

Women  
Writers,  
Women's  
Writing



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Epistolary Friendship: *La prise de parole*  
in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*

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Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* has attracted the attention of literary critics and scholars in both Africa and the Western world. The novel, written in the form of a letter that the protagonist, Ramatoulaye, writes to her childhood friend, examines the challenges and issues that face contemporary Africa at a time of profound change in the political and social arenas following decolonization. Much of the initial discussion of this text has concentrated on such ideological functions of the novel such as sociopolitical implications of polygamy, cultural conflicts in post-colonial Senegal, and the role of the African woman writer (see Cham; d'Almeida; and Stringer). More recently, studies have engaged in a discussion of the formal elements of the work, its narrative structure, and use of discourse (see Larrier; Mortimer; and Stratton). This paper joins this current dialogue through an examination of Bâ's use of the epistolary

genre. Bâ distinguishes herself from her contemporaries in her choice of genre. Although the first-person narrative is common in the African corpus, it is usually represented in the form of autobiography or journal writing. Letter novels are a rarity. One study of the francophone African corpus at the end of the 1970s reveals only five letter novels published before or around the time of *Une si longue lettre*, all by men.<sup>1</sup> Bâ's surprising choice of genre has provoked much discussion (see Cham; Miller; and Schipper).

In light of the title and the work's apparent structure it is interesting that most criticism to date focuses on how this text that presents itself as a letter novel resembles, in fact, a journal. Several studies have demonstrated how the "diary" format best provides Ramatoulaye the opportunity to reflect on her life (see Nnaemeka; Stratton). Through these private writings, the narrator examines her experiences as an abandoned wife, a single mother, and currently a recent widow. The "diary" records a journey to self-understanding in a climate of great social transition in postcolonial Africa. In short, although critics acknowledge the epistolary wrapping that serves as a catalyst for journal writing, they frequently pass over the epistolary structures with only cursory consideration. A close reading of the novel reveals, however, a richness of epistolary features firmly embedded in the framework of the text. The primary epistolary property that defines my reading is the position of the internal reader. It has been demonstrated that Aïssatou, the addressee of the missive, represents a double for Ramatoulaye. Aïssatou's experiences as a young woman growing up in the period immediately following Senegal's independence from France, her decision to choose her own husband, and her experience of betrayal by her spouse parallel Ramatoulaye's own life.<sup>2</sup> Aïssatou's role has even been defined as an alter ego to Ramatoulaye. Although the bond between the two women is reinforced through this structural device of doubling, it is crucial that we not ignore the fact that Bâ's text posits this internal reader whose life, although parallel in many ways to the narrator's, remains distinct at the diegetic level.

It is Bâ herself who opens the door to the study of the diary aspects of the novel, alongside the epistolary structures, through her artful manipulation of genre. From the first words of the text, Bâ plays with generic distinctions. The opening paragraph insists that we read the text both as an individual's search for self-understanding and as a woman's written communication with a carefully selected confidant. Bâ's creative use of genre is immediately apparent in Ramatoulaye's first words:

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 confidence noie la douleur. (7; emphasis added.)<sup>3</sup>

Dear Aïssatou, I have received your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress. Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain. (1)<sup>4</sup>

The ambiguous phrase "en guise de" introduces not only the text but also the discussion on genre. Able to be understood in two contradictory ways, "by way of reply to your letter" and "in place of responding to your letter," these words immediately incorporate two distinct genres in the structure of the work. Also interesting is the use of the term "cahier." In Modupé Bodé-Thomas's English translation of the novel, "cahier" is translated as "diary" instead of "notebook." This translation, the basis for much scholarship, has led to further examination of the text as a diary, with Bâ's word choice posited as evidence of journalistic or private writing instead of epistolary writing. This paper does not argue the correctness of Bodé-Thomas's translation, but does caution commentators that this interpretation, although not inaccurate, denies the text its richness.

