

**UCLA**

**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

Women Subjugating Women: Re-Reading Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter and Scarlet Song

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4j47346d>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 33(2-3)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Author**

Mutunda, Sylvester

**Publication Date**

2007

**DOI**

10.5070/F7332-3016489

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 2007 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

**Women Subjugating Women:  
Re-Reading Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*  
and *Scarlet Song***

Sylvester Mutunda

**Abstract**

*Mainstream feminist scholarship attributes the dominance of patriarchal ideology in African society to the activities of men, while regarding women as innocent victims of patriarchal authority. However, a close reading of texts by some African women writers like Mariama Bâ, provides a critique of this standpoint, and examines the direct and indirect roles played by some women in the sustenance and perpetuation of patriarchal oppression. The focus is on elderly women who, often times, are so ignorant, selfish and manipulative that they make life hard for other women. Thus, this study differs from conventional feminist research, which generally emphasizes 'male-female' relations of oppression as an ideal way of understanding male dominance and female subordination.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on 'female-female' relations mediated by age, generation, education, exposure, and experience, in order to understand the complexities of patriarchal oppression and to contribute to the debate on the nature of patriarchy and its role in the oppression of women in African societies. This paper suggests that women should join hands and use the power available to them if they are to overcome the challenges they all face.*

## Theoretical Framework

In this paper I use a post-structuralist approach that takes into account critical differentiating cleavages, heterogeneity and differences inherent among women, as opposed to other approaches that treat women as a homogenous social group.<sup>2</sup> As Janet Bujra points out, "Women cannot be thought of as a single category, even though there are important and unifying struggles in which they engage. At the same time, women cannot simply be analyzed 'as men'; gender is almost invariably a relevant social category. The point is that gender differences find differential expression at different class levels – gender is qualified by places, which women occupy in newly emergent classes" (Bujra 1986: 118).

Thus, even the smallest unit of production, the household, often involves hierarchies and unequal power relations among women, for instance, mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law, senior wife versus junior wife(s), and elderly women versus young women.

## Introduction

The common belief among most feminist critics of African literature today is that men are the worst enemies of women. These feminist scholars have denounced men, accusing them of being the major source of women's unhappiness particularly in the family. They claim that men oppress, mistreat and exploit women by inhibiting and restricting their self-realization. Critics like Katherine Frank even argue that it is not possible or even necessary to negotiate and compromise with men, the enemies. She therefore suggests a complete rejection of patriarchy in all its guises in order to create a world without men, where

women would be safe, sane and supportive of one another (Frank 1987: 15). However, the issue is more complex and one wonders whether women are not victimizers of other women and partially responsible for their own marital unhappiness. To explore this question, I will analyze two of Mariama Bâ's works: *So Long a Letter*<sup>3</sup> and *Scarlet Song*.<sup>4</sup> In both novels, Bâ depicts the Islamic-influenced and patriarchal Senegalese society where families exert a great deal of pressures and influence upon young people in order to uphold traditional taboos, norms and privileges in relation to marriage.

*So Long a Letter*, Bâ's first novel, won the first Noma Award for publishing in Africa in 1980. With this novel, "Mariama Bâ achieved a reputation as a writer who adds a strong, unique, and culturally relevant feminist voice to modern African literature" (Ajayi-Soyinka 2003: 153). In the novel, Bâ narrates the fate of two initially successful marriages between Aïssatou and Mawdo and Ramatoulaye and Modou, which end in failure due not only to the excess of polygamy, but also to the extended family's actions.

In her second novel, *Scarlet Song*, published posthumously in 1981, Bâ focuses on the bane of ethnicity and the problem inherent in interracial marriage. In this novel, the failure of marriage between Ousmane and his French wife, Mirelle, is basically attributed to Ousmane's passionate involvement with his childhood Senegalese girlfriend, Ouleymatou. But the encouragement of his mother, Yaye Khady, who prefers Ouleymatou to Mireille, is also a factor.

### **Victims and Victimizers**

In *So Long a Letter*, Bâ gives an insight into the

way two central characters, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou, react to the same situation of husband's infidelity and betrayal. Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are childhood friends who were raised in the same village with traditional Islamic customs. In addition, they received a Western education. Both went against their parents' wishes and against custom, choosing to marry Western- educated men whom they loved without requesting any bride-wealth. Reminiscing on her marriage to Modou, Ramatoulaye says, "Our marriage was celebrated without dowry, without pomp, under the disapproving looks of my father, before the painful indignation of my frustrated mother, under the sarcasm of my surprised sisters, in our town stuck dumb with astonishment" (16). Unlike her parents, Ramatoulaye does not put premium on the traditional bride-wealth payment; what matters to her is, to quote the Nigerian female author Flora Nwapa, "a home that she could call her own, a man she would love and cherish, and children to crown the marriage" (Nwapa 1992: 1). Ramatoulaye's choice is driven by love and sharing rather than wealth. She believes that marriage is "a close association between two equals, and the sharing of pains, joys, hopes, disappointments and success" (Makward 1986: 273). She is a true romantic lover who marries Modou not because her mind appreciates him but because her "heart loves him" (66).

It is worth noting that, unlike many Western societies where a form of dowry is the custom of the bride's family paying the wedding expenses, in most African societies, the bride's father requests the groom to pay dowry or bride-wealth prior to the marriage. This is usually a kind of material benefit compensation to the family of the bride from the groom's family. The institution of bride-price does not diminish the status of

the African woman, nor does it mean that African wives are "regarded as little better than goods and chattels."<sup>5</sup> It is, rather, a cultural practice amply supported by valid social reasons. First, a man pays bride-price to betoken his ability to be a husband, a provider. Second, it establishes the respect in which he and his family hold the wife and her people. The bride's parents believe that, without bride-wealth, the groom will not respect their daughter or treat her with the appropriate recognition with which her family had officially and ceremonially handed her over. Therefore, Ramatoulaye's decision to marry Modou without any payment of dowry on her is an abomination; it suggests that she is morally loose, that she has no family, or that she is a non-entity. This explains her parents and family's disappointment, indignation and surprise at her wedding.

