



## Research Paper

# Introspection, Female Consciousness and the Quiet Revolution in the Novels of Mariama Bâ

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### ABSTRACT

*This study looks at how the narrative technique impacts questions of self and identity, subjective experience, coherence and transformation in the novels of Mariama Bâ, a Senegalese writer. The female protagonists of So Long a Letter and Scarlet Song undergo a process of introspection and female consciousness that leads to feminine awareness. Confession of the personal emotions enables the subject to move inward as part of the self-reflection process, which allows knowledge of the self. In So Long a Letter, the protagonist uses Letter writing to explore the self and identity. Through this process of writing a letter, the character reaches a realization of the past events and experiences that have shaped her present consciousness. By contrast, third-person narration in Scarlet Song foregrounds the social context that shapes the characters' sense of self and identity and worldview. This research article discusses how the narrative contributes to the construction of the self and identity.*

**KEYWORDS:** introspection, subjectivity, narrative, confession, epistolary, self, identity, transformation.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

At first glance, it would appear that surgery and writing have very little in common, but I think that is not so .... The surgeon sutures together the tissues of the body to make whole what is sick or injured; the writer sews words into sentences to fashion a new version of human experience. A surgical operation is rather like a short story. You make the incision, rummage inside for a bit then stitch up. It has a beginning, middle and an end. Richard Selzer, "The Pen and the Scalpel" (in Davis)

Richard Selzer, in the above quote, is referring to the act of writing being a powerful instrument in understanding and recording the individual's experience of being-in-the-world. An act of writing a novel acts as a catalyst for self-reflection and allows the writer space to rewrite and reclaim the self and identity. This research article explores how the narrative technique provides a creative space to reclaim and rewrite the identity of the marginalised individual that brings a revolutionary change in the characters. Furthermore, this exploration investigates how the form of the novel plays an influential role in portraying the experiences of individuals who find themselves disconnected and alienated from and within their respective societies. The Narrative, therefore, plays a significant role in creating meaning and coherence of the events which affect the self. This study reveals that meaning and coherence is attained through a process of introspection "looking inward".

The process of introspection ultimately results in self-discovery because it places the individual in a position to ask questions, to obtain "facts" about whom or what influences and shapes the self and identity. It further helps in analysing how these external factors contribute to the development of self, but even more importantly how these same factors may also serve as obstacles and contribute to the individual remaining fragmented or the repression of the self and identity. As stated earlier, a split in the self is necessary to reflect on the present and past self to be able to reach a coherent future self filled with purpose. The exploration of the relationship between narrative and the self helps one to understand how narrative firstly constructs and secondly, reconstructs the self and identity. Furthermore, this exploration has shown that redefining and reclaiming a new identity requires the individual to participate in an active process of questioning to gain knowledge of the self. The study has also proven that the concepts of self and identity are neither abstract nor fixed but are fluid and changing. It is, in fact, the outcome of an individual's state of being in a crisis that initiates the process, as a means of making sense of and finding a possible solution.

The form of the narrative is thus relevant and crucial to understanding how the introspective process contributes to self-discovery. The novel *So Long a Letter* is a personal narrative. The protagonist Ramatoulaye finds a newly transformed self through letter writing to her friend Aissatou. The narrating self reflects over the present, and the experiencing self relates to the past. This splitting of the self is necessary to create meaning for the character. It ultimately leads her to introspect over who she is, how others define her and finally her definition of self-worth. Ramatoulaye experiences her introspective journey during a period of “forced” isolation. Ramatoulaye is mourning the death of her husband. This state of enclosure appears to be influential in enabling her to disclose herself.

The novel *So Long a Letter* is a cry from the heart of a Senegalese woman, Ramatoulaye. It articulates astutely the problems of Senegalese women in general, and a Muslim woman, in particular. On a personal level, the employment of the western literary device of letter writing in this novel facilitates the marginal women like Mariama Bâ and the protagonist, Ramatoulaye, to make themselves succinctly heard to the people in the central power. The writing of a letter signifies a spiritual journey of the doubly oppressed protagonist, Ramatoulaye, to reach an emotional breakthrough. It is this journey that reveals all the aspects of African life that result in the oppression of women. These aspects include polygamy, caste, race, culture prejudices, motherhood, and various other issues. Bâ presents the complexities and intricacies involved in African life through the conflict in the protagonist's mind between tradition and modernity.