Although the novel resembles a journal and merits the consideration given this form in previous studies, the ambiguity of this first section also draws attention to the epistolary features in the work. The examination of those formulae specific to the letter novel when read in conjunction with the journalistic structures engages the reader in a closer reading *and* in a richer appreciation of Bâ's text.

In her study, *Epistolarity, Approaches To a Form*, Janet Altman examines how the basic elements of the epistolary novel generate meaning in the text. Her analysis of the epistolary text rests on two assumptions:

- (1) that for the letter novelist the choice of the epistle as narrative instrument can foster certain patterns of thematic emphasis, narrative action, character types, and narrative self-consciousness; and
- (2) that for the reader of epistolary literature, the identification of structures common to letter novels can provide (and expose) important models and perspectives for interpretation of individual works. (9)

Borrowing from the Bakhtinian theory on dialogism, each new contribution to a genre bears a "family resemblance" to its predecessors; each text is an absorption of and a response to another text (Kauffman, *Discourses* 18). In this way, the identification of common features in epistolary texts will reveal how Bâ has manipulated different structural constituents within an established genre and will also clarify how Bâ's manipulation of the genre represents a departure from this traditional Western genre. Linda S. Kauffman elaborates on the dynamic relationship among epistolary texts in her studies on contemporary letter novels, stating that each new text

engages in "dialogic" contestation with them [its predecessors]: it draws on multiple languages and sources, it posits an alternative logic, it eschews resolution and closure, it depicts ideologues in conflict, it creates an open-ended dialogue that encourages further innovation. (*Special Delivery* xix)

The epistolary text by nature engages in at least two levels of dialogue. First, the letter novel engages in a dialogic relationship with the epistolary tradition. It situates itself as part of a genre that has long given voice to both the seductive act, the seduction of the innocent woman through artful

letter writing as seen in Richardson's *Clarissa*, and the suffering of the epistolary victim. Traditionally, the epistolary victim is the object of the seduction act who, subsequent to her succumbing to her lover, finds herself abandoned, as in Guillerague's *Lettres portugaises*. The epistolary victim also includes heroines like Zélia, the narrator of *Lettres péruviennes* by Mme de Graffigny who, in the midst of their pain, try to define a life for themselves. Second, at another level, the basis of the epistolary text is, as Bakhtin calls it, a "reflected discourse" (Bakhtin). Even in letter novels where the addressee does not speak directly, where speech appears unidirectional, it remains dialogic; the characteristic feature of the letter is an acute awareness of the addressee to whom it is written. The letter is a rejoinder in an ongoing dialogue. Addressed to a specific person, its style and content are defined by the anticipation of another's words. This second level of dialogue, the "reflected discourse," is the key factor that distinguishes the epistolary novel from the genres of memoir, journal, and autobiography. Jean Rousset underscores the preeminent role of the addressee in epistolary production: "Elle [une lettre] se dirige vers un destinataire, s'adresse à quelqu'un, est un moyen d'action, dans la lettre, on se raconte et on s'explore, mais devant et pour autrui" "It (the letter) is directed toward a reader; it is addressed to someone, it is a means of action, in the letter, one tells one's story and one examines oneself, but in front of and for another" (72; trans. mine).

*Une si longue lettre* constructs itself through the epistolary relationship. Through writing Ramatoulaye explores her inner self but she does so *before* and *for* a selected audience. Whereas diary writing is born of private introspection and solitude, whether sought or enforced, the writing of letters implies camaraderie, sharing, a reaching out to another. Critics have argued that Ramatoulaye uses the four-month period of mourning and seclusion dictated by Islamic tradition to write what becomes a personal journal; Aïssatou does not serve as a true correspondent but rather as an alter ego in an inward journey toward self-discovery. In this way, Ramatoulaye seems to be, in effect, writing to herself (see Larrier; Stratton). One commentator, Charles Drayton, speaks of Ramatoulaye as a victim of enforced isolation who turns in desperation to the diary as her only recourse. Her profound isolation does indeed permeate the text and suggests therefore that her writing is purely introspective, that of a diary. I would argue conversely that it is *precisely* this overwhelming sense of isolation that links Ramatoulaye to traditional epistolary narrators who also maintain a balance between what appears to be contradictory impulses. On the one hand, the isolation of the narrator forces her to reflect on her inner-most thoughts and feelings, thereby magnifying her seclusion. Yet it is from this seclusion that the very stuff that shapes the epistolary relationship is born. Ruth Perry develops this apparent contradiction in her significant study of the letter novel:

