

# Gender and Religion in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

Elias Kifon Bongmba

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## Abstract

In this essay, I argue that Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* unveils a social reality in which gender and religion take center stage in a difficult dialogue played on the stage of a family. This drama unfolds in the context of death, and it is ensuing to a sense of loss and grief in which the main character deploys religion and her resolve to address gender biases and claims her selfhood.

**KEY WORDS:** Religion, Gender, Literature, Death, Mariama Bâ

## Background

Mariama Bâ's *So Long A Letter* invites the reader into a drama in which gender and religion take center stage of a deeply personal, yet social contestation of the personal virtues and social conventions which ground marriage, family, and friendships. While the novel remains for many readers the quintessential feminist novel, it is fair to claim that *So Long a Letter* was a breakthrough because the text brought to the surface, in a woman's voice, intimate details of gender contestation, power dynamics in the home, and a sense of self when the ethics of family life no longer works. In the novel, the world of Ramatoulaye, the main character, suffered irreparable damage earlier, finally collapses with the death of her husband, Modou Fall. The drama that unfolds reveals one of the most engrossing narratives of gender and religion. The themes of gender have been explored, and I add to that discussion, religion because it is clearly the most important tool the protagonist uses to overcome her lot as a woman in a patriarchal society. Very little work has been done on Bâ's appreciation of religion in a society that uses religion to oppress women. In this essay, I will focus mainly on the use of religion in the novel, and I do not intend to discuss Islam in African or Senegalese writing. Others have attempted such an enterprise.<sup>1</sup> I use the term religion broadly to refer to personal and social values and practices which people hold as part of their relationship to sacred beings. Such values may be codified in sacred books or the mythology and cultural practices of the community and in the institutions that have been set up to provide support and enable

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<sup>1</sup> See Ahmed S. Bangura, *Islam and the West African Novel: The Politics of Representation*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000; Kenneth W. Harrow, ed. *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, Portsmouth, NH.: Heinemann, 1991.

people to live out those values. I consider *So Long a Letter*, an important text whose account is structure around how individuals see their relationship to a sacred community.

Mariama Bâ was born in Dakar, Senegal in 1929 and died in 1981 after a distinguished career in education and public life. She attended the French School in Dakar, and later trained as a teacher at the Ecole Normale in Rufisque. She married a former Information Minister of Senegal, and they had five children. She played an active role in women's organization and the feminist movement in Senegal. She was a devout Muslim. Bâ first published *So Long a Letter* in 1980 in Dakar, a good indication that the first audience was Senegalese readers. Modoupe Bodé-Thomas translated the novel into English and Heinemann published it in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Critics have hailed Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* as a truly feminist novel.<sup>3</sup> It received the Noma Award in 1980 because the book offered a refreshing view of the female condition in Senegal and Africa.<sup>4</sup> *So Long a Letter*, gave voice to women, breaking a silence that overshadowed women's perspectives on basic questions of fairness and dialogue, issues that I would argue were more significant to women than polygamy, which many critics rightly condemn.

I read this text as a compelling account of gender relations and the religious experience. As a personal memoir, it gives us the gender themes that frame family life, but it also allows the reader to see in the protagonist's views on religion and deploys the rituals of that religion to address her distress, and makes difficult decisions about how to respond to these distressing situations.<sup>5</sup> Bâ constructs a text that gives us a biography of sorts, of the main character, Ramatoulaye. That account is not a biography in a strict sense of a biographical novel, but what shines through the text is the main character's world in which she is a woman, though highly educated, but is subjected to certain practices that are gender biased. Central to those practices is the fact that, she has not voiced, and is not consulted on the significant changes that would affect her family life. This among other things is the gender dimension of the novel that is also its moving feminist critique. Also, religion plays an important role in the life of the main character. In the narrative, the reader gets the impression that religious dogmatism is not involved as an *évolué*, since the main character and her family celebrated other holidays. But she is a devout Muslim who knows the words of the Qur'an by heart and follows all the prescriptions of the religion throughout the mourning period.

*So Long a Letter* is an epistolary novel, a genre of literature which Bâ has used effectively to demonstrate that fiction can and often addresses the personal in a way that has profound implications for the broad social context in which the work appears.<sup>6</sup> The protagonist, Ramatoulaye writes to Aïssatou, her friend who is divorced from her

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<sup>2</sup> Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*. Translated from the French by Modoupe Bodé-Thomas. London: Heinemann, 1981. The English references will be taken from this text, hereinafter referred to as SLAL.

<sup>3</sup> Blair, p. 139

<sup>4</sup> Susan Stringer *The Senegalese Novel by Women: Through their Own Eyes*, New York: Peter Lang, 1996. 49

<sup>5</sup> Azodo has explored reading *So Long a Letter* as a confessional work. Azodo uses the idea of confessional texts here broadly referring to a broad genre of literature that includes Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, to personal memoirs. Azodo is careful to point out that one cannot also take *So Long a Letter* as a memoir of personal biographical work because of the differences between the main character, Ramatoulaye Fall and Mariama Bâ the author. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, "Lettre Sénégalaise de Ramatoulaye: Writing as Action in Mariama a's *Une si Longue Lettre*," in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, edited by Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, (Trenton, NJ." Africa World Press, 2003) p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, 2003, p. 4.

husband and is working at the Senegalese Embassy in Washington DC. This communication invites the reader to read a private mail, in which the writer opens up to her friend, talks about her distress, and explains boldly, freely, and eloquently on the nature of that distress.<sup>7</sup> The novel opens with Ramatoulaye acknowledging receipt of a letter from her friend Aïssatou. Ramatoulaye then adds: “By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in distress,” and in doing so, the narrator gives the reader a simple, yet bold statement of the purpose for writing this letter and with that, she gives notice to the reader that this is a deeply personal matter. This is a diary which also serves as her “prop in distress,” an idea which suggests that writing the letter is a therapeutic activity. While the actual-writing would be, the fact that this is a diary, signals that this is a journey back in life to give an account in her voice. She will tell her own story. Such positioning is described as a “prop” because of the immediate circumstances but could be seen as a hint that what unfolds will be even greater engagement with the issues of love and family. The narrator continues: Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain.”<sup>8</sup> These opening words present us with some of the hallmarks of epistolary writing in which “the writing itself is action and plot, action and plot which refuse the kind of closure informing other narratives.”<sup>9</sup> Other devices mediate the epistolary form of this novel.

