



## Cadmus' myth in Mariama Ba's "So Long a Letter": an intertextual study

أسطورة قدموس في "رسالة الطويلة جداً" لمارياما با: دراسة نصية

## Mythe de Cadmus dans "So Long a Letter" de Mariama Ba: une étude intertextuelle

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### ملخص

يظهر التناقص في رواية "رسالة طويلة جداً" لمرياما با مع أسطورة كادمس. هذه المقالة ستبين أين تظهر هذه الأسطورة وكيف استعملت في تحليل أزمات النساء مثل تعدد الزوجات والبدائل التي تقترحها الكاتبة لنساء السنغال في مرحلة ما بعد الاستقلال. إلى جانب ذلك هذه الأسطورة تبرز عرش أسطورة إفريقيا الأم التي في نظرها غير ملائمة في هذه الحقبة. الكاتبة أيضاً تقترح إلزامية اتحاد النساء والذي يمثله في الرواية تبادل الرسائل بين الشخصيتين راماتولاي و عيساتو.

الكلمات الدالة: مرياما با؛ رسالة طويلة جداً؛ تعدد الزوجات؛ أسطورة كادمس؛ تبادل الرسائل.

### Abstract

Cadmus' myth appears to be an intertext in Mariama Ba's «*So Long a Letter*». This paper will highlight where this myth lies in, how it takes part in the analysis of the women's issues like polygamy and the alternatives Mariama Ba presents to Senegalese women in the post-independence era. This myth shakes that of Mother Africa which proves, in M. Ba's opinion, inappropriate in this era. Besides, M. Ba opts for a necessary sisterhood which she represents by her recourse to epistolary.

**Keywords:** Mariama Ba; «*So Long a Letter*»; cadmus myth; epistolary; polygamy

### Résumé

Le mythe de Cadmus apparait comme un intertexte dans le roman de Mariama Ba, *Une Si Longue Lettre*. Cet article illuminera ou le mythe réside, comment il participe à l'analyse de la situation des femmes Sénégalaises comme la polygamie et les alternatives que l'auteure présente aux femmes après l'Indépendance. Ce mythe remet en cause celui de Mère Afrique qui prouve selon l'opinion de M. Ba, inapproprié pendant cette ère. M. Ba aussi défend la nécessité de l'union des

femmes Sénégalaises qu'elle représente par son recours au genre épistolaire.

**Mots-cles:** Mariama Ba; *une si longue lettre*; mythe de cadmus; épistolaire; polygamie

## Introduction

The inclusion of myths in women's narratives illustrates an act of a woman writer's resistance as the world of myths excludes women as active agents. Her entrance into the domain of writing parallels her entrance into the domain of the myth sometimes in order to feminize it. The following article will shed light on the inclusion of Cadmus' myth in Mariama Bâ's «*So Long A Letter*» and on its instrumentalization as a sub/text in order to unravel and stand against the patriarchal practices in Senegal such as polygamy and oppression.

It will try to answer the following questions: How does Mariama Bâ use this myth in her novel? Why does she use a pair of female characters, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye? Is there really a link of contrast (in spite of some similarities) between the two?

The aim of this article is to uncover from a feminist perspective the working of this myth in Bâ's narrative in order to re-contextualize Aissatou and ultimately rehabilitate Ramatoulaye as a woman who shows resistance to patriarchy in a way totally different from Aissatou's.

## 1. Feminist perspectives on myth-criticism

Myth-criticism has been besides other issues the target of feminist criticism. Simone De Beauvoir stresses that myth represents the male reality. She identifies transcendence of the subject as the aim of the myth while this subject cannot be in anyway a woman. She writes:

A myth always implies a subject who projects his hopes and his fears towards a sky of transcendence. Women do not set themselves up as Subject and hence...they dream through the dreams of men... Men have shaped for their own exaltation great virile figures: Hercules, Prometheus, Parsifal...woman has only a secondary part to play in the destiny of these heroes[...]



