Dialogical Subjectivity, Epistolary Gaze, and Temporalities of Becoming in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1979)

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Abstract: This article argues that *So Long a Letter* (1979) constructs African female subjectivity as a dialogical self forged through the confessional epistle's denouncement of colonial and patriarchal forces that have long sought to bend African women's heads to external and internal orderings of their society. It contends that Bâ carves temporal and narrative spaces for African women by casting a subversive gaze on the interlocking systems of oppression that repress their sense of agency. Through the enabling potential of epistolary writing, the Senegalese writer fashions her heroine into a subjectivity that is neither given nor fixed, but constructed in the shifting positions of friend, wife, mother, widow, and at times Bâ's own mouthpiece, and through a continuing dialogue with past memories, present dilemmas, and alternative temporalities beyond dominant chrononorms. Drawing on Bakhtinian dialogism, Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness, Freeman's *chrononormativity*, and Barrett's affective continuum, this analysis therefore seeks to offer a transdisciplinary investigation into the ways how the novel reimagines African female subjectivity as a dialogic process of becoming emanating from the interstices of epistolary voice, affective temporalities, and the repudiation of colonial and patriarchal chrononormative imperatives. Ultimately, the paper concludes that the novel becomes a canvas onto which Bâ inscribes alternative modes of self-articulation, collective agency, and female futurity for African women.

Keywords: Affective continuum, African female subjectivity, colonial and patriarchal chrononormativities, Dialogical subjectivity, Epistolary gaze

Introduction

It goes without saying that Mariama Bâ, the first African woman novelist to be awarded the Noma Prize for her seminal novel *So Long a Letter*, commands an unmistakable prominence in African letters as a writer whose literary ingenuity has indelibly altered the contours of contemporary francophone African fiction and compelled new directions in feminist thought. Much of the critical attention surrounding her writing may be said to owe to her idiosyncratic yoking of the female condition in Africa to the agonizing transition into postcolonial modernity, insofar as this conjunction is subtly rendered with such delicate attentiveness and dense

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historical complexity that its meanings invite a mode of interpretation grounded in the sociocultural vista that catalyzes them.

From this vantage, Bâ's singular literary oeuvre, succinct yet inexhaustible in critical provocation, has elicited a considerable and extended scrutiny that far exceeds the bounds of her modest body of work. Her only two published books, *So Long a Letter* (1979) and *Scarlet Song* (1981), have been consistently interpreted through feminist and postcolonial perspectives for their trenchant criticisms of gendered oppression, neocolonial social structures, and the betrayal of nationalist ideals in post-independence Senegal. Feminist interpretations, for instance, foreground how Bâ dramatizes African women's disillusionment with the shallow promises of independence that have left a patriarchal system largely intact. However, Abdulkadir resorts to a Marxist-feminist prism to argue that the personal struggles of Bâ's heroine in *So Long a Letter,* speak directly to the socio-economic oppression of Senegalese women, and her experiences showcase how colonial legacies continue to inform postcolonial gendered realities.[1] Similarly, Warner explores how feminist criticism and postcolonial thought converge in Bâ's *So Long a Letter* through a transnational viewpoint to demonstrate how the novel attacks the limitations of legal reforms that although purported to modernize women's roles, they instead perpetuated neocolonial and patriarchal norms.[2] Moreover, recent critical readings have also cast light on Bâ's postcolonial skepticism, particularly her opposition to the nationalist rhetoric of *negritude*, which Ramatoulaye implicitly indicts as complicit in fuelling patriarchal domination. In this regard, *So Long a Letter* has been the focus of much feminist and postcolonial readings for its imaginative indictment of the unfulfilled promises of liberation, and its powerful call for a consideration for African women realities.

While previous readings have consistently explored *So Long a Letter*'s incisive commentary on gender, neocolonialism and the betrayal of nationalist ideals in post-independence Senegal, none has thoroughly considered the intricate implications of its epistolary form as an empowering space for the female protagonist to enact a dialogical subjectivity that challenges the silencing forces of colonialism and patriarchy. In light of Bakhtin's literary criticism, this kind of subjectivity finds realization when the main character assumes a "complex wholeness" that exists only dialogically.[3] In the text under scrutiny, Bâ's heroine engages in the act of writing the letter to her lifelong friend only after she experiences a self torn between her thoughts and emotions, and the role she is compelled to play because of social conventions. Her reality, amid such dissonance, "no longer offers external totality" to her sense of self.[4] *So Long a Letter* thus corresponds well with what Bray stresses as the "search for inner self" within a heterogenous reality.[5] Throughout the novel, Ramatoulaye's journey towards a clear self-recognition is not informed by a singular voice, but by a multivocality that issues from different positions (those of friend, wife, mother, widow, and Bâ's mouthpiece), which together constitute a complex wholeness of African female subjectivity that defies reductive categorization of colonial and patriarchal discourses. In view of this, this article contends that Ramatoulaye's subjectivity is neither given nor fixed but constructed in and through a continuing dialogue with past memories, present dilemmas, and alternative temporalities beyond dominant chrononorms.

