
Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* and Subverting a Mythology of Sex-Based Oppression

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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.

It is up to us women to take our fate in our hands in order to overthrow the order established to our detriment instead of submitting to it. We must, like men, use this weapon, peaceful, of course, but effective, which is writing.

Mariama Bâ, "La fonction politique" (7)

Many studies focus on the division between oppressor and oppressed to conclude that *Une si longue lettre* (1979) by the Senegalese female author Mariama Bâ simply discusses the mistreatment of Senegalese women by their men and society.¹ This novel is particularly important because it won the first Noma Prize (1980) for the most outstanding work published in Africa (Blair, "Preface"). Marie Grésillon states that the principal theme of *Lettre* is the indictment of men who, in order to fulfill their own desires, victimize women (67, 69, 88). Alain Rouch and Gérard Clavreuil similarly summarize the book as the story of women who are abandoned by their husbands (396). Obioma Nnaemeka, Deborah G. Plant, and Mbye Baboucar Cham come closer to nuancing Bâ's thoughts concerning society, power, and the sexes. As Nnaemeka maintains, *Lettre* subverts and destabilizes certain dichotomies rooted in race, age, and culture and demonstrates that each woman experiences her environment differently and in a complex way (13-27). For Plant, *Lettre* depicts the African women's economic and sociopolitical contributions to society and asks how they lost their power. Cham introduces the reasons that African men and women get caught in a dynamic that encourages husbands to abandon their wives.

Over twenty years before the appearance of *Lettre*, Barthes, who was interested in the dynamics between differing ideologies, developed a terminology to dissect the myth-making mechanisms of the French bourgeoisie, which, as an Occidental colonizer of Senegal, had a lasting influence on Senegal's vision of itself. His classifications for the principal figures of social and discursive structures of domination in the bourgeois France of 1957 (inoculation, the quantification of quality, the privation of History, identification, *ninisme*, and the statement of facts) serve as useful tools to target the underlying causes of hierarchies and their relationship to gender construction.² These categories have a particular relevance to an analysis of Senegalese society because of French colonialism, but they can

also be used universally and particularly in terms of gender and social expectations of the sexes: in *Mythologies*, Barthes includes essays, such as "Novels and Children," "Striptease," and "Conjugales," that deconstruct the discourses and practices perpetuating societally dictated gender roles.³ Read in light of Barthes's categories and these essays, *Lettre* reveals the underpinnings of conditions that might normally be accepted as irrevocable givens.

My analysis explores the implications of the myths involved for both sexes: *Lettre* illustrates that old and new ideologies often function to maintain a status quo that is ultimately unjust for men and women. I use *ideology* as defined by Althusser to mean "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162).⁴ For my study, myth is a subset of ideology; as such, any idea or representation of an individual in a society could be considered a myth. As Laurie Edson shows without explicitly involving Althusser, African philosophers and critics increasingly point to the importance of identifying the real conditions of daily life and the conflict between tradition and modernity (13-15). Bâ herself stresses the importance of the imaginary in her promotion of African literature which shows men and women working together: "Il faut donner dans la littérature africaine à la femme noire une dimension à la mesure de son engagement prouvé à côté de l'homme dans les batailles de libération, une dimension à la mesure de ses capacités démontrées dans le développement économique de notre pays" 'In African literature the black woman must be given a dimension equal to her proven political commitment beside man in the battles of liberation, a dimension equal to her proven capabilities in the economic development of our country' ("La fonction politique" 7). In *Lettre*, she investigates the imaginary relationships of Africans to their real situation. Certain imaginary relationships such as those Léopold Sédar Senghor established to depict the pure African character undoubtedly inform Bâ's consciousness as she quotes Senghor often in other works.⁵ In *Lettre*, Bâ depicts the problems created by colonization and illustrates the difficulty of defining a pure African code of behavior. Categories such as the pure African and the French-colonized African are not without ambiguities: one might argue that the Senegalese African was pure before the introduction of Islam in the eleventh century, which some would say modified woman's societal stature and transferred power to the patriarchal system (Herzberger-Fofana 97; cf. Plant 102-4). Senghor's African is primarily sensual, tactile, intuitive, social ("L'esprit" 22-24). The head of the family, because he is religious, sacrifices everything for the good of his family. For Senghor, the family is the clan, the ensemble of people, living or dead, who share a common ancestor. Literature and art, daily occupations for all Africans, are always politically motivated and committed to promoting a certain future. Senghor views pride, often incarnated by the love for money and a need to correct nature with art, as Occidental traits ("L'esprit" 22-29).

Exploring the interstices of the imaginary and the real, *Lettre* recounts in epistolary form the story of a Senegalese woman, Ramatoulaye, whose husband Modou leaves her after many years in order to marry one of their

daughter's school friends. Despite his desertion of her, Ramatoulaye continues to love him, learns a new form of independence, and is able to refuse certain traditions and escape the patriarchal authority represented by his brother and best friend who, as upstanding Senegalese men, offer to keep her supposedly free from strife and cares by marrying her. During the process of telling about her own life, Ramatoulaye also recapitulates the experiences of her husband, her daughters, other African men and women, and her best friend Aïssatou to whom she is writing and who was also rejected by her husband.