Representation of the world ...is the work of men;they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.(Simone de Beauvoir,162)

Indeed, myths 'often prioritize masculinity by giving male characters a certain additional degree of voice and visibility... mythic femininity is vulnerable to appropriation in ways that mythic masculinity is not'(Bahun-Radunovic; Rajan, 9). This vulnerability is due to their 'deprivation of *mythos*, of their myth, and their cooptation or enslavement into the male mythic structures.' (Sankovitch, 5)

However, some women critics view myths as textual occasions for women's rehabilitation and agency. For example, Susan Sellers views in *mythos* 'playful possibilities of language to create a plurality of meanings that will exceed all rational binary orders, including the foundation of the *logos* itself' (Susan Sellers, 24).

She also sees feminist re/writing as a place of 'ironic mimicry and clever twists as well as a whole gamut of tactics that would open the myth from the inside as well as out' (Sellers, 30). It can be thought of as 'an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction of bringing into being enabling alternatives' (Sellers, 30).

In other words, it is in *mythos* that the woman can rehabilitate herself and withstand the *logos* of patriarchy. Sanja Bahun-Radunovic and V.G Julie Rajan side with the position that 'women writers and artists find in myth an adequate means to negotiate against various forms of violence'(Bahun-Radunovic; Rajan, 5) like the one 'inherited' from phallogocentrism; they 'employ narrative stratagems such as the re-focalization of mythic stories from a female perspective'(Bahun-Radunovic; Rajan, 5).

Tilde A. Sankovitch sees that the women's absence from the world of *mythos* reflects their absence from the world of the Book, that is of expression; 'their access to the world of the Book has been effectively blocked by that negatively [mythical] determining absence' (Sankovitch, 5). This implies that the woman writer's access to the world of the Book means necessarily her



access to the world of the *mythos* and vice versa, and this explains the inclusion of myths in her writing.

On the basis of these women critics's readings of myths, this article will explain the function(s) of this myth and the implications of its use in an African woman's novel from a feminist perspective. In fact, my interest in Cadmus Myth was also triggered by my reading of Charles O'Keefe's article, 'Sinking One's Teeth into Mariama Bâ's "«So Long a Letter»": Lessons of Cadmus' which gist hinges on the connection of the image of teeth and the issue of polygamy.

Cadmus' myth, as Charles O'Keefe remarks, is an intertext in Ba's novel, «*So Long a Letter*». His enlisting of the many uses of the teeth in the novel pages '1, 37-38, 60, 62, 73, 76, 84' (O'Keefe, 64), stands for his position that this myth can be taken 'as a point of departure in order to highlight the narrator Ramatoulaye's unacknowledged inconsistencies and conflicts both in the cultural and emotional domains' (O'Keefe, 63). However, my direction in this article will be towards how women writers 'invade' the world of *Mythos* in order to enter the world of the Book, of expression, and re/write the mythos in order to reward the woman with a more active rôle, and this literally happens with Mariama Ba and her Aissatou and Ramatoulaye.

## **2-A summary of the Greek myth of Cadmus**

The myth of Cadmus consists of two essential outcomes: the building of the city of Thebes and the introduction of the alphabet into Greece. According to mythology, Cadmus' Sister, Europa, was abducted by the chief of the gods, Zeus. Devastated at the news of his daughter's mysterious disappearance, her father, King Agenor entrusted his four sons, Cadmus, Phoenix, Cilix and Thasus, with the mission to find Europa, Her mother, the queen Telephassa also accompanied her sons. They searched far and wide for Europa but in vain. Cadmus along with his mother settled in Thrace where Telephassa soon died of grief at the loss of her daughter. Subsequently, Cadmus went on a pilgrimage to the oracle of Delphi to ask for his sister. The oracle advised him to give up the search for Europa and instead



to found a new city. He was instructed to follow a cow he would find outside the oracle and build a city on the spot where the cow would stop to rest.

