



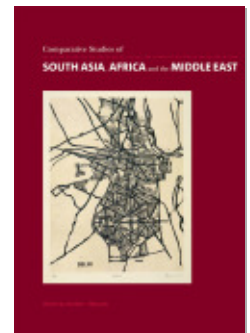
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On Mariama Bâ's Novels, Stereotypes, and Silence

Wandia Njoya

The title of this article is borrowed from Trudier Harris's essay that analyzes the reception of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.¹ Harris argues that Walker had been chosen by the one-track-minded American media, which, "by its very racist nature, seems able to focus on only one black writer at a time."² The publicity had in turn created "a cadre of spectator readers . . . who do not identify with the characters and who do not feel the intensity of their pain, [but] stand back and view the events of the novel as a circus of black human interactions."³ Harris suggests that the acclaim Walker's novel received had discouraged critics from writing critical reviews, even though the characters appeared implausible against the historical background and experience of black Americans.

I raise similar concerns about the increasing critical focus on Mariama Bâ's novels, particularly *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*).⁴ Bâ's first of two novels is currently about the most popular African woman-authored novel in the United States and is featured in reading lists of courses that range from French to African and women's studies. However, there is little or uneasy acknowledgment that Bâ and her characters represent a small and privileged section of African societies or that her women have condescending views of African traditions consistent with colonial ideologies. The few critics who have been categorical about this reality have been criticized for ignoring the colonial masculine privilege. Between them and those who read Bâ's work as an expression of a feminist consciousness, the intricacies and the human complexities in the narrative are minimized, while the biases and assumptions behind the popularity of the work remain unquestioned. In this article, I argue that the popularity of Bâ's novel rides on stereotypes of African cultures as inimical to love, individual fulfillment, and monogamy. I trace these images to the imperial framework and locate them in the criticism of her work.

Femi Ojo-Ade's critical review of *So Long a Letter* is perhaps the best place to begin such an analysis because of the status it has since acquired in African literary criticism.⁵ As Pius Adesanmi has noted, Ojo-Ade seems to have carved a niche in literary criticism on the basis of the article, probably because he was a male critic who gave an unfavorable review to an African woman's book.⁶ However, his criticism of Bâ's feminism as condescending toward

1. Trudier Harris, "On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence," *Black American Literature Forum* 4 (1984): 155–61.

2. *Ibid.*, 155.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*), trans. M. Bodé-Thomas (London: Heinemann, 1981). Page citations for *Letter* are given in the text.

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

6. Pius Adesanmi, "Constructions of Subalternity in African Women's Writing in French" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2002).

African traditions is well merited and shared by J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, Katwiwa Mule, and Uzo Esonwanne.⁷

Although I generally agree with these critics' concerns, I find some weaknesses in their approach as well as in other scholars' responses to their analyses. Both sides of the debate neglect the human and emotional aspects that underlie *So Long a Letter*. The novel is a letter from Ramatoulaye to her friend Aïssatou, and many of their common values and experiences are therefore assumed and remain in the background of the narrative. The intimacy of the friendship and the genre are necessary for Ramatoulaye as she mourns the death of her husband, Modou, a man she appears to still love despite his having left her for one of their daughter's best friends after twenty-five years of marriage. However, Mule minimizes this situation when he remarks that during the mourning rites, Ramatoulaye "is more concerned with cola nut stains on her house tiles than with the ritual of bonding at time of death in the community."⁸ These comments ignore the fact that the bereaved usually focus on minute details of events because of the intensity of their pain, and they ultimately discount the fact that Ramatoulaye's goal is to articulate her experience rather than offer a lucid analysis of social problems left behind by colonialism.

Both the genre and the friendship necessarily exclude the detached voice, civility, and rigorous analysis that normally characterize academic study, and so, overt analysis of broader political and economic issues remains secondary to the emotions on which the correspondence is based. Moreover, any human being who loses the love of his or her life is not in the frame of mind to give a fair portrayal of those who broke their hearts or the people for whom

their partners left. Consequently, Ramatoulaye is understandably inclined to consider herself the ultimate victim and to negatively portray the husbands who remarried and their new wives. However, few critics have acknowledged the specific dimensions of the epistolary genre, and even those who do neglect to reflect on its implications for both the characters and the readers. Ann McElaney-Johnson, for example, uses the genre primarily as a gauge of the narrator's sincerity and as a tool to delve into textual details that say little about the characters or the events depicted.⁹ Similarly, Ojo-Ade's statement that Bâ portrays men as the "symbol of evil" or as "the monster" imposes a strictly literal reading of the novel.¹⁰

Nwachukwu-Agbada and Mule may be justified in criticizing Ramatoulaye's condescending views toward women without Western education, but the fact is that unfavorable depictions of men are typical of conversations between African women and are not intended for the hearing of men. The men who do overhear women are expected to take the comments in good stride. In Niger this reality is given social recognition through the *marchande* ceremony, which, as Aïssata Sidikou explains, is organized by the first wife when her husband marries another wife. The friends of the first wife dance and sing songs that insult the man and even the new wife. Men are never present at this ceremony; in fact, they "oppose the ceremony simply because they may hear songs that are highly offensive to them and their parents."¹¹ Bâ's novel could arguably fulfill the same role as *marchande*, which is to help "heal the psychological pain that the woman and all wives go through when their husbands remarry."¹²

The tendency to discount the emotional aspects of fiction was identified by Wole Soy-

7. J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, "One Wife Be for One Man: Mariama Bâ's Doctrine for Marriage," *Modern Fiction Studies* 3 (1991): 561-73; Katwiwa Mule, "Negotiating between the Tomb and the Womb: Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*," in *Contemporary African Literature and the Diaspora*, ed. Olga Barrios and Bernard W. Bell (Salamanca, Spain: Universidad de Salamanca, 1997), 131-39; and Uzo Esonwanne, "Enlightenment Epistemology and 'Esthetic Cognition': Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*," in *The Politics of (M)Othering: Woman, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. Obioma Nnaemeka (London: Routledge, 1997), 82-100.