Ramatoulaye's interactions illustrate that what Barthes has called a *societal vaccination* promotes a system that exploits wives. Such an inoculation involves the confession of the accidental evil caused by the hierarchy of social classes or other similar divisions. In his essay "Novels and Children" Barthes shows that husbands and wives are culturally treated as two separate classes: society grants to a husband many more socioeconomic and status privileges than it does a wife who, despite the fact that she might be highly educated, must always be reduced to her biological condition as man's possession—his ever-available genitrix. Similarly, Bâ illustrates that Senegalese society functions as though all wives came from a lower class than their husbands even when both sexes belong to the same caste. There is no indication, for example, that Ramatoulaye comes from a lower caste than Modou, but his family treats her more like an inferior than an equal. Barthes posits that by pointing to solutions that will end what are only the side effects of inequities, society figuratively vaccinates its members, avoids the roots of problems, and tricks the dominated into accepting certain situations. One such African situation is the tendency developed by colonization to replace African notions that value the good of the community first and foremost with Occidental individual-oriented ideas and goals ("La fonction politique" 4).

Lettre implies that an injustice resulting from contamination by Occidental thought in Senegalese society is the abuse of the charity and sacrifice which are traditional requirements of all good Muslims.⁶ Although Ramatoulaye criticizes how women treat other women, the larger hidden evil is that a society that values individualism encourages a husband's family to interact with his wife in ways that insidiously distort Islamic practices. The good Muslim wife is consequently in a double bind: if she accepts this treatment as normal, she implicitly sacrifices herself without reason; if she speaks up for her rights, she is openly chastised. Images of in-laws who create strife in the family pervade African literature and Bâ's novel is no exception (Nnaemeka 19). For example, Ramatoulaye criticizes the pettiness of her husband's sisters who continually eat her food, mess up her house, and leave spit under her rugs (33). His mother shows equal disrespect for her by parading her friends throughout Ramatoulaye's house: "Sa mère passait et repassait, au gré de ses courses, toujours flanquée d'amies différentes, pour leur montrer la réussite sociale de son fils et surtout, leur faire toucher du doigt sa suprématie dans cette belle maison qu'elle n'habitait pas" 'His mother used to stop by again and again during her errands and always surrounded by different female friends to show them the social success of

her son, and especially to make them witness her supremacy in this beautiful house in which she did not live' (33).⁷ Ramatoulaye's explanation of funeral rituals concerning the proper Senegalese wife, who must always appear generous, faithful, and hospitable to all of her husband's family and friends in order not to be publicly shamed when he dies, foregrounds the importance of such qualities as generosity, fidelity, and hospitality; but her depictions of the despicable behavior of her in-laws problematize the societal use of Islamic law, which promotes neither a love for money nor the need to denigrate wives:

C'est le moment redouté de toute Sénégalaise, celui en vue duquel elle sacrifie ses biens en cadeaux à sa belle-famille, et où, pis encore [. . .] elle s'ampute de sa personnalité, de sa dignité, devenant une chose au service de l'homme qui l'épouse, du grand-père, de la grand-mère, du père, de la mère, du frère, de la soeur, de l'oncle, de la tante, des cousins [. . .] des amis de cet homme. Sa conduite est conditionnée: une belle-soeur ne touche pas la tête d'une épouse qui a été avare, infidèle ou inhospitalière.

It is the moment feared by every Senegalese woman, the one in anticipation of which she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her in-laws, and where, worse yet [. . .] she cuts herself off from her personality and her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who marries her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his cousins [. . .] his friends. Her behavior is conditioned: no sister-in-law would touch the head of a wife who has been stingy, unfaithful, or inhospitable. (11)

Some stylistic elements Bâ uses, such as *modes of discourse*, also foreground the myths constructing marriage. For Barthes, myth is a specific type of speech involving a linguistic system or mode of representation and a metalanguage. If the materials of mythical speech (language in this instance) are caught by myth, only pure signification appears. In other words, the underlying assumptions and linguistic artistry creating the discourse are no longer easily visible (199-200). *Narratology* offers useful tools for an analysis of the intersections between myths and the linguistic systems produced by Ramatoulaye.⁸ A study of the manipulation of narrative modes such as direct, narratized, and free indirect discourse recreating other specific acts performed by men in society also points to larger underlying problems concerning the Senegalese attitude towards women, wives, and mothers. At times Ramatoulaye uses the direct discourse of her own thoughts to complain about injustices: Modou can easily get a loan without his wife's knowledge by mortgaging the house that she inhabits and helped to acquire:

Ce logement et son chic contenu ont été acquis grâce à un prêt bancaire consenti sur une hypothèque de la villa "Falène" où j'habite. Cette villa, dont le titre foncier porte son nom, n'en est pas moins un bien commun acquis sur nos économies. Quelle audace dans l'escalade!

These lodgings and their chic contents were acquired thanks to a bank loan granted on a mortgage of the "Villa Falène" where I live. This villa, whose deed carries his name, was nonetheless our common possession acquired with both of our savings. What daring in this burglary! (20)

Although only the specific offense of Modou's action is named here, the larger wrong is that society legally allows such actions.

Sometimes Ramatoulaye uses narratized discourse (in other words, she simply summarizes the character's utterances or verbal thoughts in her own words, as acts among other acts) to speak out against society. By blaming only her husband, who is ruled by his passions and can thereby not control his desires, she personalizes a situation created by cultural dictates. A reader might accept that she attributed Modou's behavior to his individual weakness were it not for her focus on society's approval of this comportment.⁹ Male friends, the system, and Binetou's mother encourage him to embrace polygamy and irresponsibility towards his first wife and family. Unknowingly, he becomes a slave to the larger evil of a social system that does not heavily penalize, but rather rewards him for his actions against women. For example, he feels perfectly justified in requiring that Binetou quit school to marry him and does so primarily to keep her as his captive: "Et puis, ayant retiré Binetou du circuit scolaire, il lui versait une allocation mensuelle de cinquante mille francs, comme un salaire dû. La petite, très douée, voulait continuer ses études, passer son baccalauréat. Modou, malin, pour asseoir son règne, entendait la soustraire au monde critique et impitoyable des jeunes" "And then, having removed Binetou from the scholarly circuit, he paid her a monthly fee of 50,000 francs as though it were a salary. The very gifted little woman wanted to continue her studies and take her baccalaureate exams. Modou, cunning, in order to establish his reign, intended to take her away from the critical and unmerciful world of youths' (20).

