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## Enclosure/Disclosure in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*

by Mildred Mortimer

DEPICTING THE DAKAR-NIGER RAILWAY STRIKE of 1947 in his novel *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, Ousmane Sembène gives several female protagonists revolutionary scripts. When Penda delivers a fiery speech proposing that the women of Thiès march on Dakar, she is responding to a community crisis, the railway workers strike, by moving women into public space. Both her speech and the march challenge societal norms: "De mémoire d'homme c'était la première fois qu'une femme avait pris la parole en public à Thiès" (289). Although Sembène projects the women into the political arena, he concludes the novel on an ambiguous note. As the marchers near Dakar, Penda dies, killed by the police. At the conclusion of the demonstration the women return home to resume their former activities: "Le soir venu, elles regagnaient la maison paternelle ou le toit conjugal" (371). Women who have been catalysts for change either disappear or are recuperated by the patriarchal structure.<sup>1</sup>

Sembène published *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* in 1960, two decades before the emergence of Senegalese women writers Nafissatou Diallo, Aminatou Sow Fall, Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul.<sup>2</sup> Bâ, in particular, offers an important contrast to Sembène's text. I propose to study her *Une si longue lettre*, seeking a response to the following questions: Does Bâ's text reveal Sembène's same ambiguity? In other words, are women who appear as catalysts for change sacrificed or recuperated by the patriarchy? How does Bâ treat the conflict between the patriarchal tradition that confines African women to domestic space and women's struggle to claim public space?

In her first novel, Bâ chooses the letter as a vehicle for recounting episodes of her heroine's past. Following her husband's death, Ramatoulaye begins a long letter to her childhood friend, Aïssatou, in which she describes how she copes after Modou, her husband of twenty-five years, takes a second wife. Choosing a young woman the age of his oldest daughter, Modou abandons Ramatoulaye and their twelve children.

Bâ received the Noma prize for *Une si longue lettre*, acclaimed by the judges for its significant testimony and true imaginative depth (Zell 199). Given its strong attack on polygamy, however, the novel was evaluated primarily as a sociological statement. Critics who focus on the socio-political and cultural dimensions of polygamy in the work agree that Ramatoulaye, the heroine, is a victim of a society that endorses and encourages

polygamy, but disagree as to whether she uses her energies heroically to overcome obstacles or to reproach bitterly the patriarchal structure.<sup>3</sup>

Without neglecting the socio-political implications of the work, the present study focuses upon Ramatoulaye's journey to self-understanding, emphasizing the narratee's role in the novel. I shall argue that Ramatoulaye addresses her long letter (28 chapters) to Aïssatou because she is both an intimate friend and an important role model. The reader learns that Aïssatou faced the issue of polygamy in her own marriage, refusing it before the crisis occurred in Ramatoulaye's home. Aïssatou's revolt and subsequent "escape" to America makes her Ramatoulaye's ideal reader. Her success in the "new world" is convincing testimony that the journey outward is possible.

By writing to Aïssatou the narrator introduces the tension between enclosure and the outward journey. In Bâ's fictional world Senegalese men are most often offered the opportunity to make the journey outward, returning home with gained maturity, whereas Senegalese women are usually barred from this experience. Modou has been to France to study; Ramatoulaye has not. Given this context, Aïssatou's journey to the United States is a radical statement of revolt.

The death and funeral of Ramatoulaye's estranged husband result in enclosure for Ramatoulaye rather than the outward journey. Following the demise of Modou, Ramatoulaye is committed by Islamic tradition to spend four months in mourning and seclusion. Ramatoulaye uses this period to travel in time rather than space. She recalls the past in an attempt to understand herself better and to cope with the present. Annis Pratt states that women's escape through imagination is strategic, a withdrawal into the unconscious for the purpose of personal transformation (177). Indeed, Ramatoulaye turns to the inner journey to obtain knowledge, through self-examination and maturity, through personal transformation. By examining her own thoughts, memories, and the collective experience of family and nation emerging from colonialism, Ramatoulaye attempts to gain a heightened sense of maturity.

The reader's task in this work is to evaluate Ramatoulaye's inner journey, bearing in mind a binary construct, the portrait and the mask. Does the novel conceal as much as it reveals?<sup>4</sup> Let us refine the question. Does enclosure (brought about by the Islamic tradition of respectful mourning) lead to disclosure, or ironically, to concealment and therefore to the self-delusion of a protagonist who proposes an inner journey for the explicit purpose of lucidity and self-understanding?