Despite their unconditional devotion and loyalty, both Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are sadistically rewarded with deception and dupery by their unfaithful and fickle husbands who take new and much younger wives. As soon as her husband acquires a new wife, Aïssatou takes the initiative to divorce him. Her radical refusal to stay in a traditional polygamous marriage is clearly expressed in her farewell letter to her husband that reads:

Mawdo,

Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. . . .

I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only garment, I go away. (31-32)

Aïssatou is clear sighted, unsentimental, and courageously bold. She breaks with archaic customs that thrive on women's subjugation and oppression, and chooses to get out of her marriage and the society which legitimizes infidelity and polygamy. She then moves off with her children to France where she improves her education and, thereafter, to Washington, D.C. where she eventually takes up the job of an interpreter in the Senegalese Embassy, and establishes a home and a new life for herself and her children. Many female critics hail Aïssatou as a true feminist. To Julie Agbasiere, for example, Aïssatou is a woman of action "who is ruled by her head, who knows what she wants and goes out for it" (Agbasiere 1999: 75). Helen Chukwuma praises her because "she burst the fence of subjugation and nihilism and turned her back to its oppression" (Chukwuma 199: 32). She is free and can reorganize her life without reference to a patriarchal domineering husband. She escapes from sharing a husband which certainly "breed(s) hatred, conflict, unhappiness and even tragedy" (Ezeigbo 1994: 18).

With her exposure to Western education, Aïssatou has been able to absorb some values of the Western world, most especially its individualism and democratic spirit. However, as Aduke Adebayo argues, the path taken by Aïssatou is an ambiguous adventure in that it is in contradiction with most African societies where communal life is a much cherished value (Adebayo 1996: 52). Indeed, in the African society, to think of an individual destiny based on individual values is considered abnormal. The society puts a premium on collectively built norms,

which are invariably determined by men. Paradoxically, a woman could experience intense solitude simply because she is educated and in spite of the common claim that society places value on solidarity.

When, much later, the same fate befalls Ramatoulaye, everybody expects her to follow Aïssatou's footsteps and divorce Modou. But, she accepts her situation with resignation and anguish, thus bowing to society's expectations. She is, in Aduke Adebayo's words, "the prototype of the objectified woman, always wronged but eternally forgiving, preferring to suffer from emotional paralysis rather than incur society's wrath or lose the custody of her children" (Adebayo 1995: 105). Bâ demonstrates a perception of the dilemma of educated, married Africa women who indulge in self-deception and stoic acceptance of their male partner's chauvinism.

Despite the desertion of her husband and complete abandonment of his home, wife and children, Ramatoulaye remains in marriage. Even when her embittered daughter Daba advises: "Break with him, mother! Send this man away. He has respected neither you nor me. Do what Auntie Aïssatou did; break with him" (39), Ramatoulaye chooses to stay married to Modou and share him with the young Binetou, in the hope that Modou will at least abide by traditional Islamic rule and practice, providing each wife in a polygamous household equal attention from the husband.<sup>6</sup> But Modou violates this religious dogma, he denies Ramatoulaye equitable apportionment and his attention and fails to provide economically for his family while lavishly spending on Binetou and her parents. Worst of all, he abandons Ramatoulaye to live with his new wife in a magnificent villa which he secretly bought with their mutual life savings. He also builds a second villa for Binetou's mother and even sponsors her on a holy

pilgrimage to Mecca. Finally, he dies, leaving nothing but debts and bankruptcy. Here, Bâ reveals the injustice or lack of fairness and equality for women in her society where tradition outvalues modernity.

Ramatoulaye's decision to remain in a polygamous marriage is interesting and requires some discussion. She has twelve children and her prime concern is their well-being. She thinks that her children might be treated poorly by her co-wife in her absence, thus she chooses to remain in the marriage despite the humiliation and indignity she suffers. The reasons for her choice are also derived from her sentimentality and convictions about love and human sensibilities. Ramatoulaye is ruled by her heart more than anything else. She loves her husband so dearly that, even after his demise, she turns down the strong attentions of Daouda Dieng for the second time. She concludes after a torturous rationalizing on the reasons of her stay with Modou when he completely detaches himself, "The truth is that, despite everything, I remain faithful to the love of my youth" (56).

The other truth is that the fear of not belonging, of going against the status-quo keeps Romatoulaye quiet, caged in her bitterness and resentment. As Helen Chukwuma rightly points out, Ramatoulaye "remains the suffering, enduring female caged in her own prison walls" (Chukwuma 1991: 37). Her shortcoming is her passivity; she does not have enough courage to break away from the society that subjugates her. She writes to her friend: "Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage" (56). Ironically, she has neither marriage nor happiness. She is full of social righteousness and personal integrity while, around her, her world crumbles. Ramatoulaye does not

advocate change for herself, but she admires and acclaims it in others.

The passivity displayed by Ramatoulaye is highly criticized by radical feminists like Emelia Oko who exonerate men from blame and advise women to “shake up from the torpor of self-delusion” (Agbasiere 1999: 73). Oko believes that women’s problem in failed marriages is that “Woman as immanent, non self-realizing, foolishly thinks she can create love into a separate entity from other social endeavours” (Oko 1996: 177). In other words, Oko is asking women to be less sentimental and courageous to map out new directions if their marriage fails.