Cadmus soon found a cow a few meters from the oracle and followed it. The cow reached Boeotia where it lied to the ground to rest. Cadmus then decided to sacrifice the cow to goddess Athena. He sent his companions to look for pure water to do the sacrifice. They found the purest water in a lovely spring. As they were filling their vessels with water, a fierce serpent-like dragon, guardian of the spring, emerged from a nearby cave. The horrid serpent, with its crest-like head and venomous teeth shining like gold, slaughtered all the unfortunate companions of Cadmus. Getting no news from them, Cadmus went looking for them and soon came face to face with the enraged dragon.

Cadmus attacked and managed to slay it. He then sacrificed the cow to Athena, who told him to get the teeth of the dragon and plant half of them in the ground. As soon as Cadmus did so, a host of fierce warriors appeared out of the ground and, before Cadmus could engage them, the armed men began a ferocious and bloody battle among themselves. At the end of the vicious fight only five warriors were left alive and made peace among themselves. These five people, called the "Spartoi" ("sown men"), subjected themselves to Cadmus and helped him to build the city of Cadmea. After a few years, Cadmus named the city Thebes; The other achievement Cadmus is famous for is that he was the man who introduced the alphabet--thus writing- into Greece, an alphabet borrowed by the Phoenicians. Through Greece, writing was spread to the Romans and then the whole Europe. (R. Calasso, *the Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*)

A close reading of Mariama Ba's *«So Long a Letter»* may build bridges between the narrative and the myth. In fact, Ba africanize and feminizes Cadmus myth that consequently comes to the fore with a female pair of 'warriors', Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, who 'buried [their] milk teeth in the same holes



and begged [their] fairy godmothers to restore them to [them], more splendid than before' (*So Long*, 1)

### 3- The African Spartoi: Ramatoulaye and Aissatou

Mariama Ba's two female characters, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye, are warriors in the sense that they wage a war against the traditional Senegalese *logos* that reduces women to men's properties. Cadmus in Ba's text appears to be the white headmistress. 'She knew how to discover and appreciate [their] qualities' (*So Long*, 16). Figuratively, she planted African women's teeth to make of them female warriors against oppression and injustice African women undergo:

Aissatou, I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an 'uncommon' destiny [...] we were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation. 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. (*So Long*, 15-16)

The result is that they are demonised by men as they put in question the male sense of superiority and attack its source, the patriarchal tenet. 'Because, being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women, there were very few of [them]. Men would call [them] scatter-brained. Others labelled [them] devils' (*So Long*, 15).

Somehow, the two African *Spartoi* believe in the idea of the European female Cadmus and participate in the building of the African *Thebes* which is no more than a Senegalese society that will grant women their rights and work for their liberation and emancipation. Herein, a remark can be raised. The African woman/warrior can be thought of as a victim manipulated by the European woman in order to implicitly destroy her society. It is true that it is the European headmistress who nourishes in Ramatoulaye's and Aissatou's brains emancipatory (for some poisonous) ideas. Her presence was due to the colonization of



the Senegal by France. But to say that the two African warriors are puppets in her hands is a simplistic deduction. The French woman 'loved [Aissatou and Ramatoulaye] without *patronizing* [them] (*So Long*, 15: my emphasis).

### 3.1-Aissatou

Aissatou does not like the French environment where she reads for her degree in law and sees the white woman's 'advantage' just in physicality. As Ramatoulaye says:

The milky complexion of the women had no hold on you. Again, quoting from your letters: 'On the strictly physical plane, the white woman's advantage over the black woman lies in the variety of her colour, the abundance, length and softness of her hair. There are also the eyes which can be blue, green, often the colour of new honey.' You also used to complain of the sombreness of the skies, under which no coconut trees waved their tops. You missed the swinging hips of black women walking along the pavements, this gracious deliberate slowness characteristic of Africa, which charmed your eyes. You were sick at heart at the dogged rhythm of the life of the people and the numbing effect of the cold. You would finish by saying that your studies were your staff, your buttress. (*So Long*, 14)

Also, after her divorce, Aissatou goes to the U.S.A. If she had been seduced by the French culture, she would have preferred France. This in fact can be seen as Aissatou's act of resistance.