The novel begins with a direct statement of purpose:

Aïssatou,

J'ai reçu ton mot. En guise de réponse, j'ouvre ce cahier, point d'appui dans mon désarroi: notre longue pratique m'a enseigné que la confiance noie la douleur. (7)

Having just received a letter from Aïssatou (which we later learn announces Aïssatou's forthcoming visit to Dakar), Ramatoulaye announces Modou's death. At the same time, she expresses the need for this correspondence as support in time of crisis. This very long letter, ultimately a diary, will allow Ramatoulaye to express her intimate thoughts and justify her responses to life through the act of writing to her ideal reader, her closest friend.

Thus, the death of Modou, *not* his second marriage and ultimate abandonment of Ramatoulaye and their children, is the catalyst for the letter. The important subtext in the work, revealed in the opening paragraphs, is the importance of female bonding, presented as a legacy of traditional Africa. Ramatoulaye recounts the friendship between their grandmothers, mothers, and finally recalls their shared childhood: "Nous, nous avons usé pagnes et sandales sur le même chemin caillouteux de l'école coranique" (7). Hence, at the beginning of her letter Ramatoulaye acknowledges that Aïssatou is her ideal reader because of common experiences: a shared Islamic past, a long sustained friendship, and a painful experience of polygamy—"Hier tu as divorcé. Aujourd'hui, je suis veuve" (8). Later, she will come to terms with Aïssatou's decision, her choice to embark upon the journey outward to a new world and a new life.<sup>5</sup>

Enclosure as an important structuring element of the novel must take into account the Islamic context; the latter influences both the narrative content and structure. The mourning period, an obligation of Islam, provides Ramatoulaye with the time frame in which to write the long letter. Opening the notebook that becomes a 131-page novel, she explains:

Mon cœur s'accorde aux exigences religieuses. Nourrie, dès l'enfance, à leurs sources rigides, je crois que je ne faillirai pas. Les murs qui limitent mon horizon pendant quatre mois et dix jours ne me gênent guère. J'ai en moi assez de souvenirs à ruminer. (18)

Islam as well provides the vehicle for disclosure. "Mirasse," an Islamic precept, calls for the disclosure of all possessions of the deceased for the purpose of inheritance. Ramatoulaye states: "Le Mirasse" ordonné par le Coran nécessite le dépouillement d'un individu mort de ses secrets les plus intimes. Il livre ainsi à autrui ce qui fut soigneusement dissimulé" (19). Her religion thus encourages revelations of a deceased person's past so as to praise the individual. She reinterprets this practice to allow for the disclosure of Modou's financial and emotional treachery. She explains that upon his death she learned that he had taken a loan to pay for his second wife's home by putting a lien on his first wife's property (a residence that they had in fact paid for jointly). Subsequently, Ramatoulaye broadens the definition of disclosure to unveil Modou's emotional breach of faith in their marriage.

Ramatoulaye's reaction to the process of "mirasse" is crucial to her journey toward lucidity and the reader's understanding of the protagonist.<sup>6</sup> By

disclosing Modou's transgressions to the readers (Aïssatou, you, me), she, the betrayed individual, allows us to seek evidence of a healing process. We can then ascertain whether the victim remains victimized, blocked by his betrayal of their married life, or whether she proves capable of transcending the experience by word and deed, discourse and actions.

For the purpose of analysis, the novel can be separated into three sections. Announcing Modou's death and introducing the concept of *mirasse*, the first part (letters 1-4) puts forth the two structuring devices: enclosure and disclosure. The second part (letters 5-17), depicts Ramatoulaye's journey through time. By means of analepses (reaches into the past or flashbacks), the protagonist gathers information that prepares her for the present. In the final part of the novel (letters 18-24) Ramatoulaye, having spent forty days in mourning, forgives Modou. However, as a widow Ramatoulaye faces a series of moral and emotional challenges that test her judgment and values. These trials complete the protagonist's maturation process.

Hélène Cixous, a leading exponent of the women's movement in France, has written: "Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (875). Once Ramatoulaye concludes the description of the rituals surrounding Modou's burial, presenting ethnographic details as well as her open criticism of the crass materialism that spoils tradition, she encounters the difficulty of "putting herself into the text." She begins with two false starts: a "cri de cœur," in which she proclaims herself victim, followed by a letter to Modou, not to Aïssatou, in which she remembers with great sentimentality their first meeting. Although Ramatoulaye praises Modou's progressive views, as she recalls them, his words contradict her portrait; they reveal a young man locked into gender stereotypes. For example, calling Ramatoulaye his "négresse protectrice," Modou languishes in Paris, missing "le dandinement des négresses le long du trottoir" (25). Hence, Ramatoulaye's acts of telling and showing contradict one another.

