

# Sinking One's Teeth into Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*: Lessons of Cadmus

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## ABSTRACT

Because the myth of Cadmus makes striking use of the image of teeth and involves the issue of foreign cultural penetration, it offers a productive vantage point from which to view *So Long a Letter*, for the latter too pays distinctive attention to teeth and of course to the issue of colonialism. This article takes the myth as a point of departure in order to highlight the narrator Ramatoulaye's unacknowledged inconsistencies and conflicts both in the cultural and emotional domains. This allows for an increased appreciation of the text's subtleties in characterization, narration, and genre classification, and it adds to questions about Ramatoulaye's narrative reliability and about too facile an interpretation of this novel's progressive inspiration.

To sink one's teeth into a narrative is to engage it substantially and presumably positively. However, the expression is ultimately paradoxical, because to sink one's teeth into a narrative also implies violence, specifically a tearing into and apart. So in analyzing *So Long a Letter*, the first of Mariama Bâ's two novels, the following consideration of the image of teeth will illustrate the paradox: while attempting to engage Bâ's text substantively and positively, the argument arising from a consideration of teeth will also do violence to the novel, specifically to its apparent paean to female solidarity.

The violence notwithstanding, we may be confident that a consideration of teeth gets to the substance of Bâ's important novel, which was awarded the Prix Noma in 1980, the year after its publication. First, teeth get linked to what is this Senegalese novel's very crux, the letter-writer Ramatoulaye's pondering the issues of fidelity, character, and betrayal in human relationships on both the personal and more broadly conceived levels.<sup>1</sup> Those issues assume their most immediate and intense form regarding the physical and emotional abandonment of the Muslim Ramatoulaye by her husband, Modou Fall, after twenty-five years of marriage; in spite of the progressive vows of monogamous exclusivity that as a young man he

had made to her, he eventually took a young co-wife in keeping neither with the letter nor the spirit of the sura usually cited to authorize polygyny for Muslims like the Falls (Abubakr 26–27). For Ramatoulaye, her husband's fidelity, character, and betrayal crystallize visually for her in her superstitious preoccupation with the two front teeth as marker of sensual selfishness. At one point Ramatoulaye, apostrophizing Modou, whose death had provided the near occasion for her to take up the pen, writes: "I no longer laugh when I think that [my mother] found you too handsome, too polished, too perfect for a man. She often spoke of the wide gap between your two upper incisors: the sign of the primacy of sensuality in the individual" (*So Long a Letter* 14).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Ramatoulaye's preoccupation with teeth, viewed directly or indirectly as signs of character, appears repeatedly throughout the text (37–38, 60, 62, 73, 76, 84). It is worth noting, moreover, that Bâ's seemingly picturesque use of an African superstition regarding teeth in order to make broad individual and social points ought just as easily be taken as a sign of her sophisticated sensitivity to European culture, for the image of teeth in modern Western literature has evolved from being a symbol of personal qualities to one of social qualities as well (Ziolkowski 28).

A second reason for maintaining that a consideration of the image of teeth promises a representative reading of Bâ's text is the issue of Ramatoulaye's inconsistencies. In what is not the only example of that tendency on her part,<sup>3</sup> Ramatoulaye does not even recognize the logical conflict between her unchallenged superstition about teeth and the rational modernism that she absorbed as one of the first students in a selective French teacher-training school for women during colonial rule. This is the sort of cultural conflict that for Charles Sarvan marks Ramatoulaye as "a paradox, a conservative in revolt" (459), and that Susan Stringer has shown to be so much a focus of Bâ's narrative. Similarly, Irène Assiba d'Almeida considers Bâ a member of a generation of African women writers whose work is characterized by a conflictual malaise. For Geneviève Slomsky, cultural conflict in *So Long a Letter* creates "a discrepancy between Ramatoulaye's reading of herself and the reader's reading of her" (142), and for Shaun Irlam it "gives [Bâ's novel] a historical density so often missing from more crudely manicheanizing colonial and postcolonial writings" (76).<sup>4</sup> Thus, confident of the suitability of the "dental approach" as a point of departure for a representative analysis of this text, the following pages will focus on teeth in *So Long a Letter*—teeth, central marker of character for Ramatoulaye, as well as site of unacknowledged conflict and contradiction on her part.

All good reading being rereading, once alerted to the role of teeth in Ramatoulaye's narrative one can with profit reread the complete text in search of a richer appreciation of their role. Accordingly, one cannot help but notice that at the very start of the narrative, in the second paragraph, a memory of the childhood shared by Ramatoulaye and her dearest friend Aïssatou ends with a mention of teeth: "we buried our milk teeth in the same holes and begged our fairy godmothers ['Fée-Souris' 'Mouse-Fairy' in the original] to restore them to us, more splendid than before" (1). In a text woven of memories, the seemingly incidental character of this initial memory ought not to incline us to dismiss its importance, for as Edward Said has emphasized, "what is first, because it *is* first, because it *begins*, is eminent" (32), and in this text Ramatoulaye's memory of teeth is an integral part of her undertaking the act of recollection. We should note as well that the notion

of future harvests from metaphorical plantings constitutes an important part even of Ramatoulaye's world view, for later in *So Long a Letter* she returns to it in the larger context of sisterhood (72), and in her closing paragraphs she writes of feeling the growing buds of her future self (89). Moreover, in this *incipit* teeth take us to the heart of the text in another way too, because in unfettered inconsistency they relate to an animist practice faithful to the Mouse-Fairy, but performed by devout Muslim girls, but articulated in one of the more intellectual languages of Christian Europe. In other words, the mention of the teeth also incarnates the culturally conflicted crossroad that is the African, Muslim, and French-educated mind both of the literate, captivating narrator and of her creator, the conflicted crossroad that has made this novel of such interest and significance in a world of increasing cultural conflict.