In other instances, free indirect discourse allows Ramatoulaye to reveal the inoculations provided by society.¹⁰ As Edris Makward points out, the failure of the marriage between Mawdo and Aïssatou is partly due to his "mother's efforts to correct what she considered as her son's misalliance, his marriage with a member of a lower caste" (278). According to African custom, a mother should have a say in the choice of a daughter-in-law (d'Almeida 111). But this right does not also, if her opinion is ignored, permit her to destroy the son's wife. An examination of the free indirect discourse presenting Mawdo's decision to take a second wife clarifies the way Mawdo, his mother, and society interact to perpetuate his behavior and thereby indict society: the voices of Ramatoulaye and Mawdo merge to show how men and women manipulate traditions in Senegalese society in order to escape responsibility for their actions. It becomes clear that both Mawdo and his mother (Tante Nabou) are calling on traditional African beliefs concerning the good of the family and the community to satisfy their own ego-driven individualistic desires, encouraged by the Occident. His mother seemingly values not family but pride and hierarchy, whereas he

opts for physical pleasures. Although Mawdo went against his mother's wishes to marry Aïssatou, he later cloaks his own desires in his mother's demands and projects himself as a victim of her whims, so that he can figuratively abandon his first wife in order to sleep with a tempting new woman: "Devant cette mère rigide, pétrie de morale ancienne, brûlée intérieurement par les féroces lois antiques, que pouvait Mawdo Bâ? Il vieillissait, usé par son pesant travail et puis, voulait-il seulement lutter, ébaucher un geste de résistance? La petite Nabou était si tentante" 'In front of this inflexible mother, molded by ancient morals and aflame with the fierce laws of antiquity, what could Mawdo Bâ do? He was getting old, worn out by his heavy workload, and then, did he really want to struggle, attempt a gesture of resistance? The little Nabou was so tempting' (48).

Another myth debunked by Bâ involves Barthes's notion of essence. In order to maintain control, the dominant often claim that something has a nonmaterial essence, when that thing is in fact constructed by a visible quantity of effects. One such example, which Ramatoulaye describes at length, is that of Tante Nabou's adherence to the traditional pre-Islamic caste system even in postcolonial Senegal. Tante Nabou exemplifies the difficulty of viewing the tensions in Senegalese society as sole products of the French colonization. In fact, it is difficult to define a precolonial Senegalese society because extant texts are from the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese explorers who were also instrumental in colonizing Senegal. From their accounts and a few earlier others kept alive through oral tradition, it seems that the Islamic religion was present in Senegal in the eleventh century, that some individuals, mostly the aristocracy, believed in Mahomet, but that the majority "still worshiped idols." One of the aristocratic tribes which remained the most impervious to Islam was the Tukulóor (Toucouleur), that of Tante Nabou (Diop 215-19): "Elle portait un nom glorieux du Sine:Diouf. Elle est descendante de Bour-Sine" 'She bore a glorious name of the Sine: Diouf. She is a descendent of Bour-Sine' (42). Ramatoulaye's comments show that Tante Nabou's selfish and glory-seeking desires to force her son to marry a woman whom she has chosen, derive in large part not from French colonization but past pre-Islamic traditions which divide individuals into castes. This is why Ramatoulaye calls Tante Nabou's beliefs a mixture of the rites from antiquity and the Islamic religion, describes her offerings to appease invisible spirits and to ward off the evil eye (45), and emphasizes her demands that others still treat her as royalty, solely because of her bloodline: "Les visiteurs vinrent de partout pour l'honorer, lui rappelant ainsi la véracité de la loi du sang. Ils ressuscitèrent pour elle l'exploit de l'aïeul Bour-Sine et la poussière des combats et l'ardeur des chevaux pur sang" 'Visitors came from everywhere to honor her, thereby reminding her of the veracity of the law of blood. They resuscitated the exploit of the ancestor Bour-Sine and the dust of combat and the ardor of the pure-bred horses' (45).

Ramatoulaye's narrative deconstructs several of the essential definitions that the dominant order uses to justify its actions. During the course of its history, Senegal has had many governing forces including the caste-defined aristocracy of yore, the patriarchal interpretation and subsequent

practice of Islamic precepts, the Portuguese, and the French. Tante Nabou, because she is descended from royalty, for example, believes that a person's social rank at birth locks him or her into a certain mode of behavior. For her, each family's occupation reveals its caste and dictates that all members of that family will always act in certain ways. Both griots and smiths are on the lower end of the caste system. Yet, griots are honored as the transmitters of oral literature who are responsible for teaching traditional values and the role and place of each member of the community (Bâ, "La fonction politique" 3-4). Smiths, on the other hand, bring only destruction: "Maintenant, son 'seul homme' lui échappait, par la faute de cette maudite bijoutière, pire qu'une griote. La griote porte bonheur. Mais une bijoutière! [. . .] Elle brûle tout sur son passage comme un feu de forge" "Now her only man was escaping her through the fault of that damned goldsmith's daughter, worse than a griot woman. The griot woman brings happiness. But a goldsmith's daughter! [. . .] She burns up everything in her path like a fire in a forge" (42). To illustrate the primacy and inaccuracy of these essential beliefs, Ramatoulaye recounts that Aïssatou, the "maudite bijoutière" "the cursed goldsmith's daughter" gave her a brand new Fiat as a present but that even her educated and more liberal husband Modou was too influenced by the traces of ideas that originated in pre-Islamic society to believe that a woman of a lesser caste could manifest any generosity: "Modou surpris, incrédule, enquêtait sur la provenance de la voiture. Il n'accepta jamais sa véritable histoire. Il croyait, lui aussi, comme la mère de Mawdo, qu'une bijoutière n'a pas de coeur" "Modou, surprised, incredulous, inquired about the origin of the car. He never did accept the true story. He believed, just like Mawdo's mother, that a goldsmith's daughter has no heart" (80).