8. Mule, "Negotiating between the Tomb and the Womb," 137.

9. Ann McElaney-Johnson, "Epistolary Friendship: *La prise de parole* in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*," *Research in African Literatures* 2 (1999): 110-21.

10. Ojo-Ade, "Still a Victim?" 74, 75.

11. Aïssata Sidikou, *Recreating Words, Reshaping Worlds: The Verbal Art of Women from Niger, Mali, and Senegal* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001), 52.

12. *Ibid.*, 48.

inka as a habit of Western literary criticism that resulted from the emphasis on ideology in the analysis of literature.¹³ Obioma Nnaemeka also highlights the importance of emotion in *So Long a Letter* when she states that Bâ's women "are not declaring war on men" but simply expressing their desire for happiness while rejecting "deception, humiliation [and] betrayal from their spouses."¹⁴ Nnaemeka paradoxically minimizes the women's emotional turmoil in her argument that the issue in Bâ's novel "is not polygamy [but] abandonment," for it is likely that Ramatoulaye would not have felt less bitter if Modou had followed the traditional and Islamic procedures when he married a second wife.¹⁵ The *marchande* ritual that Sidikou describes demonstrates that African societies have always acknowledged that polygamy causes resentment, because the ceremony follows a properly contracted polygamous marriage.

The argument that the women's focus of attack is the failure to follow traditional requirements for polygamy erroneously implies that African traditions romanticize polygamy as an institution in which everyone is comfortable as long as the correct procedures are followed. It also misrepresents the reality that resentment of polygamy or marital infidelity is an ageless and universal phenomenon that can be found in any range of narratives: from the Biblical story of Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel, to contemporary novels such as Terry Macmillan's *Waiting to Exhale* and Olivia Goldsmith's *First Wives' Club*. Using ideology to criticize or justify African women's expressing pain following their husbands' betrayal or subsequent marriages essentially demands of women that they ignore their pain, which is akin to imposing what Harris calls in a different article "this disease called strength."¹⁶

Another important factor often overlooked in literary criticism is the reality that African societies consider polygamy an exception rather than a norm. Like concubines and mis-

tresses in Western bourgeois and aristocratic circles, polygamous households are the domain of the wealthy because few men can afford it or are willing to deal with the complications that accompany it. In Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* and Abibatou Traoré's *Sidagamie*, the protagonists have neither the charisma nor the material resources to manage polygamous households, a situation that was exacerbated by the economic system imposed by colonialism.¹⁷ In *So Long a Letter*, Modou is a man who lacks social decorum and self-respect, and so it is not surprising that he eventually abandons his first family rather than contract a polygamous marriage. In Bâ's second novel, *Un chant écarlate* (*Scarlet Song*), the protagonist Ousmane is a weak character who seems unable to maintain a consistent position. He does not inform his mother of his impending marriage to Mireille, a Frenchwoman, and after his marriage he is unable to mediate the tension between his mother and his wife. He then remarries behind Mireille's back in the name of adhering to African tradition, but he ironically informs Ouleymatou that he is not willing to equally divide his time between his two wives as is traditionally required. The Grand Sérigne in Ken Bugul's *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (*Riwan or the Sandy Track*) does not encounter the same problems. His twenty-eight wives interact amiably, arguably due to his spiritual influence in the community.¹⁸ Such traditional and human complexities demonstrate that attributing the support of polygamy solely to ideological persuasions minimizes the social and world consciousness engrained in African traditions.

Traditions also accommodate the fact that human beings are both weak and strong, and so intense feelings that couples may have had at the onset of marriage may change over the course of time. Because this change may have a ripple effect on the community, traditions provide structures to ensure, for example, that the first family does not lose its economic or social support and that the women are able to voice their

13. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

14. Obioma Nnaemeka, "Urban Spaces, Women's Places: Polygamy as a Sign in Mariama Ba's Novels," in Nnaemeka, *Politics of (M)Othering*, 188.

15. Nnaemeka, "Urban Spaces," 179.

16. Trudier Harris, "This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Character of Black Female Character," *Literature and Medicine* 1 (1995): 109–26.

17. Ousmane Sembène, *Xala*, trans. C. Wake (Westport, CT: L. Hill, 1974); and Abibatou Traoré, *Sidagamie* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1998). *Sidagamie* is a combination of the prefix *SIDA* (the French equiva-

lent of the acronym *AIDS*) and the suffix *-gamie* (the French equivalent of the suffix *-gamy*). The novel portrays a polygamous household in which one of the wives becomes afflicted with AIDS.

18. Ken Bugul, *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (*Riwan or the Sandy Track*) (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1999).

anger. The flexible position on polygamy illustrates the fact that African traditions have never made claims to a perfect egalitarian society in which disputes do not exist; instead, they acknowledge the totality of the human being and provide structures through which conflict can be channeled and expelled from the community. The *marchande* ceremonies provide women with “a ritualized outcry necessary for maintaining women’s sanity and social balance.”¹⁹ Some *marchande* songs, as Sidikou observes, also warn the new co-wives of the rivalries they are to expect, advising them that “chatting is not fighting.”²⁰ *So Long a Letter* is a continuation of this tradition because the narration and the friendship allow the narrator to vent the women’s frustration with their husbands’ behavior.

The fact that polygamy is institutionalized in African societies does not necessarily mean that it is widely endorsed as is implied in Ojo-Ade’s assertion that polygamy is “the estate revered by traditionalists as a function of Africinity.”²¹ African societies still discourage polygamy because they recognize that it is a complicated institution with conflicting emotions and interests involved. The Gikuyu people in Kenya, for instance, have a proverb: *Nyumba igiri ni nyungu igiri cia urogi* (Two houses are two pots of poison). Thomas Hale also points out that wars and tensions captured in West African epics identify some of the sources of conflict as co-wife and sibling rivalries among the precolonial African elite.²² The breadth of these traditions demonstrates that the focus on wives in polygamous households is inherently misleading and simplifies the complexity of African societies.