Some feminist critics like Irène d’Almeida believe that Ramatoulaye is “a strong, dignified woman . . . who is called upon to make vital choices” (d’Almeida 1986: 162). But, I would argue that Ramatoulaye’s choice to stay in a polygamous marriage reveals some weakness on her part. She does not have the guts and courage to stand on her own or take care of herself without necessarily depending on a man. As an educated and professional woman, she is capable of financially supporting herself, but she underrates her ability and still thinks that she cannot start her life anew without the presence of a male partner. She is also unable to relinquish her youthful notions of living happily-ever-after, even after her Prince Charming takes another wife, then cuts himself off from her completely. Her reluctance to leave Modou and start her life anew confirms Molaria Ogundipe’s assertion that,

Women are shackled by their own negative self image by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-

crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. (Ogundipe 1994: 36)

In other words, Ogundipe is suggesting that women are frequently victims of themselves and prisoners of their own conscience.

The fact that Modou marries another woman after living with his first wife for a quarter of a century is not the crux of the matter to Ramatoulaye; what bothers her is her husband's callous disregard for the welfare of their twelve children. Modou denies his children the constant assurance of a father's presence, and he also robs them of their sense of continuity, as the narrator observes: "In loving someone else, he burns his past, both morally and materially. He dares to commit such an act of disavowal" (12).

Bâ's second novel, *Scarlet Song*, is a sequel to the first; it has a central theme similar to that of the previous novel: the plight of women in modern African marriages. But, this novel adds another dimension to this theme, it features a non-African protagonist who is married to a black man, and the couple lives in Africa. In this novel we find a young and brilliant Senegalese man, Ousmane. He falls in love with Mireille, the daughter of a racist French ambassador to Senegal. Mireille's father cannot accept that his daughter dates or even falls in love with a black man. But despite the stubborn opposition from her father, Mireille is madly in love and resists her father's attempt to disrupt her love with Ousmane. She openly accuses him of being a racist and tells him not to interfere with her love life: "I am in love, do you understand! I love a black man, a man black as coal. Black! Black! I love this man and I

won't give him up simply because he is black!" (29).

In order to put an end to his daughter's love adventure with Ousmane – whom he refers to as “this object” – Monsieur de la Vallée immediately sends Mireille back to France, hoping that she will forget Ousmane. This strategy fails, because Ousmane eventually goes to Paris to study. When he completes his university education, he marries Mireille who, in the meantime, has converted to Islam on Ousmane's request. He thereafter takes her back to Senegal, much to the dismay of his parents. But shortly thereafter, torn between the demands of his wife and his traditional upbringing, Ousmane starts dating and eventually marries his childhood girlfriend Ouleymatou. He does so without Mireille's knowledge but with the full support of his mother and many of his friends. That Yaye Khady openly encourages her son's second marriage is not surprising. In fact, shortly after Ousmane's return to Senegal, she became hostile to Mireille and vowed to dislodge her because, in her opinion, Mireille was an intruder.

It is clear that in her criticism of African societies with regard to marriage, Bâ exposes the patriarchal oppression of women. However, in addition to denouncing certain masculine behaviors in her novels, Bâ also examines critically the role of some women – especially those of the older generation – in a couple's life, revealing comportment that contributes to victimizing the wife.

In *So Long a Letter*, the author subtly denounces the societal interference into the private choice of a marriage partner and how one may wish to live. This point is crucial, particularly in the Senegalese society which still places value on the system of caste. Mawdo Bâ and his wife Aïssatou were happily married and satisfied with each other until he began to get external pressure from

his mother as to how best he should manage his marriage. Mawdo's mother, Aunt Nabou, cannot reconcile herself to her son's choice of a marriage partner of low social origins:

She bore a glorious name in the Sine-Diouf. She is a descendant of Bour-Sine. She lived in the past, unaware of the changing world. She clung to old beliefs. Being strongly attached to her privileged origins, she believed that the blood carried with it virtues, and nodding her head, she would repeat that humble birth would always show in a person's bearing. (26)

It is important to note that, according to traditional Wolof belief, a blacksmith possesses evil powers due to the fact that he handles metal, which symbolizes hell<sup>7</sup>; therefore, to prevent her future grandchildren from being infested with tainted and evil blood, Aunt Nabou carefully sets up a crafty scheme to dislodge Aïssatou. She first deceitfully asks her brother to give her one of his daughters, little Nabou: "I need a child beside me . . . to fill my heart. . . I want this child to be both my legs and my right arm. I am growing old. I will make of this child another me. Since the marriage of my own children, the house has been empty" (28). She then educates and trains Nabou to be obedient, docile, sober, and knowledgeable in the traditional roles of a woman. Aunt Nabou later lies to her son Mawdo that his uncle has "given" his cousin Nabou to him in marriage, as a sign of gratitude to her and the whole family: "My brother Farba has given you young Nabou to be your wife, to thank me for the worthy way in which I have brought her up" (30). She further warns that

his refusal to obey her will and marry his cousin could kill her: "I will never get over it if you don't take her as your wife. Shame kills faster than disease" (30).

Aunt Nabou's "shame" is derived not from the fact that men of her caste will think less of her but because of the way other women will judge her. Although her other children are "properly" married, they are girls and therefore cannot give her the status of a royal female patriarch that she so much desires. Thus, the only way for her to effectively and legitimately exercise her royal authority is if her son Mawdo marries "properly", that is from within the royal lineage. Whether it is a mother's ploy or not, she succeeds and achieves the double joy of breaking her son's earlier marriage and cementing the aristocracy of the family.

Clearly, Bâ criticizes Aunt Nabou for her pivotal role in the collapse of Aïssatou's marriage. Aunt Nabou is also criticized for destroying the future of her niece. Instead of helping young Nabou become emancipated, she wants her to remain ignorant, utterly docile and as silent as possible. She teaches her that "a woman does not need too much education" (29-30), just enough to help her manage her home. Aunt Nabou is an example of women whose actions are detrimental to the modern interests of women in their society. She is as selfish and manipulative as the men in her culture.

