
Mythic Dimensions in the Novels of Mariama Bâ

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The nostalgic songs dedicated to African mothers which express the anxieties of men concerning Mother Africa are no longer enough for us. The Black woman in African literature must be given the dimension that her role in the liberation struggles next to men has proven to be hers, the dimension which coincides with her proven contribution to the economic development of our country.

Mariama Bâ, qtd. in *Ngambika* xi

Such is the mandate of Mariama Bâ. Full to surfeit with romantic accolades that work more to stifle than to uplift and empower Black women—thus, Africa—Mariama Bâ demands that women be recognized as actual beings who not only exist in a physical reality, but who also have made and are making actual contributions to the welfare of that reality. Niara Sudarkasa documents the African woman's proven economic contribution to the struggle for survival, liberation, and a better quality of life for African peoples. "Moreover," she writes, "during the pre-colonial period in many West African societies, women had important political and religious roles that entailed their working extensively 'outside the home.'" This legacy continues in contemporary society where "virtually all adult females are engaged in some type of money-making activity" (49).

Sudarkasa details the African woman's economic as well as socio-political contributions. In spite of these contributions, the spread of institutionalized religions beginning in the eleventh century, the European invasion beginning in the fifteenth century—both with their attendant patriarchal ideologies—and, later, industrial capitalism served to undermine the esteem of woman and erode her "place" in society. The cataclysmic upheavals traditional societies suffered as a result of their collision with an insidious modernity forced transformations of social structure and worldviews which are yet to be dealt with in a manner beneficial to African peoples. These religious and socio-political forces would relegate woman to a tangential and marginal relationship with and within her society and a corresponding relationship in the literature of Africa. That relationship, however, is not, as Sudarkasa's article among others bears out, a representative one. Though there are notable exceptions regarding the depiction of African women in literature, Mariama Bâ's clarion call for a depiction of woman's role beyond the one-dimensional still resounds.

Mariama Bâ's own literary work is a response to that call. In her first novel, *So Long a Letter* (*Une si longue lettre*), there are a number of women characters

who function beyond the typical “role-categories such as girlfriends, mistresses, and prostitutes.”¹ Their well-wrought delineations mark their multi-dimensionality. Their economic power and contributions are also well detailed, as is their physical, intellectual, and spiritual strength. In *So Long a Letter* the main character, Ramatoulaye Fall, teaches school. Her income, placed in a joint account with her husband Modou, supported their family, which included twelve children. After Modou’s abandonment of the family, Ramatoulaye shouldered “both moral and material” responsibility for the family. Her friend, Aissatou, found herself likewise situated. Choosing to divorce her husband Mawdo rather than continue in a polygynous marriage, Aissatou supported herself and her four sons. The wives of Tamsir, Modou Fall’s brother, worked to meet the family’s needs. “To help you out with your financial obligation,” Ramatoulaye tells him, “one of your wives dyes, another sells fruit, the third untiringly turns the handle of her sewing machine” (57). Mariama Bâ recognizes and praises all of woman’s work. Whereas an industrial-capitalistic system would divide labor into remunerative and non-remunerative categories, the former valued and the latter valueless, Mariama Bâ recognizes no distinctions. Her narrator declares, “Those women we call ‘house’-wives deserve praise. The domestic work which they carry out, and which is not paid in hard cash, is essential to the home” (63).

Mariama Bâ’s characters represent and bring to the foreground not only the economic and socio-political contributions but also the moral and spiritual contributions of African women to the development of their countries. As depicted in her fiction, the African woman is not only complex and multi-dimensional, she is, indeed, mythic; and her role in Mariama Bâ’s fiction is, though subtly drawn so, of mythic dimensions. In view of Africa’s woman-centered history and in light of more profound definitions of “myth,” a sober analysis of the mythic African woman goes beyond nostalgic and romantic “sweet-nothings” while not making of her a “superwoman.” Referring to a photograph of an African woman in traditional dress, sitting before her home while holding a baby, Joseph Campbell writes:

This woman with her baby is the basic image of mythology. The first experience of anybody is the mother’s body. . . . The earth and the whole universe, as our mother, carries this experience into the larger sphere of adult experience. When one can feel oneself in relation to the universe in the same complete and natural way as that of the child with the mother, one is in complete harmony and tune with the universe. Getting into harmony and tune with the universe and staying there is the principal function of mythology. (1-2)

Many scholars agree that Africa is the beginning of human existence and the birthplace of human civilization and culture. In addition, these scholars maintain that ancient African civilizations were woman-centered. Larry Williams and Charles S. Finch write to that effect:

The matriarchy, probably the oldest form of social organization, appears to have evolved first in Africa. Even when the patriarchy emerged and began to supplant the older social organization, matriarchal social forms in Africa have thrived in whole or part up to the present. (12; emphasis in original)

John Henrik Clarke also relates his findings regarding woman-centered societies:

In Africa the woman's "place" was not only with her family; she often ruled nations with unquestionable authority. Many African women were great militarists and on occasion led their armies in battle. Long before they knew of the existence of Europe the Africans had produced a way of life where men were secure enough to let women advance as far as their talent would take them. (123)

Given the antiquity of her societies and given her power in those societies, the Black woman, asserts Filomina Chioma Steady, "is to a large extent the original feminist" (36). She is the archetypal womanist. And, as Diedre Badéjò attests, "femininity and power are central to the definition of womanist/feminist" (31). From her analysis of Osun mythology, she draws these conclusions:

(1) that women's power evolves from The Source of all power; (2) that some women have this power innately; (3) that social order cannot proceed without active participation of the female principle; and (4) that Olódùmarè ["the Infinite Being"] envisions a universal order in which balance and reciprocity prevail between the genders. (28)

Mariama Bâ's vision of the ideal society also demands a balance predicated on the principle of complementarity, on cooperation as opposed to the co-opting of power. Ramatoulaye, the protagonist, who gradually feels her innate power, questions the repression of the feminine principle and also desires and envisions a restoration of reciprocity and balance in relationships. Thus, in *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye rebuts her suitor Daouda Dieng who, defending his "feminist" stance and speeches in the National Assembly, triumphantly states that "there are women in the Assembly." She exclaims, "Four women, Daouda, four out of a hundred deputies. What a ridiculous ratio! Not even one for each province" (60). Daouda Dieng, though a member of "that male Assembly," professes, proudly conveying to Ramatoulaye his progressive politics: "Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered or calmed with promises." He continues, "Women are the nation's primary, fundamental root, from which all else grows and blossoms. Women must be encouraged to take a keener interest in the destiny of the country . . ." (61-62). Ramatoulaye acknowledges Daouda's efforts and the "notable achievements" that have aided the forward momentum of women's struggles. "But Daouda," she contends, calling him three times, "the constraints remain; but Daouda, old beliefs are revived; but Daouda, egoism emerges, scepticism rears its head in the political field. You want to make it a closed shop and you huff and puff about it" (61).²

As opposed to any recognition of the need to balance feminine and masculine principles and work in cooperation for the welfare of African society as a whole, Daouda speaks of the need to encourage fuller political participation from women so that women can protect their own interests. "If men alone are active in the parties," he declares, "why should they think of the women? It is only human to give yourself the larger portion of the cake when you are sharing it out. If men alone are active in the parties why should they think of women?" (62). The welfare of women and children is reduced to a portion of cake. Given Daouda Dieng's insight into the mindset of many of his cronies, given the industrial-capitalistic

division of labor and its inherent inequities, and given the artificial schism between domestic and public spheres, one can appreciate the standpoint of Ramatoulaye's daughter, Daba: "I don't want to go into politics; it's not that I am not interested in the fate of my country and, most especially, that of woman. But when I look at the fruitless wranglings even within the ranks of the same party, when I see men's greed for power, I prefer not to participate." Though "men will continue to have the power of decision," she counters, "everyone knows that polity should be the affair of women" (74). Daba prefers to work for change through her own associations and organizations, a realm outside the ostensibly political one. But, given the overlap of "public" and "domestic" arenas as analyzed by Sudarkasa, that does not mean her actions are any less political or any less militant and effective.