Another problem in literary appraisal of Bâ’s novels is the assumption that the women who contest polygamy or seek love and individual fulfillment do so under the influence of Western ideals. A wide range of critics seem united in this view, from Ojo-Ade, who remarks

that Bâ’s feminism “smacks of Beauvoirism: the traditional marriage is a deterrent to woman’s promise,” to Brandy Hayslett, who states that Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou demonstrate that “knowledge, through education, is a way for women to throw off their traditional roles and have the courage to change their lives.”²³ Irène d’Almeida argues that Bâ’s writing is characterized by “a certain malaise” that “emerges from the dilemma women face in wanting to keep traditions while, at the same time, wanting to reject what, in society, ties women down.”²⁴ In her analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel *Changes: A Love Story*, Maria Olaussen contends that “romantic love is connected to the development of the ethos of a modern bourgeois subject where the issue of individual freedom and fulfillment is utilized selectively in opposition to an idea of traditional and oppressive marriage rituals.”²⁵

All these views perpetuate the stereotype of African marital relationships as oppressive to women and devoid of choice and other moral and social considerations, yet such an image lacks foundation in Bâ’s novels or in reality. In Bâ’s novel *Scarlet Song*, for instance, Ouleymatou, the second wife of the main protagonist Ousmane, does not make any claims to Western ideals when she refuses to consummate her first marriage to a polygamous old man.²⁶ Individual choice, separation, and divorce—even when exercised by women—are part of human nature and therefore not a rarity in Africa. In Mongo Beti’s first novel, *Mission terminée (Mission to Kala)*, the young Medza is sent to persuade the wife of a fellow villager to return to her husband. The mission is not endorsed by the woman’s father, who argues that his daughter is adult enough to make her own decisions.²⁷ In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye eventually accepts that tradition or Western ideologies do not sufficiently explain Modou’s marriage to Binetou and abandonment of his first wife and their children. She

19. Sidikou, *Recreating Words*, 58.

20. *Ibid.*, 53.

21. Ojo-Ade, “Still a Victim?” 76.

22. Thomas Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1990).

23. Ojo-Ade, “Still a Victim?” 84; Brandy Hayslett, “Sisterhood: Knowledge, Femininity, and Power in Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*,” in *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. Ada Azodo (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 144.

24. Irène d’Almeida, “The Concept of Choice in Mariama Bâ’s Fiction,” in *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. Carole B. Davies and Anne A. Graves (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986), 167.

25. Maria Olaussen, “‘About Lovers in Accra’: Urban Intimacy in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes: A Love Story*,” *Research in African Literatures* 2 (2002): 67.

26. Mariama Bâ, *Un chant écarlate (Scarlet Song)*, trans. D. Blair (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1985). Page citations for *Scarlet Song* are given in the text.

27. Mongo Beti, *Mission terminée (Mission to Kala)*, trans. P. Green (London: Heinemann, 1964).

concedes that Modou had made his choice and intimates to Aïssatou: “I cry for Modou and I can do nothing about it” (*Letter*, 56).

By the same token, romance, love, and other expressions of tenderness and intimacy are not a novelty in Africa. In his analysis of griot characters in African novels, Hale points out that Bâ’s novels reflect the role that griots play in romantic relationships.²⁸ In *So Long a Letter*, Farmata the griot is sent by Daouda Dieng to ask for Ramatoulaye’s hand in marriage, while in *Scarlet Song*, Ouleymatou engages the services of a griot while she entices Ousmane with succulent dishes.

These complexities point to another issue in literary studies of Bâ’s novels, which is the emphasis on themes at the expense of the narrative progression of the novels. The essays that criticize Bâ’s appeal to Western epistemology or her defiance of African tradition do not consider that the novel spans a period of at least thirty years. James Phelan terms readings that ignore such details “hasty thematization.” He cautions against interpreting themes or character traits “without [paying] sufficient attention to the relation of the trait to the rest of the person or character and situation and action in which he or she is engaged.”²⁹ When Ramatoulaye and Modou marry, they are enraptured not only in their romance but also in the ideals learned in colonial schools and the euphoria of independence. They believe that love is enough to confront the challenges of marriage. Twenty-five years and twelve children later, Ramatoulaye’s views of African traditions change. She tries to use the precepts of polygamy in dealing with Modou’s second marriage and participates in the mourning rites following his death. She also realizes that her mother’s reservations about Modou were well founded. As if addressing herself to Modou, she remarks, “I no longer scorn my mother’s reserve concerning you, for a woman can instinctively feel where her child’s happiness lies” (*Letter*, 14).

Although Esonwanne notes that Ramatoulaye resorts to traditional values in raising her

children, he glosses over her maturation from a naive young woman in love who rejects African traditions to a mother and wife who relies on them to cope with the challenges she faces. Like many other human stories, Bâ’s novels are about the tragedy of living with the consequences of decisions made in the passion of youth, and so her ideological inclinations need not be judged simply on the basis of the mistakes the protagonists made when they were young.

Even though polygamy and resentment of it are not unique to Western societies, Bâ’s narrators and elite protagonists believe the contrary. As Nwachukwu-Agbada has noted, the fact that the first wives have all received a Western education and that the uneducated women “are often behind the sad fortunes of these marriages” is a telling indicator that the narrator associates tradition with failed marriages.³⁰ Moreover, the direct link between Ousmane and Ouleymatou’s marriage and the mental breakdown of his first wife, Mireille, suggests that romance in African traditions is largely unviable, leading to heart-break rather than to loving and fruitful unions. Another paradox in Bâ’s novels is the fact that the men do not follow the laid-down procedures when they marry second wives despite their justification that polygamy is an accepted African practice. The question therefore arises as to why the elite have a negative perception of African traditions in general and why they do not follow the traditions they proclaim to embrace.