Traditionally, the African woman's value is measured by the number of sons she has and the success of those sons. Thus, Modou's mother brings a constant stream of visitors to parade through Ramatoulaye's well-maintained home. She infringes on the rules of hospitality with the intention of showing off the social success of her son, and thereby, her own. Ramatoulaye explains: "His mother would stop by again and again while on her

outings, always flanked by different friends, just to show off her son's success but particularly so that they might see, at close quarters, her supremacy in this beautiful house in which she did not live" (19). Proud of her son's social achievement, Modou's mother considers herself the main architect of his success and wants to fully enjoy it in the presence of her friends. Ramatoulaye invariably interrupts her busy schedule to cater to her mother-in-law's wish, and there is always a crisp banknote folded in the mother-in-law's hand when she leaves Ramatoulaye's home. The narrator reveals: "I would receive her with all the respect due to a queen, and she would leave satisfied, especially if her hand closed over the banknote I had carefully placed there" (19).

Ramatoulaye's sisters-in-law are not exempt from the feeling of resentment towards a brother's wife. They are glaringly desirous of her middle-class, comfortable home and her ability to employ maids. But they fail to realize that Ramatoulaye is a working housewife with a double day.<sup>8</sup> They frequently visit their brothers' house and expect Ramatoulaye to give them a royal welcome. They also treat their brother's house like their own and are insensitive to Ramatoulaye's feelings. The narrator explains her experience as follows: "I tolerated Modou's sisters who too often would desert their own homes to encumber my own. They allowed themselves to be fed and petted. They would look on, without reacting as their children romped around on my chairs" (19). Ramatoulaye could not react because, according to tradition, once a woman gets married, she is literally stripped of her human dignity and becomes "a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends", and if she fails to comply with traditional norms, the

moment her husband dies, she will not be cleansed of his spirit – which will continue to hunt her throughout her life – because “no sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable” (4). Ramatoulaye is portrayed here as a common property belonging to both her husband and her in-laws, who use and abuse her as they please. Despite her education, Ramatoulaye, in a bid to be accepted,

sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends. Her behaviour is conditioned. (4)

One is stunned by the level of apathy, frivolity and lack of foresight displayed by some women in the novel. Binetou’s mother, whom the author ironically calls Lady Mother-in-law, is “more concerned with putting the pot on the boil than with [her daughter’s] education” (48), she thus encourages Binetou to interrupt her studies and then “auctions” her to the wealthy, but aged, Modou – although Binetou ridicules him because of his age: “old man, pot-belly, sugar-daddy” (39). In the process, Lady Mother-in-law destroys another woman’s home and subsequently jeopardizes her daughter’s chance of becoming financially independent. Lacking the necessary education to find work, Binetou becomes economically dependent on Modou. Binetou’s mother considers this marriage as a

means to end her poverty and to be propelled "into the category of women 'with bracelets' lauded by the *griots*" (49). Binetou's experience shows how women within patriarchy become accomplices with the control of power that men have claimed for themselves. By withdrawing Binetou from school in order to "auction" her to the wealthy, but old Modou, adults like Lady Mother-in-law stifle the aspiration of children like Binetou.

Although Ramatoulaye feels betrayed by Modou's actions and subsequent marriage, her bitterness and anger is not directed toward him, but toward Binetou's family. Apparently understanding Binetou's powerlessness, Ramatoulaye states: "But what can a child do, faced with a furious mother shouting about her hunger and her thirst to live? Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence" (39). Here, Ramatoulaye implies that Binetou is just a victim of her rapacious and selfish mother, whose desire to seize every opportunity that comes her way is of utmost importance; this vindicates Binetou of all responsibility. However, in her condemnation of blatant materialism, Ramatoulaye forgets that Binetou is also an 'innocent' participant in her oppression.

Ultimately, the mothers-in-law of Aïssatou and Ramatoulaye are the actual abettors of the polygamous marriages, destroying not only Aïssatou's and Ramatoulaye's happiness, but also the future of the two young wives. The two old women are not only handmaidens of patriarchal structures, but also their custodians. Their complicity is utterly condemned by Ramatoulaye's daughter, Daba, the advocate of egalitarian gender relation: "How can a woman sap the happiness of another?" (71) Daba also advises such young girls as Binetou and many others not to sacrifice their youth, studies and dreams in order to satisfy their mother's greed.

Hear her: "refuse . . . if a man offers [wealth for love] because none of that is worth the capital of youth" (35).

In her second and last novel, *Scarlet Song*<sup>9</sup>, Mariama Bâ also portrays female characters of the caliber of Aunt Nabou and Lady Mother-in-law. These are Yaye Khady, Ousmane's mother, and Ouleymatou, the co-wife of Mireille. Like in *So Long a Letter*, these women act against the interests and emancipation of others for personal and selfish motives.

As mentioned earlier, following their marriage in Paris, Ousmane and Mireille return to Senegal where they build a home in Ousmane's community. At the beginning, they live their lives as a romantic couple; they are close to each other until things crumble. Like Aunt Nabou in the previous novel, Ousmane's mother, Yaye Khady, is not happy that her son has married a woman she did not choose, and who is not even black. Her racist attitude toward Mireille makes clear her intention not to tolerate a white woman in her family. To her, Mireille is an "anomaly" and an intruder who will disrupt the traditional family pattern. She openly complains that "Ousmane was introducing an anomaly, a white woman [who] does not enrich a family, [but rather] impoverishes it by undermining its unity" (73). Yaye Khady's negative attitude toward Mireille could be justified in the sense that the extended family and love of company is of great importance in African societies. On the other hand, the Western concept of love is one of bilateral exchange, in which the woman gives (or at least is expected to give) her husband all her love in exchange for all his love; consequently, this excludes others. Thus, Yaye Khady fears that Ousmane's attention will only be directed towards Mireille while he neglects his traditional African family.