When, where, how, why did men lose the security they had which allowed them to see woman as their equal, to respect and encourage her militancy as they would her meekness, her firmness as her femininity? When, where, how, why has woman been taught that "the first quality in a woman is docility," that "a woman does not need too much education," as Aunt Nabou teaches young Nabou whom she prepared to be a wife for her son, Mawdo? Why is woman taught that she is powerless—powerless before what has become some men's "instincts" and appetites as Mawdo harangues Ramatoulaye:

I saw a film in which the survivors of an air crash survived by eating the flesh of the corpses. This fact demonstrates the force of the instincts in man, instincts that dominate him, regardless of his level of intelligence. . . . You can't resist the imperious laws that demand food and clothing for man. These same laws compel the "male" in other respects. . . .

Driven to the limits of my resistance, I satisfy myself with what is within reach. It's a terrible thing to say. Truth is ugly when one analyses it. (34)

Such rationalizations decree that woman be powerless before the finicky nature of those men who can, with little or no compunction, take up one woman while abandoning another and sheepishly ascribe their actions to nature, to culture—as in the case of Ousmane Guèye in Bâ's second novel, *Scarlet Song*—to fate, or to Allah. When Modou Fall secretly marries Binetou, the *Imam* chants to Ramatoulaye: "There is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side. . . . God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it" (36-37). Nothing she can do about it; nothing he can do about it. Powerless.

When, where, how, why was woman displaced from her central position as giver, nurturer, protector of life to become "a worn-out or out-dated *boubou*," "a plate of food," a "good luck" *piece*, a bouncing ball at fate's whim with "no control over where it rolls and even less over who gets it," a thing, "a fluttering leaf that no hand dares to pick up"—a thing disdained? "Truth is ugly when one analyses it." Mawdo, of course, is right. Why the imbalance between the masculine and the feminine principles? Why the one valorized at the expense of the other? This African woman, why is she told, "Shut up! Shut up!" When Tamsir, Modou's brother, decides he will inherit Ramatoulaye after she comes out of mourning, Ramatoulaye is insulted, wounded, and outraged: "You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. 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). "Stop! Stop!" protests Mawdo. "But you can't stop once you've let your anger loose." Ramatoulaye could not "tame all that anger down." "My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous," she confides to Aissatou (58). Thirty years. In Africa, where the spoken word had primacy, where the procreative power of the spoken word was recognized and revered, this woman remained silent for thirty years. The Word, the *sine qua non* of being, was denied her. She was, in the most basic and profound sense rendered powerless: "Shut up!"

Modou's total abandonment of Ramatoulaye, then later his death, left Ramatoulaye alone with the moral and material responsibility of her children and herself. "I was surviving," she writes Aissatou. "In addition to my former duties, I took over Modou's as well." She fixed broken doors and windows, managed a meager budget, and cared for her children. Interspersed in the recounting of her duties is the signifying refrain, "I survived. . . I survived. . . I survived. . ." (51-53). Her survival was nothing short of miraculous. Women similarly abandoned, like Jacqueline, suffered nervous breakdowns. Others, like Mireille in *A Scarlet Song*, became insane. Still others were hurled to early graves. Ramatoulaye found her tongue. By speaking for her *self* she moved from a state of psycho-spiritual non-existence to one of existence, of being. Prior to her abandonment, Ramatoulaye lived on the periphery of her own life, always trying to please and placate others. The greater portion of her physical, psychological, and spiritual energies were spent in meeting the expectations of her husband, her children, her "family-in-law," and the laws and customs of her religion and society. "I try to spot my faults in the failure of my marriage," Ramatoulaye ponders in a letter to Aissatou:

I loved my house. You can testify to the fact that I made it a haven of peace where everything had its place, that I created a harmonious symphony of colours. You know how softhearted I am, how much I loved Modou. You can testify to the fact that, mobilized day and night in his service, I anticipated his slightest desire.

