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# Correspondance et création littéraire: Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*

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> "Une lettre est une âme, elle est un si fidèle écho de la voix qui parle que les esprits délicats la comptent parmi les plus riches trésors de l'amour."
> Honoré de Balzac, *Le Père Goriot*

MANY COMMENTATORS HAVE FOCUSED on the feminist themes in Mariama Bâ's prize-winning novel *Une si longue lettre* (see Milolo, d'Almeida, Mokwenyé, Herzberger-Fofana). While such an approach certainly cannot be ignored, one must also take into account the work's narrative structure and discourse. *Une si longue lettre* has an epistolary form, but unlike most novels of that genre, letters are not exchanged. The first person narrator—Ramatoulaye—writes one long letter over a period of time to her best friend Aïssatou. Because it is divided into sections that sometimes correspond to temporal breaks, some critics say that *Une si longue lettre* combines the characteristics of the epistolary form with those of a "journal intime" (see Schipper, Stratton). That most of the text is a "retour en arrière" leads one to call it a memoir novel. An epistolary novel, a diary, a memoir are all written forms whose structures Bâ combines, extends, and reworks. In this study I shall determine how Bâ has fashioned a narrative designed to imitate the "voice" of the narrator.

*Une si longue lettre* is just that, a very long letter—one hundred twenty-three pages of text divided into twenty-eight sections (actually twenty-seven, there is no number twenty-five)—written to Aïssatou over a period of months and signed Ramatoulaye. It opens:

> Aissatou,
> 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 confidence noie la douleur. (7)[1]

The first indication that it will be more than simply a letter in response to another letter is found in the word "cahier," which connotes private writings. The narrator begins a diary—addressed to Aïssatou—into which she

relates her present as well as past situation. The "cahier" ends months later with the imminent arrival of Aïssatou, thus the "lettre" is never sent.

This kind of daily communication among friends began with their grandmothers, who "échangeaient journellement des messages" (7), was maintained by their mothers, who "se disputaient la garde de nos oncles et tantes" (7), and continues with Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou. Their grandmothers' and mothers' unwritten texts have been replaced by their written ones. Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are able to write because they were among the first female graduates of the French school. They correspond by mail due to their separation: Ramatoulaye lives in Dakar while Aïssatou resides in Washington, D.C., where she is employed by the Senegalese embassy. This attempt at daily contact with Aïssatou reflects Ramatoulaye's desire for closeness at a critical time in her life. Her husband has just died and she needs a friend: "L'amitié a des grandeurs inconnues de l'amour. Elle se fortifie dans les difficultés, alors que les contraintes massacrent l'amour. Elle résiste au temps qui lasse et désunit les couples. Elle a des élévations inconnues de l'amour" (79).

In another context Jane Gurkin Altman posits: "In order to make a 'confidence' as epistolary characters so often do, one must have 'confiance' in the 'confident'" (48). Ramatoulaye chooses Aïssatuo, who has been her best friend since childhood: they buried their baby teeth in the same hole, shared mangoes, attended Koranic school, French school, the *Ecole Normale* together, became teachers, married friends Modou Fall and Mawdo Bâ, and took vacations together. Ramatoulaye even named one of her daughters and one of her sons after Aïssatou and her husband Mawdo. The Wolof term "wolëre," "ami auquel on est lié par une longue et profonde relation d'assistance mutuelle" (Sylla 89), best defines their relationship.

When direct communication or a conversation between friends is not possible, a letter can be a nearly comparable substitute. Here it allows the narrator to reveal her innermost feelings. A diary offers similar opportunities. Daily entries provide the emotional support that the presence of her friend would have given. Ramatoulaye's undated letter begins the day of her husband's death. The next four sections/chapters coincide with the following four days. The frequent references to time at the beginning or end of a chapter—"aujourd'hui" (14), "A demain" (18), "Je t'ai quittée hier" (22), "J'ai célébré hier, comme il se doit, le quarantième jour de la mort de Modou" (84), "nous sommes vendredi" (93)—not only situate the fictional time of the narrative, but contribute to the letter/diary effect. In addition, the lettre/cahier serves as a bridge between the two women, both of whom have lost husbands—Ramatoulaye through death and Aïssatou through an earlier divorce.