Unlike her husband who has left fate in God's

hands and decided to give his daughter-in-law a fair chance, Yaye Khady objects to Ousmane's marriage because Mireille will not be able to fulfill all the traditional responsibilities of a daughter-in-law towards her in-laws, especially her mother-in-law. In her opinion, only a daughter-in-law who hails from her own society and tradition would understand and even take care of all the family needs. Hear her:

*A Toubab* (white woman) can't be a proper daughter-in-law. She'll only have eyes for her man. We'll mean nothing to her. And I who dreamt of a daughter-in-law who'd live here and relieve me of the domestic work by taking over management of the house, and now I'm faced with a woman who's going to take my son away from me. I shall die on my feet in the kitchen. (66)

Yaye Khady therefore schemes to secure Ouleymatou for her son Ousmane. Ouleymatou is a Senegalese well versed in traditions, and aware of the responsibilities of a woman towards her in-laws, particularly the husband's mother. Ouleymatou will be able to relieve her mother-in-law of her duties in her old age. This certainly seems to be the view of the feminist critic Juliana Nfa-Abbeyi:

Yaye Khady assumes that a Senegalese daughter-in-law would automatically fit into a predetermined sexual division of labor – one that directs another to relieve her domestic duties, thus rewarding her for her numerous years of motherhood and childbearing. Yaye Khady thinks first of

herself and her position, and these selfish feelings blind her from developing any constructive or meaningful relationship with Mireille. (Nfa-Abbenyi 1997: 116)

Ousmane's mother sees nothing wrong in encouraging her son to marry a woman of her own choice, what matters to her is to see her son marry a traditional Senegalese woman, whom she believe would care for her in her old age. Yaye Khady assumes that a Senegalese daughter-in-law would automatically relieve her of her duties, thus rewarding her for her many years of motherhood and childbearing. Because of these selfish feelings, she cannot develop any constructive or meaningful relationship with Mireille who is an outsider and must remain that way.

The status of outsider which is conferred on Mireille is due to several factors. Besides being French and of aristocratic origins, Mireille is intellectual, intelligent, and an equal to Ousmane in education and insight. She is neither versed in Senegalese tradition nor in the responsibilities required of a wife towards her in-laws, particularly the husband's mother. In stark opposition to Mireille is Ouleymatou. She is Senegalese, raised in a traditional setting. She is barely educated but knows how to manipulate the local traditions to her benefit.

Yaye Khady conceives of a white and a black daughter-in-law in totally different ways. She asserts:

A black woman knows and accepts the mother-in-law's rights. She enters the home with the intention of relieving the older woman. The daughter-in-law cocoons her husband's mother in a nest of respect and repose. Acting according to

unspoken and undisputed principles, the mother-in-law gives her orders, supervises, and makes her demands. She appropriates the greater part of her son's earnings. She is concerned with the running of his household and has her say in the upbringing of her grandchildren . . . (72)

A white woman does not enrich a family. She impoverishes it by undermining its unity. She can't be integrated into the community. She keeps herself apart, dragging her husband after her. Has anyone ever seen a white woman pounding millet or fetching buckets of water? On the contrary, the white woman exploits others who have to do the jobs for her that she is not used to doing! . . . The white woman manipulates her husband like a puppet. Her husband remains her property. She alone controls her household and all the income is turned to her benefit alone. Nothing goes to her husband's family. (73)

This is clearly not only a simple issue of race difference as one might think. My assumption here is that, while there could be some measure of racism in Yaye Khady's conceptions of a white versus a black daughter-in-law, the main issue is that of women's power and familial control. Ousmane's mother wants to take advantage of her patriarchal power and privileges in order to satisfy her interest. This situation exemplifies what Mbye Cham terms, "the phenomenon of women deliberately and maliciously sabotaging the happiness of other women in

a male dominated society" (Cham 1984: 47).

We may wonder why aging parents should be so dependent on their children. Like people in many other non-Western societies, Africans do not stress independence and autonomy of the individual but rather believe that the family supersedes the individual. Therefore, to ensure that unity is maintained in the family, children need to live with their aging parents and take care of them. In addition, Africans choose to live with their parents because they want to set an example for their children so that the children will choose to support them financially, psychologically and emotionally in their old age. Africans believe that it is their responsibility to care for the parents who cared for them when they were children. Those who fail to perform this traditional filial duty, to which the parents feel entitled, will not receive blessings from their ancestors and God that are necessary for a good life and will bring disgrace upon themselves in the eyes of the community members. In the case of Ousmane's mother, however, her right to be taken care of has been threatened by her son's marriage to a white woman, who will not appreciate or accept the African family pattern and its support system.

Ouleymatou, who wants to marry Ousmane because of his prestige and relative wealth, knows how to win the favor not only of Ousmane, but also of the extended family by "playing" according to the rules. Ouleymatou is a traditional woman who has no other ambition than becoming a co-wife. Coming from a turbulent polygamous family where the home is a battleground on which co-wives verbally and physically attack one another, and having returned home from an unsuccessful marriage, she finds no problem in making her way through her second marriage. She willingly accepts polygamy, knowing quite

well what awaits her in this kind of a relationship, as the narrator explains: "She was not averse to sharing. Sharing a man was the common lot of women in her circle and the idea of finding a man for herself alone had never crossed her mind" (106). She therefore launches her armory of seduction to displace Mireille in Ousmane's heart. Her conquest of him is described by Bâ in ritualistic language, with the imagery of hunting:

She was adept in the art of seduction and laid her traps to realise her ambition . . . What could Mireille's lack of sophistication do in the face of the provocative tinkle of beads around the hips, or the aphrodisiac potency of *gongo* powder? What could Mireille do against the suggestive wiggle of an African woman's rump, wrapped in the warm color of her *pagne*? (116, 112)

Although she is formally unschooled, she possesses an exceptional intelligence for survival. Her so called love is only driven by her economic gain. She rejected her previous suitors like Samba the butcher and Diawara the bus driver because they were "incapable of setting her up in the opulent style favored in film" (106). Ousmane was the only one for her thanks to his economic prospects. Because of the nature of their economic dependence on men, women such as Ouleymatou tend to hurt other women by willingly accepting to become second wives. Through Ouleymatou, Bâ seeks to dispel certain myths about women's ability to live together in harmony and sharing.