What the characters enact in their seclusion is at the core [of an] epistolary novel: a self-conscious and self-perpetuating process of emotional self-examination which gathers momentum and

ultimately becomes more important than communicating with anyone outside the room in which one sits alone writing letters. (117)

On the other hand, although this process is intensely personal, the letter writer does reach out to another. She does not fully accept her isolation. Rousset's description of the epistolary production reconciles this apparent contradiction: "...[D]ans la lettre, *on se raconte et on s'explore*, mais devant et pour autrui" "... [I]n the letter *one tells one's story and one examines oneself* but in front of and for another' (72; emphasis added).

Ramatoulaye represents in many ways, then, a traditional epistolary writer. Her focus on self that appears to erase the presence of her addressee at times does not disqualify her as a letter writer. It echoes instead the words of her epistolary ancestor, the Portuguese nun, who admits in a letter to her lover: "J'écris plus pour moi que pour vous, je ne cherche qu'à me soulager" 'I write more for myself than for you, all I seek is consolation' (Guilleragues 58; trans. mine). Ramatoulaye recognizes her isolation and turns toward her friend for comfort. As she begins the painful process of reconstructing her life through common memories, she warns her addressee that it is her solitude that forces her to write this letter which will cause her reader pain: "Je sais que je te 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) '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' (26).

Although the matter in her letter is self-reflexive, she does not write solely to herself, but in the tradition of female epistolary voice, she reaches out to a confidant in what becomes an act of self-examination and affirmation which reinforces the bond between Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou. It is this bond between narrator and narratee that enables Ramatoulaye to write her life. As in many epistolary novels, the letter's confidentiality structures the thematics, character relationships, and narrative action (Altman 47). The opening paragraph highlights the nature of the epistolary relationship that functions to create the theme of female bonding in this text. Ramatoulaye defines her relationship with Aïssatou as "[une] longue pratique [qui] m'a enseigné que la confidence noie la douleur" '[a] long association [that] has taught me that confiding in others allays pain.' This simple phrase reveals an ongoing dialogue between two friends, a dialogue that is sustained through letter writing. Ramatoulaye, writing in response to Aïssatou's letter, uses this forum to confide in her friend.

Both the closeness of this relationship and its healing powers become basic to the thematic texture of this novel of female friendship. Unlike the diary where the protagonist's isolation is acutely portrayed, Bâ structures her work to emphasize the bond between these women. The text includes nearly one hundred references to the first-person-plural form of pronouns and possessive adjectives. Ramatoulaye repeatedly calls her addressee "soeur" 'sister' and "amie" 'friend.' Following the letter's opening words, the narrator immediately evokes common memories and experiences as

the very matter of the missive, thus cementing the nature of the relationship between these two women. They have grown up together, they have shared the same traditions and the same challenges. The strong bond that connects them is evoked not only in the content of the novel but in its form as well. Through the structural device of doubling of characters, Bâ creates the ideal confidant and reader and underlines the transcendent need of female solidarity.