It is worth to mention that, even as *So Long a Letter* has long been enshrined within the canon of African and postcolonial literature, my reading, nonetheless, argues that its convoluted

narrative architecture and ideological profundity continue to solicit renewed critical attention. Far from being a historically exhausted text, Bâ's novel still proves a fecund case of interpretive possibilities, particularly when looked through a fresh constellation of intersecting theoretical approaches. That being said, the present analysis distinguishes itself significantly by undertaking a rigorously transdisciplinary interpretation that departs from prevailing critical readings. and offers a theoretical frame capable of capturing, even if partially, the novel's affective textures and temporal reimaginings of African women, with renewed acuity. In so doing, it ultimately seeks to introduce *So Long a Letter* as a living, insurgent literary masterpiece that continues to disrupt disciplinary boundaries and incite dialogic modes of critical reading.

The Dialogicality of Ramatoulaye's Afircan Female Subjectivity

Notwithstanding *So Long a Letter* seems to communicate an authorial concern with a unified sense of subjectivity, its evident preoccupation with a persistent, yet, contested formation of African female subjectivity shaped by the interplay of voices, ideologies, and cultural inheritances, invites insight about what this study chooses to describe as the dialogical subjectivity. It is indeed tempting to say that Ramatoulaye's letter to her childhood friend, Aissatou, can be interpreted as a site of intersubjective negotiation wherein her subjectivity is articulated through what Bakhtin describes as polyphony, or, the coexistence of autonomous yet interacting plurality of consciousnesses that render the character an entity respected as full subject yet read as hosting a matrix of "consciousnesses that can never be fully defined or exhausted."[6] This is particularly evidenced by how her self-reflections are persistently mediated through the discursive presence of Aissatou, whose earlier refusal to accept a polygamous marriage becomes a paragon of a woman's self-liberation in post-independence Senegal: "Leaving a polygamous marriage was considered as proof of being saved."[7] Aissatou's demeaning experience of being edged out by a younger woman, set in motion by the Machiavellian intrigue of her conniving mother-in-law, culminates when her execrable spouse Mawdo Bâ, despite several years of love and shared life, concurs to marry his young cousin Nabou, in a disturbing bid to appease his aristocratic family's expectations and comply with caste endogamy.[8] This betrayal, though striking a humiliating blow to her dignity and self-esteem, galvanizes rather than debilitates Aissatou. With an angered voice laced with indignation, Aissatou recounts her decision to divorce Mawdo, laying it bare unflinchingly in a defiant letter she leaves behind:

> I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. You want to draw a line between heartfelt love and physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the hearts' acceptance, however little that may be. If you can procreate without loving, merely to satisfy the pride of your declining mother, then I find you despicable…I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way.[9]

Davies and Ogundipe-Leslie contend that Aissatou's self-redemption here energizes Ramatoulaye with "the raw material for telling and speaking" her own self.[10] Her friend's gesture of defiance, though not her own, seems to crystallize into a critical mirror against which she calibrates the intricacies of her own reality. While Ramatoulaye acquiesces in silence to the confining strictures of a bad marriage in the hope of salvaging dignity and continuity, her letter

diverges markedly from this position and enters into dialogue with Aissatou's more radical stance. This suggests that Bâ knits a narrative that emanates from a continuous negotiation between two opposing perspectives among Senegalese women on polygamy either as "a burden society imposes on [them]," or, "an injustice to fight."[11] Aissatou, in this sense, takes up the role of what Butler refers to as the "proleptic and performative" subject that holds out "the possibility for a convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet met."[12] This kind of subject works to constantly bring Ramatoulaye into a different subject position wherein she is always placed in tension with, and responsive to other women's issues.