The epistolary has the hallmarks of a letter and includes several elements: it is a response to Aïssatou’s letter; she writes to inform Aïssatou of the death of Modou. We do not know the content of Aïssatou’s letter, but we have what Renee Larrier and others describe as “*journal in time*” which makes the work a memoir.<sup>10</sup> It is a memoir that takes the reader through the pleasures and challenges of life; the surprising turns, and the deliberate ones who break promises disrupts, destroys, and leaves one wondering, how she should respond to such destructive turns. The letter invites the reader into the world of an individual whose world has been disrupted and the reader learns that the entire funeral rite and mourning period offers Ramatoulaye an opportunity to go back in time and review her life as a friend, wife, mother, a member of a religious community, and a member of an extended family. This is the world of one woman, but a world that most readers could be sympathetic to if similar social relations surround their lives. The reader gets a broad picture that indicates that the distress the protagonist suffers now have been part of life story for a long time.

*So Long a Letter* remains an engaging text whose style, and subject matter, is explored in broad themes that opens up multiple worlds for the reader. *So Long a Letter* explores romantic love, marriage, raising children as a professional family, betrayal, death, culture, and religion, in a postcolonial society where culture and religion shape people’s lives and the boundaries are not always clear as some would like us to think. The responses to different events in a family and one’s life are not always predictable. *So Long a Letter* addresses how the protagonist and her friend grew up, fell in love, and married professional men in postcolonial Senegal. One could argue that regardless of the multiple levels of meaning, *So Long a Letter* will always be appreciated for inviting the reader to

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<sup>7</sup> Ada Azoamaka Azodo, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> SLAL, p. 1. Bakhtin argues: “A characteristic feature of the letter is an acute awareness of the interlocutor, the addressee to whom it is directed. The letter, like the rejoinder in a dialogue, is addressed to a specific person, and it takes into account the other’s possible reactions, the other’s possible reply.” See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 205.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Campbell, “Re-Visions, Re-Flections, Re-Creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women,” in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol 41, Issue 3 (Autum, 1995): 332-348, p. 333.

<sup>10</sup> See Renee Larrier, “Correspondence et Creation Litteraire: Mariama Bâ’s Une si Longue Lettre,” *The French Review* Vol 64, Issue 5 (747-753) p. 748;

consider what Elizabeth Campbell has identified as: “love and seduction, women’s consciousness of their freedom, response to oppression and silence.”<sup>11</sup>

### Gender in *So Long a Letter*

*So Long a Letter* gives the reader a biting critique of gender inequality in the family context and by extension, the broader society. Bâ creates a character that is a modern woman, who is responsible, raises a family, gainfully employed, and contributes to society. All of these things operate under the canopy of patriarchy that has ordained society, a man’s world.<sup>12</sup> Ramatoulaye speaks to herself and takes time to engage in self-examination. She is a woman who is ready to offer a criticism of the prevailing social conventions of her society. This positioning is necessary because it offers her the necessary building blocks that would be used to reject her circumstances and resolve to do something different. Thus, we have a character who writes about her circumstances because she has taken a good look at her past and present and knows that in articulating the injustice in which she has found herself, she reclaims her life and resolves to do things differently.<sup>13</sup> The critique of gender that is presented is very effective. First, Ramatoulaye carries on a dialogue with her friend, Aïssatou, who have experienced gender discrimination and stigma because the mother of her husband did not like Aïssatou. Secondly, the idea that this is a diary and her prop suggests that Ramatoulaye reflects on her own experience and does a critical self-analysis of the situation in which she finds herself. She then offers a rational account of the events of her life and the injustice which she had been through. In a sense, she is talking to herself. She has looked into the mirror, and the person she sees is Ramatoulaye. Ann McElaney-Johnson has argued:

Aïssatou, the addressee of the missive, represents a double for Ramatoulaye. Aïssatou’s experiences as a young woman . . . Her decision to choose her husband and her experience of betrayal by her spouse [and her divorce] parallel Ramatoulaye’s own life. 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.<sup>14</sup>

Even when Ramatoulaye addresses Modou, she demonstrates that she can distinguish clearly between the role of her husband and her role as wife and mother. The reader can be sympathetic to Ramatoulaye’s perspective because she comes across in her self-analysis as a believable character. When she wonders why Modou introduced another woman into their family and detached himself from her and their children, the focus here is on Modou’s actions and his choice to detach himself from his family and not Ramatoulaye’s objection to polygamy.<sup>15</sup> I must add here that by focusing on the betrayal

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Campbell, p. 334-335.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Hermann, argues that as a woman and writer, Bâ, “offers an analysis of a hegemonic male culture but also examines the nature of the writing that has kept women marginal.” Anne Hermann, “Intimate, Irritric and Indiscreet in the Extreme”: Epistolary Essays by Virginia Woolf and Christa Wolf,” in *New German Critique*, Vol 0 Issue 38 (Spring-Summer 1986):161-180, p. 161.

<sup>13</sup> See Helena Parente Cunha, *Woman Between Mirrors*, Translated by Fred P. Ellison and Naomi Lindstrom, Austin: University of Texas Press.

<sup>14</sup> Ann McElaney-Johnson, “Epistolary Friendship: *La prise de parole* in Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre*” in *Research in African Literatures* Vol. 30, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 110-21; p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Stratten for this point. p. 56.

Ramatoulaye reinforces what could be said to be at the heart of gender critique; the exclusion of women from important decisions.

Towards the end of *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye writes, “My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows,” and by so doing also expresses the concern for other women in a text that addresses the voicelessness of the woman. This voicelessness becomes clear when she tells the reader that Modou married Binetou secretly. A male delegation came to her house to announce this marriage. Also, Ramatoulaye articulates views that may be shared by other Senegalese women who share common concerns about the way women were perceived in their families and the society. Later on, Ramatoulaye recalls that she and Aïssatou, “being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women. . . Men would call us scatter-brained. Others labeled us as devils. However, many wanted to possess us. How many dreams did we nourish hopelessly that could have been fulfilled as lasting happiness and that we abandoned to embrace others, those that have burst miserably like soap bubbles, leaving us empty-handed?”<sup>16</sup> This critical reflection rejects the assumption that a woman is helpless, or cannot find fulfillment on her own. The bold claim here is that they would have succeeded and done great things, but they became attached to men, who disappointed them and brought them grief. One could argue here that to say they were disappointed in life would be an understatement. Early in their lives, they saw themselves as “true sisters destined for the same mission of emancipation.”<sup>17</sup>

These statements provide a commentary on the state of the woman and decry practices that placed the wife at the whims of the man and his family. Bà carefully presents a picture of women in Senegal, who are subjected to some things, which hold them back and keep them silent. The voice of Ramatoulaye is the voice of many women who seek to break their silence.<sup>18</sup> Ramatoulaye recalls that their teachers wanted to “lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition, and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress.”<sup>19</sup> This agenda opened the door to an emerging world, which they had to enter without abandoning their traditions and values. Some of the new values certainly forced them to call into question some of their practices, but it did not mean they were going to abandon everything they knew as Senegalese women. It is for this reason that she pointed to practices that kept women as second-class citizens.