Indeed, Ramatoulaye echoes this celebration of female friendship and places it in a privileged position in relationship to romantic love:

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)

Friendship has splendors that loves knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love. (54)

It is Ramatoulaye's friendship with Aïssatou that has helped the narrator cope with her husband, Moudou's betrayal of their marriage vows, and his subsequent death. Aïssatou gives her friend the tools she will need to gain self-reliance and autonomy. In terms of material gifts, Aïssatou provides her first with a car. Terrified at the thought of driving, Ramatoulaye masters her fear and wins as she calls it "cette bataille de nerfs et du sang froid" (80) 'this battle of nerves and *sang-froid*' (54). This gift gives the narrator self-reliance and a greater sense of independence as she ventures more and more out of her home and into the public arena. Aïssatou's second gift is her example, her independent spirit and her refusal to compromise her integrity guide Ramatoulaye as she faces the future as a widow. In her own missive, Ramatoulaye duplicates the letter that Aïssatou wrote to her husband after having discovered that he had taken on a second wife. In this letter written as a young wife, she rejects polygamy and therefore the life her husband now offers her. Concluding her letter "Je me dépouille de ton amour, de ton nom. Vêtue du seul habit valable de la dignité, je poursuis ma route" (50) 'I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way' (32), Aïssatou takes her sons and leaves her husband. Ramatoulaye's inclusion of this letter by her confidante further solidifies their bond. The duplication of Aïssatou's letter rejecting her husband's polygamous marriage has been criticized as a weakness in the novel; Ramatoulaye's exact reproduction of her friend's letter seems to go beyond the parameters of the epistolary pact (see Nnaemeka). She states that this weakness in the epistolary structure validates the novel's status as a dialogue with self (21). I would argue conversely that it is this reproduction of the letter that confirms the importance of letter writing in their friendship. Ramatoulaye apologizes that she relates much of what her addressee already knows but it is the evocation of the women's common experiences and Aïssatou's words in this letter that provide Ramatoulaye a



model to follow. Aïssatou's declaration of separation from her husband is pivotal in Ramatoulaye's experience. This letter reproduced in the text represents Ramatoulaye's introduction to the act of writing as a process of liberation. Witness to Aïssatou's *prise de parole* in this letter, she sees the model from which she will eventually learn to write her own version of this letter rejecting polygamy to Daouda, a doctor and a deputy at the National Assembly who asks her to take the place of second wife in his home.

Far from affirming the novel's status as a diary, the inclusion of this letter only highlights then the importance that both letter writing and female friendship play in the text. In addition to this letter written by Aïssatou, the addressee's voice is frequently heard at other moments in the novel. Altman identifies two types of confidants in epistolary literature. The passive confidant is absent from the letter; he plays no role in the correspondence other than as silent addressee of a missive. The active confidant on the other hand is involved to varying degrees in the story and may influence the plot and may write letters of her own. Aïssatou belongs to this second category of confidants. Her own story clearly influences the protagonist's and although only one of her letters is represented in the text, we feel her presence in Ramatoulaye's writing. The narrator speaks directly to her addressee throughout the text. Fulfilling the "je crois te parler" 'I feel as though I am speaking to you' component of the epistolary relationship, she frequently evokes her presence by calling her by name or by using the informal "tu" 'you.' Twenty-one of the twenty-seven sections of the letter invoke Aïssatou in the opening sentence and four of the remaining sections address her at a later point. Furthermore, her voice is heard throughout through quotation and paraphrase as is typical of the epistolary confidant. Ramatoulaye also creates the illusion of dialogue by posing her interlocutor questions to which she often supplies Aïssatou's expected response—"tu me diras" (81) 'you may tell me' (55) and "tu me répondras" (83) 'you may reply' (56).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Bâ creates the illusion of dialogue through the use of parentheses. She creates two levels of discourse in the text that insist on the addressee's privileged role in the narration. While reporting conversations or events, Ramatoulaye often includes parenthetical side remarks. In her account of her brother-in-law's marriage proposal to her, an event that incenses her to the point that she finally breaks as she refers to it, her "trente années de silence, trente années de brimande" (85) 'thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment' (57-58), she uses two levels of discourse to explain the situation. On one hand, she reports the day's events as they unfold, directly citing her conversation with Tamsir. On the other hand, she uses parentheses to engage in a more intimate and subjective form of discourse with Aïssatou: "Tamsir parle, plein d'assurance; il invoque (encore) mes années de mariage, puis conclut: 'Après ta "sortie" (sous-entendu: du deuil), je t'épouse"' (84) 'Tamsir speaks with great assurance; he touches (once again) on my years of marriage, then he concludes: "When you have 'come out' (that is to say, of mourning), I shall marry you" ' (57). She reports her response to the proposal again incorporating asides to her interlocutor: "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) 'You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you. (I emphasized the word chosen)' (58). Bâ's inclusion of these parenthetical comments during this transformative *prise de parole* privileges the relationship between writer and confidant and cements their strong bond. This second and extremely intimate level of conversation affirms her solidarity with another. Ramatoulaye's situation is *not* one of isolation. Indignities and pain she suffers are shared and attenuated through correspondence with her confidante.