In notable fact, the narrator Ramatoulaye, writing her long epistle from within the socio-religiously regulated period of *iddah* evokes Aissatou's letter early in the narrative amidst a flood of reminiscences.[13] Bâ's choice of this narrative strategy seems hardly accidental, for although iddah is outwardly circumscribed by ritual obligation, the aura of its normative quietude is inwardly ruffled by Ramatoulaye's memories of shared experiences with her soul-sister: "I cannot help remembering in my forced [14]solitude and seclusion." These memories bring back distant but vivid sensations as well as images testifying to the powerful intimacy of their friendship: "I conjure you up…Ebb and tide of feeling: heat and dazzlement, the woodfires, the sharp green mango…Ebb and tide of images: drops of sweat beading your mother's ochre-coloured face as she emerges from the kitchen…"[15] Stirred by provocative remembrance, her reclusion morphs into a liminal space that is profoundly "torn between the past and the present"—between a common past of female bonding and a contemplative present seeking refuge from "a wound hardly healed" and consolation from the memory of this very past.[16]

The evocative force of a collective memory is made explicit from the very first lines of Ramatoulaye's letter, which purposefully commingle her life-story with Aissatou's:

> Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange messages daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts. As for us, we wore out wrappers and sandals on the same stony road to the koranic school; we buried our milk teeth in the same holes and begged our fairy godmothers to restore them to us, more splendid than before. We walked the same paths from adolescence to maturity, where the past begets the present.[17]

With the novel opening on flashbacks covering more than one third of the book, Bâ seems to bestow upon memory a centrality akin to what Said affirms thusly: "what is first, because it is first, because it begins, is eminent."[18] The eminence of memory in *So Long a Letter* should be conceived in its capacity to engender, in Elizabeth Freeman's words, a point of resistance to the "temporal order" of iddah by drawing Ramatoulaye into a rupture dramatizing a counter-temporality that puts her past into "meaningful and transformative relation with the present."[19] Ramatoulaye's act of writing is , in this respect, instigated by this dialogic past-present relation, which in turn helps break the obedient silence her seclusion presumes; a silence emblematic of that borne by African women under the strains of social strictures and the "heavy burden of custom."[20] In a 1980 interview, Mariama Bâ characterizes her novel thus:

> [T]his book that has so often been described as a 'cry from the heart', this cry is coming from the heart of *all women everywhere*. It is first a cry from the heart of the

> Senegalese women, because it talks about the problems of Senegalese women... But it is also a cry which can symbolize the cry of women everywhere…[T]here is everywhere a cry, everywhere in the world, a women's cry is being uttered. The cry might be different, but there is still a certain unity.[21]

If Aissatou's letter represents one cry among many, which is underscored by its concision, it may do well then to associate Ramatoulaye's spacious epistle with a capacious endeavor to encompass a multiplicity of 'cries' that combine the personal and the general. Stringer is among the few critics to identify autobiographical references in Bâ's fiction. While pointing out what she maintains as the novel's major accomplishment, she asserts that *So Long a Letter* "succeeds on appearing to be both a personal autobiography and a general account of the feminine condition in Senegal."[22] In this twinned vantage, Aissatou's dissenting voice may be apprehended as the nearest autobiographical analogue to Bâ's personal life, given that both women divorced after many years of marriage. Reading the novel, however, one discerns Ramatoulaye as bearing a broader representational burden, with her narrative voice drawing together disparate female experiences into "a certain unity" of enunciation.[23] This unity is unmistakably achieved through Bâ's deployment of first-person narration which, as the Senegalese writer Mame Seck Mbacke affirms when hosted in French radio, enables "every Senegalese woman" to see herself in Bâ's "faithful recreation of their own experience."[24]

Although Mariama Bâ has disavowed both self-portraiture and the label of feminist on multiple occasions, there remains a persistent interpretive temptation to perceive her female protagonists as emblematizing varying shadows of her African feminist consciousness. Steady succinctly defines African feminism as the "abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant."[25] Aissatou, who divorces her husband without hesitation, chooses to raise her four sons by herself, manages to continue her tertiary education in France and secures a job as an interpreter in the Senegalese Embassy in the United States, reflects an authentic embodiment of Steady's definition. She quite literally merits her creator's tribute as "the courageous pioneer of a new life."[26] However, what appears to be almost an effortless act of identification in Aissatou's case becomes considerably more problematic with Ramatoulaye. The reader is left to grapple with her ambivalent attitude toward polygyny, questioning why a woman who once "[c]ouldn't be the ally of polygamous urges," is now succumbing to those of her husband who takes a second wife the age of their daughter.[27] A possible explanation for this ambivalence is found in Davies and Graves' conceptualization of African feminism as an approach through which African female novelists explore "traditional and contemporary avenues of choice for women."[28] Unlike Aissatou whose pursuit of individual goals signifies a choice that is undoubtedly in conflict with traditionalism, Ramatoulaye's is rather conditioned by a certain malaise. This malaise, d'Almeida implies, arises from the predicament African women usually confront in seeking to "keep traditions while, at the same time, wanting to reject what, in society, ties women down."[29] This is evident, for instance, when Ramatoulaye yields to polygamous tradition, while at the same time breaking away from the Senegalese custom that obliges a widow to marry her brother-in-law. When Modou's brother Tamsir proposes to her, she replies vehemently: "You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand."[30] And although he commands her to hold her tongue, she rebuffs:

"Purge yourself of your dreams of conquest. They have lasted fourty days. I shall never be your wife."[31]

Through a Bakhtinian prism, Bâ's heroine demonstrates conflicting perspectives whose convergence creates a feminist consciousness that permits ambivalence. Seen in this light, her ambivalence results intriguingly in her experiencing a dialogic unfolding of a subjectivity that is informed by a *mestiza* consciousness. For Anzaldúa, the mestiza consciousness is a consciousness born of and lies in "healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts."[32] There is no satisfactory moment to display such split in *So Long a Letter* than when Ramatoulaye asserts,

> I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything—disappointments and humiliations—hope still lives on within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me.[33]

This assertion invites us to understand her female subjectivity as shaped through the fractures that permeate her lived reality. Spiritually, she wrestles with her husband's betrayal which, for her, epitomizes the prevailing patriarchal logic of polygamy; a logic that burdens both men and women with moral contradictions, "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."[34]

Culturally, however, Ramatoulaye finds herself existing as a liminal subject who is caught between the imperatives of female solidarity and the luring promises of modern Senegal that Bâ eloquently casts in the very character of Daouda Dieng, a man who sought to marry her years ago. Now, with Daouda attaining a distinguished position within the social elite, his second proposal to Ramatoulaye leaves her in a state of confusion where even her neighbor Farmata scolds her on, saying "Who do you take yourself for? At fifty, you have dared to break the *wolere*. You trample upon your luck: Daouda Dieng, a rich man, a deputy, a doctor, of your own age group, with just one wife. He offers you security, love, and you refuse! Many women, of Daba's age even, would wish to be in your place."[35] What Farmata is unable to see is that Ramatoulaye's confusion is but a projection of a rejection hinging on "revolt as well as female solidarity" for she thinks that marrying Daouda "would hurt his first wife the way she had been so painfully and emotionally wounded when her own husband married a second time."[36]

The narrative also casts light on the significance of experiencing gendered fractures in producing a dialogical subjectivity that speaks itself through Ramatoulaye's contemplations on motherhood in relation to African customs and the place of women in modern Senegal. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Bâ dramatizes motherhood as a critical force in the construction of Ramatoulaye's fractured self. While Innes foregrounds the belief that Ramatoulaye's identity as a mother is "an identity which is stronger and more firmly rooted than that of wife," she seems to turn a blind eye on the formative implications contributing to the resilience of her motherhood that seems to nurture itself through mutivocality.[37] When she confesses at a critical moment of her epistolary narrative, "This time I shall speak out, my voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment, it burst out," readers are more inclined to translate this burst of voice as dialogic.[38] It is not actually meant to express Ramatoulaye's self-realization only, but to deliberately converse with the voices that have once silenced her, and, more

importantly to reinscribe what Hamam postulates as the "diverse female voices in history through writing in order to construct culturally specific narratives which society, traditions, the colonial legacy, and patriarchy describe or fail to acknowledge and understand."[39]

Importantly, it is her experience of motherhood which in fact signals her departure and liberation from a monologic endurance to embrace dialogic agency. As a mother of twelve children, she strives to abandon the confining space of polygamy by dedicating and immersing herself wholly in the space of motherhood, a space where she can reclaim voice and agency away from any kind of oppression or control Senegalese women usually confront. This is evidently palpable in the way Bâ mitigates the fractured picture of her heroine's marriage through establishing strong bond and relationship with her children. Representing the strong, intellectual African mother, who is deserted by an indifferent husband, Ramatoulaye assumes the responsibility of cultivating her Muslim daughters' consciousness about marital and matrimonial matters by herself, in a way that "allows them an appropriate amount of freedom, but encourages them to confide in her."[40] Assumedly, Bâ resorts to such depiction so as to disturb the colonial as well the patriarchal "othering" of African motherhood, through a process of "matriarching" what has been accepted as a patriarchal institution. This literary gesture is inseparably, even urgently, linked to her broader ideological stance. Bâ denounces the idealized essentialism of the African Mother and asserts literature as a critical mode of intervention into both gendered hierarchies and national mythologies, a conviction she voices with unflinching candor in her reflections beyond the bounds of fiction:

> The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice…in the institutions, in society, in the street, in political organisations…As women…we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non–violent but effective weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother, who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. Within African literature, room must be made for women…room we will fight for with all our might.[41]

In this case, we can say that Bâ's epistolary mode of writing a dialogic subjectivity underscores her commitment to "unother" the lived experience of African motherhood that is severely torn between social expectations and personal agency in Senegalese society.