Aissatou's 'war' seems more direct and ferocious. Upon knowing that her husband Mawdo wants to marry another woman, Young Nabou, because of his mother's insistence, she asks for divorce. She does not accept polygamy as her fate the way the other Senegalese women do; she indeed cannot belong to the "Others" [who] bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them' (*So Long*, 31). She thinks her husband is 'despicable' as he endeavours 'merely to satisfy the pride of [his] declining mother' (*So Long*, 32). Consequently, she makes a choice and decides to 'strip [her]self of [his] love, [his] name.

Clothed in [her] dignity, the only worthy garment, [she goes] [her] way' (*So Long*, 32) with her four sons to the U.S.A where she



works as an interpreter in the Senegalese embassy. Implicitly, she destroys the social tenet that nourishes in the woman the belief that her existence depends wholly on a man: father, brother or a husband. Moreover, she achieves to raise alone four sons who 'were growing up well, contrary to all predictions' (*So Long*, 34). Yet, the most important achievement leading to all these results is her ability to progress, she 'develop[s] in peace' (*So Long*, 33); 'the past crushed beneath [her] heel' (*So Long*, 34). In other words, she develops an identity regardless her society expectations.

### 3.2. Ramatoulaye

Ramatoulaye in her turn could not practise fully what she was taught by the French teacher. Except her choice of her partner, Modou Fall, whom she marries 'without dowry, without pomp, under the disapproving looks of [her] father, before the painful indignation of [her] frustrated mother, under the sarcasm of [her] surprised sisters, in [their] town struck dumb with astonishment' (*So Long*, 16), she undergoes patriarchal injustice practised on women like polygamy besides the oppression of her family-in-law.

Indeed, after a marriage of twenty five years and twelve children, Ramatoulaye's husband takes another wife Binetou, his daughter's friend. Ramatoulaye seems unable to detach herself from her husband. She admits that 'even though [she] respect[s] the choice of liberated women, [she has] never conceived of happiness outside marriage' (*So Long*, 56) and 'remain[s] faithful to the love of [her] youth... and [she]

can do nothing about it' (*So Long*, 56). Moreover, she makes peace with his family. (*So Long*, 56). After her husband's death, she proves to be unable to marry another man like Daouda Dieng and thus presents to the reader a 'good' image of an African confined woman. But one can say that such an assessment of Ramatoulaye's character is superficial.

### 4. New modes of female postcolonial resistance

In spite of Ramatoulaye's superficially antithetical appearance to Aissatou, her itinerary is not totally different from hers if





closely read. Though Ramatoulaye accepts to be an abandoned wife after her husband's remarriage and does not follow in Aissatou's footsteps to reject this unfair polygamous situation, she too wages her own 'war'.

First, unlike the Ivorian Jacqueline who because of her husband's, Samba Diack, misconduct due to his 'chasing slender Senegalese women...with appreciation... respecting neither his wife nor his children.' (*So Long*, 42), suffers from a nervous breakdown, Ramatoulaye consciously discards Aissatou's 'dignified solution' (*So Long*, 45) and chooses to remain Modou's abandoned wife like 'a fluttering leaf that no hand dares to pick up' (*So Long*, 52). This underlies her sense and right of choice which she calls her 'new choice of life' (*So Long*, 45) which radical Aissatou respects and does not dissuade her to alter. Moreover, to her people's recommendations of *marabouts* to bring back her husband and not to 'let someone else pluck the fruits of [her] labour' (*So Long*, 49), she unexpectedly reacts:

To act as I was urged would have been to call myself into question. I was already reproaching myself for a weakness that had not prevented the degradation of my home. Was I to deny myself because Modou had chosen another path? No, I would not give in to the 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 (*So Long*, 49)

Her fight resides in surviving. In spite of her sense of loneliness felt mainly at night, when she remembers her and her husband's 'nightly conversation... [their] bursts of refreshing or understanding laughter... [their] daily consultations' (*So Long*, 52), she achieves to survive.