But in analyzing a text by a highly literate writer and one of great cross-cultural sophistication like Mariama Bâ, we should also be on the alert both to the play of intertextuality as it influences the image of teeth and to the nature of that play. "Intertextuality" will be understood in the sense articulated by Gerard Genette: "une relation de coprésence entre deux ou plusieurs textes, c'est-à-dire, eidétiquement et le plus souvent, par la présence effective d'un texte dans un autre" 'a relation of co-presence between two or several texts, that is, in essence and the most often, through the effective presence of one text in another' (8). But essential and effective presence does not necessarily require an obvious presence, especially since and as we shall see, the nature of intertextual play as it relates to teeth in Bâ's novel is, appropriately enough, as metaphorically subterranean as the teeth of Ramatoulaye's description are "literally" (in the world of the fiction) subterranean. Nor does essential and effective presence require simple intentionality on the part of Bâ, whereby she would have set out to make a connection between her novel and the intertext to be considered in these pages, the Greek myth of Cadmus. Cadmus, we should recall, buried dragon teeth only to have them spring up immediately as warriors, and he had the warriors build on a rural field a citadel that was to become the urban center Thebes (Apollodorus 100–01, 103). Furthermore, in one version of the myth (Rose 185) he brought the alphabet to Greece as part of a civilizing mission not unlike the so-called "mission civilisatrice" embraced by the French-educated teachers of Bâ's novel, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou. However, we should not be surprised that the proposed Cadmean intertext, coming from so preeminent a cultural corpus as that of classical Greek mythology, would have influenced a writer like Bâ who had been highly schooled in the Western tradition. Indeed, Lillian Corti has already pointed out the evocation of another Greek myth, that of Medea, in Bâ's second novel, *Scarlet Song*, and Debora Plant has found at work in Bâ's novels mythic dimensions more broadly defined. The presumably indirect influence of Greek mythology on Bâ appears all the more likely, at least as a component in broader cross-cultural play, since in general terms Greek mythology deals repeatedly with an experience known all too well by Bâ's Africa and reflected in both *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, to wit, a cross-continental clash of cultures and civilizations, a clash between matriarchy and patriarchy and between the rural and the urban:

A study of Greek mythology, as Bachofen and Briffault insisted long ago, should begin with an understanding of the matriarchal and totemistic system which

obtained in Europe before the arrival of patriarchal invaders from the east and north. One can then follow its gradual supersession first by a matrilineal and then by a patrilineal sacred monarchy, at last by a fully patriarchal system—as the migrant tribe with its phratries and clans gave place to the regional state with its towns and villages. (Graves 11)

A final reason for paying careful attention to the role of teeth in Bâ's novel is the fact that attention to teeth leads to an increased appreciation of many of the text's subtleties of characterization and of narration.

Sensitized then to the possibility of subterranean but substantive intertextual play brought about by Aïssatou's and Ramatoulaye's burying of teeth, we may observe that from the second paragraph's teeth, as with those planted by Cadmus, warriors spring up, in this instance black African warriors, but Westernized, urbanized warriors who will with varying consistency fight against African traditions and on behalf of France's "civilizing mission" (15–16, 18–19, 23, 32). Leaving behind their childhood animist practices, Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye themselves eventually become those warriors in their role as graduates from the colonial *École Normale* at Ponty-Ville, where they had so eagerly absorbed lessons on "universal moral values" (15): "Teachers—at kindergarten level, as at university level—form a noble army accomplishing daily feats, never praised, never decorated. An army forever on the move, forever vigilant. An army without drums, without gleaming uniforms. This army, thwarting traps and snares, everywhere plants the flag of knowledge and morality" (23). However, the Greek myth has it that Cadmus's warriors, after springing up from the earth out of planted teeth, quickly turned their weapons against each other. It is precisely in that bellicose development that we find a subtle but productive key to the proposed ironic reading of *So Long a Letter* in light of the Cadmus myth, a reading that helps draw attention to a subterranean aspect of this text that could otherwise be easily missed: the note of conflict in Cadmus's "civilizing mission" rings true in the story of the relationship between the two women warriors Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye.

First of all, the opening page itself, site of the eminent mention of buried teeth, foreshadows their conflicted relationship. On the one hand, Ramatoulaye's first paragraph makes mention of the emotional benefits that come from confiding in her dear friend Aïssatou: "Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain" (1). On the other hand one notices in the original French version that the opening line of this text intended for Aïssatou opens with a surprisingly curt salutation: "Aïssatou, j'ai reçu ton mot" 'Aïssatou, I got your message' (*Une si longue lettre* 1).<sup>5</sup> One finds in the French no hint of emotion or warmth, as the reader might expect under the charged circumstances, namely the putatively shared outpourings of soul-sisters to each other upon the death of the husband of one of them. This striking cold note is echoed ever so subtly in the narrative's second paragraph, as rereading lingers first over the implications of Ramatoulaye's choosing from among so many possible subjects of mention the fact that the two women's grandmothers spoke across a separating fence, and then lingers over the implications of her couching their mothers' relationship in terms of competition ("used to argue") over care for their uncles and aunts (*So Long a Letter* 1).

Similar strains of conflict become perceptible when one pits Ramatoulaye's emphasis on the extent to which their mutual presence in each other's life had

become a commingling of their very existences, against the absence that is the necessarily constitutive motive behind Ramatoulaye's writing in the first place to Aïssatou, who eight years earlier had left Africa (and Ramatoulaye) for France and then the United States. So on the one hand Ramatoulaye's epistle is a long address to her soul-sister, with her opening paragraphs lingering over the duration, thoroughness, and intensity of the interweaving of their existences from the start of their lives, like the commingling of their buried teeth: nothing less than such commingling is communicated by the first page's understated but sweeping expression "ton existence dans ma vie" 'your existence in my life' (*Une si longue lettre* 11).<sup>6</sup> Intimating the commingling, there is a near literal sisterhood implied by the commingled (because unspecified) antecedents of the possessive adjectives in "our grandmothers" and "our uncles and aunts" (*So Long a Letter* 1), a relationship echoed later in Ramatoulaye's calling Aïssatou her sister (53); and there is the identical nature of their shared passage from infancy to adolescence, an identity underscored by the near incantatory repetition of the words "we/our" and "the same": "we wore out wrappers and sandals on the *same* stony road to the koranic school; we buried *our* milk teeth in the *same* holes and begged *our* fairy godmothers to restore them to us" (1; emphasis added). That identification reappears shortly thereafter in the description of their no less shared passage from adolescence to adulthood: "We walked the *same* paths from adolescence to maturity" (1; emphasis added). Eight chapters later, an expression similar to "your existence in my life" appears, followed by an intriguing sentence in which yet another imprecise use of the subject pronoun *we*, reprising the antecedent of the no less imprecisely used possessive adjective *our*, momentarily allows even the thought-provoking impression that the two women were married to each other: "Nos existences se côtoyaient. Nous connaissions les bouderies et les réconciliations de la vie conjugale" 'Our existences ran side by side. We experienced the pouting and the making-up of married life' (*Une si longue lettre* 44). Moreover and famously, Ramatoulaye's bonds with Aïssatou prompt her to rhapsodize that friendship such as theirs is superior even to the heterosexual love to which she would cling: "Friendship has splendors that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wears and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love" (*So Long a Letter* 54), a sentiment that she repeats later (72).