On Ba's Dialogic Reconfiguration of African Motherhood

Ramatoulaye's experience of motherhood is not confined to a singular, fixed identity. It rather reflects a state of becoming that is the outcome of a dynamic movement conditioned by a dialectical tension between external pressures and her own evolving sense of self. For instance, the critical gaze of her daughter Daba is unequivocally desired to disturb the certitude of Ramatoulaye's choice by shaking the reverential ideal of African mothers' self-sacrifice as inherently virtuous. This gaze is voiced in her repudiation of her mother's inert, patient endurance of a broken marriage:, "Break with him, mother! Send this man away. He has respected neither you nor me. Do what Aunty Aissatou did; break with him. Tell me you'll break with him. I can't see you fighting over a man with a girl my age."[42] Her daughter's words, as a matter of fact, breed a resounding voice that compels her mother to undertake an aching

reevaluation of her self-sacrifice for the sake of her children, all delivered through the prism of a younger, less acquiescent female consciousness. The latter, for Bâ, holds the potential to make this intergenerational confrontation an enlightening event that helps Ramatoulaye see how motherhood, as a patriarchical institution, creates a fissure within her self-perception. As implicitly transmitted by her daughter's words, she is both the subject and object of a gendered narrative that captures her selflessness as a mother; a selflessness that is both expected and imposed by her culture. Nonetheless, the sacrifice of her own desires in the name of motherhood empowers her sense of subjectivity, in the sense that she practices what we can call, "matriarchical motherhood." The latter, emerges from her relationship with her grandmother whose advice is often resurrected to help pale her apprehensions about her grown children, "'The mother of a family has no time to travel. But she has time to die.' She would lament when, despite her sleepiness, she still had to carry out her share of the duties: 'Ah, if only I had a bed on which to lie down.'"[43] Her grandmother's advice keeps reminding her of the burdensome the African ideal of sacrificial motherhood passing down through generational wisdom, but also subtly criticizes it. On one hand, the grandmother's lament reflects a model of motherhood steeped in unrelenting duty and embodied resilience. Her articulation of exhaustion, "Ah, if only I had a bed on which to lie down," is not a mere expression of fatigue, but an invocation of the invisible, feminized travail upon which both family and society precariously rest and cling on.[44]

This figuration of the mother as altruistic, ever-present, and ultimately expendable dramatizes a conception of matriarchal responsibility as both noble and devastatingly dispossessing. It becomes a symbolic burden that Ramatoulaye carries, yet ultimately questions and reconfigures. In the novel, Ramatoulaye's conscious retreat from embracing dogmatically her grandmother's passively ambivalent paradigm of motherhood, culminates in her epistolary reflections on a subversive paradigm. The latter interposes to reconcile the ambivalence inherent in a culturally inherited paradigm energized by women like her grandmother, through a dialogic reconstitution of motherhood as an experience that neither rejects tradition nor remains imprisoned by it. After the death of her husband, she refuses to retreat into weakness so as to perform a self-reflective subjectivity that questions the overlapping burdens of widowhood and motherhood in a patriarchal society.

Her refusal to remarry, despite numerous proposals, speaks directly to this subjectivity. When she declares, "I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman. Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings," she articulates a teleological, romanticized vision of wedlock as a heteronormative ideal based on a relational morality that is grounded in reciprocal love and respect.[45] At the center of this vision is a politicized subversion of marriage as a cultural and social institution regulated by patriarchal subservience of woman "as not only her husband's property but is also subjected to patriarchally centered power and control."[46] Her refusal to remarry, in this sense, clings to a different paradigm of motherhood where a woman should be accepted as dialogic agent with a moral vocation transcending prevalent social expectations of womanhood, wifehood, and even widowhood.

The following pronouncement is a great tribute to the sterling character of her paragon, wherein she is able to create a strong bond with her children in a society in the midst of

upheaval where borrowed and inherited ideologies fight for supremacy: "There is a saying that discord here may be luck elsewhere. Why are you afraid to make the break? A woman is like a ball; once a ball is thrown, no one can predict where it will bounce. You have no control over where it rolls, and even less over who gets it. Often it is grabbed by an unexpected hand."[47] It is however important to say that her grandmother is credited much for polishing this paragon as her advice rings whenever needed "Different personalities require different forms of discipline. Strictness here, comprehension there. Smacking, which is successful with the very young ones, annoys the older ones. The nerves daily undergo severe trials! But that is the mother's lot."[48] In this sense, Ramatoulaye, amid such conflicting views of motherhood, manages to reconcile instructive legacies with her personal agency as both attentive to such legacies yet self-dictated.