Second, her need to survive indeed draws her to move to the public sphere besides completing her private tasks like housework and her mother's duties: In addition to my former duties, I took over Modou's as well.

The purchase of basic foodstuffs kept me occupied at the end of every month; I made sure that I was never short of tomatoes or of oil, potatoes or onions during those periods when they



became rare in the markets; I stored bags of 'Siam' rice, much loved by the Senegalese. My brain was taxed by new financial gymnastics.

The last date for payment of electricity bills and of water rates demanded my attention. I was often the only woman in the queue. Replacing the locks and latches of broken doors, replacing broken windows was a bother, as well as looking for a plumber to deal with blocked sinks. (*So Long*, 51)

Tough burdened with all these duties, she does not deprive herself of entertainment. Contrary to the social assumptions about the abandoned wife, she keeps on going to the cinema and resists the intimidating male look with indifference and courage:

I survived. I overcame my shyness at going alone to cinemas; I would take a seat with less and less embarrassment as the months went by. People stared at the middle-aged lady without a partner. I would feign indifference, while anger hammered against my nerves and the tears I held back welled up behind my eyes. (*So Long*, 51)

The early shows at the cinema filled me with delight. They gave me the courage to meet the curious gaze of various people. (*So Long*, 51)

Third, her 'war of survival' constitutes for her an occasion for self-discovery; she discovers so a powerful self able to meet more than her responsibilities with bravery that she thanks her husband. '[she] survived. The more [she] thought about it, the more grateful [she] became to Modou for having cut off all contact (*So Long*, 52). Furthermore, she learns 'from the surprised looks... The slender liberty granted to women.' (*So long*, 52)

Ramatoulaye's 'slender liberty' appears in her refusal to get married for the second time after the end of the widowhood seclusion period. Her refusal of Daouda Dieng's marriage proposal attests to her refusal of the institution of polygamy. She tells her suitor:



Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family. You think the problem of polygamy is a simple one. Those who are involved in it know the constraints, the lies, the injustices that weigh down their consciences in return for the ephemeral joys of change (So Long, 68)

Her descriptions of her co-wife, Binetou imply her view of polygamy as an apparatus of women's victimization. For her, Binetou is but 'a lamb slaughtered... a victim... exiled in the world of adults... Sold, she raised her price daily.' (So Long, 48) and 'the one who lowered her head at the sight of couples graced with nothing but their youth and rich in their happiness alone. (So Long, 50) If her refusal of Daouda Dieng's marriage proposal is written, kind and tactful, her refusal of Tamsir's, her brother-in-law, marriage proposal is verbal and fierce. Her reaction stems not only from her rejection of polygamy but also from the fact that she is thought of as a Modou's property to be inherited by his family. 'Usually it is the younger brother who inherits his elder brother's wife. In this case, it is the opposite. You are my good luck. I shall marry you', Tamsir says (So Long, 57).

Herein she decides to speak out. Her 'voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment. It bursts out, violent, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes contemptuous' (So Long, 58). In fact, the birth of her voice equates the death or her killing—as she is a warrior-of her silence. She tells Tamsir:

You forget that I have a heart, a mind that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you.' (I emphasized the word 'chosen'.) What of your wives, Tamsir? Your income can meet neither their needs nor those of your numerous children... You, the revered lord, you take it easy, obeyed at the crook of a finger. I shall never be the one to complete your collection. My house shall never be for you the coveted oasis [...] Tamsir, purge yourself of your dreams of conquest ... I shall never be your wife.' (So Long, 58)



Her response that goes against patriarchy and the male righteousness is judged by the *Imam* as 'profane'. In fact, in Bakhtin's parlance, Ramatoulaye carnivalizes patriarchy as she turns upside down the male order: the silent weak woman speaks and blasphemes Tamsir the 'lord'. If Bakhtin's carnival is of a short duration, Ramatoulaye's is long as she becomes a 'lioness' or 'mad woman' who dares refusing successive suitors (*So Long*, 70).