Much of Ramatoulaye's interaction with Daouda also **centers around the notion of essence**. She argues that even educated society defines women collectively only by gender and thereby essentializes them; they should be regarded as individuals with distinct values to society: "Quand la société éduquée arrivera-t-elle à se déterminer non en fonction du sexe, mais des critères de valeur?" "When will educated society manage to be based not on gender, but rather on standards of worth?" (90). Daouda, on the other hand, promotes simply exchanging one feminine essence for another: "La femme ne doit plus être l'accessoire qui orne. L'objet que l'on déplace, la compagne qu'on flatte ou calme avec des promesses. La femme est la racine première, fondamentale de la nation où se greffe tout apport, d'où part aussi toute floraison" "Woman must no longer be the accessory which embellishes. The object that one displaces, the female companion to flatter or to calm with promises. Woman is the primary root, fundamental to the nation, upon which any contribution grafts itself, also from which any blossoming result." (90).

Closely related to the **notion of essence is what Barthes calls the privation of History**, which Bâ both exemplifies and subverts in *Lettre*. As in the caste system, the oppressor tries to possess or rule a coveted people or idea more fully and, to this end, attempts to erase all notions of origin or choice. Part of this effacement involves one individual or group that categorizes

several individuals who have in common at least one imaginary unacceptable trait. As Althusser has argued, an ideology concerns itself first and foremost with the imaginary relation of individuals to the real relations in which they live (165). Commenting on the relationship between colonization and African writers, Bâ explains that colonizers absurdly claim that Black Africans have no history, no capacity for rational thought, and must be taught to leave behind barbaric ways and to be civilized: African literature must thus raise consciousness and offer guidance in order to affirm the Black cultural identity. She emphasizes that African texts should denounce the evils that do not conserve cultural heritage but do impede the advancement of a better society for all people ("La fonction politique" 5). According to d'Almeida's interpretation, in *Lettre* Bâ affirms that each woman makes what she wishes of her life, that choice is the ultimate affirmation of self ("Choice" 164-65) and that women have deep consciousness of the options opened to them ("Choice" 171). Barthes's category, the *privation of History*, clarifies the implications of *Lettre*, which extend much further and show rather how the gaze of the other (any other whose subjecthood is recognized by the object of the gaze) creates and controls male and female options. Ramatoulaye reveals that it is often women who perpetuate the misogynist systems that deprive other women of personal histories. During Modou's funeral Ramatoulaye feels cheated that she and Binetou, her co-spouse, are treated exactly the same despite their individual marital relationship with Modou: "Nos belles-soeurs traitent avec la même égalité trente et cinq ans de vie conjugale. Elles célèbrent, avec la même aisance et les mêmes mots, douze et trois maternités" 'Our sisters-in-law treat thirty years and five years of married life as equivalents. With the same ease and the same words, they celebrate twelve maternities and three maternities' (11). Similarly, Tante Nabou, who has lived a very hard life, but who is of noble origin, treats her daughter-in-law Aïssatou, who is of common origin, as a lowly object who could not do, think, or feel anything of worth: "Elle s'obstinait dans les vérités anciennes. Fortement attachée à ses origines privilégiées, elle croyait ferme au sang porteur de vertus et répétait en hochant la tête, que le manque de noblesse à la naissance se retrouve dans le comportement" 'She obstinately clung to ancient truths. Strongly attached to her privileged origins, she firmly believed in blood as the carrier of virtue, and she would repeat, shaking her head, that the lack of nobility at birth manifests itself in behavior' (42).

Much of Ramatoulaye's letter reclaims the individualities of those who are often perceived to be members of a generalized and inferior group. Her narrative promulgates an alternative atmosphere of nurturing amongst women. She recreates the personal histories of women and underlines each woman's uniqueness as well as her identification with other women. For instance, she emphasizes the ties between herself and her addressee, Aïssatou, which point simultaneously to her oneness with her and to their differences from other women:

Ton existence dans ma vie n'est point hasard. Nos grand'mères dont les concessions étaient séparées par une tapade, échangeaient

journallement des messages. Nos mères se disputaient la garde de nos oncles et tantes [. . .] nous avons usé pagnes et sandales sur le même chemin caillouteux de l'école coranique. Nous avons enfoui, dans les mêmes trous, nos dents de lait, en implorant Fée-Souris de nous les restituer plus belles.