This analepsis, a flashback reaching thirty years into the past, poses the problem of the narrator's reliability. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, who considers personal involvement to be a main source of unreliability, defines a reliable narrator as one who provides the reader with "an authoritative account of the fictional truth" (100). Intense personal involvement in her own story leads Ramatoulaye, an auto-diegetic or first-person narrator, to insert the story of Aïssatou's marriage into the novel. By writing *about* Aïssatou in addition to writing *to* her, Ramatoulaye restores the objectivity that will grant reliability to her narrative. Aïssatou serves not only as ideal reader and role model but as reality "anchor" as well. Thus, by using the structural device of doubling—parallel events or similar experiences that reinforce the sense of parallel lives—Ramatoulaye regains an authoritative voice.

The doubling begins in the first letter when she remembers their shared

childhood. Later, she recalls that both young girls were inspired by the extraordinary vision of their European school director. Looking back on these formative years, Ramatoulaye views her school mistress as the one who freed them from tradition. She writes in the first person plural, emphasizing the school director's effect upon both of them:

Nous sortir de l'enlissement des traditions, superstitions et mœurs; nous faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la nôtre; élever notre vision du monde, cultiver notre personnalité, renforcer nos qualités, mater nos défauts; faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle; voilà la tâche que s'était assignée l'admirable directrice. (27-28)

The director's message is clearly subversive. Urging her students to break with tradition and to affirm their personality, she calls for revolt rather than submission. Ramatoulaye's act of rebellion is to reject the suitor chosen for her by her mother, and marry Modou Fall, a man of her own choosing. Similarly, Aïssatou, the daughter of a blacksmith, defies the traditional caste system by marrying a son of royalty. Their rebellion has further consequences; their choices prepare the way for polygamy. Ramatoulaye chooses a man whose propensity towards infidelity is immediately recognized by her mother. Aïssatou, who marries above her station, incurs the vengeance of a scheming mother-in-law who succeeds in bringing a second wife into her son's household.

Although the doubling creates the dimension of parallel lives in the novel, the narrator reveals that Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are not mirror images of one another. When their husbands enter into polygamous marriages for different reasons, one to please a scheming mother, the other to find the excitement of youth, the two women react to polygamy in very different ways. Aïssatou rebels; Ramatoulaye acquiesces. Aïssatou responds to Mawdo's announcement of his second marriage with an angry letter in which she states her refusal to remain within the marriage:

Je ne m'y soumettrai point. Au bonheur qui fut nôtre, je ne peux substituer celui que tu me proposes aujourd'hui. Tu veux dissocier l'Amour tout court et l'amour physique. Je te rétorque que la communion charnelle ne peut être sans l'acceptation du cœur, si minime soit-elle. (50)

Ramatoulaye, who quotes Aïssatou's entire letter, cannot bring herself at this point to follow her friend in revolt. Despite admiration for Aïssatou's refusal of polygamy, she turns the other cheek. The second section of the novel discloses not only Modou's treachery but Ramatoulaye's failed revolt. Both husband and wife lose touch with their earlier progressive selves. He becomes a caricature of an old fool trying to regain his youth: "Modou s'essouffait à emprisonner une jeunesse déclinante qui le fuyait de partout" (72). She, lacking courage, agrees to a polygamous union out of fear of loneliness. Only after he truly abandons her and she is forced to take on the role of single parent does she resume the rhetoric of revolt. Ramatoulaye arguably writes the "long letter" to Aïssatou upon Modou's death because

she was unable to write the "short letter," as Aïssatou had done, and thereby reject polygamy.

The second section can be characterized as failed revolt but it prepares the protagonist for the series of trials or challenges that result in her final transformation. This preparation takes the form of comforting past memories on the one hand, and acts of independence on the other. As she evokes memories of her youth and early adulthood, the narrator uses them as a source of happiness. Recalling the years when she was first married to Modou (as was Aïssatou to Mawdo), Ramatoulaye turns to nature for inspiration. She depicts the beach at Ngor:

Sur le sable fin, rincé par la vague et gorgé d'eau, des pirogues, peintes naïvement, attendaient leur tour d'être lancées sur les eaux. Dans leur coque, luisaient de petites flaques bleues pleines de ciel et de soleil. (35)

Viewed metaphorically, the boats waiting to be launched on the vast ocean correspond to the two idealistic couples whose lives, at that moment in time, are filled with boundless dreams. This optimistic phase occurs in the mid-1960s when the Senegalese nation was first emerging from colonialism. As Ramatoulaye faces adult responsibilities in her personal life, Senegal assumes the responsibilities of nationhood. Hence, the narrator establishes a direct link between the personal and the historical-political phase.