Her subsequent subversion -carnivalization- appears when her daughter Daba falls pregnant out of wedlock. The adulterous girl deserves according to patriarchy imprisonment at home or death in a way to conceal/cleanse her sin and save the honour of the family. The other possibility is to chase her out of the familial house as she brings dishonour to the family. In a Senegalese patriarchal Islamic environment, this issue is a poignant one mainly when the mother is subject to abandonment and after widowhood. It is well seen in the reaction of Farmata, the *griot* woman of cowries who upon knowing the truth of Daba's situation urges Ramatoulaye to question her and be pessimistic. When Ramatoulaye learns the truth from Daba's mouth, her teeth gnash in anger symbolizing Cadmus' warrior's another war likely against Daba who destroys a social/religious tenet. Conversely, it is a war against the phallic/social mother Ramatoulaye is expected to be. Instead of punishing her daughter, she understands and protects her. In fact, this 'interior war' makes of her 'a new mother' which she conceives of as:

One is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable. One is a mother to lighten the darkness. One is a mother to shield when lightning streaks the night, when thunder shakes the earth, when mud bogs one down. One is a mother in order to love without beginning or end (*So Long*, 82-3)

Daba's pregnancy is in fact Ramatoulaye's birth as a new mother. This explains why she feels the umbilical cord coming to life once again:



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

Instead of Farmata's pessimism, Ramatoulaye opts for optimism. 'The rays of light united to form an appeasing brightness. [her] decision to help and protect emerged from the tumult. It gained strength as [she] wiped the tears, as [she] caressed the burning brow. (*So Long*, 83). Ramatoulaye decides Daba will have an appointment with the doctor and she will meet Daba's lover, Ibrahima Sall.

The stance of Ramatoulaye's mothering confronts Farmata's view of motherhood. 'Farmata was astonished. She expected wailing: I smiled. She wanted strong reprimands: I consoled. She wished for threats: I forgave.' (*So Long*, 84)

She moreover threatens Ramatoulaye in an attempt to persuade her to be a mother as society expects her to be:

You have mainly daughters. Adopt an attitude that you can keep up. You will see. If Aissatou can do "this", I wonder what your trio of smokers will do. Smother your daughter with caresses, Ramatoulaye. You will see. (*So Long*, 84)

In fact, Farmata is stuck in the patriarchal institution of motherhood. 'To give a sinner so much attention was beyond her' (*So Long*, 84). Her counterpart, the warrior Ramatoulaye destroys this institution and replaces it with mothering. Though motherhood and mothering are derived from the same root 'mother' and may have approximate meanings, Andrea O'Reilly, on the basis of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, makes a clear distinction between the two. She writes:



The term "motherhood" refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word "mothering" refers to women's experiences of mothering that is female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women... In other words, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women's own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power (Andrea O'Reilly, 2)

Thus, Ramatoulaye's smiling, consoling, forgiving and protecting Daba constitute acts of mothering emanating from an African new mother. This creation goes hand in hand with Mariama Ba's belief that old African images and myths are insufficient or obsolete in the contemporary era. She contends that:

Les chants nostalgiques dédiés à la mère africaine confondue dans les angoisses d'homme à la Mère Afrique ne nous suffisent plus. p.119 (Mariama Ba, 1981, p3)

Likely, it is this very passage that makes Omofolabo Ajayi think that Mariama Ba calls for new directions in African literature and particularly targets Senghorian Negritude and its mythical Mother Africa which privileges male identity while idealizing the African woman. (Ajayi, p.36)

Generally, Negritude rehabilitates African civilizations in the face of colonialism and imperialism. Senghor's 'femme noire' praises up the beauty and naturalness of the African woman which in fact symbolizes the land, hence mother earth. This idea can be aligned with Anne Mclintock's thesis that 'nations are pictorially represented by women, depicted as mothers (reproducers) of the nation' (Mclintock, 41).