Few critics have addressed these contradictions, and most have settled for the ambiguous position that the elite resort to the traditions they initially disregarded when they got married the first time. Nwachukwu-Agbada concedes that the men participated in defying tradition but still places the ultimate responsibility for the failure of the marriages on the women. He hints that Western-educated women tire African husbands: “What makes a man prefer the ‘simpler’ wife to the perfume-wearing, richly clad, gold-bangled, and enlightened woman? Mariama Bâ never worried her male characters long enough to elicit an appropriate response to the ques-

28. Thomas Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

29. James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 13.

30. Nwachukwu-Agbada, “One Wife Be for One Man,” 568.

tion.”³¹ However, the answer to Nwachukwu-Agbada's question is almost impossible to determine and probably immaterial, since the brokenhearted are not in a position to seek rational justifications for their pain. In any case, the logical reasons for which a spouse or lover leaves a partner cannot completely assuage the pain of a broken heart. This notwithstanding, one can also quote the age-old saying “the grass is always greener on the other side” to reflect the reality that most people who have affairs or remarry are usually attracted by characteristics that they imagine their spouses lack. If such is the case, then one would ask why limited Western schooling seems to be the common denominator that links the men's second wives.

Nnaemeka says that the men are confused and suggests that the “modern urban African man juggles different, sometimes conflicting, systems to his advantage.”³² However, the advantage that the men derive from the dishonesty is not evident in the novels. Once Modou remarries, he refuses to reason with relatives who attempt to persuade him against abandoning Ramatoulaye and their children. When he accompanies his new wife, Binetou, to nightclubs he is mocked by one of his daughter's age mates because he cannot keep up with the fast tempo of the music. The humiliation he is willing to endure confounds even members of the public, who suggest that he is bewitched.

Juggling both traditions and Western values is also not the reserve of men alone. Ramatoulaye, for instance, initially rejected the African tradition of dowry when she married Modou, but she later accepts the community's intervention on her behalf and adheres to the mourning rituals following her husband's death. Esonwanne rightly observes that Ramatoulaye “is selective about ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity,’ just as a farmer would sort her seeds into viable and non-viable before planting.”³³

I do agree with Nnaemeka that the men are confused more than anything else, but I think that their confusion stems less from masculine privilege and more from the internal con-

flict caused by colonial assimilation. Assimilation put Africans at variance with their communities by educating them to embrace values that demeaned Africans and that exalted the West. As Albert Memmi succinctly observed, the assimilation candidate “was torn between what he was and what he wanted to be, and now he is torn between what he wanted to be and what he is making of himself.”³⁴ Aïssatou's husband, Mawdou, justifies his second marriage as a resort to “polygamic instincts,” apparently unaware that his comments subscribe to the racist depiction of African sexual relations as primarily instinctual and devoid of moral or social considerations. He even uses a distasteful analogy provided by a film he saw “in which the survivors of a plane crash survived by eating the flesh of the corpses” (*Letter*, 33). He adds that “a wife must understand, once and for all, and must forgive; she must not worry herself about ‘betrayals of the flesh.’” Ramatoulaye rightly identifies this reference to instinct as reducing Mawdou's young wife, Nabou, “to a plate of food” (*Letter*, 34).

The effect of colonial assimilation in distorting healthy perceptions of sexuality and marriage is clearer in *Scarlet Song*. When Ousmane finally marries Mireille, he cannot reconcile himself to the fact that she comes from the country that colonized his own. He therefore seeks consolation in Ouleymatou but tragically applies the assimilation discourse he despises. His turmoil is evident in this passage: “In his mind, he confused Ouleymatou with Africa, ‘an [Africa] which has to be restored to its prerogatives, to be helped to evolve!’ When he was with the African woman, he was the prophet of the ‘word made truth,’ the messiah with the unstinting hands, providing nourishment for the body and soul. . . . Mireille, armed by centuries of civilization, could survive” (*Scarlet Song*, 149–50).

Nnaemeka does not side with the narrator's sympathy for Ousmane and asserts that “Ousmane is not in the least confused, he knows what he is doing; he is only battling his demons.”³⁵ However, battling demons is arguably a sign of the trauma of colonialism rather than

31. Ibid.

32. Nnaemeka, “Urban Spaces,” 175.

33. Esonwanne, “Enlightenment Epistemology,” 91.

34. Albert Memmi, *Potrait du colonisé: Précédé de portrait du colonisateur (The Colonizer and the Colonized)*, trans. H. Greenfeld (New York: Orion, 1965), 140.

35. Nnaemeka, “Urban Spaces,” 186.

the musings of a rational mind. I agree with Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi that the above passage constitutes “the strongest feminist statement of the novel,” but I differ from her argument that Ousmane’s misunderstanding demonstrates how African women are idealized to suit the claims of black nationalism.³⁶ The author’s poignant insight into Ousmane’s character expresses the paradox that when Ousmane speaks about the African woman, he necessarily speaks about himself as a colonial subject.

It is important to distinguish the classes that dominate various nationalisms before hastily criticizing them for the limited visibility of women. In most cases, the political parties and labor unions that fought for independence were largely dominated by men because colonialism gave them greater access to education and jobs. In contrast, a greater proportion of women participated in armed struggles as soldiers, as messengers, or as people who provided shelter and food to those fleeing capture from colonial authorities. The fact that they did not occupy seats in the national governments reflects the reality that the bourgeoisie who took over the reins of power in independent African nations were often not those involved in armed liberation struggles. As Frantz Fanon predicted and as history has confirmed, the Western-educated or -funded bourgeoisie would remain one of the major obstacles to Africa’s attainment of autonomy after independence.³⁷ The limitations of the African bourgeoisie affected entire African nations and not women alone.

