



Une si longue letter by Mariama Bâ So Long a Letter by Mariama Bâ

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Une si longue lettre. By Mariama Bâ. Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1980. Pp. 131.

So Long a Letter. By Mariama Bâ. Translated by Modupé Bodé-Thomas. London: Heinemann, 1981. Pp. 90.

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French colonialism opened some important doors to African men. A Léo-pold Sédar Senghor might end up in the Académie Française. And not only did Senghor write beautiful French poetry, his theories of *negritude* and African socialism set forth a sophisticated anticolonial politics. But forces both colonial and indigenous closed such avenues to women. And so women in French Africa turned to different media, like other women in other times.

In particular, they turned to fiction. In her short, poetic novel *So Long a Letter*, Senghor's countrywoman Mariama Bâ concentrates the social insights that the more fortunate Senghor could spread over the essays and volumes and reports that were his outlets as a brilliant Senegalese man. Yet to write a novel is to reflect about social life just as if one had written a theoretical thesis or an empirical monograph. Only the format is different. One sees the social from the point of view of the individual. And is not that the basic experience of all humans?

A sizable literature has debated the relation between Ramatoulaye, Bâ's protagonist, and Bâ herself. In fact, Bâ experienced nearly all the vicissitudes she assigns to her alter ego, with the crucial exception of polygamy (although Bâ's cherished elder sister was one of four wives). But the novel reorders these experiences and reduces them to more common dimension. For Bâ's own life was extraordinary beyond fiction.

Mariama Bâ was born in Dakar in 1929. Her father had served with distinction at Verdun and the Marne and returned to an administrative career that saw him eventually become minister of public health in the Senegalese transitional government. Her mother died young, and—her father being busy with his career—Mariama was raised in the household of her maternal grandmother, who in her widowhood had married a devout Tijani Muslim with three other wives and a mosque within the family compound. Nonetheless Bâ's father overcame his mother-in-law's objections to a Western education for the young girl. So Bâ was headed for a secretarial career when her school director insisted that, for her own good and the honor of the school, she must sit the exam for the Normal School in Rufisque, an exam taken by girls all across French West Africa. Bâ took first place on this exam, and her indomitable headmistress persuaded the reluctant grandmother to allow Mariama to go on. Bâ loved

*Another review from 2049 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

her new school and especially its feminist and pro-African headmistress Germaine Le Goff. (Bâ's first published work was actually a school piece, on the writer Chateaubriand.)

Once graduated, Bâ became a schoolteacher and eventually an inspector of schools. In the late 1960s she turned to active feminism, and at some point in the 1970s, with the strong encouragement of woman friends, she took up fiction. *So Long a Letter* grew directly out of Bâ's feminist commitments, as its dedication makes clear: "To all women and to men of good will."

Like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and many other early feminist militants, however, Bâ was also *essentiellement mère*, in her daughter's words. Immediately after graduation from school, Bâ married a flamboyant older man with three children. But he wanted an old-style relationship, and after four years and three more children, Bâ divorced him. She quickly remarried (a quiet physician, with whom she had another child) and then divorced again. In the 1950s, she met Obèye Diop, a brilliant young socialist intellectual and journalist, who became her third husband and the father of another nine children. Diop's career in the 1950s was spectacular, taking him to the Colonial Council, the secretaryship of state for technical and professional education, and a position as minister of information, before he fell from power in a 1962 Senghorian housecleaning that followed a coup scare.

As Bâ's daughter (Mame Coumba Ndiaye) made clear in her 2007 memoir, the Diop/Bâ menage was wildly exciting: intellectual, committed, passionate, and loving, if often argumentative. Both partners were preoccupied with work and family, but the one was very public while the other was very private. Diop's work kept him on the move, while Bâ's kept her near home. Diop had little concern for worldly things, while Bâ loved clothes, jewelry, and style (all African, for she gave up Western clothing after the 1950s), not to mention that there were 13 children of varying ages and paternity. This extraordinary household eventually broke up over differences between its passionate principals, and Bâ established herself independently in Dakar. She was almost immediately taken ill and died August 17, 1981, at 52, with a second novel (*Scarlet Song*) virtually finished and a third in design.

All these complexities are sea-changed into a rich, jewel-like novel. *So Long a Letter* details the reflections of Ramatoulaye, a Senegalese widow, from the day of her husband's death until the time when her mourning has ended and she can receive the visit of her oldest friend, Aissatou. Because Islamic mourning customs require seclusion, the novel takes the form of a diary/letter written for that friend. In this text are reviewed all the possible vagaries of a middle-class, middle-aged West African woman's life: motherhood, polygamy, betrayal, triumph, duty, religion, friendship, and, occasionally, happiness.