Your existence in my life is not an accident. Our grandmothers, whose habitats were separated by a fence, used to exchange messages daily. Our mothers argued over who would look after uncles and aunts. [. . .] We wore out wrappers and sandals on the same stony path to the koranic school. We buried our baby teeth in the same holes as we implored the tooth fairy to make the new ones even more beautiful. (7)

In a move that subverts the notion of a dominant people by insisting on equality for all, Ramatoulaye similarly restores personal histories to women of different races and nationalities. She carefully gives credit to a variety of women and explores the individual backgrounds of females that she likes as well as those that she does not. It was a white European woman who first taught them to aspire to an uncommon destiny. Yet, Ramatoulaye suggests that she was great partially because of the way that she showed them to circumvent the hierarchy by never denying their cultures or intimate pasts:

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

To get us out of the rut of traditions, superstitions, and customs, to make us appreciate multiple civilizations without denying our own, to raise our vision of the world, to cultivate our personalities, to reinforce our good qualities, to overcome our faults, to make the values of universal morality bear fruit in us, all of this was the task that the admirable directress took upon herself. (27-28)

Unlike those who misinterpreted religious or ethical precepts to their own ends, this white female instructor liberated them from frustrating taboos: without, establishing herself as a superior governing force, she inspired them to love diversity and to see a person's value regardless of appearances: "Elle nous aime sans paternalisme, avec nos tresses debout ou pliées, avec nos camisoles, nos pagnes. Elle sut découvrir et apprécier nos qualités" "She loved us without paternalism, with our plaits sticking out or folded in, with our camisoles, our wrappers. She knew how to discover and appreciate our good qualities" (28). Due to her influence, Ramatoulaye had the courage and the independence to disregard societal and parental views and marry the man of her choice (28-29). János Riesz argues that in providing this example, Bâ illustrates the "emancipatory potential of the French school system or the political consciousness of the new African" (29). Seen in this light, for Bâ one positive effect of this system promulgated by the colonizers

is to renew the African faith in the idea of true community: she implies that accepting the differences of others is easy for the person who accepts all others as part of a larger diverse but united whole.

Similarly, Ramatoulaye tells the drama of Jacqueline, a black African native from Ivory Coast, which shows the uniqueness of each African nation and of each member of the same race and gender while simultaneously criticizing society's intolerance of difference. Not only was Jacqueline unlike other black Senegalese women, but society also forced her into feeling like a freak by refusing her attempts to integrate: "Noire et Africaine, elle aurait dû s'intégrer, sans heurt, dans une société noire et africaine, le Sénégal et la Côte d'Ivoire ayant passé entre les mains du même colonisateur français. Mais l'Afrique est différente, morcelée. [. . .] Jacqueline voulait bien se sénégaliser, mais les moqueries arrêtaient en elle toute volonté de coopération" 'Black and African, she should have integrated herself, without a problem, into a black African society since Senegal and the Ivory Coast had passed through the hands of the same French colonizer. But Africa is diverse, divided. [. . .] Jacqueline wanted to become Senegalese, but the mockery checked in her all will to cooperate' (63-65). As with other women, Ramatoulaye insists upon Jacqueline's solidarity with other women by evoking her as she rethinks her own past. Like so many women, Jacqueline suffers because both the community and her husband mistreat her. Unable to find support, she internalizes her sorrow, and thereby feels sick. Yet, her numerous doctors neither discover a medical problem nor explore her psychological pain. To placate her, physicians prescribe tranquilizers. Thus the medical profession too implicitly sanctions the abuse of a female by ignoring it and drugging her:

Son mari, qui revenait de loin passait ses loisirs à pourchasser les Sénégalaises "fines" [. . .] Son absence de précautions mettait sous les yeux de Jacqueline les preuves irréfutables de son inconduite: mots d'amour, talons de chèques portant les noms des bénéficiaires, factures de restaurants et de chambres d'hôtel. [. . .] Et un jour, Jacqueline se plaignit d'avoir une boule gênante dans la poitrine, sous le sein gauche [. . .]. Rien dans le tracé électrique du coeur, rien d'anormal dans le sang. Il [un médecin] prescrivit, lui aussi, un calmant, de gros comprimées effervescentes qui ne vinrent pas à bout de l'angoisse de la pauvre Jacqueline.

Her husband, who would return from afar, spent his leisure chasing sophisticated Senegalese women. [. . .] His lack of precautions put plainly in Jacqueline's sight irrefutable proofs of his misconduct: love letters, check stubs bearing the names of the payees, restaurant and hotel bills. And one day, Jacqueline complained about having an annoying lump in her chest, under her left breast. [. . .] Nothing showed up in the electric reading of the heart, nothing abnormal in the blood. He (a doctor) also prescribed a tranquilizer, huge, effervescent tablets that did not end poor Jacqueline's anguish. (64-65)

In addition to the portraits of maltreated women, Ramatoulaye also points out that society tends to misjudge men in ways that encourage poor behaviors, and in this way, she shows the same respect and fairness to men and women.¹¹ The attitude that Barthes calls identification helps to understand *Lettre's* implication that generalizations about male dress and comportment impede men from acting as responsible beings who interact fairly with all others. Identification functions such that the dominant will ignore, deny, or transform the differences of others so as to pretend that all humans are the same or they will label them as exotic in order to discount their relevance. Ramatoulaye's surprise that the sloppily dressed young man is polite and responsible reveals the strength of the temptation to reject men who do not correspond to the status quo: "Un jeune homme s'avance, cheveux longs, lunettes blanches, gris-gris au cou. La poussière grise de la rue maquille son ensemble 'jean' [. . .]. Avec un accent et des gestes polis qui contrastent avec sa mise débraillée, il s'excuse [. . .]. Le jeune homme au cyclomoteur me surprend agréablement" 'A young man approaches, long hair, white glasses, grigri around his neck. The gray dust from the street covers his jean ensemble [. . .]. With an accent and polite gestures which contrast with his unkempt look, he apologizes. [. . .] I am agreeably surprised by the young man with the moped' (114-15). Her willingness not to blame him immediately, just because of his surface appearance and her own prejudice against uncleanness and disorder, allows her to see his unique goodness. Similarly, her patience reinforces his impeccable manners.