Apparently, the tension between these women is triggered by the "intrusion" of Mireille in the traditional

African family pattern. But it is also caused by class differences among the members of society, and the need for each individual woman to survive within the social fabric where women have minimal access to education. Yaye Khady depends on her son for her future security. As for Ouleymatou, she cannot move up the social ladder because she has no formal education. Therefore, the only way to guarantee her social mobility is by marrying a man who belongs to the elite. Mireille, on the other hand, is financially independent; she has a job and can support herself. She only needs Ousmane to support her morally because she is a foreigner in a country whose customs and traditions she does not understand.

It is fairly evident that Yaye Khady takes advantage of her traditional motherhood powers in order to control and maintain her grip on Ousmane's household. Moreover, she deliberately makes no effort to accommodate and integrate Mireille into the Senegalese society and culture; instead, she adopts a confrontational attitude. For example, to annoy Mireille, Yaye Khady rudely intrudes on the couple's privacy every Sunday morning by walking straight into their bedroom without knocking and without apologies, claiming that the white woman with her insatiable love of sex is "killing" her son. She enquires as she walks in: "Ousmane, did you say your dawn prayer?" And further complains: "Ousmane, a man has only one intestine. If you imitate your insatiable white woman, your sole intestine will burst and I will be the only loser" (85).<sup>10</sup> Yaye Khady is jealous of her son's white wife and insinuates that Mireille will make Ousmane impotent by making love to him too frequently. She is also frustrated that her once beloved son now belongs to another woman. When Mireille complains to her husband about his mother's intrusion into the privacy

of their bedroom, Ousmane does nothing to stop her but instead stands up for her, rejoining: "She feels frustrated. You must forgive her. She feels she has lost me. That I now belong to you" (81).

Some critics, particularly those who are unfamiliar with African cultures, may quickly conclude that the intrusion of Yaye Khady into her son's bedroom is typical of African mothers. On the contrary, an African woman has respect for her son's room, especially if he is an adult, and more so when he is married. Yaye Khady's behavior is un-African and amounts to disrespect and disregard for traditions.

Like in the previous novel, where Bâ uses a young female voice – that of Daba – to attack Lady Mother-in-Law for the consequences of her selfish actions, the author utilizes another young woman, Ousmane's younger sister, Soukeyna, as a vehicle for condemning meddling mothers-in-law who abuse their traditional privileges for personal interests to the detriment of their daughters-in-law. Soukeyna chastises her mother for blessing Ousmane's second marriage and not helping Mireille to integrate into the family and conform to the Senegalese model of a good daughter-in-law:

By your selfishness you're driving Ousmane to eventual disaster; and simultaneously, you're killing another woman's daughter, as Mireille also has a mother. I am completely opposed to my brother's second marriage and consider that nothing can justify it except your self-interest. I'll have nothing to do with this second home. Mireille has attempted the impossible to try to please you! She

even offered to take a turn in cooking at the brazier in the yard, to give you a rest, but you just laughed in her face. You discouraged any attempts at co-operation. You reject her without even knowing her. Why? Because she is white . . . Her color is the only reason you've got for hating her. I can't see anything else you can have against her. (152-153)

Soukeyna also accuses her mother of not making things easier for Mireille and of not appreciating even the small effort her daughter-in-law is making to adapt to Senegalese culture. I agree with Ada Azodo that Khady's hatred is no different from that of a juggernaut that crushes everything in its path.<sup>11</sup> As an illustrative example, let us take the incident where Yaye Khady prepares enormously peppery dishes that Mireille cannot tolerate, forcing her to live for days on fruits. Clearly, Yaye Khady does not consider the psychological and emotional pain she is inflicting on Mireille. In her view, the white woman is 'abnormal,' like all white people, and therefore "not subject to the same laws and the same servitudes as black people!" (74). However, Yaye Khady should not be blamed entirely for her participation in the destruction of Mireille's happiness. Like other women of her generation, Yaye Khady is a victim of her past; her selfishness and cruel treatment of her daughter-in-law may be attributed to her upbringing and past experience. Traditionally in African societies, a woman is told by her mother and other elderly women that through marriage, she is brought into a new household: that of her husband. As an outsider within her newly adopted homestead, she is expected to live under the shadow and control of her husband and his

parents, as well as his extended family.

Although Mireille is a victim of Ousmane's machismo and selfishness, as well as his mother's ploy, I contend that her own intransigence, her refusal to adapt to Senegalese customs, also plays a role in the breakdown of her marriage. Although she converted to Islam, at her husband's request, Mireille does not kneel to pray five times a day as required by the Islamic religion, and she prefers an outing to the cinema to the religious ceremonies over which Ousmane's father is presiding. When Ousmane attempts to explain to her the significance of Senegalese music and the contribution Africans have made to civilization, she remains unmoved and does not listen (92-93).

Despite the revolutionary ideology she embraced as a student, Mireille demonstrates her allegiance to the nuclear family. Thus, she resents Ousmane's cronies, who keep dropping by the house. Equally important is the fact that she does not seek help from the women's social network, a valuable tool of support that would comfort her and suggest other ways of understanding and coping with the institution of polygamous marriage. Even when Rosalie, her sister-in-law's friend, tells her to open her heart and mind to her in-laws, and to be kind and cheerful to them, Mireille does not consider her advice. Instead, she elects to sequester herself in her bedroom and thinking about her husband, hoping that the child she is expecting will bring reconciliation and harmony by eventually re-kindling the love that once existed in her household. Unfortunately, the child brings a tragedy of his own. He is born a mulatto, a *Gnouloule Khessoule*, that is a child who is "Not black! Not white!" (164).