Although the mid-section of the novel depicts a protagonist who appears to have lost her earlier rebellious stance (and is therefore unable to revolt against her husband's abuse of power), two specific incidents toward the end of the section indicate that, despite her initial acquiescence, Ramatoulaye will recapture both the spirit and the language of revolt. First, Ramatoulaye recounts her experience of braving the curious stares of a public who wonders why she is alone at the cinema.

On dévisageait la femme mûre sans compagnon. Je feignais l'indifférence, alors que la colère martelait mes nerfs et que mes larmes retenues embuaient mes yeux. Je mesurais, aux regards étonnés, la minceur de la liberté accordée à la femme. (76)

Here Ramatoulaye finds the courage to venture alone into public space but at the same time masks her anger toward a hostile public. Then Aïssatou's gift of a new car allows her to travel more freely in the city. The Fiat proves to be a challenge. She conquers her fear of driving and obtains her driver's license. These experiences affirm her presence in public space. Occurring after Modou's departure but before his death, they attest to the protagonist's essentially independent spirit and foreshadow her final transformation.

The fortieth day of mourning marks the beginning of the third and final section of the novel. At this point, the widow forgives her late husband. In addition, suitors begin to ask for her hand. First Ramatoulaye's brother-in-

law and then a former suitor propose marriage. Presented with a co-wife several years before, Ramatoulaye is now asked to become one herself. Refusing her brother-in-law (whose offer is motivated by the desire for her inheritance), she finally expresses her anger: "Ma voix connaît trente années de silence, trente années de brimades. Elle éclate, violente, tantôt sarcastique, tantôt méprisante" (85). The woman who greeted the announcement of Modou's second marriage with a smile and feigned indifference now removes the mask of passivity and acquiescence. She finds the words to affirm her identity, expressing her conviction that marriage must be a choice between partners, not an arrangement between families:

Tu oublies que j'ai un cœur, une raison, que je ne suis pas un objet que l'on passe de main en main. Tu ignores ce que se marier signifie pour moi: c'est un acte de foi et d'amour, un don total de soi à l'être que l'on a choisi et qui vous a choisi. (J'insistais sur le mot choisi.) (85)

Later, rejecting the second suitor, Daouda Dieng, whose motivation is affection not avarice, Ramatoulaye writes him a letter to explain that she cannot enter into a polygamous marriage because she has suffered the consequences of one. Thus, Ramatoulaye finally writes a letter rejecting polygamy, although neither the tone nor the circumstances recall Aïssatou's angry words to her ex-husband, Mawdo.

Having learned to express her anger openly as she rejects polygamy, Ramatoulaye faces her final trials. Forced to cope with family crises as a single parent, she rises to each occasion: a son's motorcycle accident, then the pregnancy of an unmarried daughter.

As she writes her last letter to Aïssatou, Ramatoulaye eagerly awaits her friend's visit. The dual process of introspection and writing, of enclosure and disclosure, have led Ramatoulaye to cease questioning Modou's initial rejection. No longer a victim, she now expresses new hope in her future. "C'est de l'humus sale et nauséabond que jaillit la plante verte et je sens pointer en moi des bourgeons neufs" (131). The epistolary novel that began with Modou's death ends in an expression of rebirth.

Ramatoulaye's journey leads to lucidity. She discovers that Modou abandoned her because of his weakness, vanity, and she learns a deeper truth, to believe in herself. By removing her mask, the smile of acquiescence, she recovers her earlier vitality and optimism. Moreover, the successful conclusion of the first journey prepares the protagonist for a second one, a new quest for happiness.

At the end of the novel Ramatoulaye awaits Aïssatou in the traditional manner, seated on a straw mat. Unlike Aïssatou, who chose the outward journey and left Senegal in order to begin a new life, Ramatoulaye decides not to leave her community. She avoids the risk of uprootedness in exile, the challenge that her friend assumes, and reaches a new beginning via a different route. Ramatoulaye creates an identity that blends traditional and



modern elements. Rather than break with her society, she attempts to work from within.

An interesting parallel can be drawn between Bâ's novel and the orphan tale of oral narrative. For example, Bernard Dadié's "*Le Pagne noir*" recounts the adventures of Aïwa, sent by her stepmother to whiten a black cloth. As she travels in search of water in which to wash the object, the orphan courageously confronts danger and frustration. Finally, the ghost of her mother descends from heaven to replace the black cloth with a white one which the stepmother immediately recognizes as the winding sheet used to bury Aïwa's mother. Not only does the orphan accomplish the task, she teaches the wicked stepmother a lesson.<sup>7</sup>

Both Bâ's novel and Dadié's folktale depict a vulnerable female protagonist. Ramatoulaye, like Aïwa, ventures forth unprotected in a hostile world. She has lost the protection of her husband (a variant of the orphan's loss of a parent), and is forced by a patriarchal society to grapple with a series of difficult tasks. One of her final tests is to reject her two suitors. By refusing a second marriage to which she is not committed by love, Ramatoulaye confronts and overcomes her fear of loneliness. The orphan's trials have been compared to initiation rites.<sup>8</sup> Ramatoulaye's tests initiate her to a new stage of life: the role of a single person.