I must underscore here that the gender critique of patriarchy in the text must first be seen in context, of the Senegalese society. The ideas that are contested are local ideals, and the grounds on which they are contested are the experiences of women in Senegal. One could see different influences on the character of the novel, such as a good education, the urban environment in Senegal, and the social circle they were associated with in a cosmopolitan society. Even if one were to consider all those things, one would still argue that this is a Senegalese centered critique and rejection of patriarchy. This position does not rule out certain common themes that are shared by people across

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<sup>16</sup> P. 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Ella Brown argues: the author has implicitly embraced western notions about the place of women in society and protested against those of her own society.” Ella Brown, “Reactions to Western Values as Reflected in African Novels.” *Phylon*, XLVIII.3 (1987): 216-28; p. 218.

<sup>19</sup> SLAL, p. 15-16.

cultures and contexts. Bâ's text indeed appeals to human values and challenges the betrayal of those values. Glenn W. Fetzer has argued that Bâ's work has a wide appeal because of the universal character of its appeal to human issues: The novels of Mariama Bâ continue to have wide-reaching appeal. [As] literature by an African woman about African women, the novels develop themes common to all cultures—themes of love, happiness, choice, and self-expression."<sup>20</sup> While I recognize the broad human as well as gender issues which Bâ has articulated, my emphasis on local context is important to underscore the fact that African women did not have to learn western ideals to understand injustice.<sup>21</sup> My position is similar to that of John Champagne who emphasizes the need to see universalism as general principles, and as general themes that frame postcolonial subjectivities and identity and in that sense, the character, Ramatoulaye subscribes to perspectives of "global feminism [which] convinces Ramatoulaye that 'all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed,' although she 'remain[s] persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman,' with heterosexual love remaining as 'the natural link between these two beings'."<sup>22</sup> One could make a case for particularism and universalism from Bâ's novels. She has created a character in Ramatoulaye and supporting characters like Aïssatou, and Jacqueline who face issues, which many women in Africa and other places can identify with. The question about feminism/womanism is best resolved when we look at the diverse agendas and ask what is at stake? The marginalization of women in different forms is what is at issue in *So Long a Letter*, and its critique is a local one.

In contesting gender biases, Bâ also opens up other themes that complement the gender issues that are at the center of the novel. When I taught this book to a religion and literature class in 2013, we identified several themes. First, there is the theme of friendship. Ramatoulaye writes to Aïssatou because she is her friend and she can afford to confide in her at a difficult time. She calls Aïssatou her friend and repeats it to make the point. For example, one cannot miss the theme of friendship that binds Ramatoulaye to Aïssatou. They became friends in childhood, went to school together, and married upper-class men in their society. Aïssatou decided to leave her husband when he took a second wife. She studied translation and took up an appointment at the Senegalese Embassy in Washington DC. This distance did not break their friendship. She addresses her as "Aïssatou my friend" 3 times, "my friend" 4 times, "my best friend", and my sister.<sup>23</sup> At the end of the novel, Aïssatou is coming to Dakar on a visit, which Ramatoulaye anticipates. We learn that there are several things, which kept that bond of friendship alive. It is a friendship, which began in childhood and continued through school and their professional life. Secondly, education is an important theme for women in the novel. Bâ offers details about the education of the protagonist, her husband, their circle of friends, especially, Aïssatou.<sup>24</sup> Again modernity is another theme that is hinted at and which one assumes because of the importance of education. The text more than anything presents one with the irrefutable agency of women. This is clear when Ramatoulaye refuses marriage proposals from Tamsir, her brother-in-law and from

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<sup>20</sup>Glenn W. Fetzer, "Women's Search for the Voice and the Problem of Knowing in the Novels of Mariama Bâ." In *CLA Journal*, 35.1 (September 1991):31-34.; p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> In a similar critique, Charles P. Sarvan has argued that Bâ's feminist perspective is based on assimilation because she is influenced by European ideals, and her characters are elites who have been educated in the western tradition. Charles P. Sarvan. "Feminism and African Fiction: The Novels of Mariama Bâ," in *Modern Fiction Studies* 34.3 (1988), p. 457.

<sup>22</sup> John Champagne, "A Feminist Just Like Us? Teaching Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*." In *College English*, Volume 58, Issue 1 (Jan., 1996): 22-42, p. 28, 30.

<sup>23</sup> The number of times these addresses occur in the French text is taken from Larrier, p.750.

<sup>24</sup> P. 33-35

Dauda Deming, the member of Parliament who works very hard to persuade her to marry him. The novel also offers a remarkable example of how one woman handles conflict. When her daughter becomes pregnant, Ramatoulaye, teaches her, thereby introducing a different way of handling conflict, in this case providing sex education. It is now also clear that the novel is a commentary on how women have survived and thrived under patriarchy. We find that Ramatoulaye's husband betrays her. The imam, her spiritual leader is complicit in this, and one would think she would collapse under the weight of this abandonment, but she survives. When her friend Aïssatou decides she cannot take such betrayal, Ramatoulaye is able to survive. What makes her cope? She depends on her friend. She depends on the teachings of her religion. This novel also introduces one to the theme of love and marriage. On love, one finds descriptions of romantic love in the novel. Their generation, of young, educated Senegalese men and women, married because of love. This romantic love is described as complementary engagement. If marriage is an institution, it is not an institution where someone dictates, but one intended for two people who complement each other. In addition, the novel also gives the reader an insight into the difficult task a widow faces in organizing a funeral. Funerals for some people are a time to find entertainment and therefore Ramatoulaye who was abandoned, is expected to provide entertainment and meet the demands of many people including the demands of her in-laws, and the family of Benito, her young rival.