Ramatoulaye's inscription of her life enables her to transcend her physical and psychological confinement (Stratton 138-39), but crucial to this *prise de parole* is the act of reading. The epistolary relationship, unlike the autobiography or diary, is a reciprocal one. Writers also act as readers and readers take on the task of writing. Altman asserts that the act of reading is an important narrative event and a prime instrument of self-discovery (92). Therefore, although Aïssatou figures as the primary reader in the text, Ramatoulaye adopts this task as well. The protagonist's reading of Aïssatou's divorce letter is crucial in her search for self-understanding; this articulate and decisive missive proves formative in Ramatoulaye's development as a writer in her own right. This letter, although key, is not the only missive that Aïssatou writes and Ramatoulaye reads. The narrator refers to several other letters she receives from her confidante. These letters, although often ignored in discussions of the text, help define Ramatoulaye's story. She refers to several missives that not only serve as a source of news and advice over the years (51, 79) but also as a bridge in their relationship. Letters solidify their friendship. As the narrator anticipates her friend's visit, she ponders the powerful link nourished by the ongoing correspondence:

L'important ne sera pas sur nos corps en présence. L'essentiel, c'est le contenu de nos coeurs qui nous anime; l'essentiel est la qualité de la sève qui nous inonde. Tu m'as souvent prouvé la supériorité de l'amitié sur l'amour. Le temps, la distance autant que les souvenirs communs ont consolidé nos liens et font de nos enfants, des frères et des soeurs. (104)

The essential thing is the content of our hearts, which animates us; the essential thing is the quality of the sap that flows through us. You have often proved to me the superiority of friendship over love. Time, distance, as well as mutual memories have consolidated our ties and made our children brothers and sisters. (77)

Their correspondence bridges distance and time. It protects intimacy and possesses a healing power that obscures physical separation. We recall Ramatoulaye's words, "notre longue pratique m'a enseigné que la confiance noie la douleur" 'our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain.' This capacity to comfort is crucial to the understand-



ing of the epistolary relationship. Letters bring the confidante within reach. They comfort and they encourage their reader. The narrator recognizes the healing capacity of the written word: "ces mots caressants qui me décrispent sont bien de toi" (104) 'these caressing words, which relax me, are indeed from you' (71). Words inscribed in letters connect the two women and comfort both writer and reader.

Letters in this novel serve not only the metaphoric function of bridge builder but also play a metonymical role. The letter becomes a substitution for the confidant and in a very real sense, the physical presence of the letter is a comfort in itself. Through this metonymic function, the receipt of a letter is as easing and as healing as the presence of its writer would be. Ramatoulaye describes the ritual surrounding the arrival of Aïssatou's letters. Her youngest son, Ousmane, can always recognize his "tante Aïssatou's" letters and carries them with pride to his mother:

Il [Ousmane] a le privilège de m'apporter toutes tes lettres. Comment les reconnaît-il? A leur timbre? A leur enveloppe? A l'écriture soignée qui te reflète? A l'odeur de lavande qui en émane? . . . Ousmane savoure sa trouvaille. Il triomphe.(104)

He (Ousmane) has the privilege of bringing me all your letters. How does he recognize them? By their stamp? By their envelope? By the careful writing, characteristic of you? By the scent of lavender emanating from them? Ousmane enjoys his find. He exults in it. (71)

The physical presentation of the letter reflects its writer. The careful handwriting, the smell of lavender both suggest the metonymical representation of the writer. Ousmane's presentation of the letter to his mother accords the letter the place of the cherished guest who is presented to the household head. The letter that provokes this particular reflection on the part of the narrator also happens to be the letter which indeed announces Aïssatou's imminent arrival. It is a literal bridge that will end in reunion the following day.