The juxtaposition of Ramatoulaye's contradictory reactions to the man who impregnated her daughter also illustrates how easily men are forced into certain subject positions by the ideology that posits males and females as adversaries or two hierarchical social classes. In accordance with the stereotype, Ramatoulaye immediately sees Ibrahima Sall, her daughter's lover, as a thief who committed a crime: "Qui? qui est l'auteur de ce vol [. . .] qui est l'auteur de ce préjudice" 'Who? Who is the author of this theft? [. . .] Who is the author of this wrong doing?' (119). Upon meeting him, she has the good sense to judge him on his own merit: "Il me plut et je constatai avec soulagement sa propreté" 'He pleased me and with relief I noticed his cleanliness' (123). In addition, she and her daughter are rewarded for not condemning him thoughtlessly; he helps his future wife to achieve excellent grades at school (126) and spends much time with Ramatoulaye to show his respect and concern for her and her daughter (127).

Barthes's category of **identification**, which annihilates others with the broad classifications of same or other and thereby perpetuates a social hierarchy, also helps to understand the nuances in Ramatoulaye's comments about her female enemies, whom she views as simultaneously similar and different. Although disliking Nabou for having stolen Aïssatou's husband and criticizing Binetou for having become her co-spouse, she nevertheless recounts the stories of Nabou and Binetou in a fair and judicious manner assigning credit and blame where it is due. Instead of discounting or exaggerating disparities, she explains them. For example, she reviews Nabou's education to show the effect of a good upbringing on future actions: "Cette

éducation orale, facilement assimilée, pleine de charme, a le pouvoir de déclencher de bons réflexes dans une conscience adulte forgée à son contact. Douceur et générosité, docilité et politesse, savoir faire et savoir parler, rendaient agréable la petite Nabou" 'This oral education, easily assimilated, full of charm, has the power of triggering good reflexes in an adult conscience molded by it. Sweetness and generosity, docility and politeness, knowing how to act and speak, make little Nabou very pleasant' (71).

Other parts of the narration imply that one can successfully combine ideas from conflicting ideologies without denying the differences of each ideology as a whole: Ramatoulaye not only praises a more traditional upbringing for women, but also suggests that they should have professions outside of the home and that female moodiness and capriciousness are caused by intellectual boredom: "Et puis, la petite Nabou exerçait un métier. Elle n'avait point de temps pour des 'états d'âme'" 'And then, little Nabou, had a profession. She did not have time for "moods"' (71). A good moral education coupled with a good career makes for a very likable person, which Ramatoulaye must acknowledge even if the existence of this person has hurt her friend: "Responsable et consciente, la petite Nabou, comme toi, comme moi! Si elle n'est pas mon amie, nos préoccupations se rejoignaient souvent" 'Responsible and aware, little Nabou, like you, like me! Even if she is not my friend, our preoccupations were often the same' (72). Riesz finds it surprising that Nabou's traditional education is presented as being just as valid as the French education received by Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou and identifies the struggle over the "right" form of education of women as a major theme of the novel (30). Bâ's depiction of a variety of successful and failed female lives shows that the traditional African and the French systems both can produce well-adjusted and contented African women. It is not unusual that Bâ upholds both manners of education, for she herself is the product of a positive blending of the two worlds (Edson 328-32). *Lettre*, however, also shows the result of an unfortunate mix of the two cultures: Binetou's upbringing is faulty because it did not teach her what Senghor might have called African responsibility to herself and the community at large; she learned rather a more stereotypically Occidental love of money and the survival of the fittest.

To emphasize the importance of erudition and upbringing to future actions, Ramatoulaye also analyzes Binetou's background and suggests that the tyranny against women that is part of the patriarchal cultural system promoted by a distortion of Islamic laws encourages women to be tyrants to others:

Quant à Binetou, elle avait grandi en toute liberté, dans un milieu où la survie commande. [. . .] Belle, enjouée, bon coeur, intelligente, Binetou qui avait accès à beaucoup de familles aisées où évoluaient ses amies, avait une conscience aiguë de ce qu'elle immolait dans son mariage. Victime, elle se voulait oppresseur. [. . .] Exilée [. . .] elle voulait sa prison dorée. Exigeante, elle tourmentait.

As for Binetou, she had grown up in total freedom, in a milieu where survival was primordial. [. . .] Beautiful, playful, good-hearted, intelligent, Binetou, who had access to many well-off families where her friends evolved, had a bitter awareness of what she was sacrificing in her marriage. Victim, she wanted to be the oppressor. [. . .] Exiled [. . .] she wanted her prison gilded. Demanding, she tormented. (72)

Ramatoulaye's narrative also illustrates the way that both men and women are seduced into certain harmful societal behaviors by what Barthes calls *ninismes*: the governing discourse reduces two equally intolerable occurrences by representing them as two opposites that cancel each other. These contradistinctions as presented in the text always pit the desires of the less powerful against those of the more powerful, who maintain the status quo with artful self-interested interpretations of traditional customs and behaviors. Thus, the groups most respected in society, men and their mothers or potential mothers-in-law, use guilt tactics that invoke Muslim laws, literary commonplaces, and social taboos to pressure other women into abandoning their own desires. Ironically, the misreading of Islamic precepts and the attempt to reproduce societal myths, both of which are meant to maintain male dominance, also often result in misery for men. One such myth can be seen in West African Romanesque literature which often celebrates the African mother as radiant, fulfilled, and always welcoming life and man whereas the African wife is rarely mentioned (Sonfo 95). According to Mémel Foté, the three great principles of "l'éthique nègre" (Black African ethics) are life, force, and unity, which is why one's mother, the origin of life, is sacred and enjoys unlimited respect and veneration in Senegalese society. In such a system, there is no greater insult that one can address to a person than that which involves the mother (Sonfo 95). Novelists who privilege the mother and glorify her are thus only following tradition. Bâ, in contrast, calls into question a mother's supremacy and shows with specific examples the ways in which a mother often abuses respect. Bâ disproves two societal givens: that a woman must put her role as a mother above all else and that a mother can do no wrong.¹² When Aïssatou's husband remarried, she was encouraged with an implied *ninisme* to accept his second wife and take her rightful position as his first wife—Aïssatou would be miserable sharing her husband; her sons would be devastated without their father: "Ces vérités, passe-partout, qui avaient jadis courbé la tête de bien des épouses révoltées, n'opérèrent pas le miracle souhaité: elles ne te détournèrent pas de ton option. Tu choisis la rupture, un aller sans retour avec tes quatre fils" 'These truths, good for all purposes, which had in yesteryear bowed the heads of many rebellious spouses, did not perform the desired miracle: they did not dissuade you from your choice. You chose a break-up, to leave with your four sons without coming back' (49). The fact that Aïssatou is able to succeed on her own and raise her sons in a very comfortable fashion indicates that being a good mother does not mean sacrificing one's own self-respect and happiness.