Finally, the commonest reading of *So Long a Letter* that carves in sharp relief gender issues is the implied and devastating critique of the institution of polygyny. From this perspective, the narrative moves into the discussion by describing the secret desire that brings polygyny into the home of Ramatoulaye and her family; the surprise; betrayal; a sense of hurt; abandonment that follows and are drawn to show sympathy to Ramatoulaye on this issue.<sup>25</sup> The other conflict in the novel is why she did not get a divorce and leave her husband as her daughter counseled. Ramatoulaye chose to stay. There is obviously a clash of values, which Bâ highlights in the novel very well. Modou chose to betray what they had together and marry the friend of their daughter. Modou chooses to abandon them and live his life with his new wife. However, Ramatoulaye in contrast, choose to stay in her marital home, although betrayed and abandoned by Modou.<sup>26</sup> It is not easy to resolve the critique of polygamy in this novel because of the actions of Ramatoulaye, but the work certainly portrays a heroine who is bold, has a strong sense of justice, understands patriarchal manipulation of family practices, and sees how men can take over divine powers and serve as spokespersons for Allah. I think the main character chooses to resist in a non-militant way by refusing to be broken by the system. Other critics see a courageous woman, but others as Femi Ojo-Ade see a victim.<sup>27</sup> I am not sure I can answer the question posed by Elinor Flewellen who wonders if Ramatoulaye's character as portrayed in *So Long a Letter* reflects a choice between assertiveness and submissiveness.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Obioma Nneameka, 1997, p. 162 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Mildred Mortimer argues: "Critics who focus on the socio-political dimensions of polygamy in the work agree that Ramatoulaye, the heroine, is a victim of a society that endorses and encourages polygamy, but disagree as to whether she uses her energies heroically to overcome obstacles or to reproach bitterly the patriarchal structure." Mildred Mortimer, "Enclosure/Disclosure in Mariama Ba's *Une si longue lettre*" in *The French Review*, Vol. 64, Issues 1 (Oct., 1990) 69-78, p. 69-70.

<sup>27</sup> Femi Ojo-Ade, "Still a Victim? Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*." *African Literature Today* 12 (1982): 71-87.

<sup>28</sup> Elinor C. Flewellen, "Assertiveness vs. Submissiveness in Selected Works by African women Writers." *Ba Shiru: A Journal of African Languages and Literature* 12.2 (1985): 3-18.

I think African women are aware of polygamy and the injustice inherent in the system. They have also lived with competing perspectives on the question offered by the two major religions that have shaped the lives of Africans for good or bad, Islam and Christianity. On this question, I am inclined to follow Obioma Nneameka's caution that critics of polygamy in African tend to ignore the subjectivity of African women and speak as if African women cannot make choices.<sup>29</sup> I agree with Nneameka that in *So Long a Letter*, the problem is not the institution of polygamy but its subversion by self-centered philandering men who have used "*instincts polygamique* (53/34), *domaine polygamique*, (69/46) and *probleme polygamique* (100/68)" to subvert Islamic law and turn a legitimate institution into a manipulative and oppressive practice.<sup>30</sup>

Bâ provides a critical view of polygamy in the complaints of Ramatoulaye, who states that the institution of marriage and polygamy is a place where individuals can practice "equity, justice, harmony, and sharing responsibility". The important thing for Ramatoulaye is "presence." The husband ought to be there physically for the entire family.<sup>31</sup> Hence, Ramatoulaye is critical of the vulgar attitude of a man who after thirty years of marriage forgets that he once assured her *C'est to que je porte en moi. Tu es ma négresse protectrice*. Ramatoulaye states that Modou has abandoned her and the children because "his new found happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us."<sup>32</sup> In doing so, Madou has destroyed his past "morally and materially."<sup>33</sup> Nneameka argues that Ramatoulaye not advocate monogamy and presents a rather ambivalent position of about polygamy. The passage below from *So Long A Letter* is Aristophenesque ~~and~~ in some places.

I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman. Love, as imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between two beings. To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely towards the other! If each could melt into their other! . . . The success of the family is corn of a couple's harmony, as the harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony. The nation is made up of all the families, rich, or poor, united or separated, aware of unaware. The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family.<sup>34</sup>

The protagonist points to the reader what is problematic about polygamy. In the case of Ramatoulaye, polygamy has expanded the context of humiliation, especially when your husband moves out because he has married your daughter's friend who came to your home frequently.

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<sup>29</sup> Nneameka comments on the case of polygamy from the Utah, where a man lives together with several wives. All the wives made the choice to marry him because they believe the arrangement has its benefits such as freedom, friendship with other women, security, independence, and the sheer fact that polygamy empowers women rather than weaken them as people tend to think (166)

<sup>30</sup> P. 168, 170.

<sup>31</sup> P. 173.

<sup>32</sup> P. 179.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Quoted on in Nneameka, p. 180. See *So Long a Letter* p. 89. Nneameka argues appropriately that one could read this an endorsement of monogamy only if several things are true. (1) complementarity between a man and woman applies only in a one man one wife situation, (2) two people love one another and melt into one only in monogamy, (3) "partners exist only in monogamy; (4) partners can sincerely move toward one another only in monogamy; (5) successful families and harmonious couples are prerogatives of monogamy; (6) couples exist only in monogamy." (180)



In the end, Ramatoulaye resolved that she would not turn a blind eye at injustice or support oppression based on gender, even if it is one woman oppressing another woman. These issues work out intricately in the text, and we see that one cannot stop thinking, especially thinking about the things that have brought her to the point she is. She cannot just ignore that and claim, I have forgiven everything, and it is time to move on. That is why she raised her voice in criticism of Tamsir's marriage proposal. "My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It burst out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous. . . You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand."<sup>35</sup> This part of the broad gender critique that affirms in very specific terms that a woman should think and make her own decisions. In the section of the text where Ramatoulaye has forgiven Modou and is ready to move on, one could say that forgiveness also involves taking back the voice that was lost. Ramatoulaye stated that she considered marriage, faith, love and a definite choice. She did not choose Tamsir. Forgiveness does not also mean dropping one's guard to please those who claim to be on one's side.