As a cultural hybrid, Gorgui is neither fully French, nor accepted as a full-blooded Senegalese. Unlike his full-

blooded African half-brother whose birth is welcomed by Yaye Khady with open arms and with baptismal rituals, no elaborate ceremony announces Gorgui's birth. His baptism, as Yaye Khady claims, is "sadder than a day of mourning" (125). Unlike a normal family in which the first born is cherished, Gorgui's grandmother treats him with disdain. She openly confesses: "I am ashamed of my grandson with his skin that's neither black nor white" (153). Yaye Khady's reaction does not come as a surprise, given that the mother of the child was never integrated into the family.

Contrary to popular belief that "a child is supposed to strengthen the ties of a couple" (160), Gorgui's birth does not bring the much expected reconciliation, harmony and joy to the lives of his parents. His father, Ousmane, has fallen out of love with Mireille and leaves her for Ouleymatou. When Mireille discovers the betrayal, she reacts with sadness and rage. She hacks their only son to death and leaves Ousmane on the floor oozing blood from the deep wounds he received at knife point.

What, then, is Bâ's attitude to a cross-cultural marriage? Does she suggest that such a union is doomed to failure and therefore people from different races or cultural background should avoid inter-marrying? From evidences available in her novels, Bâ does not condemn mixed marriages. In fact, she provides examples in the novels to show that such a union could work, depending on the maturity of character mutually possessed by the two individuals involved. A better explored and more tested case is the happy marriage between Lamine and Pierrette in *Scarlet Song*. Lamine is disciplined, tolerant, open-minded, faithful and devoted to his French wife, Pierrette. He allows her to be herself and retain her identity in the African patriarchal culture in which they live.

Lamine's accommodating nature is further highlighted in his assertion: "And if to respect my wife and let her live happily in the way she chooses mean that I've been colonised, well then, I've been colonised and I admit it. I want peace. That does not mean I am a traitor of myself" (100).

The oppressive mother-in-law is a familiar figure in other works by African women writers. Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981) is an example that comes to mind. But Yaye Khady, in *Scarlet Song*, seems to be "the most pernicious and crafty of these objectionable female kill joys. Her role in her son's home is that of an intruder and a plunderer" (Ezeigbo 1999: 66). It is ironical that a woman, who has enjoyed uninterrupted peace and harmony in her monogamous marriage, shamelessly interferes in her son's marriage and encourages him to take a second wife. In fact, Yaye Khady has not had to compete with or be harassed by a co-wife: "She's the only one in charge in her own yard. There, she's the mistress of all she surveys; hers are the only hands that scrub and scour; she can organise everything and if anything goes wrong, she is the one to put it right" (8). Her resentment, hostility and selfish desire pursue Mireille relentlessly, contributing greatly to her insanity, her killing of her child and attempted murder of her husband. Her meddling is identified as "the cause of something indefinable but essential deserting the couple's relationship" (95).

## Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to argue that, although men are often accused of oppressing women, it is quite evident that women are equally participants in female oppression. If Mawdo is responsible for failing to control

his sexual craving, one wonders whether his culpability is any greater than that of the mother who, through her evil machination, makes him marry his cousin Nabou. Lady Mother-in-Law is not any better either. Her daughter, Binetou, is reluctant to marry a man older than herself but, coming from a poor background, Lady Mother-in-Law begs Binetou to marry Modou so that she, the mother, can rise to a higher socioeconomic status and experience some comfort. As for Yaye Khady, she fails in her traditional duty as mother-in-law. Because of her rigid preconceived notions about white women and her obsession with privilege, she encourages her son, Ousmane, to marry a woman of her choice, and does not even make any effort to help Mireille cope with her "two difficult apprenticeships: that of married life and that of a black man's wife in Africa" (99). As agent of patriarchy, Yaye Khady seeks to ascertain authority under the guise of family honor, by subjecting Mireille to an unfair treatment. These ignorant, selfish, manipulative and insensitive older women are a real obstacle to women's emancipation.

There is, therefore, absolute necessity for cordial relationships, sisterhood and, above all, solidarity among women, be they married or single, in order to save themselves from male oppression and dominance. As Irène d'Almeida rightly points out, "A greater solidarity among women is needed to alleviate the agony women go through in [marital and social] situations" (d'Almeida 1986, 162). This solidarity, however, cannot flourish without a good understanding on the part of women themselves that, in a patriarchal society, all women – mothers, mothers-in-law, daughters, or daughters-in-law are, in the words of Buchi Emecheta, second-class citizens.<sup>12</sup>

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> See Gaidzanwa and McFadden's chapters in Ruth Meena (ed.) 1992. *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues*.
- <sup>2</sup> Sandra Harding. 1986. *The Science Question in Feminism*, 193-195.
- <sup>3</sup> Mariama Bâ. 1981. Trans. Modupe Bode-Thomas. Oxford: Heinemann. All citations are from this edition, and are incorporated within the text.
- <sup>4</sup> Mariama Bâ. 1986. Trans. Blair Dorothy S. New York: Longman. All citations are from this edition, and are incorporated within the text.
- <sup>5</sup> Eustace Palmer. 1982. *A Powerful Female Voice in the African Novel*, 22.
- <sup>6</sup> The famous verse from the chapter on women in the Qur'an is as follows: "Marry of the women who seem good to you, two, three or four, and if ye fear that ye cannot do justice [to so many] then one [is enough].." (Mernissi, Fatima. 1987. *Beyond the veil*, 46).
- <sup>7</sup> The traditional Wolof social structure was characterized by division into castes. The upper stratum included royal lineages, nobles, warriors, cultivators, religious teachers and leaders. The middle stratum was composed of artisans such as workers in gold, silver or iron; leatherworkers; woodworkers, and griots. The lowest stratum consisted of a vast number of slaves. These social distinctions based on caste had a bearing on marriage. Men and women of a different social status were not allowed to marry. As far as the goldsmith is concerned, he was the most feared of the artisans, and a person from whom it was wise to distance oneself. The blacksmith earned his living by working with fire which is associated with destructive power that can reduce anything to ashes. Therefore, marrying anyone from this social class would be risky. (See *Area Handbook for Senegal*, 90-93)
- <sup>8</sup> Ramatoulaye spends her double day as housewife and teacher.

