Rejecting those traditions and customs that inhibit the natural expression of love and respect forms the basis of Bâ's morality, applicable to both family and public life. Traditions are neither good nor bad in themselves, but must be judged against higher moral standards. *Un Chant écarlate* presents a picture of society in which traditions are evoked selectively; you choose to observe those that advance your selfish ends, and you can do this successfully if you can dominate someone else. It is a bleak picture of power relationships, of immoral manipulation of the weaker by the stronger. In the family of Mireille, the mother has been married for "trente années où elle n'avait eu aucune pensée propre" "thirty years during which she had not had a thought of her own" (C 120; SS 78). It is not simply men who use women, but also women who use men by playing upon either their filial or their erotic feelings. Ousmane's mother, Yaye Khady, is presented as someone who uses her son and who cannot accept Mireille, realizing she could never dominate her: "Une Toubab ne peut être une vraie bru" 'A Toubab can't be a proper daughter-in-law' (C 101; SS 66).

The interference of the mother-in-law seems primarily, as Mbye Cham has observed, "the disturbing phenomenon of victims victimizing victims" (96). In *Une si longue lettre* the griote Farmata hopes for a festive wedding for Ramatoulaye's daughter, so that she can earn money. Binetou's mother wants modern conveniences. Uncontrolled desire for material possessions is often the vice of uneducated women in Bâ's novels; since their lives are narrower, they are interested primarily in showing off what they own or what their children have accomplished. Ousmane's mother, in *Un Chant écarlate*, is much more tradition-bound than his father, whom Ousmane initially admires for having only one wife. Oulymatou, Ousmane's second wife, had little education and can only define herself in relation to a man, can only make herself a desirable sexual object. In spite of the tragic results of her plotting, she too is victim as well as victimizer.

As Ousmane considers his dilemma, early in the novel, he thinks of the "voix accordées des valeurs traditionnelles" 'singing in unison of traditional values' (SS 36). But, the narrator comments, "les mentalités

se momifiaient dans le carcan du passé” ‘Minds fossilized by the antiquated ideas of the past’ (C 56; SS 36). Traditions cannot be justified indiscriminately. Negritude should not be perverted into racism. *Un Chant écarlate*, a much darker, more pessimistic novel than *Une si longue lettre*, is an impassioned plea for the type of universal humanism in which Mireille believes: all human beings are equal. Mutual comprehension, acceptance of equality, though, is not possible in either the French or the Senegalese society Bâ portrays. Ousmane’s friends think of interracial marriage as an out-of-date way of advancing socially and economically. They cannot believe in understanding between peoples: “Leur humanisme [des Français] d’hier n’était que leurre, une arme d’exploitation honteuse pour endormir nos consciences” ‘Their [French] former humanism was nothing but a snare, a shameful weapon of exploitation to lull our consciences’ (C 59; SS 38). Africans think of white women who marry them as trash; European women think of Africans as treacherous seducers who will steal their belongings. Ousmane’s mother thinks white people are abnormal; Mireille’s father thinks Africans are primitive. Mireille, the idealist, goes mad.

Ousmane is led to deny his own ideal of Negritude, which initially means for him “L’Enracinement” and “L’Ouverture” returning to one’s roots’ and keeping the way open’ (C 72; SS 47). Gradually, however, Negritude comes to mean only a return to one’s roots, with no opening towards others. Practically it becomes an excuse for his desire to be the master of the house and for his sensual attraction to Oulematou: “La même sève des mœurs imprégnait leur âme. Les mêmes causes les exaltaient” ‘Their souls were impregnated with the sap of the same customs. They were excited by the same causes’ (C 183; SS 121):

Ouleymatou se confondait dans son esprit avec l’Afrique, “une Afrique à réinstaller dans ses prérogatives, une Afrique à promouvoir!” Chez la Négresse, il était le prophète au “verbe-vérité,” messie aux mains riches, nourricier de l’âme et du corps.