I made peace with his family. Despite his desertion of our home, his father and mother and Tamsir, his brother, still continued to visit me often, as did his sisters. My children too grew up without much ado. Their success at school was my pride, just like laurels thrown at the feet of my lord and master. (55-56)

In all this, she was dutifully submissive and self-effacing. And it was there, in the eyes of others, that she garnered her sense of self and self-worth. When she began to speak, however, and on her own behalf, she gave voice to ideas, beliefs, and feelings which expressed her true self and acknowledged her inherent self-worth. She became profoundly aware of herself as an autonomous, complex, and significant entity who had a choice, a say, in how she would live. This self, in its incipient stages of life, she nurtured. The African woman, praised also for her procreative power, her fecundity, is the giver of life. Like Isis, of Egyptian mythology, she is not only procreative, but self-created, autogenetic. It is through

the miracle of autogenesis that Ramatoulaye comes into her own. She experiences again what Campbell describes as the first experience: the mother's body. She seeks again balance and harmony. The void created in the house by Modou's absence became her womb. Images symbolic of gestation and fecundity are prevalent in *So Long a Letter*: "I lived in a vacuum," she tells Aissatou. And it is within the womb of the cinema that she was distracted from the void in this vacuum and learned "lessons of greatness, courage, and perseverance." It was there, in the darkness that she was enlightened and gained a "vision of the world." "The cinema, an inexpensive means of recreation," helped her to re-create herself (51-52). Ramatoulaye emerged from its dark maw renewed. And in the sleepless, solitary night, pregnant with loneliness, Ramatoulaye writes that "music lulled my anxiety. I heard the message of old and new songs, which awakened hopes. My sadness dissolved" (52-53).

Ramatoulaye's ritual acts of "rememory" were the birthpangs of her travail.³ To recall her thirty silent years, to acknowledge and articulate them, the ebb and flow of them, was to begin to understand and heal self. In expressing her trials of abandonment and, as well, the trials of her friend Aissatou, Ramatoulaye knows the pain her words evoke: "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). Ramatoulaye's ritual of rememory evokes her mythic self, allowing her recreated self to issue forth. She is reborn.

When Modou chose to marry Binetou, Ramatoulaye reconciled herself to be a "co-wife": "I had prepared myself for equal sharing, according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamic life. I was left with empty hands" (6). But emerging from the womb of her solitude and seclusion, she learned, like Aissatou, the necessity of taking one's life into one's own hands. Aissatou would not reconcile herself to polygynous life, as she could not accept Mawdo's "absurd divisions" between "heartfelt love and physical love" (31). She left. She took her life and the lives of her children into her own hands. Ramatoulaye writes that books saved Aissatou. They created for her a womb of fertile interiority as did the films at the cinema for Ramatoulaye. But Aissatou's development was nurtured by Ramatoulaye's presence and encouragements (32). As she was midwife at the rebirth of Aissatou, so Aissatou was midwife to her friend. And it is to friendship that Ramatoulaye sings hosannas throughout the novel. Though Aissatou chose to live the "single life" of the "modern, liberated woman," she respected Ramatoulaye's choice to remain in her marriage and her desire and hope to some day marry again. As E. Imafedia Okhamafe argues in "African Feminism(s) and the Question of Marital and Non-Marital Loneliness and Intimacy," it is not often that respect is accorded women who make choices seen as contrary to feminist ideologies. She observes:

... [S]elf-esteem does not come by telling women to develop androphobia or manophobia since many of these single or divorced or abandoned women would still want to develop intimate relationships with some other men. . . . What I am saying is that women should have such an option without being made to feel guilty if they choose to exercise it. (36)