On the other hand, for all that past commingling of Ramatoulaye's and Aïssatou's existences, we need to stay mindful that *So Long a Letter* is a first-person narrative in the form of an extremely lengthy self-described letter, the writing of which extends over the traditional Muslim mourning period of four months and ten days. Consequently even within the fiction the narrative's commingling is actually only a remembrance brought about by Aïssatou's current absence, and let it be emphasized that absence is the matrix of all letter-writing, real as well as fictional.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, epistolary fiction, historically and in such monumental avatars as Ovid's *Epistulae Heroidum*, the letters of Abelard and Heloise, Guilleagues's *Lettres portugaises*, and Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* often springs from the longing of a lover for the absent beloved. In short, without an absent addressee there can be no letter-writing. At the very least, then, Aïssatou's absence should not be viewed as incidental to other, essential, and more topical if too often hastily simplified themes such as this novel's feminism, postcolonialism, or a coming to writing. Rather, absence dictated by genre is in Bâ's text those themes' necessary,

contextualizing condition in what is at least as much a novel that happens to treat sociological and ideological issues, as it is a sociological and ideological document that happens to be a novel.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, insofar as the marital betrayals that provide the thread for this narrative are all spun out of the theme of abandonment,<sup>9</sup> the constitutive nature of Aïssatou's absence encourages us to push beyond the fact that Aïssatou, having been abandoned by Mawdo Bâ her husband, in turn immediately abandoned him for a life in France and then the United States; we should appreciate that in making the symbolically fraught step of leaving her husband and Africa behind, she physically abandoned her soul-sister and fellow warrior Ramatoulaye too. That the latter does not even mention having missed her dearest friend at that time creates an odd gap in the narrative exploration of her reflections and feelings as they unfolded over the years.

Do the odd gaps, the commingling of Ramatoulaye's and Aïssatou's existences as described above, and the preceding comparison with famous lovers from epistolary fiction allow us to conclude that a possible suppressed lesbian attraction is at work in Ramatoulaye's relationship with Aïssatou? Perhaps, but the thinness of the evidence as well as numerous counter examples make drawing such a conclusion hasty. More likely the text reflects here a set of qualities found in women whom Alice Walker has termed "womanists" in preference to "feminists," a set of qualities that suits Ramatoulaye very neatly, as Dorothy Grimes citing Walker allows us to conclude: "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility . . . and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. . . . Traditionally universalist. . . . Traditionally capable . . ." (Walker xi). The point to be taken here is not to categorize Ramatoulaye sexually: "The path to self-definition [for women] is riddled with traps, and women, particularly in the Western World, become caged by a dilemma which places the idea of heterosexual love and motherhood in opposition to the idea of female love and friendship, as if these were irreconcilable opposites" (Busia 10). Instead, it is argued here that because Ramatoulaye focuses on Aïssatou's abandonment by her husband Mawdo and on her own abandonment by her husband Modou, in both cases to the exclusion of Aïssatou's abandonment of Ramatoulaye, she falls short in her self-assessment by not including in her letter's emotional inventory the possibility of an attachment to Aïssatou powerful enough to complicate her entire emotional life.

However, just as the myths of Greece and Rome can be read in any number of ways—fanciful echoes of vast historical, sociological conflicts, or embodiment of cultural and religious principles, or reflection of universal processes of imagination and thought—so too fiction such as Bâ's can be read variously, for instance as an embodiment of feminist or womanist principles, as a portrait of postcolonial conflicts, or as a coming to consciousness and writing. *So Long a Letter*, although indisputably a highly effective and pioneering novel that addresses those and other issues in the voice of a black African woman, does so with considerable narrative subtlety and sophistication. Consequently, it raises substantial questions about the narrator's self-understanding, questions that in turn intimate the human impediments to a facile realization of the goals of this novel's progressive inspiration. So I propose that regardless of how one reads *So Long a Letter*, one cannot read it well without also taking into account one of the problems specific

to all good first-person narratives—and Bâ's novel is both good and a first-person narrative—namely, the problem of narrative reliability.

In conjunction with spinning out the consequences of rereading the opening pages of Bâ's text in light of the myth of Cadmus, we should note their telling symmetry with the closing pages, which too enjoy an inherent if polar position of eminence. They include an unflattering portrait of Aïssatou, very much in tension with Ramatoulaye's expressed eagerness at that point to see her long-lost sister-spirit. Following immediately on the heels of the resolutely child- and family-centered Ramatoulaye's assertion that "[t]he success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family," the conclusion announces itself with what appears unbecomingly close to a swipe, conscious or otherwise, at what may be Aïssatou's somewhat fractious relationship with her sons, that is, with what remains of her immediate family: "Why aren't your sons coming with you? Ah, their studies . . ." (89; suspension points in the original). The rest of the conclusion then goes on to paint a cold, unappealing portrait of Aïssatou: "Beneath the shell that has hardened you over the years, beneath your skeptical pout, your easy carriage, perhaps I will feel you vibrate" (89). The word "perhaps" adds a note verging on the mean-spirited.