Temporalities of Becoming: Epistolary Gaze Vs. Objectifying Gaze of Chrononormativity

Frank argues that Ramatoulaye's letter is not intended to address her dear friend Aissatou only, as Ramatoulaye has been essentially writing to the self that she has been striving to become; a self that is the ultimate product of a constant dialogue between past, present, and future; a self that is the dialogic epitome of many selves situated at the crossroads of different temporalities of becoming.[49] Indeed, the letter, unfolding as a sequence of her reminiscences instigated primarily by death and abandonment, can be translated as a temporal bridge between past, present, and possibility. Bâ's epistolary mode of writing transcends chronological time to produce a recursive temporality where memory is evoked as a strategy of meaning-making and resistance. Her remembrances, then, become the terrainscape onto which she reconsiders her womanhood and muses over the collective fate of Senegalese women, in particular, and African women, in general.

The recollection of Aissatou's radical choice to reject polygamy, for instance, is not narrativized with bitterness, but with Ramatoulaye's strong admiration that is distilled through the wisdom of time and shared suffering. Seemingly, this retrospective moment represents a narrative reminiscence that belongs to the past, yet, at a deeper level, the author appropriates it to the present time so that it conveys an expansive invitation for solidarity among present as well future African women to forge collective empowerment. That being said, the letter, here, reflects a performative gesture of what Jolly theorizes as feminist memory. According to Jolly, this kind of memory engenders a "feminist mode of testimonial narrative" whose aim is twofold: to restore the past and reorient it toward political criticism and imaginative resistance.[50] In this sense, Ramatoulaye's introspections on the conditions that "bend their heads and, in silence," force her and other women of her society to "accept a destiny that oppresses them", are but a call for a reborn, where she and other women may at last experience the feeling that they "had emerged into the light after a long journey through a dark, narrow tunnel."[51]

The epistolary gaze also builds itself on what Bakhtin famously conceptualizes as the chronotope: a dialogic imaginary in which "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole."[52] The epistolary space of Bâ, with its colliding voices of past and present, of past Senegal and modern Senegal, would then be understood as a literary space where time thickens to take on narrative density and become inseparable from the space of Ramatoulaye's subjectivity. Ramatoulaye's memory of her mother, "My mother has suffered a great deal," in this sense, haunts the temporal space of the letter to reveal itself as casting a

spectral presence of a past that Ramatoulaye seeks to revolt against.[53] Unlike her mother, who chooses silence over action, Ramatoulaye's act of writing reclaims the past to redefine her becoming: "This time I shall speak out. My voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment; it bursts out."[54]

Bâ's epistolary novel, then, authorizes a temporal and political breach to appropriate a narrative space long denied to African women, particularly in societies shaped by colonial, religious, and patriarchal synchronies. Furthermore, the letter itself occupies a liminal temporality between personal mourning and political awakening. The letter's narrative trajectory that is initiated by the trauma of widowhood and polygamous betrayal, creates a threshold where mourning and rejection commingle. This temporal liminality defies linearity so as its recursion allows remembrance to spring in a form of political consciousness. This is made manifest when Ramatoulaye writes, "To overcome my bitterness, I think of human destiny. Each life has its share of heroism, an obscure heroism, born of abdication, of renunciation and acceptance under the merciless whip of fate."[55] Her expression excavates the grief of abandonment as a collective affliction endured by several women of her community. Yet, at the same time, it invokes mourning and grief as transformative agents bearing comparison to what Butler claims: "Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation the full result of which one cannot know in advance)."[56] The result of which Butler speaks here is however known in *So Long a Letter*. The protagonist's recollection of a collective affliction transcends temporal and spatial confinements of this experience to convey it as a timeless, universal condition.

It is however in the waning moments of Ramatoulaye's correspondence with her lifelong friend, Aissatou, that the writer condenses the temporalities of her becoming through a reimagination of time, affective continuum, and female agency:

> 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 to 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. Reunited, will we draw up a detailed account of our faded bloom, or will we sow new seeds for new harvests?[57]

In what can be received as a lingering culmination of an epistolary gaze, 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."[58] Through this description, Bâ conveys a poeticized yet politicized account of African women's defiance against the interlocking chrononormativities of patriarchy and coloniality, both of which reduce time to normative frames of biological determinism, visible aging, and reproductive potential. The latter, according to Arriola et al. is "prioritized over all other roles , as this was central to the idea of the nation."[59] In this vein, Ramatoulaye's language is attentive to these teleological chronologies of domesticity and reproduction. When she propounds, "the signs on our bodies will not be important…the essential thing is the quality of the sap that flows through us," she displaces feminine value from these chronologies using the

metaphor of "sap" to instead locate it within a temporality that is cyclical and nourishing.[60] Just like the sap, whose constant, unrelentless circulation in the trunks, regardless of trees' visible decay, women should be regarded as a life-force that surmounts the declinist view of aging, where feminine worth supposedly diminishes with time. This temporal complexity of Ramatoulaye's epistolary gaze, and by implication that of the writer, is intended to resist the objectifying gaze, inherent in chrononormativities of patriarchy and coloniality, that equates aging with obsolescence and women's value with youthful conformity to social roles.