A letter/diary, however, seems contradictory. A letter, afterall, is meant to be read by someone else; a diary is not. One can say that for Ramatoulaye writting to Aïssatou is like writing to herself. Consequently, in this novel the narrator and the narrataire can be considered one and the same.

While diaries and epistolary novels comment on recent events, memoir novels reach further back into the past.[2] Chapter 6 of *Une si longue lettre* opens with a recollection of the narrator's first meeting with her husband more than thirty years before when they were still students.[3] A chronicle of their courtship, marriage, and separation (as well as that of Aïssatou and Mawdo) follows and takes up the next nine chapters of the narrative.[4] The flashback ends in Chapter 17: "Je souffle. J'ai raconté d'un trait ton histoire et la mienne" (81). This recounting of the past is generated by the circumstances. Faced with the required seclusion of Moslem widows, Ramatoulaye writes: "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). These particular memories, the ones centered around her life with Modou, are triggered in Chapter 5, when she reflects: "Et pourtant, que n'a-t-il fait pour que je devienne sa femme?" (23). Also, as Mbye Cham points out, the narrative is generated by the Islamic principle of Mirasse in which the deceased's material possessions are disclosed so that they may be divided among the survivors:

> In extending the conceptual boundaries of "Mirasse," the novelist is able to provide Rama with the structural and, indeed, cultural framework within which to undertake a comprehensive exposition ("dépouillement") of intimate secrets of married life with Modou Fall, particularly the latter's weakness as a human being and the effect of such on their relationship. Being such a devout Muslim Rama sees this stocktaking as a religious duty mandated by the Qu'ran. 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. . . . mirasse, therefore, becomes the principle that legitimizes and regulates Rama's act of systematic personal revelation which simultaneously constitutes a systematic analysis of the most pressing socioeconomic and cultural issues challenging women and society. (19, 32–33)[5]

The challenges are numerous, especially those faced by a widow with twelve children, like Ramatoulaye. The novel opens as she has just become a widow. It is ironic, however, that she is accorded all the privileges and respect that accompany that status, for her loss actually occurred five years earlier when her husband abandoned the family. After twenty-five years of marriage, Modou decided to take a second, younger wife who happens to be their daughter's good friend, Binetou. The *fait accompli* is announced to Ramatoulaye by her brother-in-law Tamsir, Mawdo, and the Imam. While polygamy is sanctioned by Islam, the narrator sees it as giving in to weakness and egotism, and as an attempt to recapture lost youth. Modou is a prime example of a middle-aged, married man who hides behind a religious practice to justify his attraction to a younger woman. His insincerity is seen in the fact that he does not treat his two wives equally; he completely abandons his first family. As a single mother Ramatoulaye is forced to assume her husband's responsibilities. Going out alone brings stares of disapproval and makes her realize "la minceur de la liberté accordée à la

femme" (76). She struggles, nevertheless, she survives: "Je survivais" (76, 77, 79).

Aïssatou's story is similar; however, when her husband Mawdo married a second time, she forced the break by opting for divorce. Moreover, her life changed as a result. She leaves the teaching profession, attends the *Ecole d'Interprétariat* in France, and is named to a post at the Senegalese embassy in the United States, where she moves with her four sons.

Ramatoulaye recounts a third story of abandonment, that of Jacqueline, an Ivorian friend who suffers a nervous breakdown when her Senegalese doctor husband starts seeing other women. Unlike Modou and Mawdo, Samba Diack does not use polygamy as an excuse. This brief embedded episode which occurs halfway through the narrative serves as a mise-en-abyme of Aïssatou's and Ramatoulaye's stories.