Similarly, Binetou's marriage to Modou illustrates that blind devotion to one's mother often results in unhappiness for the majority. Binetou feels caught in a double bind (another *ninisme*) when she agrees to marry Modou. She does not wish to suffer for the rest of her life married to an old man. But she does not want her mother to cry continually or to hate her for not giving her a rich and easy old age, as Daba's description of her shows: "Maman! Binetou, navrée, épouse son 'vieux'. Sa mère a tellement pleuré. Elle a supplié sa fille de lui 'donner une fin heureuse, dans une vraie maison' que l'homme leur a promise. Alors, elle a cédé" "Mama! Binetou, devastated, is marrying her "old man." Her mother cried so much. She begged her daughter to "give her a happy ending in a real house that the man promised them." So, she agreed (55).⁷ Binetou's mother would like to be wealthy and well-considered like so many of her more affluent neighbors. It is because of societal hierarchies and structures that support such injustices that she has the figurative right to sell her daughter into marriage. It is due to the European colonizer's influence that money plays such a powerful role. Ramatoulaye stresses in her description of Binetou that such situations are bad for both sexes in society. First, they encourage pettiness and revenge in women: "Vendue, elle élevait chaque jour sa valeur. Ses renoncements, qui étaient jadis la sève de sa vie et qu'elle énumérait avec amertume, réclamaient des compensations exorbitantes que Modou s'exténuait à satisfaire" "Sold, she raised her price each day. The things she gave up, which were in yesteryear, her reasons to live and which she bitterly enumerated, required exorbitant compensations which Modou wore himself out trying to provide" (72). Second, conditions that allow men to buy women from their families inspire these same men to try to transform themselves in impossible ways for their female captives. Ramatoulaye emphasizes Modou's ridiculous and failed attempts to satisfy Binetou:

Modou s'essouffait à emprisonner une jeunesse déclinante qui le fuyait de partout. [. . .] Il avait peur de décevoir et pour qu'on n'eût pas le temps de l'observer, il créait tous les jours des fêtes où la charmante enfant évoluait, elfe aux bras fins faisant d'un rire le beau temps ou d'une moue la tristesse.

Modou ran out of breath trying to imprison a declining youth which was escaping him from all sides. [. . .] He was afraid of disappointing and so that nobody would have the time to observe him, everyday he created parties where the charming child would circulate, an elf with slender arms, whose laughter could make the world beautiful and whose pout could fill it with sadness. (72)

Furthermore, Ramatoulaye's narrative concerning her daughter Aïssatou provides a corrective to a bad mother's behavior. Ramatoulaye herself presents her children as individuals with unique characteristics, needs, and wants. She treats the pregnancy of her unwed daughter with discretion, understanding, and love: "Je la reconnaissais au don entier d'elle-même à cet amoureux qui avait réussi à faire cohabiter dans ce coeur, mon image et la sienne" "It was just like her to give herself completely to this lover who

had succeeded in making my image reside together with his in her heart' (120). She redefines a mother's role: "On est mère pour comprendre l'inexplicable. [. . .] On est mère pour aimer, sans commencement ni fin" 'One is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. [. . .] One is a mother to love, without beginning or end' (120).

An additional way that *Lettre* foregrounds the myths informing ideologies that support adversarial relationships between individuals becomes evident if a reader focuses on the use of the proverbs and maxims that are handed down from one generation to another as irrevocable verities. Ramatoulaye reiterates but constantly questions these supposed truths and, in so doing, tries to come to terms with her African heritage, the colonizers' lessons, and her own self-respect. She opens her tale with a confirmation of the way that she learns best, which is not through trusting others' perceptions of reality but is through her own experimentation with life: "[N]otre longue pratique m'a enseigné que la confiance noie la douleur" 'Our long practice taught me that confiding in someone drowns sorrow' (7). Although she often repeats statements of facts learned from her mother or others in society, her intuition and reason consistently reject them. Her mother's maxims warned her against marrying Modou: "Les paroles de ma mère me revenaient: 'Trop beau, trop parfait' Je complétais enfin la pensée de ma mère par la fin du dicton: 'pour être honnête'" 'My mother's words came back to me: Too handsome, too perfect. I finally completed my mother's thoughts with the end of the saying: "to be honest"' (57). Her mother encouraged her to wed Daouda: "J'entends sa voix persuasive me conseiller: une femme doit épouser l'homme qui l'aime mais point celui qu'elle aime; c'est le secret d'un bonheur durable" 'I hear her persuasive voice advising me: a woman must marry the man who loves her but not the one she loves; that is the secret to lasting happiness' (87). The village matchmaker uses proverbs to convince her to break up with her husband: "Une femme est comme un ballon; qui lance ce ballon ne peut prévoir ses rebondissement. Il ne contrôle pas le lieu où il roule, moins encore celui qui s'en empare. Souvent s'en saisit une main que l'on ne soupçonnait pas" 'A woman is like a ball; whoever throws the ball cannot foresee where it will bounce. He does not control where it rolls, and even less, who will pick it up. Often, an unsuspected hand will seize it' (62). Yet, just as in her youth, she values her self-respect more than these supposed truths. Ultimately, she follows her heart and stays married to a man that she still paradoxically loves.