While Nnaemeka and Nfah-Abbenyi minimize the men’s trauma that accompanied assimilation and its inevitable impact on women, Ojo-Ade and Mule largely ignore it and focus instead on the women’s bourgeois ethics. However, both sides neglect to point out that men’s and women’s trauma are interrelated and cannot be divorced from each other. For instance, both Ramatoulaye and Modou exhibit symptoms of alienation from the beginning of their relationship. While in France pursuing his studies,

Modou writes to his fiancée praising the beauty of French women as having an “advantage over the black woman” because their hair varied in color, length, and softness and their eyes could be “blue, green and often the color of honey” (*Letter*, 14). Many African women would wince at such comparisons with white women, but Ramatoulaye is impressed by his apparent nostalgia for the swinging hips of African women and fondly remembers: “And yet, what didn’t he do to make me his wife!” (12). She does not realize that Modou is a profoundly conflicted man who essentially states that he loves her despite her being black. It is little wonder that he defies African traditions in both his marriages by failing to pay a dowry for Ramatoulaye and then abandoning her twenty-five years later to marry Binetou.

The visible effects of assimilation in both the male and female elite call into question the critical practice of focusing on one gender alone. This approach to criticism neglects the reality that oppression functions largely through the distortion of emotions and relationships, not simply through problematic gender divisions. Patricia Hill Collins observes that “sexuality and power on the personal level become wedded to the sex/gender hierarchy on the social structural level in order to ensure the smooth operation of race, gender and class oppression.”³⁸ Consequently, it would be better to examine how the people relate to one another and go about their daily lives, rather than to analyze them as isolated individuals or social groups.

In order to assess the impact of oppression on African sexuality, one needs to identify the specific values, institutions, events, and actors that frame the thinking and relationships of the African elite. It is easy to vaguely accuse Western colonialism of being responsible for tragic events in Africa because, as Lewis Gordon argues, power entrenches itself through anonymity and generalizations that obscure its interests and actors. The role of the intellectual is to put

36. Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 122.

37. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre (The Wretched of the Earth)*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004).

38. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 196.

a historical and human face to power, for unless one does that one cannot determine the exact cause and nature of colonialism's responsibility for Africa's problems. Gordon refers to this gesture as "dramatizing" the colonial situation, observing that the intellectual's role is "to help set the stage, as it were, for the characters to unfold in their peculiarities."³⁹ The greatest weakness in the criticism of Bâ's novels is the failure to address the peculiarities of French education in influencing the elite's thinking, which is paradoxical given the numerous references to colonial assimilation. Such a paradox essentially provides catharsis for audiences seeking condemnation from the third world without assuming responsibility for its impact in oppressing Africans at real and individual levels.⁴⁰

It is evident that the distorted view of African traditions, marriage, and sexuality in Bâ's novels is rooted in colonial assimilation, but few critics have furnished details of who, when, why, or how it functioned. It is this situation that I regard as the "silence" of literary criticism. Esnonwanne rightly notes that the maze of contradictions in the heterosexual relationships indicates the values of European Enlightenment that the bourgeoisie inherited through colonial education but fails to specify how these values were transmitted or how they affected the elite beyond their ideological affinities. In the rest of this article, I analyze the historical and cultural peculiarities of French colonialism and link them directly to events in Bâ's novels.

One of the defining characteristics of French imperialism is the discourse of love and the emphasis on France's ostensible goodwill toward Africa. From the nineteenth century onward, France identified concern for Africans' welfare as its central motivation and dubbed colonialism a civilizing mission. In so doing, it applied the colonial framework as a model for human relationships. As Dawn Rae Davis notes, love within the civilization discourse functions

as the "basis for a benevolent rhetoric of the West dutifully marching alongside the imperialist project and justifying its systems of information gathering and domination—the ideological foundation for moral and economic salvation."⁴¹ While benevolence necessarily entails power difference, the colonizer insisted that the differences had been eliminated by universal principles. In reality, the differences were not wiped out but camouflaged by concepts defined according to European patriarchal values.⁴² This definition of love in which stated ideals perpetually contradict concrete realities allowed the French empire to justify its civilizing mission while maintaining silence about the oppression and exploitation that entrenched it.

Since the universal essentially stood for white, benevolence became the negation of the African in his or her totality. As Gordon puts it, love under the racist framework constitutes an opportunity to "escape blackness through a lover's words of whiteness."⁴³ Fanon translated the same reality as follows: "When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I'm locked in the infernal cycle."⁴⁴ Blacks were expected to respond to this demeaning expression of love by embracing their inferior position. They were urged to give up any legitimate claims to freedom in order to match the privileges that the colonizer had ostensibly forfeited on their behalf. Consequently, accepting the colonizer's love meant accepting Africa's unworthiness to prove the benevolence of France.

When these dynamics are applied to African marriage, polygamy becomes the anathema of love from which Africans are redeemed when they embrace Western values. This discourse of polygamy has persisted in France over the past two centuries. Even today, monogamy in African immigrant households is used as a gauge of their integration into French society.⁴⁵ This rhetoric

39. Lewis Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism in a Neocolonial Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 167.

40. For more on the implication of the third world scholar in the Western academy, see *ibid.*, chap. 9.

41. Dawn Rae Davis, "(Love Is) the Ability of Not Knowing: Feminist Experience of the Impossible in Ethical Singularity," *Hypatia* 2 (2002): 147.

42. *Ibid.*, 149.

43. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children*, 41–42.

44. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*), trans. C. L. Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 116.

45. For an analysis of this phenomenon, see Jane Freedman, "Women and Immigration: Nationality and Citizenship," in *Women, Immigration, and Identities in France*, ed. Carrie Tarr and Jane Freedman (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 13–28; Caroline Sargent and Denis Cordell, "Polygamy, Disrupted Reproduction, and the State: Malian Immigrants in Paris, France," *Social Science and Medicine* 56 (2003): 1961–72.

can be traced to the nineteenth century when polygamy was used as a signifier of French empire and civilization. In debates preceding the 1884 legislation that reinstated divorce, opponents defended monogamy as inherently French and as an institution that spared Frenchwomen the sufferings of “pagan” and Muslim women in polygamous marriages.⁴⁶ In the early twentieth century, magazines in France carried images of the overworked African woman collecting firewood and drawing water, always with a child on her back. African men were portrayed as marrying multiple wives to exploit their labor and satisfy their sexual appetites.⁴⁷ Polygamy thus developed from the bane of the Frenchwoman’s existence to the justification of colonialism as the mission to save African women from their misery.