The epistolary relationship between writer and reader engenders the thematic texture of the novel. The text not only tells the stories of women facing difficult cultural challenges but also inscribes their friendship into the very fabric of the novel. The formal properties of the epistolary confidence generate and define the dynamic and formative relationship between writer and reader. The final paragraph in the letter affirms the defining role of the epistolary relationship. The end of the narrator's seclusion, the end of this reflective period, marks the end of her letter. Ramatoulaye has learned to use writing as an instrument of self-expression and as a weapon against her thirty years of silence. Yet her closing thoughts are not words proclaiming total self-sufficiency. Her statement is an affirmation of solidarity among women. "Tant pis si j'ai encore à t'écrire une si longue lettre . . ." (133) 'Too bad for me if once again I have to write you so long a letter' (89). Ramatoulaye celebrates not her autonomy but her bond of friendship with Aïssatou. Unlike the diary scriptor, she does not

write in desperation to herself but writes in anticipation of continued dialogue. The double-voiced discourse inherent in the formal properties of the letter novel witnesses a dialogue heretofore unheard in francophone African literature. Ramatoulaye's *prise de parole* through letter writing to another woman removes her from the "suffering epistolary victim" status and posits a new discourse that refutes the male representation of women in African literature. Bâ's manipulation of the Western epistolary genre offers a vehicle through which African women can tell their own stories, stories that have been mistold for so long. Mariama Bâ expresses this need for a new female discourse:

... [L]a femme-écrivain a une mission particulière. Elle doit, plus que ses pairs masculins, dresser un tableau de la condition de la femme africaine. . . . 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. . . . Les chants nostalgiques dédiés à la mère africaine confondue dans les angoisses d'homme à la Mère Afrique ne nous suffisent plus.

... [T]he [African] woman writer has a special mission. More than her male counterparts, she has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. As women, we must take the future in our own hands in order to overthrow the status quo which harms us and to which we must no longer submit. . . . Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. . . . We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother, who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. ("La fonction" 6-7; trans. mine).

In this text where women speak to women, where men's voices are inscribed through the female prism, Bâ *challenges* the status quo. The epistolary novel, through its inherent dialogic form, presents not only rich dialogue within the text but also engages in dialogue with other texts and traditions. Bâ's creative manipulation of this genre posits this text in contestation with tradition and generates a distinctly female and African discourse that challenges Western and African male representation of women in literature.

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## NOTES

1. Schipper (119-20) and Miller (277) list a total of five texts that can be categorized as "letter novels": Bernard Dadié, *Un nègre à Paris*; Nsimba Mumbamuna, *Lettres kinoises (roman épistolaire)*; Henri Lopès, *Sans tam-tam*; René Philombe, *Lettres de ma cambuse*; and Etoundi-M'Balla Patrice, *Lettre ouverte à Soeur Marie-Pierre*.
  2. See both Mortimer and Stratton for a more developed discussion of doubling in the text.
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3. All citations from the text are from Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre*. The emphasis is mine.
4. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of the English translation of Bâ's novel are from Modupé Bodé-Thomas's translation, *So Long a Letter*.
5. Bodé-Thomas's translation lacks the directness of Ramatoulaye's address: "You may tell me" (55; emphasis added); "You may reply" (56; emphasis added). The translation of Bâ's use of the future tense as "will" insists on the anticipation and expectation of continued correspondence.

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