Ramatoulaye's tale clarifies that traditional sayings such as those repeated by the matchmaker and others often permit individuals to do what they want without taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions. For example, when Modou's friends come to announce his second marriage, their discourse abounds in proverbs that sanctify all behaviors:

Quand Allah tout puissant met côte à côte deux êtres, personne n'y peut rien.

Dans ce monde, rien n'est nouveau.

Un fait qu'on trouve triste l'est bien moins que d'autres.

When the all powerful Allah puts two beings side by side, nobody can do anything about it.
 In this world, nothing is new.
 A fact that we find sad is much less so than others. (56)

To explain his second wife to the first, Modou similarly invokes God's will: "Dieu lui a destiné une deuxième femme, il n'y peut rien" 'God intended for him to have a second wife, he can't do anything about it' (57).

Overall, Barthes's categories offer a method to uncover the myriad ways in which societal and discursive structures imbue ideologies and imprison men and women in certain roles in the Senegalese universe of *Lettre*. Bâ writes for public consumption as a type of revolution which disturbs this classification for both women and men. The stories of Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou as well as Bâ's more politically overt presentations indicate a need for equality between the sexes. Aïssatou leaves her husband to follow her own principles, to show him the consequences of his decision to embrace either unjust traditional or individualistic values. By refusing marriage with Modou's friends or Daouda Dieng, Ramatoulaye affirms her equality with men and shows that she is not a possession but an independent being capable of true love and devotion to herself and others. Modou's dismay that he cannot remain physically young and Mawdo's discontent when his first wife leaves him underline that men are not in control of the system. The way in which Bâ presents these decisions and events illustrates the societal structures which support the status quo. Thus *Lettre* becomes a way for Bâ to influence the comportment of both sexes and to illustrate the results of new choices to them. Bâ declares: "Books are a weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps, but they are a weapon" (qtd. in d'Almeida 6). Barthes's method provides a way to examine the weapon in action: her words become a catalyst that breaks down the myths impeding new social behaviors that would solve problems.

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NOTES

1. Henceforth, *Une si longue lettre* will be referred to as *Lettre* in this essay.
2. Wole Soyinka recommends Barthes's theories as critical paradigms for the new left-leaning Africans who must always particularize their social situations with regard to their writings (36). Kingué and Cazenave suggest categories to identify the hierarchical relationships between African women. Barthes's divisions

cause one to ponder the reasons for such relationships between groups of individuals.

3. "Novels and Children" for example, argues that *Elle Magazine* always discusses women's writing as though women can only be acknowledged as writers if they have produced children. This assumption organizes *Elle's* narratives on women writers, informs a female reader of her proper place in society, and reassures a male reader that his role is not being usurped. The essay on striptease also analyzes the way adornments such as furs, fans, gloves, feathers, and fishnet stockings turn a woman into a magical decor for a man. Barthes evokes the themes of gender construction once again in his essay "Conjugales" on the media's presentation of marriage. "Conjugales" does not appear in the English translation of *Mythologies*.
4. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's discussion of the conflicting views concerning representation and subjectivity have informed the articulation of my arguments. She explains that according to Althusser, "representation is, from the start, dissociated from reality"; and ideology "functions as unproclaimed fiction, wool over one's eyes, in the service of the powers that be" (16).
5. Bâ evokes Senghor's theory of Negritude when she discusses the political function of African literature ("La fonction politique" 4). The identification of traditions created by colonization and the precolonial society is complicated because although Senegal did not become a French colony until 1802, France and other European nations had already set up commercial centers in Senegal as early as the seventeenth century. In 1802, Senegal sent its first representative to the French parliament. The first high school was opened in the mid-nineteenth century and by the end of that century, the first Senegalese citizens were entering into the best French universities (Senghor 6-8).
6. Cheryl Wall Staunton stresses the importance of these traditional values in Bâ's upbringing (328-29).
7. All translations from *Lettre* are my own, although influenced by those provided in Modupé Bodé-Thomas's English version of *Lettre*. In many cases, I have chosen to render certain unusual expressions or cadences into an equivalently unexpected English rather than providing more colloquial English expressions.
8. Rimmon-Kenan provides a helpful discussion of the intersections between ideology and narration (19-29). She disagrees with Althusser's assumption that "the subject believes him/herself to be outside ideology, although in fact s/he is totally in it" (23). For Rimmon-Kenan, the narrating subject is always in the double position of the one telling what one or others have experienced. It is the discrepancy between protagonist and narrator that creates the distance or doubleness (23), and this is what allows for play inside and outside ideology.
9. Edris Makward, for example, says that Modou's first marriage failed due to his "infatuation with a much younger woman" (278).
10. Free indirect discourse blurs two voices, those of narrator and character, and thereby approximates objective narratorial statements and seems to acquire the authoritative status of the narrator's own account (Pascal 111-12).
11. Grésillon, in contrast, emphasizes that Bâ's male figures are weak and easily ready to be homewreckers.
12. Edson makes the more generalized statement that Bâ creates Ramatoulaye as the mother who abandons patriarchal values and becomes an active subject in her own right (19-20).

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