The full story emerges not as a narrative but in complex and overlapping flashbacks. It starts with betrayal revealed: Ramatoulaye almost

immediately discovers the depth of her husband's theft of common resources for his new wife. Then gradually we hear that the new wife is in fact a daughter's school friend—one who has been joking with the daughter about her absurd "sugar daddy."

In parallel emerges the betrayal and divorce of Aissatou by her husband. (Unlike Ramatoulaye, Aissatou chooses to leave Africa via a job as a translator—another circumstance that calls for the epistolary format.) Again and again, we see the richness of Ramatoulaye's consciousness, the threads of religion, hope, duty, doggedness, even grandeur that weave through her reinterpretation of her past. (Bâ once remarked "I have neither the greatness of soul nor the qualities of Ramatoulaye, and my life is much more complicated, more dramatic in its incidents, than that of my heroine.")

Like many wonderful first-person novels, *So Long a Letter* has the ironic problem that its protagonist's voice is almost too lovely. Even in English translation, the writing is beautiful, and the French original is exquisite: its vocabulary at once rich and economical, its syntax elegant, and its insights symphonically timed. An average Senegalese widow does not write such language, we may think, nor has she the concentrated self-insight here shown. Yet social restrictions steered many talented women into the silent roles of the everyday, where they made their lives, and those of their households, into a species of poetry. Here, too, Bâ makes a profound point about everyday social action—that it has a profound beauty, here expressed as the beauty of the text.

As social scientists, we usually forgo that beauty, for we eschew writing rooted in personal vision. We pursue abstractions and generalization, and in that pursuit we ignore the daily flow of glancing insights, of little irrevocabilities, of everyday emotions, that make up the content of human life. These real life details are mere noise in our models beside the sterner stuff of gender, race, class, age, region—the serried ranks of variables assembled. So also with networks. Where Ramatoulaye's subtle connections ebb and flow through the incidents of life, our network models have simple links, often without content or even direction. We forget that the threads we weave were once thousands of little interactional fibers. Only the spinning of life made them the long filaments we weave so carelessly into our abstractions.

More specifically, there seem to be three qualities that make *So Long a Letter* questionable as social science: first its presentation as fiction, second its first-person viewpoint, and third its narrative character. Each of these "disabilities" needs to be questioned.

There is no inherent problem, first, in fiction as social science. One can imagine a genre of fictional inquiry into social life (as opposed to individual life), and such a genre in fact exists. On the theoretical end of this spectrum we have the utopias of More, Bellamy, Gilman, and so on, as well as the dystopias of Orwell, Huxley, and any number of others. On the empirical end, we have self-consciously sociological fiction, like that of Trollope and

Zola or the more dramatic Dickens and Balzac. For many years, none of this was felt to be appropriate for social science readers except as amusement. Eventually, we saw that Trollope was every bit the sociologist that Goffman was; his dissection of upper-class life in mid-19th-century Britain cannot be surpassed, however fictional it might be. Perhaps, we saw, fiction is not really a bar to social science, at least in the right hands.

As for a focus on individual lives and the first-person standpoint, non-fictional biography/autobiography has served as a method from time to time in social science, but has never been fully legitimized. First emerging in the Progressive Era casework literature, biographical documents were widely used in early studies of crime and immigration; the “life course” tradition continued them fitfully throughout the 20th century. But even then the “life course” did not really succeed as social science until it translated itself into the language of generalization and variables. Only in ethnography did the first-person voice stabilize as social science, and the epistemological hypochondrias of the later 20th century questioned even that. It was well after 2000 that a serious sociology of the individual began.

That sociology of the individual has reflected a theoretical unification, at last, of explanation and narrative, for the final—and most vexing—question raised by *So Long a Letter* is the question of narration, and in particular first-person narration. A long and distinguished literature has pitted history against sociology as modes of apprehending the social. But that literature has focused on grand questions of explanation. It has too little theorized the microscopic interweaving of social experience. The phenomenologists attempted that theory, to be sure, but their sociological followers grew unadventurous, illustrating their masters’ ideas rather than extending them. It was therefore rather the “individual turn” in the social sciences after 2010 that provided the impetus to and data for the theoretical interweaving of explanation and narrative. And a surprisingly large amount of that theory came from the profound contemplation of the great sociologists who happened to write narrative fiction, writers like Trollope, Balzac, and, of course, Bâ. It is not only refreshing to read a book that grasps in 90 pages the narrative experience of social living; it is also an important theoretical challenge.