This image of polygamy had an impact on women’s education both in France and in the colonies. Colonial administrators who saw polygamy as an embodiment of Islam used it as an indicator of the potential threat to colonial rule particularly in western Africa. To moderate this threat, a 1902 education report called for an increase in girls’ schools in the hope that educated African girls would inspire affection for the French in their husbands and children.⁴⁸ The proposed curriculum differed little from what was offered in girls’ schools in France. It included French language, geography, and history, as well as reading, writing, hygiene, and child care. The incorporation of Frenchwomen into the colonizing mission through education was also reflected in manuals on life in the colonies that Alice Conklin notes, advised the woman to “help the French win their subjects’ trust by influencing African mothers to whom she had unique access.” Conklin adds: “French women appear to have embraced these roles, which, after all, did not differ much from the

ones that strident demographers were encouraging them to play at home.”⁴⁹

One of the women who responded to the call of the civilizing mission was Germaine Le Goff, the French headmistress of the École normale de Rufisque that Bâ attended between 1943 and 1947.⁵⁰ In an article she wrote on education in the colonies, Le Goff described her school as “une famille où des femmes françaises se font mères éclairées des jeunes filles Africaines [*sic*]” (a family in which Frenchwomen became the enlightened mothers of young African girls).⁵¹ Education would give African students “les mêmes droits que ceux des femmes blanches” (the same rights as those of white women) by training African women to be wives and mothers like their French counterparts (533). Le Goff’s description of the house—its living room and bedroom, its floors covered in carpets and animal skins, its walls with paintings and photographs—reflects the model of a home that the students were expected to replicate once they graduated. She also expected that these new domestic ethics would guarantee monogamous marriage:

Que les Noirs sachent que . . . ces jeunes filles, ces jeunes femmes, dans l’ensemble, sont simples et toutes prêtes à se dévouer dans un simple foyer, car même les musulmanes veulent avoir un mari qui soit bien un mari et le père de leurs enfants, de leurs enfants seulement. (563)

[Let Africans know that . . . these girls, these young women, are generally modest and always ready to devote themselves to a simple home, for even Muslim women want to have a husband who is a good husband and the father of their children and their children only.]

In the above passage, the house and the couple are collapsed into one entity so as to present monogamy as a reward system that would solicit the gratitude of African men to their wives for being domestic and of women to their

46. Elisabeth Pedersen, *Legislating the French Family: Feminism, Theatre, and Republican Politics, 1870–1920* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 32.

47. See Eric Savarèse, *Histoire coloniale et immigration: Une invention de l’étranger (Colonial History and Immigration: The Invention of the Foreigner)* (Paris: Séguier, 2000).

48. See René Lemier, *L’enseignement en Afrique occidentale française (Education in French West Africa)* (Corbeil, France: Crété, 1906), 81.

49. Alice Conklin, “Redefining ‘Frenchness’: Race, Regeneration, and Imperial Motherhood in France and West Africa, 1914–1940,” in *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, ed. J. A. Clancy-Smith and F. Gouda (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 76.

50. For more information on Le Goff, see Pascale Barthélémy’s “La formation des institutrices africaines en AOF: Pour une lecture historique du roman de Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre*” (“The Training of African Women Teachers in French West Africa: A Historical Reading of Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*”), *Clio* 6 (1997): 155–67.

51. Germaine Le Goff, “L’éducation des filles en AOF” (“Girls’ Education in French West Africa”), *Oversea Education* 4 (1937): 561. All translations of Le Goff’s article are my own.

husbands for remaining monogamous. Ultimately all Africans would be grateful to France for giving them civilization, a conviction that was spurred by letters Le Goff received from African husbands and fiancés who wrote “pour exprimer une reconnaissance émue à la France qui leur donnait des compagnes” (to express heartfelt gratitude to France for giving them companions) (562). The citation of these letters does not acknowledge the fact that few Senegalese could read and write in French because colonial education for Africans was limited. Moreover, women’s education necessarily benefited the African male *évolué* because, as Conklin observes, colonial laws after 1932 required that an African man seeking French citizenship furnish evidence that he and his family “were culturally French.” She adds: “To prove that he and his wife lived as French, he had to be monogamous.”⁵²

The irony of girls’ education as described by Le Goff was that the syllabus was largely based on African cultures. Students prepared African meals, wore African attire, and used African materials for the interior décor of a house that was nicknamed “la case” (the hut). The reliance on local knowledge unveils the narcissistic nature of colonialism that sought to give France credit for everything Africans did. The African graduates would marry as they had always done, wear the same clothes, eat the same meals, and raise their children in the same way, but this time they would do so thanks to French rather than African values. This continuity between love, monogamy, domestic ethics, and colonial assimilation indicates how the elite in Bâ’s novels may have gotten trapped in a vicious cycle of not being sure what “African” or “Western” values exactly entailed.

There are a number of important themes that Bâ’s fiction shares with Le Goff’s article. One is the emphasis on housework as the sole expression of women’s love for their husbands and on monogamy as the sole expression of men’s love for their wives. The combination of this ethic with the racial element of love as defined by African alterity meant that women would give up their cultures and selflessly dedicate themselves to housework, in the vague hope

that the husband would remain monogamous and with the sole consolation of maintaining the higher moral ground should he fail to do so. Thus Ramatoulaye disregards her mother’s skepticism about Modou, defies the tradition of dowry to marry him, and then judiciously balances taking care of her twelve children with her career as a teacher. Her description of the house as “a haven of peace where everything had its place . . . a harmonious symphony of colors” (*Letter*, 56) vaguely reflects the curriculum offered at Le Goff’s school. Her pride in the skill at coordinating her domestic and professional responsibilities is evident in her claims that her dedication kept her “first up in the morning, last to go to bed, always working” (20).