In his mind he confused Ouleymatou with Africa, ‘an Africa which has to restored to its prerogatives, to be helped to evolve!’ When he was with the African woman, he was the prophet of the ‘word made truth,’ the messiah with the unstinting hands providing nourishment for body and soul. (C 225; SS 149-50)

Blind adherence to tradition or to an ideology is one cause for decay in the family and in the society. Another is materialism. Bâ satirically describes the ceremonies for Ouleymatou and her baby, with a “voltige

des billets de banque” ‘rain of banknotes’ (C 201; SS 133); she comments: “les qualités morales d’un prétendant ayant peu de poids dans les jugements et l’argent seul motivant l’extase devant la mariée, marchandise enlevée par le plus nanti!” ‘a suitor’s moral qualities carrying little weight in people’s judgments, money alone being at the heart of their raptures over Ouleymatou, merchandise that had gone to the highest bidder!’ (C 203; SS 134-35). Greed reduces women to the level of merchandise and reduces politics to a corrupt search for personal wealth.

The ideals advocated in both Bâ’s novels are a union of individuals based on mutual respect, a refusal to dominate, a willingness to compromise, an openness to other cultures, a stability growing out of love. Such ideals are equally applicable to the family and to the state, and are far from being reality. As Ramatoulaye tells her politician suitor: “les restrictions demeurent . . . les vieilles croyances renaissent . . . l’égoïsme émerge, le scepticisme pointe quand il s’agit du domaine politique” ‘the constraints remain . . . old beliefs are revived . . . egoism emerges, scepticism rears its head on the political field’ (L 89; SL 61).

Although she wrote only two novels—rather conventional fiction in terms of form and characterization—Mariama Bâ’s voice of reasoned moderation in both the political and personal realms has had a considerable impact on readers and critics of African literature. She speaks of “l’amour sans patrie” ‘a love that knew no national frontiers’ (C 32; SS 20), of harmony between men and women, white and black, African and European. It is a message that appeals in an age of ideologies of separatism.

## Notes

1. Citations in the text to *Une si longue lettre* are marked L and those to *Un Chant écarlate* “a love that knew no national frontiers” are marked C.

2. For an interesting study of how feminism is indigenous to Asian countries—debates on women’s rights and education were held in the eighteenth century in China, for example—see Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. Jayawardena also shows how reformers in many countries, who wanted women to be both “modern” and “traditional,” “idealized the civilization of a distant past, speaking of the need to regain the lost freedom that women were said to once have possessed.”

3. Katherine Frank’s tendency to see Aissatou as stronger than Ramtoulaye leads her to misread the end of the novel: “Ramatoulaye herself has finally emerged from the shadow” (SL 24). The novel closes her long letter with her name, badly

written" (20). The final sentence of the novel reads: "Tant pis pour moi, si j'ai encore à t'écrire une si longue lettre" 'Too bad for me if once again I have to write you so long a letter' (L 131; SL 89). Ramatoulaye is well-educated and does not write her name badly!

4. See, for instance, among novels by women of the African diaspora: Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Maryse Condé's *Hérémakhonon*, Myriam Warner Vieyra's *Juletane*. In none of the three is there a strong mother to help the protagonist.

5. For an interesting commentary on the role of family and economics in European marriages, see the article "Conjugales" in Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972, trans. Annette Lavers).

### Works Cited

Bâ, Mariama. *Une si longue lettre*. Dakar: Nouvelles éditions africaines, 1979.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Un Chant écarlate*. Dakar: Nouvelles éditions africaines, 1981.

\_\_\_\_\_. *So Long a Letter*. Trans. Modupé Bodé-Thomas. London: Virago, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Scarlet Song*. Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. Harlow: Longmans, 1985.

Cham, Mbye B. "Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Mariama Bâ." *African Literature Today* 15 (1987): 89-101.

Frank, Katherine. "Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa." *African Literature Today* 15 (1987): 14-34.

Hammond, Jenny. "'My Revolution is Like Honey': Women in Revolutionary Tigray." *Women: A Cultural Review*, 1.1 (1990): 56-59.

Herrmann, Claudine. "Women in Space and Time." *New French Feminisms*. Ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980. 168-73.

Jayawardena, Kumari. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. London: Zed Books, 1986.

Masroor, Mehr Nigar. *Shadows of Time*. Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1987.

Mortimer, Mildred. *Journeys Through the French African Novel*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1990.

Ogundipe-Leslie, Molar. "The Female Writer and Her Commitment." *African Literature Today* 15 (1987): 5-13.

Ojo-Ade, Femi. "Still a Victim? Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*." *African Literature Today* 12 (1982): 71-87.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Female Writers, Male Critics." *African Literature Today* 13 (1983): 158-79.

Schipper, Mineke. "Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism." *African Literature Today* 15 (1987): 35-54.

Tharu, Susie J. "Savitri's Pedigree." *New Quest* 40 (1983): 213-20.