Daouda Dieng, who had proposed to Ramatoulaye when they were both younger was now serving in the National Assembly and still wanted to marry Ramatoulaye. He claimed that in the National Assembly he was called a feminist because of his stance on women's issues. He argued: "women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered or calmed with promises. Women are the nation's primary, the fundamental root from which all else grows and blossoms. Women must be encouraged to take a keener interest in the destiny of the country."<sup>36</sup> When Daouda finally made his proposal, Ramatoulaye also turned him down. "My heart does not love Daouda Dieng. My mind appreciates the man. However, heart and mind often disagree."<sup>37</sup> She decided to inform Daouda of her decision in a letter. "My conscience is not accommodating enough to enable me to marry you, when only esteem, justified by your many qualities, pulls me towards you. I can offer you nothing else, even though you deserve everything."<sup>38</sup>

Ramatoulaye wrote a letter to Daouda in which she rejected his marriage proposal. When Aïssatou left her husband, she wrote to inform him that his decision to take a second wife was unacceptable and she had decided to leave. Writing in this work is not only a therapeutic device but also a firm weapon in the struggle against the domination of women. It is not the only tool, but it is a powerful tool in the struggle for emancipation from domination.<sup>39</sup> In the rest of the work, Ramatoulaye tells of her decision to remain single despite other proposals. She discusses problems encountered in child rearing, and the struggles she experiences with her children.

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<sup>35</sup> SLAL, p. 58.

<sup>36</sup> P. 62.

<sup>37</sup> P. 66.

<sup>38</sup> P. 68.

<sup>39</sup> Jeanette Treiber has argued: "Bâ's insistence upon the importance of literacy, writing, and feminism is not a naïve adaptation of or fascination with western culture and the glorification of individualism, but is first of all a realization that literacy, writing, and the construction of a feminist discourse are tools for empowering women in postcolonial Africa. It is precisely the exclusion from education and discourse that has kept women in vulnerable and exploitative positions." Jeanette Treiber, "Feminism and Identity Politics: Mariama Bâ's *Un Chant écarlaté*" in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 27 No 4 (1996):109-123, p. 110.

### Religion in *So Long a Letter*

*So Long a Letter* is a religious text because it offers the readers insights into how Ramatoulaye draws on her Islamic faith to deal with her crisis. I must confess that this reading is not without problems. Some critics of Bâ argue that Ramatoulaye is oppressed because she is devoted to Islam, which permits polygamy. Her commitment to Islam hindered Ramatoulaye from leaving her husband when he married a second wife. Ella Brown has argued: “It is obvious that [her] religion is the cause of the many ills she complains of. Her life would be much happier in a society that gave greater consideration to the needs of women.”<sup>40</sup> Ramatoulaye’s problem is not Islam, but the manipulation of Islam. Bâ like Nawal El Saadawi is critical of the way people have proclaimed the values of Islam but used the religion for their purposes. The difference with Saadawi’s is that the unfair treatment of women continues to the point where in *The Innocence of the Devil*, divinity also participates in the manipulation of women. However, in *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye turns to Islam to deal with her pain and problems. The text suggests that she emerges from her problems as a strong woman because of her devotion to Islam.

The sudden death of her estranged husband, Modou makes her write this letter to Aïssatou. The opening passage demonstrates that this is no ordinary letter. She introduces her pain by recalling Aïssatou's past difficulties. “Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am a widow.” In doing this, Ramatoulaye not only solicits her sympathy, but she also identifies with her on two issues that could be the nightmare, and are in this case, of many women, divorce, and widowhood. They may have slightly different experiences, but they are linked together through their childhood friendship, which will also be unfolded in the narrative as well as in pain. She continues with these grave somber words:

Modou is dead. How can I tell you? One does not fix appointments with fate. Fate grasps whom it wants when it wants. When it moves in the direction of your desires, it brings you plenitude. However, more often than not, it unsettles, crosses you. Then one has to endure. I endured the telephone call which disrupted my life. A taxi quickly hailed! Fast! Fast! Faster still! My throat is dry. There is a rigid lump in my chest. Fast: faster still! At last, the hospital: the mixed smell of suppurations and ether. The hospital-distorted faces, a train of tearful people, known and unknown, witnesses to this awful tragedy. A long corridor, which seems to stretch out endlessly. In the end, a room. In the room, a bed. On the bed, Modou stretched out, cut off from the world of the living by a white sheet in which he is completely enveloped. . . Death, the tenuous passage between two opposite worlds, one tumultuous, the other still.<sup>41</sup>

This lyrical description of what one could call an ultimate tragedy is made complex by the revelation that Ramatoulaye is confounded, weak, and wants to lie down but in her own words “Middle age demands dignity.” The question then is what does one do in such a situation? This is where our first inkling about the role of religion comes in. Ramatoulaye states:

“I hold tightly on to my prayer beads. I tell the beads ardently, remaining standing on legs of jelly.” As she stands on those legs of jelly, her “loins beat as

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<sup>40</sup> Ella Brown, p. 218.

<sup>41</sup> SLAL, p. 1-2.

to the rhythm of childbirth.” It is not only the small material symbol of her religion which she holds on to that makes her conscious and acts as if she wants to understand the new world that is opened up to her and to that Ramatoulaye has another “prop” and she tells Aïssatou: “Cross-sections of my life spring involuntarily from my memory, grandiose verses from the Koran, noble words of consolation fight for my attention.”<sup>42</sup>

With these words in the first two pages, the reader is introduced to what in addition to all the ideas of *So Long a Letter*, the religious images and the religious experience of the main character.

These descriptions paint several images. Religion offers ways of dealing with a tragedy that has taken Ramatoulaye by surprise. She was separated from Modou, but it was an earthly separation, a different situation from what she now faces—death. Modou is dead and is no longer here. She goes to the hospital only to find the dead body of that of her husband. In her world she has experienced abandonment and now the catastrophe of death, we find that religion pervades that world, making it possible for her to find composure and determination to live as well as be her person. She faced gross injustice in her life but remained silent. Aïssatou her friend was betrayed once, and Ramatoulaye will recall this in the poignant flashback ahead. Modou betrayed them by abandoning them.

The death of Modou triggers events and reflections that would be difficult to handle, but the text demonstrates that she depends on religion and can speak for herself, and resists marriage proposals from Tamsir, Modou’s brother, and Doua Deing. Rather, than serve as a hindrance, Islam provides the resources she needs to cope with her difficulties and emerge as a new person. Religion is used as a resource to soften the blows inflicted by death and give her the courage to understand the younger generation. Ramatoulaye comes to terms with death by drawing on the power and symbols of religion in several ways.