However, these domestic ethics also accentuated the tension with her in-laws. While Ramatoulaye sees the house as central to protecting her marriage, the in-laws see the house in terms of social relations. Ramatoulaye complains that her sisters-in-law crowded her home and watched as their children “romped around on my chairs” and laments that she had to tolerate their “phlegm expertly secreted under my carpets” (19). With the collapse of her marriage, she is therefore left perplexed at the work she did to maintain Modou’s physical comfort.

Depending on one’s perspective, Ramatoulaye’s attitude and expectations were either self-righteous or misguided. Ojo-Ade appears to prefer the former when he implies that Ramatoulaye’s account is self-congratulatory and falsely modest:

The engrossing picture is that of Ramatoulaye, suddenly called to her dead husband’s hospital bed, overwhelmed by what she calls the “atrocious tragedy,” desperate in her desire to revive him. . . . That love surpasses all class constraints and traditional taboos. And we might rush to state that all is a matter of love between the heroine and her man. But the ambiguity prevalent in the text exists here, too. Love in the colonial context—that society evolving toward the accepted zenith of materialistic civilization—is not detached from the material.⁵³

Ojo-Ade rightly captures the contradiction of French domestic ethics that proclaimed

52. Conklin, “Redefining ‘Frenchness,’” 75.

53. Ojo-Ade, “Still a Victim?” 81–82.

love as founded on metaphysical ideals but in reality framed it in terms of consumer values. However, I think that Ramatoulaye is more naive than materialistic. She seems to have placed all her eggs in the same basket in the hope that her husband will remain monogamous, yet human nature dictates that feelings may change over time and circumstances. My concern here is not with women doing housework but with women's reliance on monogamy as the sole motivation for their efforts. Ideally, housework should be done because it needs to be done rather than because one hopes for a reward that cannot be guaranteed. Mireille in *Scarlet Song* is so confident about abandoning her family in France and maintaining an immaculate house in Senegal that she isolates herself from the community and especially from her mother-in-law. This perception of marriage in which the woman's sole motivation is her husband is foreign to African traditions in which sisterhood provides emotional support and friendships for married women. Nfah-Abbenyi makes a similar point when she observes that "Mireille's biggest mistake comes from the fact that she does not actively seek out and court a women's network that would support and offer other avenues for undermining oppressive institutions."⁵⁴

Another problem with the bourgeois domestic ethic was its reduction of the mundane elements of family life to ideological platforms. Under colonialism, monogamy and polygamy were seen not as two forms of marriage in Africa but as indicators of one's cultural sympathy toward France or Africa, respectively. This false dichotomy exacerbates gender conflicts so that when the marriages end, the women blame the men for not adhering to universal values, while the men accuse the women of not respecting traditional values. In *Scarlet Song*, Jeanette Treiber states, Mireille and Ousmane "act out their individual ideologies in a hideous power play. Their everyday life becomes a battle in which each attempts to assert his or her power."⁵⁵

The fundamental problem with the colonial framework is the illusion that love is restricted solely to goodwill and excludes material conditions in which people live. This inherently

requires that people deny their history and culture in the name of love, yet one cannot love another without also accepting the rational, emotional, physical, and social dimensions of that person. In Bâ's novels, the elite erroneously believe that tenderness is enough to overcome colonial history, racism, African traditions, and other material realities. Ramatoulaye praises her former headmistress because she believes that the latter's affection overrides the reality of colonialism. She observes that the headmistress "loved us without patronizing us. . . . She knew how to discover and appreciate our qualities" (*Letter*, 16). Esonwanne suggests that her minimization of the headmistress's position in the colonial framework is evidence of "the rather paradoxical situation in which even well-meaning Europeans find themselves under colonialism," so that the headmistress is "at once a source of inspiration and empowerment for women and . . . a purveyor of an evolutionist view of African culture."⁵⁶ On the contrary, Ramatoulaye's failure to question the headmistress's colonial status is the successful accomplishment of education that vaunted the French Republic's good intentions in order to distract the attention of African intellectuals from colonial oppression. To paraphrase Fanon, Ramatoulaye is grateful that a European loved the students "despite" their being African and delivered them from the confines of tradition "not because" she was under the obligation to do so.

This false perception of love is not limited to the women alone. In *Scarlet Song*, Lamine ignores the history of assimilation that required Africans to disown their cultures. He defends his French wife's absence from family events by arguing that "if to respect my wife and let her live happily in the way that she chooses means that I've been colonized, then I have been colonized" (*Scarlet Song*, 100). Lamine fails to realize that he is making no sacrifice since colonialism had already trained the elite to deny their cultures and given Europeans the privilege to defy them.

In contrast to the elite, the nonelite do not idealize love and are more practical about the possibilities of love and the limits marriage. In

54. Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing*, 119.

55. Jeanette Treiber, "Feminism and Identity Politics: Mariama Bâ's *Un chant écarlate*," *Research in African Literatures* 4 (1996): 114–15.

56. Esonwanne, "Enlightenment Epistemology," 91.

So Long a Letter, Binetou's and Mawdou's mothers are determined to protect and advance their socioeconomic status through the marriages of their children. Farmata, the griot, is also practical when she reminds Ramatoulaye that she is no longer an eighteen-year-old with the luxury of choosing a husband based on the palpitations of the heart. In *Scarlet Song*, Ouleymatou eventually decides that Ousmane would provide her with the economic and social stability she wanted. Nfah-Abbenyi points out that the manner in which she deftly garnered the support of Ousmane's mother, Yaye Khady, was consistent with traditional roles and expectations of married women. She adds that the tensions between Yaye Khady and Mireille favored Ouleymatou's efforts because they emanated from Yaye Khady's consciousness that Mireille, as a Frenchwoman, was exempt from the traditional expectations of daughters-in-law. The fact that Mireille did little to contradict Yaye Khady's suspicions made things only worse.