Through this novel, both Bâ and her female protagonist, make themselves heard by the people in the world of phallic imperialism. Women have been supposed to have a special natural talent for epistolary expression from time immemorial. Although epistolary fiction is written by both men and women, and there are both male and female fictional letter-writers, the “most memorable epistolary voices are those of women.” (Bower, 1990: 135) As a form of expression especially meant for women, the letter is a medium to transmit everyday experiences and personal reflections. The writing of letter provides women with an opportunity to write about themselves in the culture where they are the ones “prevented ... from acting or speaking [their] desires, the one[s] left behind at a distance from loved ones, the one[s] restricted to a private voice”. (Ibid)

Thus, as a letter, the novel establishes a sense of intimacy and authenticity for the sincere feelings of the protagonist. At the same time, it helps create similar feelings among the readers. The readers also become one with the feelings of the protagonist who narrates post-colonial experiences delineating the oppression of women prevalent in the African scenario. A long letter covers not only the distressed character of the protagonist, but it also illustrates in detail the factors responsible for the women's oppression in African life. Mildred Mortimer regards Ramatoulaye as ‘a time traveller in her mourning period.’ Mortimer points out:

Ramatoulaye turns to the inner journey to obtain knowledge, through self-examination and maturity, through personal transformation. By examining her thoughts, memories, and the collective experience of family and nation emerging from colonialism, Ramatoulaye attempts to gain a heightened sense of maturity. ((1990: 70)

Ramatoulaye undertakes a spiritual journey to understand her own ‘self’ and ‘the self’ of the average African women. Ramatoulaye reveals herself that undergoes good and bad experiences and finally culminates in a complete transformation.

The central theme in *So Long a Letter* is, thus, the problem of a woman writer coming to age at the creative level. The autobiographical voice in the letter significantly suggests Mariama Bâ's emergence from her muteness. Bâ's text speaks of the issues like caste, friendship, fate, and women's relations with men in the Senegalese society. As a writer, Mariama Bâ is emerged from the oral tradition of Senegalese griot women and writes the speakerly text. Stiga Fatima Jagne in her research article, *The Gathering of Women in the Novels of Mariama Bâ*, points out:

May be contemporary black women writers have their names signed to their texts, but the texts are from those female ancestors who were not given a chance to write. The tradition of griot women is important to Senegalese women because it has always been one way of making them heard and listened to. So, for the Senegalese women, writing a speakerly text takes on an added dimension. (2004:1)

This oral tradition in Senegal has been the major portal for women's voices. Mariama Bâ gets Ramatoulaye to ventilate her feelings. While doing so, she also expresses the innermost layers of her subconscious. Ramatoulaye undertakes through this letter a spiritual voyage of self-discovery. Ramatoulaye reflects on her past to understand the present which later designs her vision of the future. The letter serves as a relief to her pent- up feelings.

Ramatoulaye writes a long letter to her friend Aissatou which reveals her thoughts on the death of her husband, Modou. In writing to Aissatou, Ramatoulaye discovers a redefined self and a projected stratification in her life. The letter allows Ramatoulaye to get motivated by a new wholeness of herself and her womanhood which in the end extends into the cosmic realm. It ultimately leads to her enlightenment and celebration of the self as an extension of an Ideal Mother. Ramatoulaye finds godhead, the spiritual force of an Ideal Mother, within herself.

Significantly, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou have been friends for many years. It is through the bond of friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou that Bâ celebrates female solidarity. Ramatoulaye writes to Aissatou:

When we meet, the signs on our bodies will not be important. The essential thing is the content of our hearts, which animates us; the essential thing is the quality of the sap that flows through us. You have often proved me the superiority of friendship over love. Time, distance, as well as mutual memories, have consolidated our ties and made our children brothers and sisters. (72)

Here, Ramatoulaye refers to a kind of friendship in which 'pure love' predominates. These kinds of the intense friendship of women are frequently projected in both the Western World and the Third World literature. These writers have projected the kinds of friendship which may be sensual but not necessarily sexual. In *So Long a Letter*, Aissatou is an interlocutor of Ramatoulaye. Ramatoulaye's reliance on Aissatou provides her with the courage to face the various oddities that she comes across in her life. In the critical moments of her life, Ramatoulaye turns to Aissatou, as she confesses in the opening of her letter: "I've received your letter. By way of reply, I'm bringing this diary, my prop in my distress. Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain." (1) She continues: 'Our lives developed in parallel. We experienced the tiffs and reconciliations of married life. In our different ways, we suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of customs.' (19) Aissatou, in Altman's term, functions as the "passive confidante", whose major role is to listen to 'confessions' and 'stories.' (1982: 50)