- <sup>9</sup> This novel was published shortly after the demise of Mariama Bâ in 1981.
- <sup>10</sup> Ada Azodo comments on this Senegalese tradition. She observes that "according to Senegalese popular belief, women have two 'intestines,' the food track and the uterus. Men have only one, the food track," in *Emerging Perspectives On Mariama Bâ*, 245.
- <sup>11</sup> *Op.cit.* 236.
- <sup>12</sup> This is the title of a novel by the Nigerian woman writer, Buchi Emecheta. In this novel, the author gives an insight into the life of Adah, a modern and enlightened woman living in London with her traditional grounded husband, Francis. He refuses to give Adah any freedom of action and frowns on her social interaction with Europeans. To him "a woman was a second-class human to be slept with at any time, even during the day, and, if she refuses, to have sense beaten into her until she gave in; to be ordered out of bed after he had done with her; to make sure she washed his clothes and got his meals ready at the right time" (Emecheta 1974, 181).

**References**

- Adebayo, Aduke. 1995 *Critical Essays on the Novel in Francophone Africa*, Volume 1. Ibadan, Nigeria: ADM Publishers.
- . 1996. "Tearing the Veil of Invisibility: The roles of West African Female Writers in Contemporary Times." In *Feminism & Black Women's Creative Writing: Theory. Practice. Criticism*, ed. Aduke Adebayo. Ibadan, Nigeria: ADM Publishers.
- Agbasiere, Julie. 1999. "Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*: The Classic and the Critique." In *The "New Eve" in Francophone African Literature*, ed. Julie Agbasiere. Enugu, Nigeria: Jee-Communications.
- Ajayi-Soyinka, Omofolabo. "Negritude, Feminism, and quest for Identity: Re-Reading Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*." In *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Post-colonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*, ed. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo. Trenton, N.J: Afria World Press, 2003: 153-174.
- Azodo, Ada U. 2003. "Can the Post-Colonial Subject be White? The Nightmare of Self (Re)Definition in Mariama Bâ's *Scarlet Song*." In *Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: Post-colonialism, Feminism and Postmodernism*, (ed.) Ada Uzoamaka Azodo. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.

- Bâ, Mariama. 1981. *So Long a Letter*. Trans. Modup Bod - Thomas. Oxford: Heinemann.
- . 1986. *Scarlet Song*. English (U.S.) Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. New York: Longman.
- Bujra, Janet. "Urging Women to Redouble their Effort: Class, Gender and Capitalist Transformation in Africa." In Claire Robertson and Iris Berger (eds.), 1986. *Women and Class in Africa*. New York: African Publishing, 1986: 63-65.
- Cham, Mbye B. 1984-85. "The Female Condition in Africa: A literary Exploration by Mariama Bâ." *A Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, vol. 17 (1): 29-51.
- Chukwuma, Helen. 1991. *Accents In The African Novel*. Enugu, Nigeria: New Generation Book.
- d'Almeida, Irène A. 1986. "The Concept of Choice In Mariama Bâ's Fiction." In *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves. Trenton, N.J: Africa World Press.
- Emecheta, Buchi. 1974. *Second-Class Citizen*. London: Allison & Busby Ltd.
- Ezeigbo, Theodora A. 1994. "Women's Empowerment and National Integration: Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*." In *Current Trends in Literature and Language studies in West Africa*, ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu and

Charles E. Nnolin. Ibadan, Nigeria: Kraft Books.

- . 1999. "Marriage and Family in Mariama Bâ's *Scarlet Song* and Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*." In *The "New Eve" in Francophone African literature*, ed. Julie Agbasiere. Enugu, Nigeria: Jee-Communications.
- Frank, Katherine. 1987. "Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa." In *Women in African Literature Today*, ed. Eldred Jones and Eustace Palmer. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.
- Gaidzanwa, Rudo. 1992. "Bourgeois Theories of Gender and Feminism and their Shortcomings with Reference to Southern African Countries." In *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical issues*, ed. Ruth Meena. Harare: SAPES Books.
- Harding, Sandra. 1986. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Makward, Idris. 1986. "Marriage, Tradition and Women's Pursuit of Happiness in the Novels of Mariama Bâ." In *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, ed. Carole B. Davies and Anne Graves. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.
- McFadden, Patricia. 1992. "Sex, Sexuality and the Problems of AIDS in Africa." In *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical*

*issues*, ed. Ruth Meena. Harare: SAPES Books.

Meena, Ruth. 1992 (ed.) *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues*. Harare: SAPES.

Mernissi, Fatima. 1987. (ed.) *Beyond the veil: male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society*. Bloomington: IUP.

Nelson, Harold et al. 1963. *Area Handbook for Senegal*. Washington, D.C.: Foreign Area Studies Division, The American University.

Nfa-Abbenyi, Juliana M. 1997. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Differences*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nwapa, Flora. 1992. *One is Enough*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.

Ogundipe-Leslie, Molar. 1994. *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.

———. "The Female Writer and Her Commitment." In *Women in African Literature Today*, ed. Elder D. Jones. Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1987: 5-13.

- Oko, Emelia. 1996. "Eros, Psyche and Society: Narrative Continuity in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*." In *Feminism & Black Women's Creative Writing: Theory, Practice, Criticism*, ed. Aduke Adebayo. Ibadan, Nigeria: ADM Publishers.
- Palmer Eustace. 1982. "A Powerful Female Voice in the African Novel: Introducing the Novels of Buchi Emecheta." *New Literature Review* 11, November 1982: 22.