When we move on from an examination of the novel's bracketing pages in order to address it as a whole, an intimation of Cadmean conflict in Ramatoulaye's relationship with Aïssatou makes itself felt throughout the body of the text as well, via the exclusion of any of Aïssatou's own abundant words of communication to her friend ("all your letters," 71), words also mentioned but excluded at another point (33). The exclusion becomes noteworthy because of what, from within the fiction, we may assume was Ramatoulaye's decision to publish her document, which represents only one side of an apparent dialogue whose integrity is withheld from the reader. This suppressive epistolary gambit evokes the first French epistolary novel voiced by a woman spurned by her lover, Guillerague's *Lettres portugaises*, three of five of which letters, like Heloise's first letter to Abelard, apologize for being "so long a letter" (Guilleragues 50, 58, 69; *Lettres Complètes d'Abélard et d'Héloïse* 99).<sup>10</sup> The resonance of that latter expression with the title chosen by Bâ has considerable power. First of all, given the assertiveness of Bâ's real and Ramatoulaye's fictional initiative to speak out as an African woman against sexist injustice, the title becomes a defiant African repudiation of the defensive, apologetic stance of too many of their influential epistolary predecessors from the West.<sup>11</sup> Second, it reaffirms the appropriateness of considering the implications of the suppressive epistolary gambit that it shares with its earlier models. Indeed such suppression evokes as well one of the world's monuments of epistolary fiction dealing with spurned love, Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, in which the spurned lover's voice, Werther's, is similarly left unbalanced by the absent beloved's voice, Lotte's.

In notable fact, within *So Long a Letter* the exception to this cutting off of the addressee's voice is the unexplained inclusion of every word of a letter written by Aïssatou not to Ramatoulaye, but to Aïssatou's husband Mawdo Bâ (31–32), a scathing adieu announcing to him that she is stripping herself of his love and his name in response to his unexpected taking of a younger co-wife. Whereas questions of novelistic skill have been raised about Bâ's alleged clumsiness in having Ramatoulaye quote to Aïssatou in its entirety the letter that Aïssatou already knows for having written it herself (Nnaemeka, "Mariama Bâ" 21–22), if one problematizes

the narrative instance by anchoring the reading more resolutely within the fiction of Ramatoulaye's and not Bâ's being the author, one can ask other kinds of questions instead. For example, how did Ramatoulaye manage to memorize "the exact words" of the letter (31)? Had she helped Aïssatou write it? Did she know that Aïssatou had left the letter out in the open on her marital bed (31) because she had been told by Aïssatou or indeed because she had been in the bedroom to have seen it herself? Had she later copied it or borrowed it from Mawdo? Most important, precisely why had she been driven to memorize it on whatever occasion she might have seen it?<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Mawdo himself could have shown it to Ramatoulaye on his own initiative during their frequent contacts with each other, because as Florence Stratton observes and in what may have been yet another of Ramatoulaye's slights of Aïssatou, Ramatoulaye "betrays her friend by retaining Mawdo as a confidant and as the family doctor" after Aïssatou's separation (Stratton 163). Whatever answer is proposed, the fact of Ramatoulaye's curious, unexplained knowledge and inclusion of the exact contents of the letter raises at the very least the probability of her having been more emotionally invested in Aïssatou's leaving her husband Mawdo than first meets the eye. That probability provides in turn another hint of Ramatoulaye's inconsistency both in her writing project and in her attitude toward Aïssatou, and therefore provides yet another reason for one of the main intents of this article, using the myth of Cadmus to problematize the narrative instance of her letter and with it her narrative reliability.

Questions concerning narrative straightforwardness arise too: if there is no obvious point in quoting the letter to Aïssatou, would this not suggest that Ramatoulaye is not in fact merely writing to Aïssatou in any simple way? Does much the same suggestion not lurk behind the fact that her second sentence states that in her pain and confusion Ramatoulaye is turning for support, not to Aïssatou, but rather to her own "cahier, point d'appui dans mon désarroi" 'notebook, something to lean on in my helplessness' (*Une si longue lettre* 11)<sup>13</sup>; is there in fact an ever so sly pay-back at work here, insofar as when Aïssatou had to deal with the shock and humiliation of her husband taking a co-wife, she turned more to books than to Ramatoulaye for refuge and support: "more than just my presence and my encouragements, books saved you. Having become your refuge, they sustained you" (*So Long a Letter* 32)? Therefore, quite consistently with Ramatoulaye's introspective turn for support away from Aïssatou and toward writing, from the outset her text does not consist of letter-pages to be sent directly but rather a note book more likely to be put to other, unexplained ends, an uncertain step moreover that Ramatoulaye herself hesitantly describes in the less than clear and straightforward words that open her would-be letter, "By way of reply" (1). Finally, if she had really intended to correspond in any traditional way, why did she not start by mailing the first of the text's twenty-seven sections, which appear as chapters instead of letters?

A potential but only partial answer to this latter question can be found in a consideration of the nature of the epistolary genre. In the twenty-seven sequential sections of *So Long a Letter* that are given chapter-like numbers, this ostensible letter quickly comes to resemble a diary, even though it maintains the essential criteria of epistolary fiction (see Altman 117 ff. for those criteria), and even though none of the sections bear a date. But the ambivalent status of Ramatoulaye's text is ultimately less a problem and more of a revelation. In spite of the letter as diary being "an ancient tradition" (Miller 278), the straddling of genre reflects what Jean

Rousset, identifying the inherent instability of the epistolary novel, has pointed to as “la tendance profonde de la lettre vers le journal intime” ‘the letter’s deep-seated tendency toward the diary,’ as epistolary attempts to communicate at length and in isolation verge toward monologues (Rousset 78). Consequently, the odd form of Ramatoulaye’s letter, and so of Bâ’s novel, may be considered an illustration of a tension inherent in most if not all epistolary fiction, a tension that is subterranean like the women protagonists’ emotional conflict argued for in this article. In addition, the genre’s basic tension offers an admirable structural accompaniment to that same conflictual strain. This illustration of Bâ’s keen sense of the nature of the genre that she chose to employ indicates as well what the world-wide success of her novel has long suggested: her fiction is that of a master.