Aissatou's long-term friendship with Ramatoulaye secures Aissatou the place of a confidante. The text shows that the origin of their acquaintance has origin in the acquaintance of their grandmothers, who used to chat over the fence. Similarly, it has its origin in their mother's intimacies. Ramatoulaye mentions: "Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts." (1) Ramatoulaye and Aissatou spent their childhood together and received the same education from a European teacher. Even their marriages are the outcome of this reality: Modou Fall introduces Mawdo Bâ to Aissatou. Besides, both of them are the victims of polygamy. All these shared experiences bind the two women together. This bond leads Ramatoulaye to talk in volumes about her personal experiences and provides her enough courage to reveal herself.

Sections seventeen and twenty-eight of the novel delineate most of the intense sharing of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. It is in section seventeen that Ramatoulaye reveals her troubled psyche. The agony and pain she still suffers due to Modou's alienation. She also expects Aissatou to answer as to why Modou betrays her and imagines herself as to what Aissatou would say to soothe her: "You may tell me: the path of life is not smooth; one is bruised by its sharp edges." (55) Then, following up Aissatou's reasoning, Ramatoulaye expresses her own experiences regarding the married life:

I also know that marriage is never smooth. It reflects differences in characters and capacity for feeling. In one couple the man may be the victim of a fickle woman or of a woman shut up in her preoccupations who rejects all dialogues and quashes all moves towards tenderness. (Ibid)

The statement makes it clear that Ramatoulaye is almost in conversation with Aissatou through her long letter. Bakhtin describes this technique as the 'side-walk glance':

An acute awareness of the interlocutor, the addressee to whom it is directed. The letter, like a rejoinder in a dialogue, is addressed to a specific person, and it takes into account the other's possible reactions, the other's possible reply. [...] Not only the tone and style but also the internal semantic structure of these self-utterances is defined by the anticipation of another person's words. (1984: 205)

Mariama Bâ also makes Aissatou be the interlocutor of Ramatoulaye by establishing contact between them in the form of a letter. Ramatoulaye mentions Aissatou as her witness and appeals to her conscience to soothe her by way of reply. However, it is by seeking it again from her self that Ramatoulaye satisfies her emotions. It is in this way that Ramatoulaye establishes the emotional link with Aissatou. As she writes: "You, very logically, may reply: 'Affections spring from nothing; sometimes a grimace, the carriage of a head can seduce a heart and keep it.'" (56)

In section twenty-eight, the closing section of her letter, Ramatoulaye is almost in conversation with Aissatou. She writes: "Till tomorrow, my friend. We will then have time to ourselves, especially as I have obtained an extension of my widow's leave". (88) In the same section, Ramatoulaye summarizes her opinions about their intimacy; the passage more or less appears like a telephonic conversation. She mentions:

Why aren't your sons coming with you? Ah, their studies.

[...] So, then, will I see you tomorrow in a tailored suit or a long dress?

I've taken a bet with Daba: tailored suit. Used to living far away, you will want-again. I have taken a bet with Daba—table, plate, chair, fork.

More convenient, you will say. But I will not let you have your way. I will spread out a mat. On it, there will be the big, steaming bowl into which you will have to accept that other hands dip. (89)

The statement reveals the intimate bond of friendship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. The letter serves as a medium through which Ramatoulaye shares her earnest feelings with her friend and confidante Aissatou.