First, Ramatoulaye depends on prayer. Early in the novel as she stands beside the body of Modou, she holds her prayer beads. As Ramatoulaye struggles with her feelings, she also counts the beads and says her prayers. What she is saying at the time may not be eloquent, but every single bead that she allows to fall on top of the others, as she counts them is a prayer, in which she asks help to deal with the major changes in her life. Death is difficult to deal with, let alone the fact that she was going to endure forty days of mourning rites. Furthermore, it is not only memory and prayers, but also the words of the sacred text, which she describes as: “noble words of consolation [which] fight for my attention.”

In saying her prayers, she hangs on to a material element of her religion. Muslims carry and use beads when they say prayers. By itself one cannot make very much out of it. However, Bâ calls attention to a tough situation in which Ramatoulaye depended on those beads. Confused in the hospital room, she could not bend because of her age. In such a moment, something very material, something that has religious significance was her support. Furthermore, Ramatoulaye depends on the power of the Koran. In the third chapter, as she describes the coming of the people to mourn Modou's death, she points out that words of comfort from the Koran were given at the occasion. The mourner said

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<sup>42</sup> SLAL, p. 2.

prayers at rituals organized to mourn for her late husband. Describing the crowded scene at her house, Ramatoulaye refers to the impact of religion: “Comforting words from the Koran fill the air; divine words, divine instructions, impressive promises of punishment or joy, exhortations to virtue, warning against evil, exaltation of humility, of faith. Shivers run through me. My tears flow and my voice joins weakly in the fervent ‘Amen’ which inspires the crowd’s ardour at the end of each verse.”<sup>43</sup>

When Ramatoulaye thinks about her fate and the fate of many victims of death, she writes: “thinking of you, I thank God for my eyes which daily embrace heaven and earth. If today moral fatigue makes my limbs stiff, tomorrow it will leave my body. Then relieved, my legs will carry me slowly, and I shall again have around me the iodine and the blue of the sea. The star and white could will be mine. The breath of wind will again refresh my face. I will stretch out, turn around, I will vibrate. Oh, health, live in me. Oh, health...”<sup>44</sup> This is a meditation on health and life that is grounded in her religious imagination and experience that the narrator has cultivated for most of her life.

Secondly, Ramatoulaye invokes and depends on the words from the Koran. Islam is a religion of the Word. In her darkest day, that Word of Islam which she learned in childhood when she attended the Koranic school, and which were said at her house gave her comfort. The reader may notice the prolepsis that Ramatoulaye displays early in the text. The choice of words here in some way prefigures her account of the injustice that Modou has done to her. In effect, Ramatoulaye is telling Aïssatou and the reader that she has lived in a state of loss for a long time. The death of Modou is a different kind of loss, but she has known what it means to lose for a while. Later on in the narrative, Ramatoulaye implies that although Modou is dead, he needs help because the tough words from the Koran in which she takes comfort to apply to Modou. The prayers people offer are a source of peace and comfort to her. However, the word of the sacred book is a source of critique of excess in the midst of pain. Ramatoulaye points out an irony in all of this “partying” that is going on at her house in the name of mourning. Her religious sensitivity becomes critical. As she observes the carnival atmosphere that reigns at her house, she writes to Aïssatou:

Moreover, yet we are told in the Koran that on the third day the dead body swells and fills its tomb; we are told that on the eighth day it bursts; and we are also told that on the fortieth day it is stripped. What then is the significance of these joyous, institutionalized festivities that accompany our prayers for God's mercy? Who has come out of self-interest? Who has come to quench his own thirst? Who has come for the sake of mercy? Who has come so that he may remember?

Further, Ramatoulaye employs religious ritual to reflect on her life together with Modou. In section four of the text. The ritual she employs is the obligatory *mirasse* “commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person is stripped of his most intimate secrets; thus exposed to others what was carefully concealed. These exposures crudely explain a man’s life. With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou’s betrayal. His abandonment of his first family (myself and my children) was the outcome of the choice of a new life. He rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account.”<sup>45</sup> This section continues for several chapters. She uses it to provide the reader

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<sup>43</sup> SLAL, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> SLAL, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> SLAL, p. 9

with a powerful flash back about her pain, her friendship with Aïssatou, and what emerges is not only the portrait of Modou, but the socio-economic reality of the post-colonial state.

In her flashback, Ramatoulaye recalls their childhood days, the beginning of the love. She remembers when he wrote to her stating: “It is you whom I carry within me. You are my protecting black angel. Would I quickly find you, if only to hold your hand tightly so that I may forget hunger and thirst and loneliness.”<sup>46</sup> Despite the pressures from in-laws, they lived a good life, Christmas parties, music, trips to the beaches to escape the city, picnics at the farm, but the two women remained devoted to their families as well as their teaching jobs. The world around them did not move in the same direction. That is why Mawdo’s family brought pressure on him to take another wife. Aïssatou chooses to leave rather than accept polygamy. In a letter to Mawdo, she wrote: “I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. You want to draw a line between heartfelt love and physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart’s acceptance however little that may be. . . I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way.”<sup>47</sup> Reflecting on how Aïssatou’s life changed after the divorce, Ramatoulaye remembers that things were going well for her, her children, and she did not care about Mawdo. “There you were, an innocent victim of an unjust cause and the courageous pioneer of a new life.”<sup>48</sup>

Ramatoulaye recalls that her own troubles started three years later. It was not a conspiracy from the family, Modou her husband cooked it all. He became a “sugar daddy” to Binetou who was friends with their own daughter Daba. She details Modou’s scheme that included seeking financial independence so that he would do extravagant things for his new wife and her family. He took loans to buy a house for his new in-laws, and send them on pilgrimage to Mecca. He withdrew Binetou from school and paid her an allowance, and made a commitment to pay it for a long time. Binetou’s mother was expecting that even after his death the payments would continue from his estate. When Modou died, they made an inventory of the things they have in the house but did not list all the things, because they secretly removed some of the furniture.