Although the above points, evolving out of a consideration of the tensions implied by the text’s parallels with the bellicose side of the myth of Cadmus, suggest a complicated intention and practice on Ramatoulaye’s part as she writes, such complications have been argued for before, although from different grounds. For example, Florence Stratton too views Ramatoulaye’s text as an exercise, not in simple letter-writing, but in self-communication: “Ramatoulaye writes to herself in an attempt to locate the source of her disequilibrium” (160), thereby making Aïssatou an imagined sounding board for Ramatoulaye’s self-scrutiny. Obioma Nnaemeka has also taken a step away from too simple a reading of this deceptive narrative instance by proposing that Ramatoulaye’s letter is the “exteriorization of an internal dialogue, a dialogue that the author wishes to share with the reader,” “a pretext for a dialogue with the self” (“Mariama Bâ” 20). Mildred Mortimer recognizes letter-writing’s “dual process of introspection and writing, enclosure and disclosure” (144), and Shaun Irlam similarly understands writing in Ramatoulaye’s narrative to be “an instrument of both communion and separation” (87).<sup>14</sup>

We may press the problem further. Ramatoulaye’s addressing Aïssatou while acknowledging that she is relating to her a variety of details already familiar to both (*So Long a Letter* 9) can also be read to suggest that something more than simple correspondence is involved. Even a desire to share nostalgic recollections is not adequate to explain the inclusion of those details, because there is no indication that Aïssatou ever sees the letter/notebook. But the initial choice of a notebook—so frequently emblematic of school writing, particularly for a school teacher like Ramatoulaye—hints at what, in a moment of supreme pain and confusion in her life, the death of her husband, may well have been a yearning for the communication that the intimate friends once shared as school girls and as college women before marriage; the reader senses a yearning for that time of the commingled teeth and lives, a time of union and not abandonment: “Friendships were made that have endured the test of time and distance. We were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation” (15). In bitter, disappointing contrast lies the outcome of Ramatoulaye’s and Aïssatou’s marital dreams “that have burst miserably like soap bubbles, leaving us empty-handed” (15). In short, the academic notebook bespeaks a conflicted desire: on the one hand, from the start and as seen above, it is a medium completely inappropriate for an initial epistolary response and all too suitable for suppressing communication with Aïssatou the contemporary absent adult in favor of communication with Aïssatou the school companion present in idealized recollection; on the other hand: “[l]’amitié est le soubassement et la raison d’être d’*Une si longue lettre*. Sans l’amitié que

Ramatoulaye éprouve pour Aïssatou son amie [. . .] ce roman n'aurait pas existé" Friendship is the foundation and the raison d'être of *So Long a Letter*. Without the friendship that Ramatoulaye feels for Aïssatou her friend [. . .] this novel would not have existed' (Ka 129).

Furthermore, the desire to communicate with an idealized Aïssatou by excluding the voice of the "real" Aïssatou offers the context for an interpretive recuperation of what, as mentioned above, would otherwise seem the letter's narratively inept inclusion of details and events already known to Aïssatou. The inclusions now appear less a graceless means of informing the reader of the women's past and more another aspect of what Christopher Miller would have them be, a productive and highly significant "compromise between epistolarity and narration" (282). By my reading, communicating with an idealized Aïssatou becomes a means for Ramatoulaye within the fiction to narrate and relive their common past on her own terms, arising from a confusion of ends and means on her part. The confusion is anchored in her assuming that she is in daily communication with Aïssatou (for example: "When I stopped yesterday, I probably left you astonished by my disclosures," *So Long a Letter* 11), even as she clings to the unsent pages of her notebook and excludes her friend's letters. On a similarly conflicted note, the opening paragraph concludes by observing the advantages of confiding in a friend ("notre longue pratique m'a enseigné que la confiance noie la douleur" "frequenting each other for so long has taught me that sharing personal secrets drowns pain," *Une si longue lettre* 11), even as the text does not in fact confide; indeed it couches the aborted confidence on a jarring note of physical violence, namely drowning. Farther along in Ramatoulaye's narrative another outburst of violent language, this time involving the image of a twisting knife, comes close to suggesting that, although she recognizes the pain that her recollections of Aïssatou's marital experience would inflict on her imagined interlocutor, she is driven to her recollections out of painful solitude, a solitude to which her soul-sister had been an original contributor: "I know that I am shaking you, that I am twisting a knife in a wound hardly healed; but what can I do? I cannot help remembering in my forced solitude and reclusion" (*So Long a Letter* 26). Moreover, in what is yet another conflict-fraught example, Ramatoulaye's imaginary consistently reports other instances of letter-writing as also negative, sometimes violent experiences, and this in spite of her own letter being a productive if incomplete and imperfect means of education, understanding, and discovery for her: she reports that, in addition to Aïssatou's assaulting her husband's honor and integrity in a letter, her own husband suffered a mortal heart attack while writing a letter, and that she herself used a letter to reject the marriage proposal, repeated after thirty years, by the spurned lover of her youth, Daouda Dieng, a letter that Shaun Irlam emphasizes (86) leads to what her griot neighbor and childhood acquaintance Farmata considers Dieng's figurative death: "You have killed a man" (69). Her knife-like letter to Aïssatou enjoys no exemption from this tendency.<sup>15</sup> In short, then, Ramatoulaye's choice of writing medium and many aspects of her writing itself undermine our confidence in the degree of coherence and self-awareness in the voice offering the *confidence*, the shared secrets, a voice that begins to sound less "authoritative" than it does in Mortimer's reading (140). I will concur instead essentially with Slomski who concluded that "in Bâ's text the narrator's discourse functions both as portrait and mask; it conceals as much as it reveals" (135), and

with Florence Stratton who found that Ramatoulaye writes with “subconscious evasion and revelation” (159). But whereas Stratton emphasizes Ramatoulaye’s failure to understand that her embrace of “romanticization of the monogamous union and her role in it as the tractable, serviceable, selfless wife” (161) results both in a “debasement and self-destructive” life-choice and in increasingly ambivalent feelings toward Aïssatou (161, 162–63), my argument emphasizes that the uncertain narrative instance of Ramatoulaye’s text and her defective vision arise from a much earlier problem. That problem is her conflicted relationship with her soul-sister and addressee Aïssatou, starting as early as their youth when, like Cadmus, they buried their teeth, an act symbolically portending strife.