The other outcome is that African womanhood is reduced to motherhood, i.e. the honourable position an African woman can/must have in her society is that of a mother, a stereotype much criticized by many African women writers, notably Buchi Emecheta in *Joys of Motherhood* which desacralizes motherhood as it is, in Adrienne Rich's words, an institution of patriarchy.



Omofolabo Ajayi views Ramatoulaye as a bi-functional character. It 'is revealed as the ultimate symbol of Mother Africa, thereby validating Negritude precepts [and] a critical construct whose function not only exposes the inherent shortcomings of Negritude but actually subverts the Mother Africa image she replicates.' (Ajayi, 36). The idea of the subversion of the Mother Africa image could not happen without Ba's textual inclusion of the mythical Cadmus' warriors to substitute for Mother Africa. This deep dialogism rewards Ramatoulaye with a vital and productive role like Aissatou's though she does not follow her path.

Refusing to be Daouda Dieng's second wife, thus deligitimizing polygamy and adopting mothering instead of motherhood make of Ramatoulaye an active woman in her society perhaps in a more interesting and difficult way than Aissatou as the latter, the least to say, lives in a more progressive supportive environment for women whereas Ramatoulaye is surrounded by conservative and patriarchal Farmata, Tamsir and his family, and the *Imam*. In some way, M. Ba presents to women a new African aesthetics which is moreover beautified by female solidarity.

### **5. Female solidarity and epistolarity**

The other aspect of the female *spartoi's* war is the reinforcement of the sense of female bonding. 'Friendship has splendours that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wearies and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love (So Long, 54). This bonding is clearly materialized by epistolarity. The epistolary form is proven to be in Mariama Ba's case her preferable one as she opts for it in her first novel in order to present a new form of female politics of resistance in independent Senegal.

The other point is that the epistolary form is in fact her access to writing which can be intertwined with Cadmus' warriors' introduction of the alphabet to Greece, Rome and the whole world after. The alphabet then becomes epistolary in Africa in



order to reinforce the necessity of women's solidarity in the face of patriarchy in the newly independent Senegal.

Like the five mythic *Spartoi* who made peace among themselves and contributed in the building of Thebes, Aissatou, though far from her friend and society, contributes after Modou's remarriage in the reshaping of Ramatoulaye's self. It first appears when she pays for her a car and encourages her to learn driving. This will help her to move freely and to accomplish her mother's duties: You, the goldsmith's daughter, gave me your help while depriving yourself.

And I learned to drive; stifling my fear [...] I would tell myself: Don't disappoint Aissatou. I won this battle of nerves and *sang-froid*. I obtained my driving licence and told you about it. I told you: and now---my children on the backseat of the cream-coloured Fiat 125; thanks to you (*So Long*, 54)

The other aspect is Aissatou's moral and psychological support which is clear in their exchange of letters. At the end of the novel, eager to meet her friend Aissatou who intends to visit Senegal on vacation, Ramatoulaye manifests a change in her way of reflection. '[she] reflect[s]. [Her] new turn of mind is hardly surprising to [her]. [She] cannot help unburdening [her]self to [her].' (*So Long*, 88) Her final statements show how much she is committed to the women's issues echoing a reinforcement of the female bonding: I am not indifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world. This commotion that is shaking up every aspect of our lives reveals and illustrates our abilities. My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult: social constraints are ever-present, and male egoism resists. Instruments for some, baits for others, respected or despised, often muzzled, all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed. My reflections determine my attitude to the problems of life. I analyse the decisions that decide our future. I widen my scope by taking an interest in current world affairs (*So Long*, 88)





Another trait to be noted is some freedom Ramatoulaye expresses. It is the epistolary form which allows her to speak without fear and limits but above all without shame. Somehow epistolarity is a woman's private space disallowed by men who in return are represented by silent/silenced characters in this novel.