Later on when he married Binetou, a delegation made up of Tamsir, Mawdo Bâ, and the local *Imam* announced Madou’s secret marriage to Binetou. “Modou sends his thanks. He says it is fate that decides men and things: God intended him to have a second wife; there is nothing he can do about it. He praises you for the quarter of a century marriage in which you gave him all the happiness a wife owes her husband.”<sup>49</sup> Ramatoulaye did not react negatively but beneath; she was in great pain. From her own judgment, “Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the alter of affluence.” Ramatoulaye’s daughter Daba urged her mother to break with Modou as Aïssatou did. Ramatoulaye thought of leaving after twenty-five years and twelve children! She had seen the sordid side of marriage and was not going to run away from it.

She contemplated leaving, forgiveness, and assessed her physical condition, and that of many women who were abandoned because they had grown old-they were “like a

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<sup>46</sup> SLAL, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> SLAL, p. 31-32.

<sup>48</sup> SLAL, p. 34.

<sup>49</sup> SLAL, p. 37.

worn-out or dated *boubou*.<sup>50</sup> There were other women in similar situations, they handled it differently, and some succumbed to pressure. Ramatoulaye thought of Jacqueline who had a nervous breakdown because her husband was seeing another woman. Ramatoulaye recalls, “I chose to remain. Modou and Mawdo were surprised, could not understand.”<sup>51</sup> It was a difficult choice because she cried every day, was forced to share her husband according to the precepts of Islam. Modou avoided them. “He never came again; his new found happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us.”<sup>52</sup> It is important to emphasize that Ramatoulaye decided to stay.<sup>53</sup> She told Aïssatou, she refused to give in to pressure. “My mind and my faith rejected supernatural power. They rejected this easy attraction, which kills any will to fight. I looked reality in the face.”<sup>54</sup> This is a difficult passage to interpret because she states she rejected this supernatural power, but one gets the sense that she rejected it because of her faith. One way of making sense about this is to suppose that what Ramatoulaye rejected were the supernatural power of men and the Imam. The imposition of that power on her constituted an abuse of supernatural power itself, especially coming from her husband who did not behave in a manner that was recommended by the Koran. Ramatoulaye tried to understand where she failed as a homemaker. She asked why Modou put Binetou between them. In a moment where her humanity also shines, she confessed she was still in love with Modou.

Bâ has also worked the theme of betrayal into her second novel, *Un chant écarlate*. During his school days, Ousmane falls in love with Mireille, the daughter of a French diplomat who works in Dakar. Mireille’s parents disapprove of this relationship and send her to France to go to school. Both lovers continue to exchange letters and write about different things including the 1968 student riots in Paris and Dakar. When Ousmane completes his university education, he flies to Paris and marries Mireille against the wishes of his parents. Then the challenges began with the nagging of his mother who did not like that marriage, the demands of an educated Mireille, and his Senegalese traditions, Ousmane marries Ouleymatou, without the knowledge of Mireille. This part of the story resembles what happens in *Une si Longue Lettre*. In this second novel, Bâ takes the consequences of this duplicity much further.

Ramatoulaye ponders her pain and slowly acknowledges the fact that Modou has abandoned her and the children. In *Un chant écarlate* Ousmane moves back and forth between the two women. Mireille is disappointed and cannot take it any longer. She has no place to return to, and in pity for their son, because French society will not accept a child of mixed race, she kills her son and stabs Ousmane. In a confrontation with her father, Mireille took her to stand on the side of Ousmane.

“The father of ‘that object’ as you call him, fought for our country at the risk of his life. He is disabled from the wound he received, a victim of somebody else’s cause. Ousmane’s father defended our history and protected our safety. What have you done for him in return? Your presence here? That is not out of any altruism. You’re in the service of your own country, as an unarmed soldier in

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<sup>50</sup> SLAL, p. 41.

<sup>51</sup> SLAL, p. 45.

<sup>52</sup> SLAL p. 47.

<sup>53</sup> See I. A. d’Almedia, “The concept of Choice in Mariama Ba’s Fiction” in C.B. Davies and A. A. Graves, eds. *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, pp. 161-171, Trenton, N.J.: African World Press, 1986.

<sup>54</sup> SLAL, p. 49.

civilian garb keeping a watchful eye on someone else's business. You're still the same old colonizer, just disguised as a humanitarian, still playing your own game, which is simply and solely to exploit this country. But I am not playing your game; I'm on the other side, and I'm not going back on that, you understand."<sup>55</sup>

The tragedy of Ousmane and Mireille comes about from abandonment. Mireille abandons her family for romantic love. Ousmane refuses to listen to the voice of reason, and marries her only to betray her and yield to tradition and marry another woman behind her. Ousmane in response to the philosophy of Negritude, declared that he favored returning to one's roots, but also being open, meaning he would be open to other ideas and people of different races such as Mireille. He did not live up to his openness, in much the same way as Mudou Fall did not live up to the romantic promise he made to Ramatoulaye. The novel criticizes colonial and racist ideologies. Treiber argues that the novel also demonstrates: "that an indiscriminate reliance on tradition will reestablish patriarchal power and is ultimately collaborative with colonial ideology."<sup>56</sup> However, *So Long a Letter* presents a difficult picture because religion plays an important role in the life of Ramatoulaye.

Ramatoulaye used the ritual *mirasse* to detail Modou's betrayal and abandonment. Ramatoulaye uses this ritual very carefully to detail not only her pain, oppressive aspects of culture, and restate Aïssatou's friendship and loyalty, but to take a stand about her situation. Mbye B. Cham argues: "In extending the conceptual boundaries of 'mirasse,' the novelist is able to provide Rama with the structural and, indeed, cultural framework within which to undertake a comprehensive exposition (dòpulyrlement) of intimate secrets of married life with Modou Fall, particularly the latter's weakness as a human being and the effect of such on their relationship. Being such a devout Muslim, Rama sees this stalk taking as a religious duty mandated by the Qu'ran. . . Mirasse, therefore becomes the principle that legitimizes and regulates Rama's act of systematic personal revelation which simultaneously constitutes a systematic analysis of the most pressing socioeconomic and cultural issues challenging women and society."<sup>57</sup> We must see Ramatoulaye's decisions beyond conformity because she uses the *mirasse* to confront not only her husband's betrayal and abandonment but emerge from the ordeal as a strong woman.<sup>58</sup>

The rite she observes and writes about in her flashback allows her to carry on the process of disclosure. Ramatoulaye takes this opportunity, and the result is an engagement in a provocative ritual. In carrying on the ritual of *mirasse* Ramatoulaye not only grasps on religion to deal with the past, but to prepare for the future. Regarding the past, she begins: "With consternation, I measure the extent of Modou's betrayal. His abandonment of his first family my children) and (myself was the outcome of the choice

<sup>55</sup> Mariama Bâ *Scarlet Song*, Translated by Dorothy Blair, London: Longman, 1986, p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> Treiber, p. 119.