In keeping with the conflicted Ramatoulaye’s resentment yet idealization of Aïssatou, an emotional inconsistency that is as subterranean as the buried teeth, Ramatoulaye later begins an account of an incident that had caused her great hurt and anger along with joy, her daughter’s getting pregnant but out of wedlock, in a way that associates Aïssatou with those mixed emotions. In the space of a few lines she recalls twice that the daughter who caused the hurt and anger was Aïssatou’s namesake (*So Long a Letter* 80). But this incident’s negativity associated with Aïssatou long after her departure happens to be of a piece with what their relationship had been even at its best, for as Igolima Amachree has argued, the caste-minded Ramatoulaye had slighted her socially inferior friend, to all appearances frequently and unconsciously throughout their life.

Wider if more indirect resonances of Ramatoulaye’s conflicted feelings for Aïssatou can be heard if we consider her narrative structurally, trying to identify in it for example what Michael Riffaterre has called “narrative subtexts” (450), that is to say, if we try to identify in Bâ’s text the stories, episodes, and situations that contribute to the reader’s semiotic grasp of its complex narrative through the narrative elements’ similarity to each other and to the narrative as a whole. With this as a goal and with the intent of remaining fully in the fiction, let us pretend that Ramatoulaye not Bâ has written the text in hand, that it is the narrator’s not Bâ’s personality guiding the perceptions and memories, and that she not Bâ has chosen what to include in her narrative. As a result we can find special significance in the repeated and extensive attention that she chooses to pay to women’s relationships with each other. In this text that consists of course first and foremost of Ramatoulaye’s nominal communication with Aïssatou, a communication centered on their own relationship, Ramatoulaye’s story-line weaves the rest of itself largely out of sub-stories relating the support and antagonism of various women in their relationships with each other. On the side of positive affect, one finds the story of the beloved, influential French woman, she of educational missionary zeal “who was the first to desire for us an ‘uncommon’ destiny” (*So Long a Letter* 15), then the story of Ramatoulaye’s and Aïssatou’s emotional support of the Ivorian Jacqueline who had been reduced to severe depression by her philandering husband and by intolerant Senegalese, next the story of the emotional and legal support given to Ramatoulaye by her daughter turned mother-figure, Daba, and finally the story of her own growth in a mature, nuanced love for her daughter Aïssatou following the discovery of the latter’s pregnancy out of wedlock. On the side of negative affect, one reads Ramatoulaye’s annoyed account of her relationship with her sisters-in-law and relatives, the story of Aïssatou’s vile treatment at the hands of her mother-in-law Nabou, the story of Ramatoulaye’s victimization

by, and dispute with, the materially grasping mother of the teenager who will become her co-wife, the story of Ramatoulaye's strained relationship with her friend and neighbor Farmata, that of her parental sparring with her problem older children whom acquaintances call her trio of female teenagers (Arame, Yacine, and Dieynaba), the brief mention of her having irritated her grandmother (75), and of course the story of the relationship of both Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou with their co-wives. This dismal list of negativity reflects all too well what Pierre Fandio has called "les haines féroces" 'the ferocious hatreds' that too often mark women's relationships with each other in Africa, making of some women the worst enemies of women's emancipation (173).

The reader of *So Long a Letter* also gets a tantalizing glimpse of what may well have been Ramatoulaye's own rocky relationship with her mother: Ramatoulaye did after all inflict considerable personal pain and social opprobrium on her by willfully marrying Modou Fall, a man of Moorish background and of lower social standing (19, 59), and one whom her mother disliked (13, 14). In addition Ramatoulaye married him "without dowry, without pomp" (16), marital elements so important to Senegalese custom, as is made abundantly clear in *Un chant écarlate* through the portrait of Yaye Kadye, implacably enraged at her son's marrying the white woman Mireille in France and without ceremony, thereby denying her the attention and privileges traditionally redounding to a Senegalese mother on such an occasion. So what the preceding paragraphs have been proposing as Ramatoulaye's unacknowledged, conflicted feelings for Aïssatou may be viewed within the fiction as being consistent with, and indeed perhaps generating, an unacknowledged, conflicted pattern of preoccupation with other woman-to-woman relationships.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that the emotional tension of the letter's salutation and its closing (see above) reverberates only too well with the tension marking what is usually characterized as the text's optimistic conclusion. Ramatoulaye roots her optimism in an explicitly repulsive image: "Despite everything—disappointments and humiliations—hope still lives on within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me" (89). This off-putting image intimates a realistic hope, that is, a hope neither unalloyed nor facile. On the same complicating, realistic note, the final paragraph emphasizes the possibility that happiness is in fact unattainable. Its first sentence offers only a question, not an affirmation, regarding whether the word "happiness" actually refers to anything real in the first place, with the rest of the paragraph suggesting that in fact happiness will in the end be the object only of pursuit, not of attainment. Ramatoulaye anticipates that at the end of her quest for happiness, she may well find herself yet again confronted with problems calling for yet more self-query and inventory-taking: "The word 'happiness' does indeed have meaning, doesn't it? I shall go out in search if it. Too bad for me if once again I have to write you so long a letter. . . ." (189; suspension points in the original). Florence Stratton too questions the optimism of Ramatoulaye's closing pages, showing how Ramatoulaye herself has undermined the putative triumphalist surge that would take her out of her restrictive past, the surge implied by her bold statement of going out in search of happiness. The critic focuses on Ramatoulaye's seeking and getting an extension of her widow's leave, a step that allows her to avoid actually going out into the world after the four months and

ten days of confinement expected of Muslim widows by the Koran. The extended leave will allow her to postpone breaking out of the physical and psychological constraints of what through mourning has literally become her "house of death," and so it is unlikely according to Stratton that Ramatoulaye's pursuit of happiness will be anything other than a continuation of her past inability to realize the sort of independence and self-realization achieved by Aïssatou (163–66). Moreover, as Charles Sarvan has emphasized in countering much early received opinion about this novel: "Mariama Bâ does not write from a clear and categorical standpoint; her novels are questioning and explorative rather than radical and imperative" (464; see also Irlam 88–89).