In Dadié's orphan tale, Aïwa, despite her hardships, never removes her mask, a smile: "*Elle sourit encore du sourire qu'on retrouve sur les lèvres des jeunes filles*" (22). Ramatoulaye, on the other hand, discards the smile that has functioned as a mask and asserts her individuality and independence. As she assumes a dynamic identity, she reaffirms the rebellious spirit of her youth. Challenging the patriarchy that demands submission and obedience, Ramatoulaye looks within herself to find the courage to break free.

When Aïwa accomplishes the impossible task, she is rewarded for her stoicism and obedience by receiving the help of her mother, a spirit of the dead. Ramatoulaye's intercessor, however, is not a spirit from the other world, but Aïssatou. The faithful friend and confidante offers Ramatoulaye two gifts, a car and a letter, and thereby provides her with tools of transformation. The Fiat allows Ramatoulaye to lay claim to public space by traveling freely in it, thus encouraging her to affirm a new identity. The letter, Aïssatou's declaration of separation from her husband, Mawdo, initiates Ramatoulaye to the act of writing as a process as well as a product of liberation.

In contrast to the winding sheet of the dead mother, a white cloth that puts an end to the orphan's quest in Dadié's narrative, the white sheets of Ramatoulaye's notebook propose a new beginning. Presented as a therapeutic activity in the early pages of the novel, writing subsequently results in liberation as well as in healing. Moreover, in Bâ's novel, the act of writing as a process of disclosure that promotes discovery and self-affirmation clearly reinforces female bonding. Hence, the two structuring devices, en-

closure and disclosure, the one facilitating the journey inward, the other recording it, serve another important function; they strengthen communication between Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou. These bonds between narrator and narratee have made it possible for Ramatoulaye to put herself into the text.

At the end of her journey, Bâ's heroine, unlike Sembène's catalysts for change, is neither eliminated nor recuperated by the patriarchy. On the contrary, Ramatoulaye has learned to use the enclosure as her refuge and writing as a means of communication to strengthen female bonding. In Bâ's text the written word becomes a creative tool of self-expression and a weighty weapon against the patriarchy. By recording her journey to self-understanding, Ramatoulaye, in effect, writes her own revolutionary script.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For further discussion of women's role in the novel, see Scharfman.

<sup>2</sup>Two factors contributed to the absence of women writers. Throughout Africa, the colonial educational system made greater efforts to educate boys rather than girls on the assumption that schools should prepare an educated male elite to serve the colonial administration. In addition, traditional African societies viewed European education, particularly higher education, as superfluous training for young girls who would become dutiful wives and attentive mothers. See Davies.

<sup>3</sup>See Flewellen and Ojo-Ade.

<sup>4</sup>Geneviève Slomski maintains that Ramatoulaye's one-sided correspondance bars objective critique: "Therefore, we observe in Bâ's text (that) the narrator's discourse functions both as a portrait and a mask; it conceals as much as it reveals" (135). While providing important insights into Bâ's fiction through careful textual analysis, she dismisses Aïssatou, the narratee.

<sup>5</sup>Florence Stratton believes that Ramatoulaye, who does not travel abroad, becomes increasingly ambivalent to Aïssatou, who "literally and figuratively storms the walls that confine her" (163).

<sup>6</sup>Mbye Boubacar Cham writes: "Mirasse" therefore becomes the principle that legitimizes and regulates Rama's act of systematic personal revelation which simultaneously constitutes a systematic analysis of some of the most pressing socio-economic and cultural issues challenging women and society" (33). In contrast to Cham's socio-economic emphasis, I will focus on the personal development that results from disclosure. Slomski, on the other hand, writes that the Islamic custom allows Ramatoulaye to launch into the series of torments she has endured as Modou's wife (140). I will examine disclosure to see whether it leads exclusively to victimization or results in self-understanding.

<sup>7</sup>For a more detailed discussion of the role of the wicked stepmother, see Lee, who notes that often the orphan's virtues win her the supreme reward—marriage. Her husband then brings about the stepmother's downfall (22).

<sup>8</sup>For a study of the orphan tale, see Domowitz.

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