What exactly was it about reading works like *So Long a Letter* that led to the new theories? Most important, we learned something about objectification. First-person, experiential social science, whether fictional or not, resists objectification. Bâ does not construct theoretical arguments. She coins no terms. One cannot, for example, cite her book to support the theory that “religious commitment trumps gender commitment,” even though Ramatoulaye—like Bâ herself—through all her gender tribulations never lets go of her unshakable commitment to Islam. For within the one commitment, the other reappears and disciplines the one as if they were dancing together. Ramatoulaye obeys all the rules of Muslim mourning, but the contempt with which she rejects her brother-in-law’s

proposal of leviratic (and polygamous) marriage is forthrightly feminist. Or again, she detests Aissatou's mother-in-law Nabou, who is driven by religious, class, and tribal conservatism stealthily to create the second bride who will destroy Aissatou's marriage, yet she entirely grants the logic of Nabou's experience as woman.

Religion and feminism cannot then be distinguished as separated objects here. And what cannot be separated in a living person cannot be redeployed elsewhere as variables. Therefore narratives always lack conceptual portability, whether they are fictional or not. Generalization of such narratives requires generalization of experiences or trajectories of experience, not of qualities of persons or experiences. That was the challenge set by fiction like *Bâ's*.

But this challenge is not merely negative—a requirement that we avoid the objectification of feminism and Islam. It at the same time requires us to theorize directly the dance of feminism and Islam within the myriads of interacting selves that inhabit a social world. One *Ramatoulaye* is not enough. And even within *Ramatoulaye*, the dance is unclear, as we see from the two quite different readings of the book. The first and historically dominant reading is feminist. In this view, the center of *Ramatoulaye's* self is her gender. Like Isabel Archer, *Ramatoulaye* refuses the easy ways out of a bad situation, and, by so doing, enacts herself as both a woman and a full human being. This reading certainly accords with *Bâ's* public pronouncements as a feminist.

But later readings have taken the novel as a study of Islam, to which *Bâ* was similarly dedicated. The *Ramatoulaye* of the book's early sections goes through the religious motions, but remains inwardly uncommitted. She begrudges her co-wife's mother the hajj with which her husband has won the woman's complaisance, trivializing it by comparing it with the Alfa-Romeos that have won the daughter. She admires Aissatou's secular-feminist refusal to remain in Dakar as one of two wives. She hears the news of her husband's new marriage with grace and aplomb not because this is what becomes a Muslim, but rather because she "must not give my visitors the pleasures of relating [to her husband] her distress."

These are all the old *Ramatoulaye*. For at the crucial moment, she decides to remain in Dakar and accept her new situation, and to "prepare myself for equal sharing according to the precepts of Islam concerning polygamic life." It is rather her husband who violates the law of Islam, failing to give her equal time with the new wife. In recounting this story to her friend, *Ramatoulaye* grows in faith, seeking her own failures in the marriage and remaining true to her love of her husband. At the fortieth day, she can truly say "I have forgiven him." On the rock of this forgiveness breaks her brother-in-law's marriage proposal, as well as a much more welcome proposal from an old and admirable suitor. Whom she rejects because she doesn't love him and because the Quran gives her the right to suit herself. Seeking to build a new social world, she offers him friendship—she has said throughout the book that friendship is better than

marriage. But he refuses, still trapped in an earlier Islam that places love within duty. And when, finally, Ramatoulaye is tested by a daughter's unplanned, unannounced pregnancy, she "sought refuge in God, as at every moment of crisis." But the new self is quickly forgiving; "One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end."

In the new readings, the novel concerns the rediscovery of Islam, of surrender to God's will. They move from feminist politics of a somewhat traditional sort—how to advance the interests of women—to the different question of how humans live religious lives that are simultaneously social and personally fulfilling. The privatization of religion in the Christian West surrendered to Islam the lead in imagining such patterns for religious living in social worlds. Little surprise then that the Muslim *Bâ* captures this performative quality of religion. Ramatoulaye has always "been religious." But to "be" a Muslim (or any other religion) is not to be something, but to be aware that one is in the process of becoming something. Religion is thus a particular form of performative articulation between the becoming person, the social process, and the natural world in which both person and process find themselves. It is from novels and other such biographical works that this insight has come—the rooting of what we used to call "institutions" in particular kinds of articulations of selves and groups.

But one need not know the detailed turns of sociological theory to know the greatness of this book. One needs only an open mind and an inquiring heart. So short a novel. So long a message.