Bâ's novel also attests that mutual respect—reciprocity and balance—is essential to friendship, as it is to any other relationship. Ramatoulaye writes Aissatou, "Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage" (56). As Ramatoulaye's choice was not a judgment against Aissatou, Aissatou's choice never rose to condemn her friend. Rather than abandoning her sister-friend, who chose a way different from hers, Aissatou supported her. Abandoned and left without a means of transportation, Ramatoulaye and her children had to rely on unreliable public transportation. Aissatou responded to her friend's plight with the gift of a car: "I shall never forget your response, you, my sister, nor my joy and my surprise when I was called to the Fiat agency and was told to choose a car which you had paid for, in full" (53). This gift never became for Aissatou a vehicle for pronouncements and dictates against her friend. It never granted Aissatou the right to impose upon Ramatoulaye an ideology that would be, for her, incongruous. Because of Aissatou's disinterested support, Ramatoulaye's self-esteem escalated. Their friendship and sisterhood reinforced her strength to be and become.

Mariama Bâ's metaphors of birth, recreation, and fecundity come to their fruition in Young Aissatou's pregnancy. Metaphors of the mythic African woman are also fully realized at this point. Young Aissatou, Ramatoulaye's second oldest daughter and the namesake of her friend, becomes pregnant while unmarried and still in school. Tradition and convention, epitomized in the character of "the *griot* woman" Farmata, dictated that Ramatoulaye vehemently upbraid her daughter. Young Aissatou standing before her, pregnant, Ramatoulaye was surprised, angered, disappointed, and hurt. Checking herself, Ramatoulaye stood for immeasured time, figuring her response. At the crossroads of a moment, where mythic and historical time dialogued with actual time to comment on its future, Ramatoulaye remembered: "Remembering, like a lifebuoy, the tender and consoling attitude of my daughter during my distress, my long years of loneliness, I overcame my emotion . . ." (82). She painfully felt her responsibilities:

To make my being a defensive barrier between my daughter and any obstacle. At this moment of confrontation, I realized how close I was to my child. The umbilical cord took on new life, the indestructible bond beneath the avalanche of storms and the duration of time. I saw her once more, newly sprung from me, kicking about, her tongue pink, her tiny face creased under her silky hair. I could not abandon her, as pride would have me do. Her life and her future were at stake, and these were powerful considerations, overriding all taboos and assuming greater importance in my heart and in my mind. The life that fluttered in her was questioning me. It was eager to blossom. It vibrated, demanding protection. (83)

Giver, nurturer, protector, and preserver of life, Ramatoulaye's ritual act of rememory called forth her mythic self: "I took my daughter in my arms. Painfully, I held her tightly, with a force multiplied tenfold by pagan revolt and primitive tenderness. She cried. She choked on sobs" (83). This is the most moving, most powerful, most profound moment in Ramatoulaye's existence. A primordial knowledge was called up from and echoed back to the timeless, mythic spiral of

life: "I took myself in hand with superhuman effort. The shadows faded away. Courage! The rays of light united to form an appeasing brightness. My decision to help and protect emerged from the tumult. It gained strength as I wiped the tears, as I caressed the burning brow" (83).

Ramatoulaye's erstwhile empty hands teemed with life—her life, the cumulation of countless lives before her, her child's life, her grandchild's life and beyond. Ramatoulaye emerged from her tumult with a mythic conception of motherhood which determined her momentous response. The potential for such growth is aborted in Bâ's *Scarlet Song*. Where Ramatoulaye could "face the flood," Mathilde de La Vallée could not—though she desperately desired to. Her husband, Jean de La Vallée, saw their daughter's marriage to Ousmane, "her nigger," as an "attack on his honour," an "assault on his dignity," and an insufferable disgrace before his French compeers. With the exclamation of "Snake-in-the-grass! Slut!" he banished his daughter Mireille to oblivion. Mathilde, like Ramatoulaye, remembered:

Finally, she read the letter [of Mireille's elopement]. As a mother, she could share her child's despair as she was driven to this drastic measure. Reading between the lines, she could appreciate her dreadful dilemma. She was heartsick at the thought of the wrench her daughter's decision must have caused her. She was moved by the sincerity of her cry from afar. She forgave her. She opened her arms to cradle her child. . . . [H]er maternal instinct was reborn. Must she forgo the possibility of becoming a grandmother? (78)

Having made her husband her life, Mathilde had no sister-friend in whom she could confide and with whom she could express herself. Her remembering, alone, was not enough. She needed more to overcome, like Ramatoulaye, thirty hushed years. Mathilde's silent scream noiselessly echoed about the infertile caverns of her deliberations to issue forth stillborn:

And then, out of habit—thirty years during which she had not had a thought of her own, no initiative, no rebellion, thirty years during which she had simply moved in the direction in which she was pushed, thirty years during which it had been her lot to agree and to applaud—then, out of habit rather than conviction, she sobbed, "Snake-in-the-grass! Slut!" and fell into a faint. (78)

Overwhelmed in face of patriarchal convention, Mathilde could not summon the courage to help and protect her child.

The umbilical cord cut, isolated and otherwise abandoned in her adopted home of Senegal, Mireille, unable to cope with her external reality, was driven inward. Interiority is dangerous when there is no connection with external reality to keep one grounded. Mireille, insane, murdered her son, stabbed her husband, his blood a scarlet song which sang a confused and strangled rhythm. Soukeyna, Mireille's sister-in-law, tried to be a sister-friend, a midwife to see Mireille through her mother-in-law's total rejection of her and her husband's abandonment of her. But Mireille, who "no longer spoke," had not understood, like Ramatoulaye, "that confiding in others allays pain."

Ramatoulaye knows what treasure she has in Aissatou. She appreciates the possibilities of and sees the need for friendship and sisterhood. As she writes Aissatou, "Instruments for some, baits for others, respected or despised, often muzzled, all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed" (88). Ramatoulaye knows also that when women suffer, they do not suffer alone. With the repression of the feminine principle, there can be no balance, no order.

"The material of myth is the material of our life, the material of our body, and the material of our environment, and a living, vital mythology deals with these in terms that are appropriate to the nature of knowledge of the time" (Campbell 1). One function of myth is to explain the inexplicable. This, Ramatoulaye concludes, is what mothers do: "one is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. One is a mother to lighten the darkness. One is a mother to shield when lightning streaks the night, when thunder shakes the earth, when mud bogs one down. One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end" (83). Given her knowledge of the tumultuous times in which she lives and her children grow, she knows she must give them a "living, vital mythology" to help ensure their harmonious existence in the universe. By example and precept, she transmits to her children her mythic concepts of balance and harmony, equanimity and complementarity, flexibility and change.

Ramatoulaye sees herself and Aissatou as "true sisters" with a "mission of emancipation." Ramatoulaye awaits an eagerly anticipated visit from Aissatou. She ponders what effect the changes each has made will have on the other and what discussions they will have about their "search for a new way." "Reunited, will we draw up a detailed account of our faded bloom, or will we sow new seeds for new harvests?" She warns Aissatou, "I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything—disappointments and humiliations—hope still lives on within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me" (89). When these two women meet, what then? What then? What then?

NOTES

1. Anne Adams Graves discusses stereotypical images of African women in literature in her preface to *Ngambika, Studies of Women in African Literature*.
2. The text's notes explain that to call on someone three times is an invocation that "indicates the seriousness of the subject to be discussed" (90).
3. Sethe, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, uses the term "rememory" to describe her act of remembering. As Morrison uses the term and as Sethe experiences its meaning, "rememory" signifies a process of mythic transformation wherein remembering is a painful ritual act essential in the sloughing off of transfixing and debilitating experiences, which allows for regeneration and continuance. It is Sethe's "rememory" of her insane husband Halle, the Sweet Home plantation, and the life and the killing of her baby girl Beloved, that gives birth to her ensuing spiritual peace.

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