Put differently, the two outstanding characters in the novel are two women: Ramatoulaye the protagonist and the narrator and Aissatou the confident. Though the latter is physically distant as she lives in the U.S.A, she occupies in this letter-novel a considerable space which Mariama Ba as an epistolary author emphasizes so as to bring to the fore an already-existing bridge between the two; the least to say about it is that it is revolutionary as basically it makes economic/intellectual links between different types of women for the sake of their rights.

Somehow, «*So Long a Letter*» revolves around absence and presence. In other words, the letter comes to existence because Aissatou is physically absent and creates for her a narrative presence which in addition to its recognition of the importance of this character bespeaks the evolution of the protagonist Ramatoulaye. At this juncture, Janet Gurkin Altman contends that:

Those works that we perceive as being the most "epistolary," as cultivating the letter form most fully, are those in which the/you relationship shapes the language used, and in which/becomes defined relative to the *you* whom he addresses [...] The/of epistolary discourse always situates himself vis-à-vis another; his locus, his "address," is always relative to that of his addressee. To write a letter is to map one's coordinates—temporal, spatial, emotional, and intellectual in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time and how far one has travelled since the last writing. Reference points on that map are particular to the shared world of writer and addressee: underlying the epistolary dialogue are common memories and often common experiences that take place between the letters. (Altman, 118-19)



Indeed, the epistolary novel is highly characterized by the relationship I/you which essentially targets the definition/self-definition of both *I* and *you* within the scope of the letter with its different parameters. Consequently, narrating the self in a letter novel is a process of becoming. To write a letter is not only to define oneself in relationship to a particular *you*; it is also an attempt to draw that row into becoming the/of a new statement'. (Altman, 121)

Ramatoulaye during her four-month seclusion writes a letter to her friend absent/present Aissatou in which she narrates her past experiences like her marriage, her husband's remarriage, his death and its aftermaths, but implicitly she also narrates her process of self- definition, of her *becoming* a woman the way she perceives without the intervention of her patriarchal society.

Therefore, this epistolary novel is not 'pure' as it is hybrid showing diary features. Indeed a great deal of passages from the novel are self- reflective and introspective ;i.e Ramatoulaye writes/speaks to and about herself in an attempt to relieve her pain; thus making of self-writing, in Buchi Emecheta's words, therapeutic. Hybridizing with diary writing also reveals that when a woman speaks to her 'sister' about her pain, she in fact speaks to herself as the experience of polygamy nourishes in women a sense of loss and inferiority but also of unity. On the whole, Mariama Ba's favouring of the epistolary form attests to her belief in women's unity and solidarity that are paramount in order to stand against the traditional patriarchal practices. Individual attempts would prove to be barren.

### **Conclusion**

«*So Long a Letter*» presents two female revolutionary characters under the pressure of polygamy. Indeed, Mariama Ba criticizes in this novel this institution which belittles women and reduces them to men's properties. Besides, she puts in question Mother Africa and appeals to a new *mythos* exemplified in the female African Cadmus whose spartoi are united via epistolarity. This goes without saying that Mariama



Ba's choice of writing about Senegalese women in the newly independent Senegal expresses her position that no development can succeed without a fruitful revision of women's condition.

Daouda's disappearance after Ramatoulaye's refusal of his marriage proposal because of her refutation of the institution of polygamy is to be denounced as he is a man who fights for workers' and women's rights, yet he opts for the persistence of polygamy. In other words, the country should make of women's condition a priority before any appeal to other forms of development.

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