But why recount the same basic story three times? For Ramatoulaye the telling of these women's stories is cathartic.[6] A voice that has been repressed for thirty years is finally heard. Parallel scenes in the novel reflect the changed circumstances. Whereas Ramatoulaye listened intently as her husband's second marriage was announced (57–58), she explodes with anger at Tamsir's plan for her to become his fourth wife: "Ma voix connaît trente années de silence, trente années de brimades. Elle éclate, violente, tantôt sarcastique, tantôt méprisante. . . . 'Tu oublies que j'ai un cœur, une raison, que je ne suis pas un objet que l'on passe de main en main. . . . Je ne serai jamais le complément de ta collection'" (85). Mawdo reacts to this unexpected outburst by demanding her silence: "Tais-toi! Tais-toi! Arrête! Arrête!" (86). Ramatoulaye's "prise de parole" was preceded by Aïssattou, who became an interpreter after her divorce. These modern urban women break the silence imposed by tradition and provide a sharp contrast to Assitan in Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*:

> Assitan était une épouse parfaite selon les anciennes traditions africaines: docile, soumise, travailleuse, elle ne disait jamais un mot plus haute que l'autre. . . . Son lot de femme était d'accepter et de se taire, ainsi qu'on lui avait enseigné." (170–71)

The narrative discourse in *Une si longue lettre* reflects this new emphasis on speech and consequently reveals numerous signs of orality. The narrator addresses her destinataire directly: sometimes by name—"Aïssatou" (7, 10, 27, 31, 34, 45, 48, 62, 66, 87, 95, 126); or "Aïssatou, mon amie" (19, 70, 72); or simply "mon amie" (8, 69, 117, 129); "ma meilleure amie," "ma sœur" (79); most often, though, using the second person singular pronoun, for example: "Toi, Aïssatou" (34, 48), "tu le sais" (105), "Adosse-toi" (20), "Tu te rappelles" (87), "Je t'envie de n'avoir mis au monde que des garçons!" (127). Because the narrataire is inscribed in the text, the reader is constantly aware of her presence, which creates a kind of dialogue.

Incomplete sentences can also imitate speech. The passage describing Modou's death is the best example. With its short phrases, virtual absence

of verbs, and many exclamation points, it mimics the jerky, halting rhythm of someone who is agitated, out of breath:

> Un taxi hélé! Vite! Plus vite! Ma gorge sèche. Dans ma poitrine une boule immobile. Vite! Plus vite! Enfin l'hôpital! L'odeur des suppurations et de l'éther mêlés. L'hôpital! Des visages crispés, une escorte larmoyante de gens connus, témoins malgré eux de l'atroce tragédie. Un couloir qui s'étire, qui n'en finit pas de s'étirer. Au bout, une chambre. Dans la chambre, un lit. Sur ce lit: Modou étendu, déjà isolé du monde des vivants par un drap blanc qui l'enveloppe entièrement. (8)

Oral syntax is also represented by the questions that Ramatoulaye often asks herself: "Où me coucher?" (9); "Partir? Recommencer à zéro, après avoir vécu vingt-cinq ans avec un homme, après avoir mis au monde douze enfants?" (60); "Si semblables physiquement, pourquoi ont-elles des caractères différents?" (108); "Le modernisme ne peut donc être sans s'accompagner de la dégradation des mœurs?" (112); "Et je m'interroge. Et je m'interroge. Pourquoi? Pourquoi Modou s'est-il détaché? Pourquoi a-t-il introduit Binetou entre nous?" (83).

Another characteristic of orality is found in the abundant use of proverbs and maxims: "On ne badine pas avec la vie, et la vie, c'est à la fois le corps et l'esprit" (38), for example. Tante Nabou advises Mawdo to accept her choice for his second wife in this way: "la honte tue plus vite que la maladie" (48). Neighbors' advice to Aïssatou—to compromise and stay with Mawdo—is given in the form of a maxim: "On ne brûle pas un arbre qui porte des fruits" (49). Ramatoulaye's mother recommends: "une femme doit épouser l'homme qui l'aime mais point celui qu'elle aime; c'est le secret d'un bonheur durable" (87).[7]

The numerous signs of orality function to imitate the spoken voice. On the one hand, they accentuate Ramatoulaye's "prise de parole." For this reason she can be considered the fictional equivalent of the real women that Awa Thiam interviewed in *La Parole aux négresses*: "Longtemps les Négresses se sont tues. N'est-il pas temps qu'elles (re)découvrent leur voix, qu'elles prennent ou reprennent la parole?" (17). On the other hand, the spoken voice, reminds the reader of the traditional African "conteur" whose telling of the story can be as significant as the story itself. By representing that voice, Ramatoulaye/Bâ establishes the continuity between "oraliture" and "littérature."