The letter also reveals Ramatoulaye's concern for women in society at large. Ramatoulaye's long letter expresses the feminine sensibility of the average women. However, for Ramatoulaye and others like her, feminism is not a battle between men and women for power; it is the complementary bonding between men and women for mutual independence. She believes that the success of a nation hugely depends upon this complementary bonding. A long letter, thus, not only concerns Ramatoulaye and her problems; but it also reflects her acute awareness of the self of the other women. In *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, Filomena Chioma Steady discusses the nature of feminism in the neo-African context. For African women, feminist consciousness is linked with the forces of the traditional past. This consciousness is the outcome of Motherhood and Family hood which still holds intrinsic value and ensures survival and self-reliance. Feminism, for the woman of African consciousness, is based on traditional values. Steady writes:

No doubt the most important factor concerning the woman in traditional society is her role as a mother the centrality of this role for society as a whole...it is because of women that men can have a patrilineage at all. The importance of motherhood and the valuation of the childbearing capacity by African women is probably the most fundamental difference between the African woman and her Western counterpart in their common struggle to and discrimination against women. For African women, the role of a mother is often central and has intrinsic value. (1983: 29)

According to Filomena Steady, Motherhood implies family hood for women in the African Diaspora. Secondly, family hood involves the nature of extended family rather than the nuclear to ensure stability, bonding and continuity of cultural values. Filomena Steady also writes that "the isolation of the nuclear family is not the typical pattern among Blacks neither in Africa nor in the Diaspora." (33) Feminism in the neo-African context, according to Filomena Steady, is seen in "human terms rather than narrow sexist terms". (34) Furthermore, Filomena Steady states:

The essence of [African] feminism is not hatred of men or blaming men, some of whom after all are also agents of oppression... True feminism is the reaction that leads to the development of greater resourcefulness for survival and greater self-reliance. (Ibid, 36)

As an African woman, Ramatoulaye's brand of 'feminism' lies in her search for the balance between femininity and feminism. Ramatoulaye's account of changing circumstances, her failure in marriage, and her emotions towards traditional practices are sensitive ones. Her long letter is not a revolutionary cry for women's liberation, nor is it a didactic appeal for equality in the light of the universal women's movement. Her letter, on the other hand, is a testimony to certain traditional values and practices which are no longer working for the good of everyone in the society. Simultaneously, the letter presents the values which are necessary to nurture and sustain society.

The form of the first-person narrative creates an intimate space in exploring the internal consciousness of the character without any interference. The focus remains on the individual and the reader can trace the character's introspective process of questioning and become informed and finally understanding how the self has been shaped. This form of narrative allows the character's voice to be foregrounded and to emerge. The reader can ascertain the character's perceptions and feelings about their experiences.

This study aims to establish how the form of the novel contributes to portraying the experiences of the individual and making sense of these experiences. In contrast to the first-person narrative form, this study has included the novel *Scarlet Song* which is a third-person narrative. The contrast drawn concerning the focus on subjectivity and access to the character's internal consciousness in revealing the introspective reveals the first-person narrative provides a direct focus on the character's process of questioning and understanding and finally transforming. The third-person narrative form is useful because it foregrounds the social context which shapes the individual's sense of self and identity. Social context is relevant to the first-person narrative but not a central focus. The third-person narrative is therefore helpful in exploring how social constructs often force individuals to oblige the roles and views of the collective. The pressure that individuals are placed under often has varying effects on the individual, Ousmane is unable to find a way to integrate his identity with that of the collective and the outcome is that he represses the identity for that of the collective. Mireille on the other hand enters as an outsider to the Senegalese community and remains an outsider because of other's perceptions of her. She thus remains a fragmented and marginalised figure throughout the novel. This particular form of narrative benefits the reader to understand the effects of the complex nature of society has on the individual and that if introspection is not allowed, understanding is not attained and thus the individual remains incoherent. The contrast between the forms of narrative, first and third-person depicts the benefits of each form but also to establish that given the aims of this study, the first-person narrative is a pivotal and relevant form in the exploration of individuality, subjectivity and internal consciousness. This narrative form explicitly shows the character's position of reflection and how they shift from a point of being fragmented to a new reclaimed self. This form of narration gives the individual a voice and to express their views and feelings about problems or concerns that they may have.

The novels which have been selected for this study focus on concerns of polygyny, patriarchy, marriage, race, culture and so forth, and how these influence the lived experiences of the central characters. The novels not only portray the character's experiences but also present new perceptions of selfhood and identity. The novels reveal the experiences and significant people who shape and influence the lives of the central characters but also reveal these experiences and individuals as the source of alienation and marginalisation. The modes adopted by these novels allow the protagonists to express their feelings of disconnection. Through the process of introspection, the central characters can discover and transform themselves. This "revolution" in the characters' self- and world view is enabled by the narrative which is rebellious and resistant in form – but quietly so. Narration and novel form thus affect the protagonists of *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* in a restrained and elegant, but strikingly triumphant revolution.

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