<sup>57</sup> Mbye B. Cham, "The Female Condition in Africa: A Literary Exploration of Mariama Bâ." In *A Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, 7.1 (1984-85):29-51' quote taken from p. 29, 32-23.

<sup>58</sup>Uzo Esonwanne argues: "With the *mirasse*, Bâ boldly redefines the relationship of (African) women to the secular and the sacred, to the European epistolary and to Afro-Islamic ritual mandated by the Koran."Uzo Esonwanne, 1997, p. 84. Esonwanne also notes that Miller thinks that the use of the epistolary undecuts Bâ's project because there is not real exchange with the interlocutor. (84-85) He argues that given the reading offered by Cham, Ramatoulaye actually circumvents an Islamic custom by using a ritual effectively to create and artificial exchange. (85) However Esonwanne argues that one ought to look at what Bâ attempts here as a form of production in which Bâ is engaged in a hybridity that can be described as poaching in order to manufacture contesting meanings.(86)

of a new life. He rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account.”<sup>59</sup> The religious ceremony provides a very powerful moment in which to pour out one's grief. While I do not want to jump into a simplistic comparison, one familiar with the traditions of the Hebrew Bible sees in this use of the *mirasse* something the Psalmist did do a lot. Many times when the psalmist goes before Yahweh, he lays out his heart and pain. Ramatoulaye does a similar thing here. The catalog is so long. Modou is “dead without a penny saved. Acknowledgments of debts? A pile of them: cloth and gold traders, home-delivery grocers and butchers, car-purchase installment.” There are all the lavish expenses and the loans he owes because he needed the money to send his new mother-in-law on a pilgrimage to Mecca. The most painful reflections during this period certainly are when she reflected: “And to think that I loved this man passionately, to think that I gave him thirty years of my life, to think that twelve times over I carried his child. The addition of a rival to my life was not enough for him. In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal.”<sup>60</sup>

However, Ramatoulaye forgave Modou. Ramatoulaye wrote: “Yesterday I celebrated, as is the custom, the fortieth day of Modou’s death. I have forgiven him. May God hear the prayer I say for him every day. I celebrated the fortieth day in meditation. The initiated read the Koran. Their fervent voices rose towards heaven. Modou fall, may God accept you among his chosen few.”<sup>61</sup> I must add here that I am not claiming that forgiveness is always a religious act. However, religion has an impact on decisions to forgive other people their faults, and this seems to be the case. I must point out that I have not undertaken a systematic study of forgiveness in Islam. I only point out that in the context of *Une si Longue Lettre*, we can read forgiveness as a religious act, which reflects what Arendt calls a “constant mutual release from what they do can [people] remain free agents, why by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.”<sup>62</sup>

Ramatoulaye made the conscious decision to free herself from the past which Modou created; thus, she demonstrated the willingness to change and start afresh. She recalls how she pulled herself out of this deception and abandonment, a thing that resonates with many women who have experienced similar things. Ramatoulaye tells Aïssatou “I try to spot my faults in the failure of my marriage. I gave freely, gave more than I received. I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage.” This further explains why she chooses to stay in her marriage, even though all she got was betrayal and rejection. Then, there is this painful confession: “The truth is that, despite everything, I remain faithful to the love of my youth. Aïssatou, I cry for Modou, and I can do nothing about it.”<sup>63</sup> This is an important claim which raises the question, is she living a delusion? Is Ramatoulaye also imposing textual and religious constraints on marriage by determining to remain in marriage when the husband has long moved on? If one wants to remain in the marriage and the other person is no longer interested and has abandoned you, when does it make sense to call it quits? Is it the case that religion forbids divorce to the extent that when one has been abandoned, he or she cannot take

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<sup>59</sup> SLAL, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> SLAL, p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> SLAL, p. 57.

<sup>62</sup> P. 240.

<sup>63</sup> SLAL, p. 56.



that next step and say, this marriage is broken, and I must move on? One also wonders if it was a question of timing. It might not have been the right time for Ramatoulaye to move on.

Finally, Ramatoulaye turns to religion to provide support to her children. When she finds out to her shock and consternation that her daughter Aïssatou is pregnant, she is overcome with emotions, and she states: “I sought refuge in God, as at every moment of crises in my life. Who decides death and life? God, the Almighty!”<sup>64</sup> As she reflects over the fact that this pregnancy will slow down her studies at school, she can only turn to God again and pray for the expected child “may God smooth the new path of this child's life. What a path.”<sup>65</sup> Bâ in many ways authored a profoundly mystical text that people of different religious traditions can relate to this work. Ramatoulaye speaks of seeking refuge in God. In the midst of storms, God is as a hiding place. The idea of refuge suggests protection against danger but also implies a place of stability, a place to gain a new perspective and a new engagement with other people. Seeking refuge in God is not hiding. It is a posture, which re-orientates the individual to other people. Ramatoulaye's theology, if I can call it that, sees God as the one who makes the final decision on death and life. The statement could mean that she accepts the Death of Modou as the will of God and then accepts the pregnancy of her daughter as an act of God. Seeking refuge in God does not always mean asking for answers. She accepted the death of Modou and went on to do everything required by Islamic teachings to give Modou respect even in his death. As she seeks refuge in God, she accepts and anticipates the birth of a grandchild. Given what she had gone through, she only prays that God will make the path of this child smooth, yet with a certain irony, she wonders, what path? Therefore, seeking refuge in God does not answer all questions. One may be resting in God, but future remains uncertain. This might be what believers call faith.

I have argued that *So Long a Letter* offer a critical perspective on gender relations and on the use of religion to respond to crisis and survival. These are not the only themes one can highlight from this rich novel, but they lie at the center of the dialogue in this short, complex, and moving epistolary which remains fresh each time one picks it up.

**Elias Kifon Bongmba** holds the Harry and Hazel Chair in Christian Theology and Professor of Religion at Rice University, Houston Texas. He is editor of *Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa*.

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<sup>64</sup> P. 82.

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