Furthermore, her metaphoric condensation reframes time as an affective continuum, or, what Barrett adequately captures as "phenomena described by complex nonlinear dynamics."[61] This condensation seems to destabilize what Freeman refers to as chrononormativity, or "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" so as they "inhabit a culture's expectations," since Ramatoulaye reconfigures time from a chrononormative parameter to a symbolic repository of shared emotions energized by memory, endurance, and care.[62] Bâ articulates this reconfiguration very clearly in Ramatoulaye's declaration: "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."[63]

The affective continuum maintained through "time, distance, as well as mutual memories," does not read separation and aging as decay.[64] Instead, it casts them into accumulative ties that bind not just Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, but speak to a larger lineage of African women and others whose lives have been historically relegated by dominant timelines of marriage, motherhood, and sacrifice. Her question, "Will we draw up a detailed account of our faded bloom, or will we sow new seeds for new harvests?" however, complicates the teleological arc of these timelines by affirming a generative temporality that renders Ramatoulaye's letter a site where personal friendship evolves into a collective feminist futurity.[65] Thus, her address to Aissatou transcends the confining limits of personal grief to gesture toward a wider, gendered temporality that is grounded in mutual recognition, memory, and the political dignity of female becoming across time.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding no final word can exhaust the layered intricacies overwhelming Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, this study has managed, through a transdisciplinary reading, to demonstrate how the artistic act of recounting a woman's private struggle reckons a dialogic enactment of African female subjectivity that exceeds the limitations of singular voice. Ramatoulaye's letters should not be regarded as spaces confined to introspection only, as they bring together different voices, occasionally in tension, yet often in accord, into its dialogical fabric. Such complexity produces a textual space where Ramatoulaye's subjectivity is always in relation with those it speaks to. Away from its declarative position, the protagonist's voice epitomizes a site of negotiation informed by a polyphonic articulation that complicates any stable boundary between self and other. This textual complexity could not be captured without recourse to Bakhtin's dialogism which helped read Ramatoulaye as a character that comes inevitably to represent a paragon of African female subjectivity; a paragon that Bâ refuses to reduce to either

autonomy or subservience, to ultimately deliver it through tension, difference, and dialogical encounters.

One of the compelling facets of this paragon is Bâ's reworking of motherhood, which the novel stresses its dialogic presence through female characters who hold conflicting views on motherhood, with some idealizing it while others question its expectations and constraints. This subtle juxtaposition renders the novel as a discursive space brimming with cultural negotiation, emotional conflict, and political implication. The maternal, in Bâ's hands, resists essentialist paradigms and becomes an expressive medium of critical self-articulation. It holds space for ambivalence as much as for care; for continuity as much as transformation. It is here, in this fraught yet fertile ground, that Ramatoulaye strives with what it means to mother, in as much as she tries to assume a dialogic motherhood that seems to neither stretch inherited cultural roles nor severe them. Hence, this dialogic motherhood is intended to trouble any conception of this experience as a unified phenomenon, where Ramatoulaye practices a dynamic mode of African mothering whose constant friction with personal, social, and intergenerational discourses allows for a continual redefinition of this experience.

Perhaps nowhere is the novel's aesthetic subtlety more evident than in its treatment of time. Bâ's temporal experimentation, astonishingly overlooked in extant criticism, constitutes a key contribution of the present paper. Renouncing the linear progressions imposed by colonial and patriarchal logics, Bâ reimagines time as a profoundly affective and recursive experience. The epistolary form, far from being presented as a neutral narrative, assumes at once an insurgent temporal modality. Perceiving of as well as experiencing time as such, Ramatoulaye subverts the interlocking chrononormativities of patriarchy and coloniality, both of which reduce time to normative frames. Her letters to Aissatou show time as a symbolic repository of shared emotions energized by memory, endurance, and care. In contrast to the objectifying gaze of synchrony and conformity, Bâ cultivates an epistolary gaze that listens inward, bears suffering without ossifying it, and makes subjectivity dance over memory's nonlinear rhythms. Within this reconfigured temporality, the protagonist fulfills an aim higher than that of simply reckoning with personal disillusionment; she is unequivocally fashioned to bear witness to the unfulfilled promises of post-independence nationhood by laying bare the dissonance between patriarchal discourse and the experiences of women.