These factors notwithstanding, one cannot romanticize the women's accomplishments, because they are unaware of the long-term implications of their actions. In *So Long a Letter*, Binetou and her mother lose their source of income upon the death of Modou, while in *Scarlet Song*, Yaye Khady has to reckon with the stabbing of her son by the enraged Mireille. The foundation of their actions in African traditions does not prevent them from suffering, since colonialism had distorted the conditions in which African traditions thrive. Unlike the women who deal with concrete realities, the elite women are confounded by their husbands' remarriage despite following the bourgeois prescriptions of the exemplary wife. Meanwhile, a Frenchwoman succumbs to depression when she realizes that racial privilege does not dissipate simply because she loves an African man. The African male characters are also adversely affected. They retain the mental and emotional scars of colonialism, espousing ideals incompatible with their environment and unable to foster healthy relationships with their wives and children.

All these outcomes demonstrate that love is not authentic if it requires people to feign denial of the material conditions in which they live. This argument in Fanon's analysis of interracial relationships in *Black Skin, White Masks* was unfortunately swept under the rug by feminist critiques accusing him of misogyny. The scholars overlooked the fact that his criticism of Mayotte Capécia's novel about a black woman who seeks to marry a white man is followed by his analysis of René Maran's novel about a black man's internal conflict following his proposal to a mulatto woman. Moreover, the pathology Fanon described was not limited to women or blacks alone. It extended to whites who sought in interracial relations the means to connect with the emotional and corporeal aspects that rationality had falsely defined as the exclusive domain of blacks.⁵⁷

The fact that African women scholars were among those criticizing Fanon is a tragic reminder of how the Western concepts of gender distract Africans' attention from the common foundation of their oppression. Likewise, the focus on the male or female protagonists alone in the criticism of Bâ's novels has obscured the role of colonialism in distorting relationships between African men and women, leading critics to talk past each other across the gender divide. Meanwhile, few question the fact that the academy tends to select books by African women in which the female characters are victims of abuse, excision, or infidelity as opposed to books that do not tackle these themes. Thus more attention would be given to Bâ's or Calixthe Beyala's novels that overtly deal with marriage and sexuality than to Aminata Sow Fall's fiction, which does not.⁵⁸ Ken Bugul's *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*, in which the protagonist voluntarily chooses to enter a polygamous marriage, has received considerably less attention than her *Le Baobab fou* (*The Abandoned Baobab*), which tackles abortion and homosexuality and has been translated into English. These biases effectively perpetuate the marginalization of African women from the political, historical realms that

57. See Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, chap. 2 for analysis of Capécia's novel, chap. 3 for analysis of Maran's novel, and chap. 6 for the links between racist myths and some of the psychiatric problems suffered by European patients.

58. See Samba Gadjigo, "L'œuvre littéraire d'Aminata Sow Fall face à la critique" ("Aminata Sow Fall's Literary Work as Viewed by Critics"), *Notre librairie* 118 (1994): 25–28.

feminism ironically claims to challenge. Such institutional dynamics make the following remarks by Joyce A. Joyce about the reception of Alice Walker's novel pertinent to African literary criticism: "To no small degree, some contemporary Black women writers have contributed, perhaps unwillingly, to the political atmosphere that undergirds this imperilment by enhancing the mainstream community's stereotypes of the African-American male. While we live in an exciting time in African-American creative productivity and while Black women writers are indeed at the vanguard of American literature, the politics surrounding the publishing of Black women writers calls for much caution."⁵⁹

Although one cannot hold African women writers responsible for Western responses to their work, the assumption that the mere increase in visibility of their writing necessarily benefits African cultures needs to be questioned. After all, if one already questions the extent to which African literature in European languages reflects the aspirations of the African majority, it is hypocritical not to raise the same issues when the writers are women. Similarly, if colonial assimilation distorted the intimate and social lives of African men, it is contradictory to assume that African women somehow emerged from Western education unscathed. It is important to articulate African women's voices and experiences related to issues such as education, language, politics, and economics, rather than leave these issues to male scholars and writers alone while accusing them of disregarding the importance of gender. Similarly, one needs to extend the impact of the stereotype of black men as instinctual beyond the men, because the women have to contend with the pathological fantasies fueled by these images, and societies often bear the material cost of the alienated men's ego trips.

Scholars' insistence that African feminism is not exclusionary has not undermined the reality captured by Gordon's observation

that "when we say 'gender studies' we invariably mean discourses on women. . . . The centered significance of gender has begun to function like race."⁶⁰ For this reason, it is important to tackle issues of love and sexuality as they relate to everyone and not just to women or men. One may also need to keep in mind that scholars in the United States sometimes read critical views of African women's literature as evidence of African patriarchy or as resentment toward African women who ostensibly enjoy the benefits of Western education.⁶¹ African women writers need not be held entirely responsible for these assessments on the grounds that they have not overtly addressed political issues. It is impossible for any African writer, regardless of gender, to compress all the social, political, and individual issues facing Africans into the pages of a novel. Moreover, African literature is not simply an ideological document to justify or explain the continent; it is also an interrogation of the human condition.

The women in Bâ's novels need not be reduced to naïve converts of assimilation or to superwomen battling the forces of patriarchy. They are simply human beings who are as flawed as they are triumphant. Attributing to them heroic feats without acknowledging their pain and weaknesses is as oppressive as portraying them as male bashers or self-righteous victims. It obscures the scars of colonialism that the women share with their families, the men they love, and the children they raise. The role of the critic is not to defend the novels simply because they are written by women, but also to be critical of the impact that such a defense might have. As Harris asserts, "Mere praise ignores the responsibility that goes along with it—we must clarify as much as we can the reasons that things are being praised and enumerate as best we can the consequences of that praise."⁶² ∫

59. Joyce A. Joyce, *Warriors, Conjurors, and Priests: Defining African-Centered Literary Criticism* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1994), 248–49.

60. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children*, 77.

61. Odile Cazenave, for example, speculates that Africans' critique of Beyala's novels could be informed by jealousy of the writer's success in France. See

Odile Cazenave, *Afrique sur Seine: Une nouvelle génération de romanciers africains à Paris (Africa on the Seine: A New Generation of African Writers in Paris)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 230.

62. Harris, "On *The Color Purple*," 161.