Notwithstanding the great value of the many ideological, social, and utilitarian readings of Bâ's novel, there have been numerous readings that like this one insist on the value of formal considerations in interpreting it.<sup>16</sup> In a symposium address entitled "La fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites" 'The Political Function of Written African Literatures' Bâ herself had straddled the question of how best to read her work. On the one hand she stressed the importance of reading African literature based on what many would consider a troublesome aesthetic theory: "la beauté de l'oeuvre d'art [africaine] est conditionnée par son contenu utilitaire ou même se réduit à cette utilité" 'the beauty of the [African] work of art is conditioned by its utilitarian content or is even reduced to that utility' (403). On the other hand she finally cautioned even herself on embracing that theory too closely, when she asked toward the end of her address: "Comment éviter le piège qui consiste à faire de la littérature comme on écrit un tract politique ou un propos de *meeting*?" 'How do we avoid the trap that consists of producing literature the way we write a political tract or comments for a public meeting?' (406). She wisely if tepidly came down on the side of what she termed "harmonie inséparable d'engagement et de valeurs artistiques" 'inseparable harmony of commitment and artistic values' (407). In spite of the risks of critical intentionalism that awards interpretive privilege to authors, this paper aspires to a reading receptive to what Bâ termed "harmonie," while maintaining that, as practiced by Bâ, it is necessarily and productively problematic and tension-filled, like *So Long a Letter* itself.

In this exploration of the implications of the Cadmean intertext for Bâ's novel, there remains a final indication of the problematic nature of Ramatoulaye's text, an indication that she like her creator straddles commitment and artistic values, specifically her commitment to self-assessment in the face of artistic values that create problems for that very self-assessment. For example, in her ninth paragraph (but eighth in the French version) Ramatoulaye narrates her trip to and arrival at the hospital to which she had rushed upon hearing of her husband's being taken there after his heart attack, which turned out to be fatal. But her language offers less the sort of straight-forward account that one would expect from a stunned, traumatized widow writing a letter to a close friend in a moment of helplessness and bewilderment, and more a moment of sophisticated literary re-creation in keeping with the implications of the writerly turn found in her very second sentence (see above), in that the ninth paragraph opens with great impressionistic use of an isolated noun in exclamation: "A taxi quickly hailed!" (2). That bold stroke is immediately accompanied by a long, highly effective string of nouns similarly without verbs, for example: "At last, the hospital: the mixed smell of suppurations

and ether" (2). The string of nouns concludes with a present-tense verb suddenly appearing to function for a disembodied hand: "A trembling hand moves forward and slowly uncovers the body" (2).

Such passages, more literary than functionally epistolary, abound throughout the rest of her narrative but nowhere more than in her eleventh chapter. Those pages consist largely of a poetic, often fanciful, recreation of what Ramatoulaye can only presume Mawdo's aristocratic mother Aunty Nabou felt, remembered, thought, saw, and said when she set out for her ancestral lands in order to claim her niece Nabou as a co-wife for her son. For example and as noted by Miller (282), Ramatoulaye conjures up, replete with an exclamation point in free indirect style, imagined details of Aunty Nabou's bus ride to her destination. In addition, the following chapter (chap.12) opens with Ramatoulaye's word-by-word rendition of conversations directly inaccessible to her between Aunty Nabou and first her niece and then her son (29–30).<sup>17</sup> Later on in her narrative she relates some of young Nabou's feelings and thoughts equally inaccessible to her (46–47); later still she pens a powerful, detailed rendition of night-club scenes involving Modou and his co-wife Binetou, but scenes at which she had not been present (50). If one remains prepared to press the fiction of Ramatoulaye's being the author of the text, these and other such instances can be read not only as examples of Bá's own verbal powers but also as her way of illustrating Ramatoulaye's own growing novelistic inclinations. Those inclinations invite a question about yet another conflict in her motivation for writing her putative letter to Aïssatou, a document that from the start she composes in a notebook: a teacher already used to addressing groups, is she using a notebook as would a writer who anticipates a much larger audience? That question nags even more when we recall that her ostensible letter to Aïssatou apostrophizes her dead husband (13–14), which of course could be explained as an overpowering emotional aside in a communication with a friend, actual or imagined. But if indeed that is the case, why does she also apostrophize paralytics and lepers, and later on doctors who treat women with depression (11, 44)?

But the most striking example of her novelistic inclinations remains her implausible reconstruction of the imagined scenes involving Aunty Nabou. So we can only wonder if Ramatoulaye so easily imagined, and so visibly enjoyed recreating, the aristocratic Nabou's "rage for vengeance" (46) against the lower-caste Aïssatou, in part because Ramatoulaye identified with Nabou, designated as "Aunty." One wonders, that is, if here too Ramatoulaye's narrative is not showing more signs of her conflicted relationship with the socially disadvantaged Aïssatou, a relationship marred by her social blind spots because, as Charles Sarvan maintains (457–58), Ramatoulaye is too often caught up unsuspectingly in her own elitist, self-serving sense of class, romanticizing for instance the plight of non-elite poor fishermen, while feeling uncomfortable with their urban counterparts and judging harshly the efforts of the latter (primarily in the person of her co-wife Binetou's mother) to enjoy the material benefits that happen to be afforded Ramatoulaye by her own class status. Speculation turns into belief when one recalls, as Femi Ojo-Ade has pointed out, that Ramatoulaye "helps Aunt Nabou to raise and educate the wife-to-be in full knowledge of the facts, while Aïssatou is kept in total ignorance" (75). Ramatoulaye had also helped Aunty Nabou symbolically by lending her the suitcase necessary for her trip undertaken to fetch young Nabou. The belief becomes all the stronger in a reading of chapter 15, where after noting Aunty

Nabou's hostility toward Aïssatou, Ramatoulaye goes on to write, almost to intone, fulsome praise both for the aunt's using traditional oral stories to inculcate in the niece "the virtues and greatness of a race" and for the niece's moral and professional excellence in her career as midwife who, according to Ramatoulaye, "all day long and several times over . . . would go through the same gestures engendering life" (47). She imagines herself so vividly, so poetically into the thoughts, deeds, and conversations of both aristocratic women, that her identification with them against Aïssatou is hard to ignore, an identification subtending and compounding Ramatoulaye's elitist attitude as a member of the educated, urban, privileged bourgeoisie of postcolonial Senegal (Nwachukwu-Agbada 567–68), a bourgeoisie to which Aïssatou had been a new-comer.