What this article ultimately has sought to argue is that *So Long a Letter*, though thematically rich with historical issues and cultural dilemmas, it, nonetheless, maintains a critical dialogue with how African women might narrate themselves in dialogic constellations of voice, memory, and relational becoming. It renders visible the multiple temporalities, voices, and relational modes through which subjectivity is forged and re-forged. Through voice and time, through the epistolary knitting of memory, affect, and criticism, Bâ composes a novel that continues to demand response. Ramatoulaye's performance of dialogical subjectivity, her epistolary gaze and thus that of the writer, along with her experiencing temporalities of becoming, together compel us to reread, to reconsider, and above all else, to listen anew To Bâ's words.

Indeed, though *So Long a Letter* remains a narrative that is deeply rooted in a specific postcolonial moment, its artistic merits continue to resurface across temporal thresholds. What we have really come to understand is that a novel's age does not wither its vociferation, nor does it foreclose its critical reception. It, as a matter of fact, attests only to the inexhaustibility of

literature's hermeneutic potential. What endures, in this vein, is not the story Bâ tells, but the dialogic space she opens. There remain, always, *terrae incognitae* within the cartographies of literary works, uncharted topographies, veiled temporalities, and submerged discursive tensions that escape, or, even resist exhaustive explanation. It is particularly this capacity for literature to exceed the boundaries of its time, to eventually invite miscellaneous interpretive infinities, which reflects its perpetual relevance. Thus, it is safe to claim that the present study contributes to this ongoing dialogue by proving that every reading of Bâ's novel is a reencounter with its polyphonic spirit that speaks anew with every act of critical attention.

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Notes

[1] Abdulkadir 2021.
[2] Warner 2020.
[3] Bakhtin 1984, p. 38.
[4] Bray 2003, p. 4.
[5] Bray 2003, p. 4.
[6] Bakhtin 1984, p. xxiii.
[7] Ward and Wild-Wood 2013, p. 159.
[8] Endogamy refers to the cultural practice of marrying within a specific social, ethnic, or caste group to maintain communal, familial, or class boundaries. In the fictional Senegal of Bâ, especially within the aristocratic Toucouleur milieu, caste endogamy is depicted as a deeply entrenched custom that polices women's marital autonomy under the guise of preserving lineage purity.
[9] Bâ 1989, p. 32.
[10] Davies and Ogundipe-Leslie 1995, p. 201.
[11] Sy 2019, p. 79.
[12] Butler 1999, p. xvii.
[13] Iddah refers to a four-month-and-ten-day seclusion mandated for widows under Islamic injunctions.
[14] Bâ 1989, p. 26.
[15] Bâ 1989, p. 1.
[16] Bâ 1989, p. 19; p. 26.
[17] Bâ 1989, p. 1.
[18] Said 1975, p. 32.
[19] Freeman 2010, p. xxii; Freeman 2010, p. xvi.
[20] Bâ 1989, p. 19.
[21] Nfah-Abbenyi 1997, p. 8.
[22] Stringer 1996, p. 56.
[23] Nfah-Abbenyi 1997, p. 8.
[24] Stringer 1996, p. 56.
[25] Steady 1981, p. 35.
[26] Bâ 1989, p. 34.
[27] Bâ 1989, p. 34.
[28] Davies and Graves 1986, p. 10.
[29] d'Almeida 1986, p. 167.
[30] Bâ 1989, p. 58.
[31] Bâ 1989, p. 58.
[32] Anzaldúa 1987, p. 102.
[33] Bâ 1989, p. 89.
[34] Bâ 1989, p. 68.
[35] Bâ 1989, p. 69.

[36] Weagel 2009, p. 35.
[37] Innes 1992, p. 149.
[38] Bâ 1989, p. 58.
[39] Hamam 2014, p. 11.
[40] Wilcox 2003, p. 127.
[41] Wilcox 2003, p. 154.
[42] Bâ 1989, p. 39.
[43] Bâ 1989, p. 75.
[44] Bâ 1989, p. 75.
[45] Bâ 1989, p. 88.
[46] Sooryamoorthy and Khalema 2023, p. 161.
[47] Bâ 1989, p. 40.
[48] Bâ 1989, p. 76.
[49] Frank 1987.
[50] Jolly 2004, p. 42.
[51] Bâ 1989, p. 88.
[52] Bakhtin 1981, p. 84.
[53] Bâ 1989, p. 71.
[54] Bâ 1989, p. 58.
[55] Bâ 1989, p. 11.
[56] Butler 2004, p. 21.
[57] Bâ 1989, p. 72.
[58] Bâ 1989, p. 72.
[59] Arriola et al. 2021, p. 123.
[60] Bâ 1989, p. 72.
[61] Barrett 2023, p. 152.
[62] Freeman 2010, pp. 3-4.
[63] Bâ 1989, p.72.
[64] Bâ 1989, p. 72.
[65] Bâ 1989, p. 72.