The narrator of *Une si longue lettre* relates the experiences of an urban Senegalese woman who balances single motherhood and a career, tries to reconcile traditional and Western ways, and is confronted by racism and sexism. In this sense, Ramatoulaye's ideas coincide with those of her creator, Bâ, who feels that writing is a weapon for combatting injustice:

> le contexte social africain étant caractérisé par l'inégalité criante entre l'homme et la femme, par l'exploitation et l'oppression séculaires et barbares du sexe dit faible, la femme-écrivain a une mission particulière. Elle doit, plus que ses pairs masculins, dresser un tableau de la condition de la femme africaine. Les injusti-

> ces persistent, les ségrégations continuent malgré la décennie internationale dédiée à la femme par l'O.N.U., malgré les beaux discours et les louables intentions. Dans la famille, dans les institutions, dans la rue, les lieux de travail, les assemblées politiques, les discriminations foisonnent. Les pesanteurs sociales étouffent dans leur cynique perpétration. Les mœurs et coutumes ajoutées à l'interprétation égoïste et abusive des religions font ployer lourdement l'échine. Les maternités incontrôlées vident les corps.
>
> Comment ne pas prendre conscience de cet état de faits agressif? Comment pas être tenté de soulever ce lourd couvercle social? C'est à nous, femmes, de prendre notre destin en mains pour bouleverser l'ordre établi à notre détriment et ne point le subir. Nous devons user comme les hommes de cette arme, pacifique certes mais sûre, qu'est l'écriture. ("Fonction" 6-7)

It is clear that Bâ has done just that in her first novel. Female characters in *Une si longue lettre* have also used this "arme pacifique." First, Ramatoulaye transcribes her story (as well as that of Aïssatou and Jacqueline) in her "point d'appui," her "cahier" (7). Second, she responds to Daouda Dieng's proposal of marriage in a letter. Third, Aïssatou informs Mawdo that she is leaving him, in a letter. Fourth, Aïssatou also writes to Ramatoulaye, but her letters are not represented in the text. Perhaps Bâ's intention is best summed up by the cover of *Une si longue lettre;* it pictures a Black woman with pen in hand in the act of writing. It is thus emblematic of the voice long stifled that is finally heard—through writing.

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## Notes

[1]African literature in French includes another novel in the form of a very long letter to a friend, Bernard Dadié's *Un Nègre à Paris* (1956). It has no salutation, but is signed Tanhoe Bertin and is dated Paris le 14 juillet-2 août 1956.

[2]Fall's *L'Ex-père de la nation* is the most recent example of this genre in Senegal.

[3]The "tu" in this chapter refers to Modou: "Modou Fall, à l'instant où tu t'inclinas devant moi pour m'inviter à danser, je sus que tu étais celui que j'attendais" (24).

[4]These ten chapters do not constitute a true flashback, as the narrator periodically returns to present time. Chapter eleven opens: "Je sais que je te [Aïssatou] secoue, que je remue un couteau dans une plaie à peine cicatrisée; mais que veux-tu, je ne peux m'empêcher de me resouvenir dans cette solitude et cette réclusion forcées" (42).

[5]In a letter to Mawdo announcing their breakup, Aïssatou uses the same metaphor: "Je me dépouille de ton amour, de ton nom" (50).

[6]In that sense the fictional narrator is like the real Senegalese poet Ndèye Coumba Diakhaté who said in an interview: "Je me suis trouvée dans les conditions telles que j'éprouvais le besoin de m'exprimer, de parler, de me confier. Une pudeur me retient de me confier à quelqu'un. Je me suis confiée aux papiers" (Dia 37).

[7]Milolo cites this element of orality only in *L'Image de la femme* 131.

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