In conclusion, then, by pursuing the bellicose implications of the Cadmean image of buried teeth, we glimpse how Ramatoulaye's awareness, the very ground of insight for the ostensible womanist/feminist and postcolonial subversions effected by her narrative (see for example Klaw), is itself open to subversion, because the narrative's failure to address her conflicted feelings for Aïssatou makes the narrator's awareness uncertain and imperfect: an occasionally obtuse observer who for example missed the signs of her husband's infidelity (35, 38) and her daughter's pregnancy out of marriage (80), she does not appreciate what can be termed lessons from Cadmus. The first lesson, seen above, would suggest that a warrior couple does indeed arise out of Ramatoulaye's and Aïssatou's commingled buried teeth, but as in the myth they do not undertake their would-be<sup>18</sup> progressive "civilizing mission" without mutual conflict. So passing over unawares the complexities of her relationship with her soul mate, Ramatoulaye does not take into account that the initially idealized relationships of the two couples Ramatoulaye-Modou and Aïssatou-Mawdo were complicated by the already caste-complicated relationship between that third couple of much longer standing, Ramatoulaye-Aïssatou, and that the painful separation experienced by the women when their husbands turned away from them may well have had its earlier and unacknowledged parallel for Ramatoulaye when Aïssatou abandoned her by leaving her and Senegal. The traumatizing occasion of the death of Ramatoulaye's still beloved husband—a most dramatic form of separation—replayed the three earlier separations. So the presumptive pain caused by Aïssatou's sudden and dramatic separation from Ramatoulaye that had earlier gone unexplored and indeed ignored by Ramatoulaye, may be viewed as a subterranean element behind her equally unexplored and ignored conflict of motives in turning both toward and away from Aïssatou in her generically uncertain text. A second lesson is that Ramatoulaye imitated unawares Cadmus and his alphabet, by sowing textuality too, in her case not only by teaching and then sharing her presumptively published notebook, but also by transforming her private letter-writing self into a public narrative-writing self or text that, as with the example of Bâ her creator, could serve as a progressive model for aggrieved African women readers.

There remains another, more sweeping, less immediate, but more provocative lesson: the "civilizing mission" of Cadmus's warriors, the establishment of the urban center Thebes, leading to the spread of the alphabet, eventually led also to mayhem in the form of murder, sexual disturbance, and civil war, most dramatically in the person of Cadmus's descendent Oedipus.<sup>19</sup> Is Ramatoulaye's vision of her progressive personal possibilities and by extension of Senegal's

national possibilities not compromised by her inconsistencies and her failures of understanding, such that the optimism of many progressive readings of *So Long a Letter* is dogged by the shadow of ideological and political outcomes not without resonances of what befell Cadmus's Thebes?

## NOTES

1. See King for this narrative's linking the personal and the Senegalese political, and Keith Walker for the argument that "epistolarity, normally associated with the privacy of the 'I,' is [in *So Long a Letter*] socialized, politicized, nationalized, and even internationalized" (260).

2. Most of this article's references concerning Bâ's novel *Une si longue lettre* will be to the English version, Modupé Bodé-Thomas's translation *So Long a Letter*. The occasional references to the original French version can be found in the edition published by Le Serpent à Plumes.

3. See Sarvan for a discussion of inconsistencies in Bâ's fiction.

4. But see Reyes who argues against "Bâ's discourse as one of 'ambiguity,' 'contradictions,' and 'failed radicalism'" (210), and Wehrs for whom reading such conflicts into Bâ's text constitutes a failure to confront the "philosophical complexity" to be found in a more Koranic reading (97).

5. Bodé-Thomas's translation unfortunately softens the tone by adding "Dear," and by translating "mot" 'word,' 'note,' 'message' by 'letter': "Dear Aissatou, I have received your letter" (1). But see Wehrs, who views "mot" here as "the verbal equivalent of a caress or a squeezed hand" (69).

6. Bodé-Thomas translates this expression as "your presence in my life" (1).

7. See Altman 2 for Franz Kafka's view of letter-correspondents as specters.

8. For examples of studies addressing those themes, see respectively Azodo "Theorizing the Personal," Pritchett, and Miller 270–77; for a list of studies problematizing those issues, see for example Azodo "Introduction."

9. For an argument emphasizing the centrality of the theme of abandonment in *Une si longue lettre*, see Cham.

10. For different parallels between Guilleragues's novel and Bâ's, see Azodo, "Lettre sénégalaise."

11. See Nnaemeka for the reality of the "independent, strong, and admirable woman" of African tradition ("From Orality" 141).

12. For an explanation of Ramatoulaye's total recall of the letter as "epistolary surmise" in the context of the theme of gossip, see Reyes 201.

13. As McElaney-Johnson has noted (110), Bodé-Thomas suppresses a key problem of interpretation by translating *cahier* as 'diary' (1).

14. But see McElaney-Johnson for an argument emphasizing letter-writing as a turning-outward.

15. Beyond the more specific writing of letters, writing in general too can have negative connotations in Bâ's novel, especially for the male characters (Larrier, *Francophone Women Writers* 76).

16. See Schipper, Busia, Miller, Fandio; see also Stratton, who refers to Palmer's and Brown's earlier studies emphasizing the importance of incorporating aestheticism in the interpretation of African women's fiction (145), Larrier ("Correspondance"), and McElaney-Johnson.

17. Josias Semujanga considers these renditions theatrical devices (294). But such transcriptions abound in novels too. In any event, if indeed theatrical, these passages would within an epistolary novel be further evidence of Ramatoulaye's writerly bent that I am characterizing as novelistic.

18. Miller proposes that Ramatoulaye's "political unconscious" poses a contradiction for her progressive agenda on literacy (275).

19. *So Long a Letter* has its own incestuous inclinations: Ramatoulaye's husband chooses as co-wife his daughter's close friend, and Aissatou's husband takes as his co-wife his cousin Nabou, as arranged by his mother Nabou who had made her into "another me" (28).

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